

## WORSHIP NOTES

*First Sunday of Advent • November 27, 2011*

### **The Season**

Today is the first Sunday of the Church Year, and the first of the four Sundays of Advent, a season with roots that can be traced back to the fourth century. Originally the season was 40 days and it was time of fasting and penitence prior to the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany. In the ninth century the length of the season was reduced to four weeks, and it has remained that way since. There is more emphasis on the expectation, preparation, and promise of this season rather than the penitential nature in our celebration of Advent, but hints of the penitential interpretation can be found in the texts of the first half of the season.

The past, the future, and the present are woven together in this season as we remember God's promise, await his coming again, and celebrate his presence with us now. We are invited to pause and reflect, to open the door and let God in. As we light the first candle on the Advent wreath and pray for our Lord's return, we also pray that a greater understanding of the depth of his love will be awakened in us. He came, he comes, he will come . . .

### **In Word . . .**

We begin the year looking toward the end. On this First Sunday of Advent we hear about the end of time as Jesus interrupts our routines to say, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." Each of our texts speaks of waiting for that time. Isaiah is waiting and longing for God to intervene in a world where everything seems to have gone wrong. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . ." The Psalmist pleads for God to come and save us. Paul writes to the church in Corinth encouraging the people who are waiting for the return of Christ, assuring them (and us) that God has already given us the strength we need to bear whatever comes our way. Our Gospel passage from Mark 13 comes at the end of Jesus' eschatological discourse. Jesus tells his followers to stay alert and cautions them to be watchful as they wait for his return. The words of Paul and of Jesus speak a common truth: God is faithful. God knows our anxieties, God knows that we wonder about the future, our destinies, where and how life will end. We live in-between times (the first and second coming). It is a time filled with possibilities and purpose as well as some uncertainty, a time that challenges us to consider what really matters. We begin our Advent journey waiting. Keep awake, keep alert . . . whatever else the future may hold, Jesus is coming.

### **And Song . . .**

#### **Traditional (9:00)**

"Wake Awake, for Night is Flying" is by Lutheran pastor and German hymn writer Philipp Nicolai. It is believed that Nicolai wrote this text during the devastating epidemic in Westphalia (1597) when 1300 of his parishioners died. This beloved Advent hymn speaks of faith in adversity and Christ's coming in glory, drawing images from the Parable of the Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13), the watchman on a city wall (Isaiah 52:8), and the Song of Triumph in Heaven (Revelation 19:6-9). The tune WACHET AUF takes its names from the first line of Nicolai's text, and was used by J.S. Bach in his Cantata No. 140 (1731).

#### **Contemporary (10:30)**

"Carol of the Dawn" is from Janèt Whitaker's Advent collection, *Tryin' to Get Ready*. The bridge quotes the opening verse from today's reading from Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . ." Whitaker describes this piece as using modal melodic elements from the Jewish tradition to suggest the plaintive cries which echoed across the barren desert, from people that walked in darkness. She writes "We are that same people. Still we walk, and watch, and wait."