

THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS



Serve & Enrich
Zion United Church
of Christ

The Sunday After Christmas – Persia: A Place of Return

Prelude

Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem

Gathering: Light for the Journey

A Message from our Guide—Our journey to Bethlehem was all about the places “on the way.” In this week after Christmas, we may feel like “whew... we did it, we’ve arrived.” But we have one more stop to consider—Persia. Why Persia? Because the “wise ones from the East” go back to their homeland... likely Persia. After we come to pay homage to the Christ Child, our life journey continues!

Advent Wreath Lighting— As we approach the beginning of a new year, we often take stock of our lives and spend time in contemplation and discernment. This continuing story of the birth of Christ also involves inquiry. Three wise “seekers” came to visit the newborn Christ, guided by a new star they had noticed. On this last day of our series, we ask ourselves, what are we seeking? Where is our attention focused? What new stars may be calling to us? Will we just go back into routines of life or will we take this moment to understand more deeply how we can “return anew?”

Advent Wreath Song

O Little Town of Bethlehem/We’re On Our Way

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Advent Wreath Reading—The journey continues, and the light remains. We have been changed on this journey. We have journeyed from grand to humble places in search of Good News. We are a people who believe that Good News resides in every place. The milestones and markers of hope, peace, joy, and

love have guided us along the way. God's light continues to go before us, we are never alone.

*We're on our way
We're on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway*

*With all the earth
In all our hearts
We're on our way
This is the day.*

Opening Prayer and Words of Assurance—Holy and Living God, we pray for all who seek. Too often, we are seeking things that do not satisfy. Give us wisdom to pursue what really matters as this new year approaches. Call us to a “turning”—following your Star of Wonder. Call us to “re-turn” toward your purposes for us. Remind us that our longing and our waiting are wrapped in your care. Draw us to a more simple and humble existence in which our treasures are defined by the hope, peace, joy, and love we feel and also give away. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, the Christ, the Savior of Our Lives. Amen.

Let this be a marker of assurance that we are moving in a faithful direction: God is with us every step of our way toward your Kin-dom. Jesus has been born into our lives. The Spirit is transforming us in this place.

****Hymn**

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice, 198

Prayer—God of Hope, we come to you today longing for your presence in our lives and with all those who suffer—in body, mind, or spirit. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers for those in your community and around the world who are in need of healing and wholeness]*

God of Joy, we come to you today so deeply grateful for celebrations, triumphs, and even small steps toward the lives we seek and the world we desire. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers of thanksgiving]*

Holy God of Peace and Love, we know you are near. We know that every step along the way to Bethlehem in this Advent season was a step closer to renewed life in Jesus, the Christ. We know that your Spirit resides within us, growing day by day into the fullness of the Kin-dom. In this moment, we pause in silence, marking your presence with awe and asking you to fill us and guide us along our journey into the new year.

The Lord's Prayer (unison)—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 debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Bell Choir

Exploring Together—The Gifts We Carry with Us

We Hear God's Word—*Matthew 2:1-12*

Vivian Thomas

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” **9** When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Meditation

Persia: A Place of Return

Hymn

We Three Kings of Orient Are, 233

We Respond to God's Word with Our Giving

Invitation—Like the magi from the east, we bring our gifts to the Christ child this day. May the gifts we offer help fulfill a bit of the hope, peace, joy, and love the world is longing for.

December Benevolence—The Christmas Fund

****Doxology***To the tune of “Away in a Manger”*

*Praise God for these gifts that we offer today
and bless them for good in the world, this we pray.
Praise Jesus, the Christ-Child, our Hope and our Stay,
the Spirit, our Keeper, our Guide on the Way.*

****We Give Thanks**—God of generosity, may your peace and your love seep into our hearts and our offerings, that we might become shining examples of your light in a dark and hurting world. Thank you for your many gifts— this gift of community, the enthusiasm for learning, the power of generosity, and the gift of love. May our gifts and our very lives bring your blessings to the world. Amen.~

A Message from Our Guide—We checked the signs and markers all along the way to make sure we were moving in a faithful direction. And now, with faith, we move on into a new year with perseverance for the continued journey ahead. Having been to Bethlehem, we know that the Light of Christ shines through any night we may encounter. We are never alone. And so we sing with confidence, that Jesus Christ is born and goes before us!

Hymn*Jesus, Oh, What a Wonderful Child, 219*

Benediction—And now as you go forth from this place, know that all the places you encounter in the world will contain signs and markers of God’s work among us. So keep your senses alert, your perception wide, and your heart open to new discoveries along the way.

****Sung Response**

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray,
cast out our fear, and draw us
near; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our
Lord Emmanuel.*

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Postlude*Behold That Star*