

Nov. 27, 2016  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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*Walking the Way:  
To Bethlehem and Beyond*

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

*O Come Desire of nations bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind;  
Make envy, strife, and quarrels cease;  
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.*

This is the hope and vision of Advent. This Advent we will be exploring the writings of the prophet Isaiah in worship and the prophet Micah in a class that begins next Sunday. Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries, living about 700 years before Jesus. It was a time of great turmoil for the nation Israel. Three hundred years earlier the kingdom had split over disagreement about a particular king. Some things sound very familiar no matter what period in history.

By the time of these prophets the Northern Kingdom had been annexed by the Assyrian empire, while Judah, the southern kingdom, lived uneasily in its shadow paying tribute.

Isaiah is upset about social injustice. The book of Isaiah begins with lamentation. With harsh words Isaiah bemoans the lack of faithfulness among the people. At the beginning of chapter two, which is our reading today, the focus shifts from the regrettable state of affairs in the present to a vision of hope for the future.

SERMON

The paradox about Advent and Christmas is that we've done this all before, time and time again. Our church year spirals through the same territory, year after year. We celebrate the coming of the Christ child but then we realize our struggles are not resolved. 'Tis the season of heightened awareness of the disconnect between what is and what we hope for, as we pray:

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.  
God be with us.*

In many ways, the spiritual journey is a spiral of paradoxes. Today I want to suggest three phases to the spiral of the spiritual journey:

Express Gratitude  
Examine the Heart  
Engage Intention

I'd been pondering these phases when I opened the most recent *Guideposts* magazine this week. Right there on the quote page were three quotes, lined up in the order I've suggested. I'll share them with you today.

Express Gratitude

*It is not joy that makes us grateful;  
It is gratitude that makes us joyful.*

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Last Sunday I went with the children to Church School. We began our time together giving thanks - for family, friends, food, home. Then one girl said she was thankful for God. As I've been thinking about her thankfulness I realize I'm thankful for God because God reminds me to be thankful, especially on the days when thankfulness doesn't come easy.

An attitude of gratitude is a powerful spiritual practice. It works on us as we practice.

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.  
God be with us.*

#### Examine the Heart

*Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you.*

Anne Lamont

I often wonder how Jesus of Nazareth dealt with the turmoil of his times. Like our times there was political turmoil, social injustice, economic inequality, physical and mental distress. Things were not that different. I'm struck by how often Jesus unplugs - goes off by himself, or takes his disciples with him, to pray.

People often tell me that worship is one of the few times in their week when they get to unplug from their busy lives. Unplugging is essential. One unplugging we may particularly need, at this time, is unplugging our minds from our own critique of our emotions. This may be a new practice for some New Englanders. We have, in some respects, the well-deserved reputation for being the "frozen chosen."

Recently some people have been telling me that they are angry or afraid, sensing that a particular justice concern or the earth itself are under siege. One thing that has struck me in these conversations is how often we are apologetic for having these strong emotions. There is nothing wrong with these emotions. Concern about injustice is always a reason for strong emotions. In his opening words, the prophet Isaiah doesn't mince words.

The problem isn't feeling pain. The dilemma is what we do with it. If we avoid it, it will eat us up. If we stay stuck in it, it will eat us up. Fear and hatred are poisons that corrode from the inside. However, if we acknowledge it and name it -and hear our neighbor's pain, as well- then new life is possible.

A couple of weeks ago I shared these words from Parker Palmer, a contemporary Quaker.

*The spiritual life is lived in a balance of paradoxes, and the humility that enables us to hear the truth of others must stand in creative tension with the faith that empowers us to speak our own.*

We need the faith to speak our own truth and the humility to hear the truth of others. We will call on both these spiritual strengths in our pastoral conversation after church today.

As we express gratitude and we faithfully examine our hearts, something we can do for healing will be revealed.

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.  
God be with us.*

### Engage Intention

*For a generous deed lives longer than a great battle or a king's decree or a scholar's essay, because it spreads and leaves its mark on all nature and endures through many generations.*

L. Frank Baum

Just a year ago this month we completed the outdoor labyrinth. In gratitude for Susan Fitzgerald's ministry with the indoor labyrinth and with grief that her life was coming to an end, we made the intention to offer an outdoor labyrinth so that more people could engage in this spiritual practice throughout the year. Thank you for your generous deed that has already touched so many lives.

We recognize that these days there are many people who are too angry and too afraid to come into a church building. I am grateful that we have provided a "sanctuary" space in the labyrinth to reach out to the wider community. I am grateful to the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust for their generosity in letting us locate the labyrinth on their land. Engaging this spiritual practice outdoors is a deepening experience. If you have not had a chance to walk the outdoor labyrinth and would like a guide just let me know. I'd be glad to go with you.

Engaging an intention has many faces – praying, contacting our legislators, marching in protest, walking the labyrinth, giving financial support to groups acting for justice and peace just to name a few.

One of my intentions is that we continue to be a congregation where we talk about the things that really matter to us even when we disagree about possible solutions.

Everyone is invited to the pastoral conversation after church today. In that time we will

Express gratitude  
Examine our hearts  
Engage Intention.

All the while praying,  
*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*  
*God be with us.*