



ADVENT IN THE VALLEY

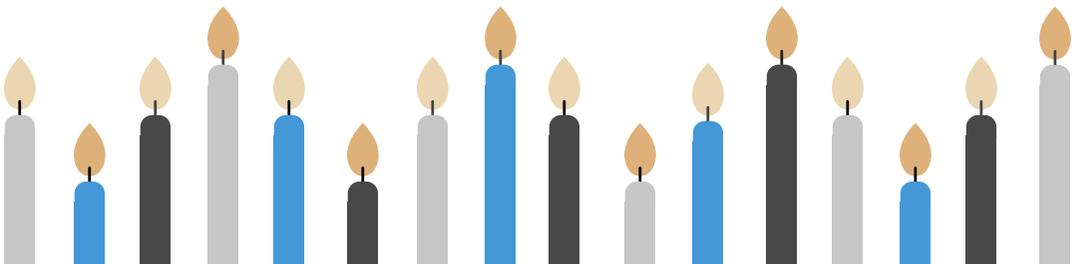
WEEK 4: LOVE

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Through the prophets, God promised a Messiah. We are in awe of Jesus' birth – that God came to us this way, in a weak and vulnerable baby. The mighty God of the universe has become Emmanuel, "God with us."

The first Advent candle reminds us to have hope for a better world. The second candle reminds us that God's dreams for peace can become real in our world. The third Advent candle reminds us that God calls us to share joy by being part of the healing of the world. Today, we light the fourth Advent candle. It reminds us of God's promise to be with us and to love us, now and always.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we thank you for your promise that you will be with us always. We rejoice in your faithfulness. Give us courage to respond with the same love and compassion shown by Jesus. Amen.



"Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.' Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.'
Hebrews 10: 5-7a

Week Four Reflections from Rev. Matthew Brown

Advent is a time of year when we frequently find ourselves reaching for our wallets. \$20 for a fresh turkey; \$45 for a Christmas tree; \$15 for Christmas lights; \$25 for a Christmas gift for a dear friend or loved one – the list could go on and on (and it can lead to a really big credit card bill in January if you're not careful!) Throughout Advent, we are surrounded by so many "transactions" – both big and small – as we make our preparations for Christmas.

Religious life in Ancient Israel was greatly influenced by transactional thinking. When couples married families exchanged gifts (dowries) to satisfy social mores. At the beginning of the growing seasons bulls and sheep were sacrificed in the temple by the priests, to secure Yahweh's blessing upon the annual harvest. But what happens when you don't have enough money to buy a marriage gift, or to pay for a bull to sacrifice? What happens when you can't afford that fresh turkey and Christmas tree, or the latest greatest tech-gizmo that your child or grandchild is hoping that Santa will bring them? Does God's blessing upon your life stop? Is Christmas ruined?

Love, of course, is not transactional. Great prophets like Isaiah knew this, and it's why they railed against burnt offerings and sin offerings that made it appear as though God's love and blessing were dependent upon our ability as humans to satisfy the rules and norms we make up. Love, as St. Paul writes, does not insist on its own way. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And when we love, we are free – free to give of ourselves without any expectation of receiving something in return. When we love, we experience the essence of God.

The twentieth century children's poet Theodor Seuss Geisel shared this divine truth with us using slightly different words (you likely know him by another name...)

*And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"*

Questions for further reflection:

What activities or people remind you that you are loved beyond measure by our living God?
Are you making room for them amidst all of life's many transactions this Advent?
How might you "make room in your inn" to receive God's incarnate love anew?