**“Unexpected Advent” - A Shared Advent Series between Fairlawn and Pleasant Street, 2022**

It’s beginning to look a lot like…. Advent?

All around us “it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas,” but Christians are poised to enter the liturgical season called *Advent.* Advent means “coming” or “arrival” and it is the beginning of the Christian liturgical year.

Both ancient and modern Christians consider Advent a time of spiritual preparation for Christmas; by celebrating God’s coming in Jesus and by awaiting his return. The practice of Advent puts us at odds with the wider culture, but connects us to Christians across the world and throughout history.

This year, the ancient practice of Advent will find a new expression for us.

Fairlawn and Pleasant Street Church are practicing Advent together.

This Advent, Fairlawn and Pleasant Street are preparing for the birth of Jesus by looking at Jesus family tree in Matthew chapter 1. Specifically, the stories of the five women who are mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.

Look Who’s Hiding in Jesus’ Family Tree

Have you ever done a close read of Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1? For many of us, these lists of names can appear rather tedious, with unimportant information we’re prone to skip over. But the genealogies of the Bible contain important reminders that names and people matter to God – and sometimes point us to God’s surprising ways of working through people we wouldn’t expect.

 By including these women Matthew does something unexpected. He breaks Jewish convention for genealogies. He is also breaking our sense of decorum! Matthew draws our attention to these women, and so also to particularly difficult stories that surround them; Tamar and family dysfunction, Rahab and violence, Ruth and ethnic conflict, Bathsheba and the death of a child.

 And because each woman’s story touches on sexuality, we can’t help but also wonder about Tamar’s last-resort, Rahab’s profession, Ruth’s seduction, and Bathsheba’s subjection. Maybe it isn’t surprising to us that Jewish custom would leave them out of the family genealogy – *their stories bring up difficult and embarrassing moments in Israel’s family history*.

Every family history includes stories of guilt, shame, disappointment and embarrassment. Like in Israel’s family, sometimes those emotions “attach” to certain people or moments in our family history too. Like damage from a house-fire, some of our memories and stories are so coated in shame or embarrassment or disappointment we toss them out like smoke-damaged family portraits.

Isn’t it interesting, then, that Matthew prepares us for Jesus’ arrival with a genealogy that *includes* the kinds of family portraits -and stories - we might otherwise leave out? We (Joel and Matthew) wondered this year, “what would it mean to let the Gospel of Matthew prepare us for Advent?”

**Prepare the Way**

Advent is a time to cultivate a dissatisfaction with ourselves and with this world. During advent we declutter our lives and take a sobering look at what we have done and left undone and with the words of the general confession in the book of common prayer declare that, “there is no health in us”. Our Advent discontent forces us to look up with *longing* and *anticipation* for a Messiah like the one pictured in Isaiah 53:

*…He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,*

*nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by mankind a man of suffering,*

*and familiar with pain.*

*Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised,*

*and we held him in low esteem.*

Christians do not hope for a Messiah who is invulnerable. With Isaiah we advent a Messiah who is familiar with betrayal; versed in the experience of abuse; conversant on unjust condemnation. We also advent a Messiah who knows what it is to be exposed to public shame; who was considered damaged goods and a cosmic disappointment.

This Messiah will free us from Guilt by being crushed under the weight ours. This Messiah will make it possible for us to be embraced unconditionally into the perfect love of God; healing our shame by being cast out wearing it. During Advent we welcome a Messiah who bears our suffering and by his wounds we are healed. This is the Messiah whom Matthew is preparing us to receive in his genealogy.

Unexpected Advent

Remarkably, Matthew includes Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba in order to say that the promised pain-bearing Messiah is born in and through the pain-bearing lives of these four women. Instead of stories that bare guilt and shame, Matthew includes them to show us that their lives bear forth the hope of the Messiah. They are mothers of Jesus.

In each of their stories God is at work in unexpected ways. And reading their stories creates expectation *in us*; for justice, for inclusion, for forgiveness, for a New World. It creates the hope that God might do these things in our lives too; and that while weeping lasts for the night joy could come in the morning, that mourning can turn to dancing, and that light can dawn on those who live in darkness and the shadow of the valley of death.

And each of their “unusual birth stories” prepares us for another mother, with whom the genealogy ends. Mary, a young girl at her prayers, favored by God, who said “yes”and through whom the Savior has come – named Jesus for he will save us from our sins.

God often works through the unexpected. And just as the Christmas story has its unexpected dimensions, the same is true of our stories as well. None of us likes the experience of pain, disgrace, hurt, shame, or other discomfort we face in life. Yet we see how God can use that to make his Son, our Savior, present to us in ways we might not have seen otherwise. This is true of our individual stories, and it is true of us as a church as well.

Sometimes when we look back at the work God is doing, we can only ask with surprise, “Why me? Why us? It would have seemed like my story is too difficult, like we (or our church community) is too insignificant to make a difference for God.” But the Bible assures us that God “chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are”

*(I Cor. 1:28).*

So, we invite you to join us for an Unexpected Advent. We’ve created a reading and reflection guide for these four weeks. We hope it will help us enter these stories more fully. For through them we expect that God will make us people who watch for God’s work and wait for God’s grace to break into our lives in unexpected ways – an unplanned conversation, a spontaneous opportunity to care for someone around you. Because we serve a God who uses unexpected people

and unexpected communities to reveal the greatest Gift of all:

the gift of a Savior.

Even so, Come, Lord Jesus, we are expecting you.



 *(Mary Consoles Eve)*

Christ The King Sunday, November 20, 2022

*Rev. Joel Vande Werken*

*Rev. Matthew Burns*

**Advent Week 1 - The Story of Tamar**

Text: Read Matthew Chapter 1: 1-6 and the Story of Tamar in Genesis 38 this week.

Prayer:  ***O Immanuel,***

***Child of promise and sign of hope,***

***You come from a distance far beyond our reach,***

***Yet are closer to us than we are to ourselves:***

***Remain with us in our own days of expectation,***

***That we may give birth to what is just, true, beautiful, and good.***

***You order all things with strength and gentleness:***

***Come now and teach us the way to salvation –***

***Through the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord,***

***Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit,***

***Abides with us, one God now and forever. AMEN.***

Reflection: (After reading Matthew 1: 1-6 & Genesis 38 sit with God in his presence)

* Matthew begins with a genealogy, which is not important to us. But in traditional cultures (ancient and today) genealogies are identity statements – they tell who you are and where you come from. What are the “genealogies” -Identity statements - that we use to prove who we are and why we matter? Is it a family name? Is it a resume? A trophy? A cherished self-image you have? (\*note, when you introduce yourself, sometimes it’s the things you say first….)
* For Jewish genealogies, purity matters. It is expected you might leave out the things that “taint” you. What in our “genealogies” – identity statements – could taint us? Are there people we leave out of the family lore? Are there moments in our own history we keep hidden? How would it feel to have the Gospel of Matthew include those things in telling the story of our identity? How could that help us to see the need of a savior?
* What are your questions about Tamar’s story? What were your emotions reading it? Did you notice anything you hadn’t see before?
* What does this story tell us about the *family life* and family dynamics of the people Israel?
* What do you notice about Tamar the person? How is she introduced to us? What does Genesis tell us about her “bona fides” and why might this matter?
* How do you read her actions with Judah, her Father-in-Law? Why? Does it matter that in Rabbinic tradition she is remembered as a hero and champion of Israel? Why might they see her this way?
* Advent is about dawn. And dawn begins in the dark. What stories or places in your life or the world seem shrouded in shadow right now? What would it be like to name those things as part of a genealogy of "Holy Irregularities” in your life – unexpected parts of the story of God’s sovereign grace?

**Advent Week 2 – The Story of Rahab**

Text: Read Matthew 1: 1-6 and the story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6 this week.

Prayer:

***0 Lord of might,***

***Master of the universe and ruler of the house of Israel,***

***Your mighty acts have rescued remnants of your people***

***from the midst of slavery, exile, war, and holocaust:***

***raise your scepter over us, that you saving rule***

***may be extended to all people in all places.***

***You appeared in the burning bush to Moses,***

***Come with outstretched arm to save us –***

***For the sake of him who we know as Lord of all,***

***Even Jesus the Christ. AMEN.***

Reflection: (After reading Matthew 1: 1-6 & Joshua 2 & 6, sit with God in his presence).

* What are you questions about Rahab’s story? What were your emotions and reactions reading it? Did you notice anything you hadn’t see before?
* How is Rahab introduced to us in the story? Why might this be important?
* What are the reoccurring images or symbols in the story? Can you think of other places in the bible where those images or symbols come up? What connections do you make between them?
* Rahab is portrayed to us as a shrewd deal-maker and business woman; even an opportunist! She understands leverage, risk, quid pro quo, and “faithful deception”. How do those images and characteristics compliment or challenge your image of a faithful person? Of trust and faith in God?
* Is Rahab’s behavior self-interested, selfless, or some combination of both? Why do you think so?
* Rahab anticipates God’s coming judgement on her city. She acts in order to find a way out – rescue. In Advent, we anticipate the return of God who will come to “judge the living and the dead” and set all to rights. How might Rahab’s urgent desire for rescue help us to understand Advent? What places in your life, your neighborhood, your office cry for rescue in the light of God’s return?
* Where might God be inviting you to take a risk for the rescue of others in your household? Family? City?

**Advent Week 3 – The Story of Ruth**

Text: Read Matthew 1: 1-6 and the book of Ruth, especially chapter 3 & 4 this week.

Prayer:

***O Root of Jesse,***

***You reach deep down into the darkness of the earth***

***And stir up the world’s longing for deliverance and hope:***

***Raise up within our own lives***

***A spirit of courage and strength, of wisdom and insight,***

***That we may do your work for the coming of your kingdom.***

***You are the rising sign for all the peoples,***

***Before you earthly rulers will keep silent***

***And nations will give you honor:***

***Come quickly to deliver us –***

***Through the merits of the one we know as the beginning of the ages,***

***Even Christ, our Lord. AMEN.***

Reflection: (After reading Matthew 1: 1-6 & Joshua 2 & 6, sit with God in his presence).

* What are you questions about Ruth’s story? What were your emotions and reactions reading it? Did you notice anything you hadn’t see before?
* How is Ruth introduced to us in the story? Where does the story take place? Why might these two things be important?
* The book of Ruth takes place during the time of the Judges. In a time of continual unfaithfulness, fear, and suffering, what does Ruth’s story show us about God’s work in the quiet corner of Bethlehem? How might that help us to understand God’s work in our lives and world?
* How is Ruth portrayed to us in the story? What is she like? How does she behave? What motivates her? How do those images and characteristics compliment or challenge your image of a faithful person? Of trust and faith in God?
* Ruth is a foreigner living in Bethlehem during a time of hostility between Israel and Moab. Ruth is portrayed to us as a “good Moabite” not unlike Jesus’ parable of the “good Samaritan”. Ruth challenged assumptions in Israel about who was “in” and on what basis they were acceptable. By her loyalty and faithfulness, she shows herself to be more Israelite than many of the Israelites in Bethlehem.

This Advent, how might Ruth’s character and portrayal challenge our assumptions about who God will find acceptable at his return? How do we know we can greet God in joy and not fear?

**Advent Week 4 – The Story of David & Bathsheba**

Text: Read Matthew 1: 1-6 and 2 Samuel 11 & 12 this week.

Prayer:

***O Key of David and throne of glory,***

***You open the way to the future and no one closes;***

***You close the way to the past and no one opens.***

***Release us and all your people from the oppressions of the past***

***That we may face the future with boldness and purpose.***

***Come set free the prisoners***

***who live in darkness and shadow of death –***

***Through the merits of the Son of David, Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.***

Reflection: (After reading Matthew 1: 1-6 & 2 Samuel 11 & 12, sit with God in his presence).

* What are you questions about David & Bathsheba’s story? What were your emotions and reactions reading it? Did you notice anything you hadn’t see before?
* In one sense there is (admittedly) nothing new about a story like this; a king abusing his power. And yet David is not just any leader. How is David portrayed to us in 1 & 2 Samuel? What about his relationship to God? His relationship to Israel? How does this change or heighten the severity of this story?
* During Advent, the days have been getting shorter. The story of David & Bathsheba takes place *as the sun is setting.* Do you see significance to that? Are there places or times when there has been growing darkness in your life? What would it mean this year for you to imagine Advent not as a time of growing light, but of deepening darkness? How might that change your prayers, your hopes, your need for Christmas? In 2 Samuel 11 & 12, where does the realization – the light - come from? Who brings it? How does it “dawn” on David?
* Matthew doesn’t actually give us Bathsheba’s name in the Genealogy. How does he name her? Why might that be important? What does to naming her in this way tell us about her? About David? About Jesus? About ourselves?
* 2 Samuel 11 gives us an anatomy of how sin operates. It has been said, “we don’t *do* sin, Sin *does* us”. Read James 1: 13-15 for a description of how this works. In the story of David and Bathsheba, where does the sin and transgression in the story start? Where does it go? Does it stop? If so where?
Can you map similar trajectories in your own life? Where do sins start for you? Where have they gone?
* What does the name Jesus mean, and why is Mary supposed to give him that name?

**Christmas Eve Prayer of Preparation Story of Mary & Joseph**

Text: Read Matthew Chapter 1 several times this week.

Prayer:

***O Immanuel,***

***Our sovereign and lawgiver,***

***Desire of the nations and savior of all:***

***Come and save us.***

***O Rising Dawn,***

***You shine with warm and cleansing light,***

***Chasing the fearsome shadows of the night away:***

***Enlighten the lives of your people with visions of shalom***

***Until you bring all things into the harmony of your kingdom.***

***God of grace,***

***Ever faithful to your promises,***

***The earth rejoices in hope of our Savior’s coming***

***And looks forward with longing***

***To his return at the end of time.***

***Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes,***

***For he is Lord forever and ever. AMEN.***

Reflection Quote:

“Sorting through the stack of cards that arrived at our house last Christmas, I note that all kinds of symbols have edged their way into the celebration. Overwhelmingly, the landscape scenes render New England towns buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse-drawn sleigh. On other cards, animals frolic…reindeer, but also chipmunks, raccoons, cardinals, and cute gray mice…an African lion reclining with a foreleg draped affectionately around a lamb…

 Inside, the cards stress sunny words like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness, and warmth. It is a fine thing…that we honor a sacred holiday with such homey sentiments. And yet when I turn to the gospel accounts of the first Christmas, I hear a very different tone and sense mainly disruption at work…

 In contrast to what the cards would have us believe; Christmas did not sentimentally simplify life on planet earth. Perhaps this is what I sense when Christmas rolls around and I turn from the cheeriness of the cards to the starkness of the Gospels.”

*(Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew. 29-30)*

* What has it been like for you this Advent to let Matthew’s “stark gospel” prepare us for Christmas? What have been the “contrasts” between this gospel story and the Yuletide celebrations around you? Have there been any disruptions in you? What would you like to say to God about that?