

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, December 21, 2025

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Friends, as we continue in worship this day, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, and we'll take just a couple of deep breaths together. So, take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

And breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would by your power make us attentive to your dwelling within us and around us in these moments. We pray that you would quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and hearing, we might be called to lead lives of response. So, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, in this season, we've moved through together an Advent sermon series entitled Insisting on Hope. Insisting on Hope. It's helped us to wrestle with how it is we navigate fear together, right? Personal fear, communal fear. And what is the posture of the Christian in this season? And our claim is that the posture of the Christian in the season of Advent is to be insistent upon the hope of our God moving in our lives and in the world. And so each week we've talked about kind of this personal dimension of each sermon and the communal dimension. And we're going to do that again this morning but in a slightly different way. Our theme this day, as Whitney told our children, is that of Advent love. And so, we'll have two scripture lessons that help to ground us in that love and what that love looks like for us this day. The first from the prophet Isaiah. We're in the 41st chapter. We're going to read verses 5-10 together. And then we'll read together from the Gospel according to Matthew.

So, first the prophet's words.

*The coastlands have seen and are afraid. The ends of the earth tremble. They have drawn near and come. Each one helps the other, saying to one another, "Take courage." The artisan encourages the goldsmith. The one who smooths with the hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil, saying of a solderer, "It is good." And they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend, you whom I took from the ends of the earth and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant. I have chosen you and not cast you off. Do not fear, for I am with you.*

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*Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

Here ends the prophet's reading.

And now from the Gospel according to Matthew, the 1st chapter, verses 18-25.

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary, his mother, was engaged to Joseph but before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus because he will save his people.*

*Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled. "Look, a virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did just as the angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And Joseph called him Jesus.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

It's been interesting for me as I prepared for each of these sermons to sit with each of our Advent themes and to ponder the ways in which they are at work in my life and where I'm getting to experience them and see them out in the world. It's been, I think, a helpful practice for me. I hope that you've gone home each Sunday or sometime during the week and you've contemplated the themes as well. They're important for us. They have no beginning and no end. They are always important in the life of God's world, and each of them has something unique for us to learn this morning. I just have two lessons that I want to draw to our attention this morning from the text about Advent love. Try to keep it simple this morning. Just two.

I think that Advent love teaches us a couple of things. Advent love for us as those who call on the name of Jesus teaches us that to love is to show up. To show up. Okay. That's what God does in both of these passages when God says, "I am with you." God shows up in the midst of the struggles. First, the prophet. So Isaiah is speaking to a group of people, this communal group who is struggling and outcast and afraid, right? They have been scattered to the ends of the earth and then gathered back together. They're still trying to figure out what is happening. The world is

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a dangerous place for them, right? And God speaks a word through the prophet to them and says, "Fear not, for I am with you." Advent love is not abstract affection. It's not divine sentiment. It is presence. It is God with us. Isaiah speaks to a people afraid and unsure of their future. And what Isaiah doesn't do is promise ease. But Isaiah does promise presence. Similarly to the troubled Joseph, the one who had everything figured out, had his fiance. You imagine they were ready to celebrate their wedding together, and then this news comes that shakes his foundation, right? That makes him start to question. Maybe you've been in that place when you come upon some new news that makes you go within and begin to question, "Have I made a mistake? What's the right thing to do in this situation?" Matthew tells us that God shows up in the form of an angel in a dream and speaks to Joseph a word of care and presence as well. God tells us, Matthew tells us that God's response to human fear, Joseph's fear, was not distance, but incarnation, incarnation, drawing ever closer to Joseph. I was thinking about this idea of presence, of love as, Advent love as presence. I was reflecting as I do during most holiday seasons on family, and for some reason this week what was drawn to my memory was my sister's funeral. I preached that funeral almost a little over 5 years ago now, actually. And February will be an anniversary of that. And it was a...it was a powerful experience to get to...to preach, to read scripture and preach at my sister's funeral. People celebrating her. But something struck me that day that I wasn't expecting. The end of my sister's life was a really difficult time for me personally, but also for our family. And...and sometimes when things get difficult, we might have the tendency to kind of draw in a little bit, maybe not reach out as much to friends and people that we know love us, but we don't... we don't really...don't feel like we can share without oversharing, right? And so in the end of her life, I'd kind of drawn in a little bit, which made what happened on the day of her funeral so much more...well, holy to me. I got up to preach the homily at John Knox Presbyterian Church, and I made my way into the pulpit, and I looked out, and about two thirds of the way back on the right hand side, we don't have doughnut side and riverside in Greenville, South Carolina. We just have right and left. On the right hand side from the pulpit there was an entire row of my high school friends. And so I was able to look at Megan and Jacquelyn and Heath and John and Steve and their spouses, their partners, seated on a row two thirds of the way back. And...and there was something that happened in that moment for me that felt like God wrapping God's arms around me, right? Their presence as good Presbyterians towards the back of the nave, right? Their presence was an affirmation of love for me, but I was interested in their presence because I hadn't talked to any of them in a while. We're close, right? But we hadn't talked in a while. And so afterwards, we were having a reception and I was asking each of them. I'm like, "Oh, so y'all all got together, and y'all...y'all like texted and talked and like planned to come and like sit on the pew together and support me and I'm so grateful for that." And they said, "No, we didn't. We haven't talked either. We're as surprised that each other is here as you are, right? In fact, we were kind of scattered across the sanctuary. But before you came out, we saw

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each other. So we decided to kind of gather together on one pew.” Each of them in their own beautiful holy way had decided that the best way that they could love me in that time wasn’t to send a text or a call. It was quite literally to be present with me in the midst of the grief, in the midst of the pain. There’s something akin to that that God is doing to the people of God through the prophet’s words, “Fear not, I am with you.” Right? God’s actually not two thirds of the way back on the right hand side. God is front row, as close as our very next breath, present with us, because that’s what Advent love looks like. That is the shape it takes in the world. It is presence, right? It is drawing near to us in fear. And it doesn’t remove the fear. It doesn’t remove the grief. It doesn’t remove the anxiety. But it says to us in the voice of the divine, I am with you in this. Right?

That becomes critically important for us as we navigate more difficult parts of our journey, to trust and believe that love doesn’t remove pain. It doesn’t remove fear, but it stands with us in it. God does not, we claim in this season of Advent, love us from afar. God loves us by coming near to us. And that’s really important because of the second lesson that it also communicates to us Advent love. And I believe this second lesson is actually kind of the emotional center of both of the texts that we’ve read this morning. Love is God refusing to let us be alone. I want to say that again. Love is God refusing to let us be alone. Isaiah’s command “Do not fear” is grounded in God’s nearness, not in optimism. Matthew’s good news Emmanuel is not that life will be easy but that life will never...that in our lives we will never be alone again, never going to be alone again. That’s the second dimension of advent love. It’s not only presence, but it is this deep assurance that one isn’t just proximate to us, right, but deeply, deeply with us. We’ve been claiming that every week during the season of Advent as we’ve recited the Iona creed. There’s one of my favorite lines in that affirmation of faith. “We believe in a with-us God who sits down in our midst to share our humanity.”

Every time we’ve recited that, another way of saying it would have been for us to have said, “We trust and we believe we are not alone. God is present with us in it.”

Sometimes y’all listen really closely, and you pick up on things that that I preach or Mary preaches or someone else preaches here. One of them “no agenda, no attenda” seems to have really resonated with some of y’all. Okay. If you, if you’re not giggling and you haven’t listened, I talked about this in a previous Advent sermon where I said that I don’t take meetings without an agenda, right? If you want a coffee, happy to do it. Just need to know why. Right? Someone reached out to me this week and said, “I have an agenda and I really need you to attenda.” That was the title of the email.

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This reaching out, in reaching out this person described a really really really difficult situation that they are navigating both personally and professionally right now. And they said, "I need a coffee with you. I need some time." Right. And so it was holy actually when I walked in and we grabbed our coffee and sat down, and it was very apparent within a few seconds that we were not going to stay in this coffee shop. Okay. The emotions were kind of right on the surface, and so we poured our coffees into to-go cups, and we started taking a lap around the Buntny neighborhood. And a hard part for me as pastor trying to be present with this person in the midst of their struggle was I had dressed as if I was going to be in a coffee shop and not walking outside in the chilly weather. Right? So I had on shorts. I know—not smart. Had on shorts and some athletic stuff up top, right? And so we start to walk, and this person starts to share the difficulty that they are navigating right now. And I find myself being present with them and also cold, and the way the sun is hitting it turns out that one block is shady and the other block is sunny. And so I found myself walking with quite a pace in the shady parts, taking my time in the sunny parts. There was something about that imagery that felt appropriate as they were sharing this really significant thing in their life. What I realized was that there was a bit of a connection, an image to hold on there. That our presence or our invitation to be present with people is a privilege in the midst of their difficulty. When someone reaches out to you in an email or text or call or catches you in TK Young after worship and they say, "I need some time with you," I think the first thing I hope you'll know is that, or that you might think is "What a privilege it is that you've asked me to be present with you in the midst of your pain and difficulty. Right? That you've asked me to walk with you in this shadier time."

So we make our way up and down the streets of the Buntny neighborhood, and they are sharing this really difficult season in their life. And what I realized was I had no good advice for them. I had nothing that I could say that was going to be truly helpful for them. The only thing I had to offer them in those minutes of walking, that about an hour that we walked, was my presence. That was it. Someone to walk down the street with. That was all I could offer. We got done. We prayed. We hugged. They departed. And it made me think that that gift and privilege of presence and that being the only thing we can offer was exactly what was needed in that moment. And it was exactly what Joseph needed to hear in the midst of that dream when he was racked with anxiety, unsure of what needed to happen next, what decision he needed to make. The word that was sufficient for him was, "I am with you." "And by the way, you're going to birth a son together, you and Mary, and you are going to name him Emmanuel, so that everyone knows that I am with them." Emmanuel, God with us. Right.

Each week we've kind of had this what I would call "invitation and call." Okay. If you came in this morning feeling alone, if you came in this morning worried that you're having to navigate

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something that is too heavy, too big for you to navigate on your own, I want you to hear the words of the prophet to the people and the words of the angel to Joseph that you are not alone. That in advent love, God draws near to you. God is present with you on the shady side of the block and the sunny side as well.

And if you came in here on a bit of an Advent high, maybe you just came in to be with family for the holiday, right? Maybe you're one of our children who was practicing here, maybe you're on a waffle and syrup high from Waffle Sunday over in Montgomery Hall. If you came in here trusting and believing that God is with you in the midst of this season of life, then what I want to tell you is I believe you are being invited and you might be being prepared to engage in the privilege of being present with someone else in the midst of their difficulty and darkness. Okay? You might be called to show up two thirds of the way back in a sanctuary as someone sits with their grief, right? Or you might get an email this week or you might get a text or you might get a call or you might see someone on your way out this morning that looks like they need a word or just your presence with them. What I want you to know is that you don't need to have the word. All you need to have is your body incarnate with them. Right? That's the gift, the simple simple gift of this Advent season. That not only are we assured that God is present with us, but we are invited to be the presence of God to our neighbor.

So I want to pray this morning to close out the sermon. I want to pray for the places where you are feeling alone and the places where you are going to be called to be present with one who is feeling that same way. Okay.

So let's pray together.

Gracious and loving God, Emmanuel, you draw near to us in our fear and our grief and it doesn't remove it, but your presence is such a gift to us. Remind us in our forgetting that you have come near in Emmanuel, that you have come near in Christ Jesus. Remind us in our forgetting that you are not far off from us, but indeed very, very present with us, that we are never alone in our struggle, in our difficulty, God. And as we are reminded, we pray that you would call us forth to exercise the privilege of presence with others in this season. Help us to have eyes to see and ears to hear those who need to know your good news of your presence with us. Give us the courage to sit in the quiet, to not speak a word that doesn't need to be spoken, but instead just offer our very selves to draw near to our neighbor. In this season of Advent, we trust and we believe that love has taken on flesh in the person of Christ, that we are indeed called to be his body in the world. So we lift these prayers in the name of Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus the Christ. Amen.