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First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017

The First Sunday of Advent often focuses on hope, especially hope that seems elusive in the midst of wilderness: of despair, fear, or grief. The juxtaposition of wilderness and hope provides a critical opportunity to name the importance of hope for this world in the midst of a Christian tradition that often focuses on hope for the next. A service that allows worshipers to begin to connect the coming of Jesus into this world with our hopes for life here and now in these bodies will do the important work of making relevant what Jesus says about money, possessions, and bodies. More importantly, a service that allows worshipers to name the wilderness of those who are impoverished as one into which Jesus exudes hope will do the important work of connecting Sunday's worship to the tax reform debate.

This word "impoverished" is not used by accident – it indicates that people are made poor, rather than just show up poor. This is a loaded idea, because if people are made poor, one must ask what makes them poor. A congregation that is not yet accustomed to talking about institutional and systemic oppression can begin this week to wrestle with the reality that Jesus speaks into systems: that his turning over the tables of money changers was simply a concrete example of what he was about.

As you plan for this week, use the suggestions below to craft a service that will help to draw congregants into an Advent full of the expectation that Jesus will upend injustice, inequity, and iniquity, and likewise that Jesus will call us into this very work - in his name.

Scripture Notes

Isaiah 64:1-9

- **Our Sinfulness:**
 - This passage describes human sinfulness, "we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." This is a powerful image that evokes touch, smell, and memory. Congregants will be able to quickly comprehend the grimy mess that can be made with a filthy cloth.
 - Likewise, it describes our iniquity as something which, like the wind, can carry us away. The phrase "carried away" is one commonly used to describe being caught up in a habit or a passion. Congregants will be able to identify with this tendency, and visualize the dangerous power of iniquity.
 - Using a plain definition for "iniquity" such as the one found on Dictionary.com ("gross injustice or wickedness"), can lay the groundwork for a turn towards teaching about those injustices with which Jesus was concerned.
- **Being Re-formed:**
 - God is at first described as hiding, or having turned away, but is then petitioned for forgiveness. Forgiveness replaces desolation.
 - This passage contains the claim, "we are the clay, and you are our potter." This image, which will be familiar to many, provides a helpful hook for leading worshippers to be changed and formed by worship, and by the teachings of Jesus. Those who have found this passage to be comforting may be challenged to be uncomfortable. Aim for this discomfort as something that can prompt one to tune in to the economic policy discussion.
- **Connections to tax reform will name as unclean those aspects of the tax reform that perpetuate inequities that Jesus clearly denounced and the iniquity of those who profit on the backs of the poor.**

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

- Save us!
 - This passage contains the powerful plea, “Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. The idea that God’s might may yet be “stirred up” is hopeful! Something new can happen. Restoration and salvation remain viable possibilities.
 - Attention to this phrase will be made even more powerful by reminders that salvation is not merely about the next life: the prayer Jesus taught us makes this plea: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.
 - The line “Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may saved,” is repeated three times in this passage, making it a strong choice for use as a refrain with the congregation. (See below).
- Bread and Drink:
 - This passage also references bread and drink. “You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.” Much can be done with this reference: it will not be difficult to describe those in your own community who feed on the bread of tears and who drink tears to full measure. This is a powerful description of some of the most vulnerable, of the least of these.
 - Churches who are celebrating the Lord’s Supper can use this language in contrast to the words of institution.
- Connections to tax reform will name the unjust system as a powerful force from which we must be saved, and will ask God to stir up God’s might among those gathered so that they might partner with Jesus in the work of care for bodies that are sick, hungry, and broken.

Mark 13:24-37

- Stay Awake:
 - This passage contains the warning to keep awake, prepared for the coming of the Lord.
 - In a passage that contains a reference to “the elect” and slaves, and makes the claim that the Son of Man will have returned long before now, it is difficult to distill the call on our own lives. But this warning to “keep awake” is a poignant one which is highlighted in other teachings of Jesus.
 - Important work needs to be done with the question: on whom (or what) are we waiting as we struggle to keep awake? Changing the focus from waiting on the Sun of Man to come in a cloud of glory to actively working to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth can affect a new willingness to engage in policy debates.
- Connections to tax reform will name uncritiqued participation in unjust economies as a dangerous sleep from which we must be extricated: keep awake, do not be lulled.

Suggested Sermon/Service Themes

- My Hope is Built on Nothing Less
 - This theme, if relying on the hymn, would require difficult juxtaposition of the bloody death of Jesus with the quiet Advent we often embrace. But there is power in this juxtaposition, especially if used to highlight Jesus’ death at the hands of the powers of the empire.

- The refrain from the hymn could be used powerfully in the service: “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand.”
- Stir Up Your Might
 - This comes from the Psalm reading and provides the opportunity to claim the movement of the Spirit, which both calls us and empowers us to follow Jesus in this time and this place in the face of the present darkness.
- Keep Awake
 - This warning, this plea, alerts all who listen that by dozing off, by turning our attention away, by becoming complacent or distracted, we risk missing Jesus. What it is that we will miss needs to be interpreted: it will be important to emphasize missing the chance to be a part of Jesus’ work in this world. This emphasis would be strengthened by reminders of Jesus claims about “the least of these.”
- Costly Hope
 - This theme anticipates that if we hope for Jesus, then we hope for those things that Jesus promised, and those things that Jesus taught – even when they cost us dearly. The cost to us may be financial, or political, or relational. It may cause us to change where we live, or where we work, or how we spend our time or our energy. But if we hope in the coming of Jesus into our wilderness, God’s love come down, the risen Lord, then we must be changed by the life he lived.

Worship Resources

Responsive Reading 1 (Stir Up Your Might)

One: Come, Emmanuel, tear open the heavens.

All: Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us. O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: Come, Emmanuel, bring life to those who eat and drink tears.

All: Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us. O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: Come, Emmanuel, and throw over the tables of the money-changers as they guard the temple, and our churches, and our legislature, and our hearts.

All: Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us. O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: Come Emmanuel, our potter, and forms us to do your work.

All: Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us. O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: Come, Emmanuel, and bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease. Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

All: Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us. O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Responsive Reading 2 (Keep Awake) (Using text from *Christians All, Your Lord is Coming*)

One: Christians all, your Lord is coming, calling you to serve in deed.

All: Keep awake!

One: See the ones who hurt and suffer, hear their cry and act with speed.

All: Keep awake!

One: Set all selfish ways behind you. Purge your hearts of sinful greed.

All: Keep awake!

One: Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ in you will meet their need!

All: Keep awake!

Prayer of Confession 1: Emmanuel, we confess that those things you teach about money and wealth and possessions are really hard to swallow. We confess that we are not sure how to make them work in our own lives. We confess that we find it difficult not to worry, not to bury our treasure, not to demand that our work is worth more than our peers at the end of the day. We confess that we more want to talk about money in church, or in prayer, than we do over dinner. We confess that staying alert – to policy, to politics, to the needs of those in our communities who eat and drink tears, is sometimes more than we can bear. Teach us, Lord. Wake us up. Help us do your work, partners in the coming of your kingdom, preparing the way of the Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession 2: Emmanuel, we confess that our hope waivers. We confess that though the tempting strain of Glorias and Alleluias beckons us, we remain tangled in weary hopelessness and we carelessly put our hope in those things that cannot save us: in clinging to possessions, and power, and surplus, and anger. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Do not let us be carried away by our iniquity. Forgive us our greed. Cause us to listen, again, to all you have taught us so that we might do your work. Teach us your ways. Give us hope. Show us hope. Fix our hope. Be our hope. Amen.

Suggested Hymns and Worship Songs:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Come, O Long-expected Jesus

Prepare the Way of the Lord (Taize)

Emmanuel, Emmanuel

Called As Partners in Christ's Service

Hope of the World

My Hope is Built on Nothing Less

My Life is in You, Lord (Maranatha) (one of the verses is "My hope is in you, Lord.")

For Everyone Born

Build Your Kingdom Here (Rend Collective)

Turning Over Tables (The Brilliance)

People, Look East

Christians All, Your Lord is Coming