**Sunday, November 27, 2016, the First Sunday of Advent**

**Announcements**

**Lighting the Advent Candles Hope**

We light the candle of hope as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

**In Christ there is life and light for all people.**

Now lift up your heads and rejoice: your redeemer is drawing near.

**Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth!**

**Opening Prayer**

Light of the world,

You call for us to walk in the light,

Live by the light,

And heed your light,

So that we may bear your light into this dark and fearful world.

Shine on us today, O Christ,

That you light our way and we prepare the way

For your salvation of all creation.

Amen.

**Call to Confession**

Nothing is hidden from the light of God. Thank goodness that God loves us so, that we may come to Him in our sin and brokenness, and reflect on our ways. Here, we may learn again of God’s amazing grace found in forgiveness. Let us approach the throne of grace and in God’s light, confess our sin and reflect in silence.

**Prayer of Confession (please see bulletin)**

**Assurance of Pardon**

Friends, no matter what, God loves you, claims you in the waters of baptism as one of his very own children. He hears our prayers and knows our innermost needs. Hear the Good news of Jesus Christ!

**Isaiah 2:1-5 (please see bulletin)**

**Time out for Teaching: What’s Paul’s deal with getting dressed in light?**

**Prayers of the People**

As we enter this first Sunday of Advent, God, we proclaim a message of hope and light. We come out of joyful and filling Thanksgiving meals and cherished time with our beloved at bountiful tables.

But we cannot help but be bothered with this pain in our hearts, knowing that people near and far struggle with problems.

We are deeply disturbed by the human tragedy, like in Mosul and Aleppo. For all people, not just our fellow Christians there, children killed, hospitals being bombed. We are sure your heart is breaking for them.

We are saddened by the situation of refugees who are leaving their homes and spreading out to places where they are put into camps and detention centers. More often than not, they are told they are unwelcome. And the nations where they go are struggling to figure out how to handle the overflow of people. To you, O God, this is the same story that has been seen for centuries, just as Mary and Joseph also sought refuge in Egypt to flee the persecution of Herod. As you granted them safety, we pray for others’ safety and welcome.

We lift up Cuba and that they find stability following the death of Fidel Castro.

In this season when families gather in joy, we feel incomplete, missing special people who were with us this time last year. For those who grieve this season, we pray you bring them moments of happiness, ground them in your love, surround them with your comfort. We pray the same for families of the children killed in the school bus accident last week, for the families of fallen police officers and children victimized by gun violence. We also grieve with you, God, the senseless violence on Black Friday in shopping centers.

For our community, seeking to be better, we pray for our city leaders, administrators, caregivers, educators. Use your light of wisdom to guide them.

We have many other concerns this day O God. Therefore, we take a moment to lift our prayers to you.

You are the Creator, the Redeemer and Sustainer. Come, Lord Jesus! It is in you we pray as you taught your disciples to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven…Amen.”

**Psalm 122:1-9**

1   I was glad when they said to me,
          “Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
2   Our feet are standing
          within your gates, O Jerusalem.

3   Jerusalem — built as a city
          that is bound firmly together.
4   To it the tribes go up,
          the tribes of the LORD,
     as was decreed for Israel,
          to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
5   For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
          the thrones of the house of David.

6   Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
          “May they prosper who love you.
7   Peace be within your walls,
          and security within your towers.”
8   For the sake of my relatives and friends
          I will say, “Peace be within you.”
9   For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
          I will seek your good.

**Romans 13:11-14**

11Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;12the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Matthew 24:36-44**

36“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

**Sermon: “Choose Light”**

In his first inaugural address, President Lincoln, on the brink of war between the States, tried to appeal to the Confederacy to heed “the better angels of their nature.” He also included in his speech that secession will be considered an act of war. This barbed speech hoped that the Southern States would listen to their “better angels.” The phrase “better angels of our nature” has become on the best-loved phrases in American history, for its poetic language and philosophical power. It seems to indicate that we all have a better side to ourselves, even though we don’t always listen. It indicates that we always have a choice and we should carefully choose the high road, even if it is the harder road to take.

We as Christians are always called to choose the high road, even when unpopular. We choose light. We light all these Advent candles to remind ourselves in worship that the Light of the World has come, and is promised to come again. We live in the light of God’s wisdom, made known to us through Scripture and the Holy Spirit. That wisdom includes love for God and neighbor. It brings hope for the nations. We, when heeding our “better angels,” can be reflectors of God’s light, so others can see it and live by it too.

Paul the Apostle writes to the Roman Church about putting off the works of darkness and putting on – like a garment – armor of light. This brief reading may sound a little like other places where he challenges churches – the Corinthians – to do a little growing up in faith. In light of their knowledge of grace – and that salvation comes from faith in Jesus – he says, now is the time to wake up and start wearing their faith on the outside, as “armor of light.” Out of all of Paul’s letters, this is the only letter we have where he wrote to a church he hadn’t visited yet. So, Romans functions as a summary of Paul’s teachings, like an introduction before he visits them. He tells them because of their faith – not works – they are closer to salvation than they ever were before. Paul and his disciples believed that Jesus was due back any day now, so he instructs them accordingly. But this teaching isn’t just for the end of times. It is good advice for all times.

Paul’s message to us is the same: shed the works of darkness and put on the garment of light. To do so takes so many forms as we know. Superficially, it could look like doing things that make everyone around us happy. Rarely, I have been to Sonic and in the drive-through, paid for the person behind me (if it’s not too much!). The person in the window gets to pass on the happy news to the next customer and I go away feeling pretty good about myself. It might be a superficial way to “choose light.” Everyone feels good. And it seems every Christmastime we hear at least one news story about a mysterious customer who leaves several hundred dollars for a waitress, as a tip. We love hearing stories of “random acts of kindness”.

These things might be examples of “choosing light,” unless the person at Sonic has an eating disorder and the waitress a gambling habit! It just goes to show however, that choosing light must go deeper than warm fuzzies.

Choosing light can be complicated, like Lincoln’s charge to the Southern States to heed their “better angels.” Choosing light doesn’t always make everyone around you happy. Choosing light illumines things that some people don’t want to see, like truth, injustices and wrongs that take place in our world. Choosing light could include choosing to stand with persons who are unpopular, suffering or disadvantaged in some way. Our better angels call us to give the world a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, and that can make some people, even us, feel uncomfortable. It’s not, in other words, all warm fuzzies. As Jesus points out, in his coming there will be hard times, when justice must reign and truth revealed.

Contemplating the Advent of Jesus might require us to make some confessions: our own need to see good win over evil, even the evil that is in our hearts. We confess our need for warm fuzzies and happy feelings. We confess our need for God’s help. We need a little peace and quiet so we can hear those better angels speak. We need time to reflect on what God’s Kingdom looks like, when we are a part of the picture, and realize we’re not the ones in charge. So we prepare. Read Scripture, even if a couple sentences each day. Place your preparation for Jesus at the top of your Christmas to-do list. Read each Sunday’s lectionary texts in advance. Participate as much as you can in this church so you feel grounded in hope before you hit the malls and Amazon.com. Paul charges you and me to put off the works of darkness and get dressed in light, which is not just something we do casually at the end of our day when we kick off our shoes at the end of the day and put up our feet. Choosing light is an intentional act, determined to stay awake to the wisdom of our better angels. Let it be so.