

"Keep Watch for Kindness Opps!"

November 29, 2020; 10:00 am

Matthew 24:36-44

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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### The Day and Hour Unknown

<sup>36</sup> "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son,<sup>[a]</sup> but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

<sup>42</sup> "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

### ADVENT COMING AMONG US

And so it begins. Advent—the season of waiting, watching, preparing for the Coming. "Adventus" means that literally—*coming*.

Advent is a season of awe and wonder. A time of waiting, not just for Jesus' birth, but for the transformation of our lives and the world. Something is being born in us and we are waiting for its arrival. (Bruce Epperly)

And as we wait, watch, prepare and get ready in the depths of our being—not just for a busy Christmas shopping and cooking and celebrating season—but for a rebirth inside ourselves, we focus on the Promises of God. Our theme for Advent 2020 is just this: "God's Promises & Presence—Emmanuel!"

For God did indeed promise to send us a Messiah, the Divine Presence to walk and talk and teach and heal among us. But God promises so much more! The touchpoints of those promises are what we focus on with our candles—as we light candles and pray against the darkness of this season and this unprecedented time in our lives and our world.

Hope. Peace. Love. Joy.

The four pillars of our faith journey through Advent. If you haven't yet, I encourage you to procure an Advent Calendar for your home this year. We will be worshiping and lighting the way through Advent together—in spirit, on the screen, and around our kitchen tables.

We find ourselves in a Pivot Place. This liminal time between Thanksgiving and Advent and Christmas. We look back at Christ's first coming and ahead to a second coming. In our civic life, we are between an election season and a new administration of our leadership. We aren't quite sure yet what that all means. What collective life will look like in the coming seasons.

In the “now and not yet” of a second wave of COVID, we practice careful enclosure and safe loving of one another, and look forward in hope to a vaccine—again, not really sure what the future holds for our individual and communal lives.

Countless Promises of God are given to us—even in end times, pivot places, unprecedented, unsure, earth-shaking times and circumstances. The promises of God hold sure and strong. Reminding ourselves of those promises—which have come down through many ages to many people, grounds us in our faith and our place in this universe and history.

These times may be unprecedented, anxious and unnerving for us, but they are not new to God. For God has been holding, guiding and shepherding Her people for eons, and will hold us close and get us through as well—together!

The #1 Best Promise is what we celebrate today and in the coming weeks of Advent: Emmanuel—God.With.Us.

Can there be any better presents for the holiday and any day than God's *presence*?!

Jean Brody, in “Plain Ole' Kindness”

When my mother-in-law, Jean Brody, passed away on November 18, she had been struggling with her health for awhile, especially in these isolating, COVID times. Yet, she kept writing—an article every week—and sharing her words of wisdom for us all—in whatever season and life stage we find ourselves.

Jean always had “something to say” to the world, even when her energy was low and the tiredness of life challenged her spirits. In recent weeks, she was renewing and re-purposing articles and stories from over the years, knowing that life wisdom is timeless and we needed to hear, again, these vital messages.

Thus, we found it poignant and profound when we realized her last article, sent the week she died, was on Kindness. We had just been struggling to understand the lack of kindness we were seeing and hearing out in our land and in our world. Jean's story came to us at just the right time—a kind of “God Thing” as she liked to call times when the Spirit breaks into our lives in undeniable ways.

In that “message from the other side of the veil,” Jean tells of a plane trip she and husband Geno took from their seasonal home in Florida to their farm in Kentucky. The ride on the rickety prop plane involved

a huge temperature drop: 88 to 20 deg. and she had forgotten to bring a coat!

I'll let her tell the story—as she always tells it best:

“When we had to walk to the prop plane in that cold, I thought I would freeze solid. There was one seat on each side of the isle and when I sat down, I couldn't even get the buckle buckled I was shaking so hard.

Right across the narrow isle sat a stunning lady. Her clothes were the latest and she was tall and beautiful. In her hands was a rather fashionable book on motivation and success and a soft leather briefcase. She was obviously *somebody*.

“Atop of her black wool suit she wore a truly *magnificent* fur coat (I don't *believe* in fur coats for people or for myself but suddenly this beautiful lady took this coat off reached over and without a word wrapped it around me like a soft, loving blanket.)

“At first I was speechless. I mean I had never even seen her before but when I looked into her face she smiled and said in the most nurturing quiet voice, “You'll be warm in a minute. Why don't you take a little nap now.”

“And almost instantly I did, but as my body warmed, so did my heart. She was so kind and nurturing more than anybody I knew.

“Somehow, she knew my need, both physical and emotional. When we landed, she *insisted* I wear it across the field into the terminal and when finally, I gave it back to her, she kissed my cheek.

“**Kindness, plain old kindness**, but the kind that goes far beyond the capacity of what most of us would do.

“When I first saw her, I thought she had got to be someone famous and special. She had the courage and the grace.

“Well I still don't know who she was and I don't know about famous. But let me tell you: she was special. She *nurtured* when she saw the need. She recognized the cold and she sacrificed her own comfort for the comfort of a stranger. Kindness epitomized. Kindness from the very heart of a woman.

“This incident became the center of Thanksgiving for me this year. I pray that each one of you will be *touched and warmly wrapped* in the same depth of kindness the lovely lady tenderly bestowed upon me.

The view from the (heavenly) mountain is wondrous.”

### **HOW TO BE UNKIND**

Talk of kindness is in the air a lot of late. Both how folks are choosing to be kind and how, unfortunately, some folks are choosing *not* to be kind. Some are choosing individual freedoms and rights over the common good—not thinking that loving our neighbor is *that* important if it interferes with our personal comfort, convenience, and space.

Jean would have been *most* distraught if she knew (and I think she does) that her apartment had to be vacated with no warning by her grieving family, because her entire wing had to be transformed to a COVID wing for the eight residents who are now fighting the virus at Brookdale.

Jean would be upset at the *cause* of that transmission—one resident’s family coming to visit and refusing to follow the protocols—claiming “their freedom to walk and breathe and visit their loved one meant they didn’t have to wear a mask.”

One couple putting themselves and their comfort over the safety of others—in an assisted living facility where everyone is elderly and at risk—would be deemed by Jean as more than unkind—that’s downright cruel.

Sadly, this story is repeated over and over in countless families and circles. And Jesus must surely weep, along with Jean Brody.

So much arguing. Disputing. About COVID and contagion; about elections and exercising our personal rights. We, frankly, could argue all the way to the cemetery.

I pray every day we can do better as humanity.

### **HOW TO BE KIND**

Thankfully, there are also good stories coming out. Even organizations like churches, who have been most resistant to the words of caution from on high, are

reconsidering what it means to love our neighbor in these times.

“As coronavirus cases spike, a national group that represents thousands of evangelical Christian doctors and other healthcare providers is asking churches to *stop holding services in person*.”

In "A Plea to Our Churches," leaders of the Christian Medical & Dental Associations say that Christians who persist in holding large gatherings at this time could "appear to care only about our individual freedoms and don't care that we may be contributing to others getting this illness because of our selfishness."

Last week we spoke about how we need to stitch a new quilt of humanity—that it’s not that hard—just start with one stitch. One step. One walk alongside our brothers and sisters on the journey. Stories like this are that first step. Let’s see if we can stitch more.

### **ADVENT CALENDAR 2020**

I have an idea for us! Let’s create a different kind of advent calendar. A la Jean’s memory: “she took this coat off reached over and without a word wrapped it around me like a soft, loving blanket.”

**“Not-So-Random Acts of Kindness Advent Calendar”** Every day.

*a) One for folks in our congregation or neighborhood;*

*b) One for folks in the wider circle beyond our ken—outside our tribe.*

## **HERE WE GO—ADVENT!**

Here we go—Advent! It's upon us. Coming. Preparing. Getting ready. What exactly are we to get ready for? In our world?? In this year where we can't do all the "usual preparations" for Advent and Christmas: Bazaar, Hanging of the Greens, decorating the church, our homes, our streets, gathering together to sing and carol, party and partake of countless goodies that probably aren't that good for our bodies, but definitely for our souls!

Perhaps we are getting ready to learn a new way of being in the world. Of walking in our own Neighborhoods, more aware of those right in our midst; of enclosing one another in love and warmth.

Of disregarding the #'s data, all the debates about testing and reports and causes and origins and effectiveness of masks and social-distancing, and simply ***caring***.

For our neighbor—for the stranger in our midst, or friend, or family. It doesn't matter who. Of practicing Care-Full-ness and concentrating on connecting—in every opportunity that presents itself.

Of seeking out the lonely, the isolated and even despairing. Not letting anyone remain alone and wondering if anyone cares.

For Christmas is *not* cancelled. This year or any year. The Christ child still comes—into our midst. Into our hearts. Into the center of our community—as he does every year, waiting to be born in us.

Advent still beckons us to awake! Even in the midst of a pandemic. Even in these "enclosure times." Even when our usual channels of communicating our love and concern are prevented. Even when our vehicles of building community: meetings and holiday parties and dinners around the table—have to be set aside or reimagined—even then.

As we await the presence of a babe who is God made flesh, and a Risen Savior, all in one. We claim the **promise**, for, as David Lose reminds us:

“at the heart of the Christmas story is the **promise** that God not only came in the small and vulnerable form of a baby born to poor and frightened parents, but that God *keeps coming* in small, vulnerable, unexpected, and unlooked for ways even now.

You Never know! The day or the hour that Christ may come. You never know when Christ will show up in your neighbor or stranger—baby or senior.

So, let's keep watching for opportunities to be kind! Every day. To Care. To wrap a warm coat of love around a friend or stranger. To reach out to another in love—to declare that once again God is invading our world—with kindness! Thanks Jean. Thanks Jesus. Amen.

**“A prayer as I put on my mask”**  
(Richard Bott, Moderator, UCCAN)

Creator,  
as I prepare to go into the world,  
help me to see the sacrament  
in the wearing of this cloth -  
let it be "an outward sign  
of an inward grace" -  
a tangible and visible way of living  
love for my neighbours,  
as I love myself.

Christ,  
since my lips will be covered,  
uncover my heart,  
that people would see my smile  
in the crinkles around my eyes.

Since my voice may be muffled,  
help me to speak clearly,  
not only with my words,  
but with my actions.

Holy Spirit,  
As the elastic touches my ears,  
remind me to listen carefully -  
and full of care -

to all those I meet.

May this simple piece of cloth be  
shield and banner,  
and each breath that it holds,  
be filled with your love.  
In your Name and  
in that love,  
I pray.  
May it be so.  
May it be so.

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