

First Sunday of Advent
“Images of God” ~ God the Shepherd
November 29, 2020
Cross of Glory Lutheran Church
Brooklyn Center, MN

PRELUDE

WELCOME

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and today we kick off our Advent exploration of “Images of God.” Throughout the Bible, we find different images, metaphors, and names for God. Some of them are already familiar to us—we use them regularly in our worship services or maybe in our own prayer life: images like God the Father or Christ the King, as we talked about last Sunday. But there are many images that may be less familiar: Isaiah describes God as a woman in labor. Luke describes God as a mother hen. Exodus describes the presence of God as fire. God comes to us in ways that are both familiar *and* in ways that might seem strange or surprising—in ways that don’t always function according to our expectations.

Maybe you’re wondering why we’re focusing on these biblical images this Advent--that’s a fair question! This isn’t the typical Advent theme, and the services look a bit different than a typical Sunday. But bear with me. Because Advent is the season when we are to be open to strange and unexpected things. Advent is the time when we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus, in the surprising and unexpected form a *human being*, a baby, born to us in Bethlehem. But as Christians, we believe that God comes to us not only on Christmas, but also that God is present among us already. So this Advent, as we await God’s incarnate coming, we will be exploring the ways that Emmanuel (God-With-Us) is with us here and now, in ways both familiar and surprising.

In the lectionary texts assigned to each Sunday in this Advent season, we find a different image of God. This week, we read about God the Shepherd. Next week, Isaiah tells us about God the Potter. The following week, we hear about the God who clothes us like the Weaver (or a Quilter, we might say!). Each of these images points to and prepares us for the final week of Advent, when we explore God incarnate, who is, of course, much more than just an image. You may have read about this Advent theme in our November newsletter, but I want to briefly revisit something I mentioned in the newsletter - the reasons *why* exploring some of the many biblical images of God can be important in our life of faith. These images invite us to do three things:

First, they invite us to see God in new ways. We start noticing God in unexpected places or people. We start encountering God not just in church on Sundays but in ordinary things like pastures and clay and clothing and mangers...

Second, these images invite us to see ourselves in new ways. Scripture tells us that we are made in the image of God, so if God is imaged as Potter, or Shepherd or Quilter, or anything else then we must ask, how are we reflected in that image? What does that say about us?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these images also invite us to see our neighbors in new ways. I had a teacher in seminary, Rev. Dr. Lauren Winner, who claims that the attributes we say belong to God are those we (whether knowingly or not) tend to value most in the world around us. If we picture God as a king, for example, we’re more likely to give greater esteem to political leaders or wealthy rulers. But following this same logic, if we imagine God as a woman giving birth, as Isaiah describes, perhaps we’ll look at the women and mothers around us through

new eyes. Or, if we look at God as an inmate on death row, as the Gospel of Luke details Jesus' final days, how might this change the way we see our neighbors who are incarcerated? This is all to say that our spiritual imaginations matter. I invite you to tonight, and throughout the upcoming weeks, to exercise yours, to be open to exploring and experiencing the many ways that God Emmanuel dwells with us, the God of many names.

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Let us confess our sins and hear of the good news of God's mercy as we read responsively:

Leader: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

All: But Lord, we are consumed with wanting more.

L: You make me lie down in green pastures;

A: But Lord, other pastures seem greener.

L: You lead me in right paths for your name's sake,

A: But Lord, we let our selfishness, greed, and pride lead us away from your path.

L: Your rod and staff comfort me in the darkest valley,

A: But Lord, we are still overcome by fear.

L: You prepare a table before me and my enemies,

A: But Lord, we prefer to dine with our friends.

L: Goodness and mercy follow me.

A: Forgive us when we do not see it.

L: I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

A: Good Shepherd, lead us to your house.

L: Amen.

LIGHTING OF THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE

MUSIC **Bring Many Names**

Bring many names
Beautiful and good,
Celebrate in parable and story.
Holiness in glory,
Living, loving God.
Hail and hosanna!
Bring many names.

God with us,
Christ, Emmanuel,
Soon a babe incarnate in a manger.
While we wait your coming,
be with us now.
Hail and hosanna!
Bring many names.

Great living God
Never fully known.
Joyful darkness,
far beyond our seeing.
Closer yet than breathing,
everlasting home.
Hail and hosanna!
Bring many names.

God who sends us forth
Into the world,
Help us see your image in each other.
Open us up to
seeing you a-new.
Hail and hosanna!
Bring many names.

PRAYER OF THE DAY The Lord be with you. And also with you.

Let us pray . . . **God the Shepherd, you lead us and guide us as we walk the pastures of this world. Guide us now, that--carried in your loving arms--we might live with our arms lovingly extended toward one another; in the name of the God of many names. Amen.**

READING: Isaiah 40:1-11

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'

¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION I

Rev. Ali Tranvik

A classmate of mine in seminary was a shepherd. Prior to knowing Erica, I had a limited imagination of who shepherds were and what they might look like. I tended to think of shepherds as older men, usually with a beard. Erica was a 27-year-old woman (she did not have a beard).

Erica worked at a farm just 20 minutes outside of Durham, NC where we went to school. There, she tended to two sheep: Molly and Maggie. I asked her one day what it was like to be a shepherd, what the work of shepherding entailed. "Oh we have to do all sorts of things to make sure Molly and Maggie are being well cared for," she told me. "Watch for parasites, carefully measure food intake, shear them for their wool, make sure they don't get lost, treat them when they get injured (which is more often than you'd think). Basically provide a ton of damage control, because sheep are so prone to get into places they shouldn't be!"

Erica's description of life as a shepherd illustrates the great nurturing and attentiveness required to tend to just two sheep, let alone a whole flock. As Erica claims, sheep can do very little without a shepherd. Without a guide to untangle them from the fencing when they get stuck, or steer them back to safety when they stray too far, sheep are a hazard to themselves. Sheep, like us, can do very little without their shepherd. Sheep, like us, are helpless on their own, and are utterly dependent on their shepherd.

But although we sheep stray, and although our straying can be costly, scripture gives us an image of God as a shepherd who never leaves our side, despite how annoying we are to work with. And interestingly, scripture *also* gives us an image of God as a sheep: Jesus, the Lamb of God. So in this season of Advent, in this time when we reflect on the incarnation, on what it means that God becomes one of us to better know and understand our condition, we worship God the Shepherd, who becomes a sheep, who walks with us, who meets us right here in the pasture.

MUSIC

#502

The King of Love My Shepherd Is

verses 1, 3, 4 & 6

1 The King of love my shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
and he is mine forever.

3 Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me,
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

4 In death's dark vale I fear no ill,
with thee, dear Lord, beside me,
thy rod and staff my comfort still;
thy cross before to guide me.

6 And so, through all the length of days,
thy goodness faileth never.
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house forever.

REFLECTION II

Rev. Ali Tranvik

As lovely as the image of God the Shepherd is, I have to admit, I don't *love* how this metaphor portrays me. If God is the Shepherd then I am a sheep, and frankly, there are way more animals that I'd rather be compared to. Sheep are passive and blindly follow whoever it is who has a stick. They're skittish. They're stubborn. They're fearful. They're easily distracted. They constantly wander off even when they're walking on a well-defined path. But perhaps this is a more accurate image of humanity—of myself—than I'd like to admit. It's an image that reveals that I need God more than I'd like to admit.

But there's another image of us that this God-the-Shepherd image yields. Yes, we're the sheep, but if we are made in the image of God, reflected in the image of God, then so too are we shepherds in this metaphor. Created in the image of God the Shepherd, we are therefore called to a life not

only of following, as sheep, but also to a life of shepherding—of leading and tending to and caring for others. Or perhaps shepherding one another is what *following* God the Shepherd really means...

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes our call to shepherding explicit, when he tells his disciples: "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep" (21:15-16). This commission to be shepherds reminds me of something memorable Pope Francis said a few years ago when talking to a group of Christians. He said, "you must smell like sheep." I realize that could be interpreted in a couple different ways. I don't think he meant literally, or probably not a lot of people would come to church. He meant, as he explained in his next words, that we shepherds must let those we tend to "rub off on us," we must be in the midst of their suffering, knowing their pain as our pain, and loving them as intimately and fiercely as we can. SO much so we become people *marked by the odor of our work*. We shepherds must go to the places of suffering and chaos and crisis, the places where sheep are stranded and in danger. We must live with hay in our hair, our cloaks tattered, and our crooks worn thin. Our sheep, in other words, must be so much a part of who we are and what we do, that we as shepherds begin to *smell* like them.

There is much work to be done, good shepherds. And sometimes, this work will lead us outside in the comforts of the pasture.

MUSIC **#769 If You But Trust in God to Guide You** **verses 1, 3, 4**

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| <p>1 If you but trust in God to guide you
with gentle hand through all your ways,
you'll find that God is there beside you
when crosses come, in trying days.
Trust then in God's unchanging love;
build on the rock that will not move.</p> <p>4 Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving,
offer your service faithfully.
Trust heaven's word; though undeserving,
you'll find this promise true to be.
This is our confidence indeed:
God never fails in time of need.</p> | <p>3 The Lord our restless hearts is holding,
in peace and quietness content
We rest in God's good will unfolding,
what wisdom from on high has sent.
God, who has chosen us by grace,
knows very well the fears we face.</p> |
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CONFESSION OF FAITH **Apostles' Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE

Gathered into one flock, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need...

God of many names, you meet us in the ordinary stuff of our daily lives, reminding us that as we prepare for your incarnate coming this Advent season, you already dwell among us here and

now. Open us to encountering you anew this Advent, in surprising ways and unexpected places and unsuspecting people, and help us see that you are Emmanuel, God-with-us. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God the Shepherd, we give you thanks for the ways that you tend to us, lovingly and persistently. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, be with us and assure us of your loving presence. Held in the love of your embrace, so too empower us to tend to our fellow sheep caught in places of danger and death, and embolden us in the holy work of shepherding, that we might stray from the pasture for the sake of our neighbors most in need. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God who created the green pastures in which we walk, we give you thanks for the gift of your creation. For the lakes and rivers in our community that cleanse and refresh, for forests that provide shelter for our fellow creatures, for the harvest of the earth that feeds and sustains us all. Just as you tend to us, so too may we tend to land on which we live. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of rest, you make us to lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters. May all those who are weary and worn find rest in you today. Be especially with parents and teachers working tirelessly to educate kids from home, students who are heading into the final weeks of their screen-based semesters, healthcare workers working overtime as hospital beds continue to fill, elderly neighbors who long for community and connection, small business owners and employees who are wondering how they'll make ends meet this month, essential workers whose labor is underthanked and undercompensated, those who are far away from home and those for whom home is not a safe or easy place to be, those who are kept awake at night with worry. Restore our souls, O God. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of tenderness, be with those who are suffering in mind, body, or spirit today. We pray especially for Gil Hartlage, Terry Stejskal, Maynard and Marian Henjum, Jeannie Kuzmich, Diane Wenninger, John and Barb Thomson, Kim and Gary Jacobson, as they grieve the death of Gary's aunt, and Erik Haugland as he grieves the death of his grandfather. We pray for peace and comfort for the grieving loved ones of Janice Solberg and Doris Boyum who now rest in your eternal embrace. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

"You feed your flock like a shepherd; you gather the lambs in your arms, you carry them in your bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (Isa 40:11). Feed us, gather us, carry us, and lead us we pray, **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER

And now let us pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

ART REFLECTION

BLESSING

As we prepare for God incarnate to come into our world this Advent season, may the God who is already with us, Emmanuel, surprise you with his presence and as you go forth. **Amen**

SENDING SONG O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
Embracing all things far and nigh:
In strength and beauty come and stay;
Teach us your will and guide our way
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O King of nations, come,
O Cornerstone that binds in one:
Refresh the hearts that long for you;
Restore the broken, make us new.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

DISMISSAL

Go in peace in the name of our shepherding God.
Thanks be to God.

POSTLUDE

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We invite you to make an offering by sending a check to the church or by visiting our new, secure online giving page which can be found at the bottom of our home page: www.crossofglory.us Thanks for your support!

<p>Congregational Support as of 10/31/2020 Annual Budget: \$225,000.00 Year to Date Budgeted: \$186,483.34 Year to Date Received: \$183,069.29 Difference: \$-3,414.05</p>

Community Announcements

- Today after Zoom worship, in lieu of Virtual Coffee Hour, we will gather for "Table Talks," our new monthly Adult Ed series where we explore the ways faith informs our everyday lives. This month's topic is Faith + Gratitude. All are welcome to take part!

- If you haven't yet had the chance to mail back your 2021 pledge card, please do so and remember to hand-write your name on the front or back of the card or return envelope. Thank you for your prayerful discernment and generosity as we celebrate the God in whom we are always being made new!
- The December issue of the Glory Banner, our monthly newsletter, will be arriving in your inbox or mailbox this next week. If you do not receive it or would like to change your communications preferences, please let Sue in the office know (office@crossofglory.us).
- Bible Study will gather on Tuesday morning at 9:30 am on Zoom. Join us by phone, tablet, or computer as we explore the texts for the upcoming week.
- To make a donation to CEAP in lieu of their Toys for Joy event, you can mark "CEAP" on the Special Offering envelope. Checks can be made out to "CEAP Gratitude and Joy." Reach out to Barb Thomson and the Community Needs Circle at bjthomson@comcast.net or 763-425-9393 with any questions.
- Be aware there is a scam going around churches right now asking for gift cards and using pastor's names. If you get an email or text message that appears to be from Pastor Ali requesting the purchase of a gift card, do not respond. Pastor Ali will always reach out to you directly by phone or from her church email (atranvik@crossofglory.us), and will never ask you to purchase gift cards. If you receive any suspicious communications or have any questions, please reach out to the church office. Thanks!
- Pastor Ali is available for pastoral care and prayer. Reach out to her anytime at atranvik@crossofglory.us or 763-533-8602.