

# Advent Letter & Important Information about Worship

Greetings sisters and brothers in Christ!

On our dining room table sits a special Advent candle with what looks like a calendar imprinted on the side. Every night, we light our special Advent candle and mark the day in red, green, or purple highlighter. On our kitchen counter sits an Advent calendar for our dog, Nina. Every day around lunch time, either Katherine or I will puncture a hole to unveil the tasty treats, which Nina quickly sits, paws, and lays down in excitement for. Every morning I wake up, it's another day closer to Christmas, and I can't believe 2020 is almost to its end. We are all waiting for something, we are all anticipating something during this Advent season, perhaps even more than usual. We may want Christmas to come more quickly, dogs may prefer to eat all the treats at once, but we are called to wait. We may be counting down the days until the pandemic is over or when we don't have to social distance from our church family, but we are, nonetheless, found waiting.



Throughout this pandemic, I've been considering myself more as a coach with a game plan than an architect with a blueprint. The quote of the day for many has been to stay flexible and adaptable, to take things one day at a time. We can't lay out grandiose or absolute plans without having that asterisk of \*subject to change\* at the tail end of everything we say and do. Part of the reason is we never know what to expect. And although we have gotten what we didn't expect from this pandemic, in the sense that it is still going on and affecting our lives in ways we never imagined and in ways we can't even fully understand yet, the story of Christmas is also one in which we got something we never expected; only, in a positive way, through the humble birth of a Savior who would come to save us from our sins and reconcile us to God.

After two weeks of being just virtual after Thanksgiving, our regathering team and worship team came together to discuss what we plan to do for the weeks ahead. It was not an easy decision and we had varying opinions represented in our discussion. But the decision made and the consensus we came to was to do in-person worship on December 13<sup>th</sup>, December 20<sup>th</sup> and December 24<sup>th</sup>, and then to go all virtual from December 27<sup>th</sup> through the end of January. Even though we will be in-person through Christmas Eve, virtual worship will still continue to be available for each of those services. Things for our youth will still continue, whether in-person before Christmas or virtually after Christmas. And we will continue to brainstorm what fun, safe, and meaningful things we might be able to do for our children in 2021. I am grateful for all those who have worked so hard to do what we can in the midst of this unexpected and difficult pandemic, and I look forward to seeing what God continues to do in and through us in the days to come.

On December 13<sup>th</sup>, we will be having communion and celebrating the theme of joy, as represented in the third candle of Advent. Whether you're taking a pre-packaged communion cup from one of our gloved and masked volunteers, or getting elements ready from home to partake in, we look forward to sharing in this joyous sacrament with you. No matter where we are, whether it's in the sanctuary or on the couch in our pajamas, we are able to worship, because God is there. Worship was never confined to a building. Worship has always been more about a spirit and heart matter than a location matter. For those coming to in-person worship, there will not be singing on the 13<sup>th</sup>, but there will be lots of joyful noise making, as we will encourage people to grab a bell from one of our masked and gloved volunteers or bring their own hand-held noise maker from home. On December 20<sup>th</sup>, we will be having our Christmas pageant (not live, but pre-recorded and

displayed on our screen for in-person worship, as well as displayed virtually for those worshipping from home). And our Christmas Eve service will be held live and virtually at 9pm.

Although we have wi-fi in the church now, along with a dedicated camera, we are still needing to work on the best way to livestream our services through it. Therefore, although we will be recording services, they will be uploaded to YouTube after the fact. So, if worshipping from home, the best way to see service live, as of now, is on Zoom, whether through the following link—<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8537182720?pwd=bmdLSEhCOGV0dzNSU0J2azcvM1QvZz09>—or using the following information: 1) Call 1-646-876-9923, 2) Enter Meeting ID: 853 718 2720 followed by #, 3) Press # again, and 4) Enter Password: 29626 followed by #. If our online ministry, which is here to stay even beyond the pandemic, is something you're interested investing in, whether with your talents, time, or generosity, please let us know.

Though the weather is getting colder, for in-person worship, windows will still be opened before service starts to increase ventilation. Therefore, we invite those who are coming to in-person worship to dress warmly, with layers that can easily be taken off or put on and placed at your side in your pew. And, as stated in our "Do No Harm" Guidelines, we want to remind you of the following: *\*\*If you are someone who is over the age of 60, have underlying health issues (especially breathing-related), recently went through chemo or radiation treatment or other intensive surgery that weakened your immune system, we invite you to take extreme caution and use great discernment before choosing to attend in-person worship. The goal of our Greater New Jersey Annual Conference, and, thus, of our church, is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ as, together, we flatten the curve of COVID-19 and ensure zero infections are spread by United Methodist activity. Please know that your health and safety are our number one priority.\*\** We are taking every precaution when we gather and ask that you do the same, following not only our guidelines (which can be found on our website if you need a refresher), but any guidelines from our state and the CDC.

For the next two weeks, our worship leaders and any volunteers are being given a free pass for as many of the services we are in-person as they would like. We want no one to feel obligated to come in-person, and everyone to feel comfortable making decisions that will make the most sense for them and make them feel most comfortable. That goes for all people in our church family, including you. Please don't feel obligated to come just because we're having in-person worship. Also, as mentioned in our second state of the church address awhile back, we recognize that we have red light, yellow light, and green light people in our church when it comes to their comfort level of coming to church. With cases rising to the extent they have in our state and nation, we know that more people may prefer to take red as their traffic signal this month compared to earlier in the year. We are a stigma free and label free church, and that means feeling freedom from any worry or concern from what other people think of your traffic light color at any season of the pandemic.

Those who lived before Jesus came into the world had been waiting for the Messiah for a long time. They did not get what they expected when the Messiah finally came, but Jesus turned out to be exactly what they would need. I hope that even in the midst of what has been an unexpected year, that you might find what you need in Christ and find a reason to keep singing (even if not during in-person worship). And I pray you may find a reason to keep highlighting those dates and unveiling those treats leading up to the day when we believe light shines in a new and glorious way.

With you in the waiting,

Pastor Donald Kirschner