

Wilkommen, Mabuhay, Swagat and Jambo!

(That’s welcome in Swedish, Tagalog, Hindi and Swahili)

Welcome by the grace of God. It’s a blessing to have you come and join us. We pray for you to know and experience God’s love and grace. If we can help you take a step on your spiritual journey, please contact me at umcpastorschmidt@gmail.com.

This year’s Advent and Christmas series embraces the theme of homecoming as a wrapper for the challenging biblical texts we are given. Each week’s service will invite us to “unwrap” something that leads us toward making our hearts, lives, families, communities, and world more like the home Christ’s ultimate homecoming will make it to be. At the same time, we’ll have activities that make us remember and reflect on the joy of coming home for Christmas, in whatever form or tradition that may be to you.

Welcome home!

Message: Longing for Christ’s Return

Have you ever wanted something so badly you could hardly stand it? You may have heard the expression, “I wanted it so bad, I could taste it!” I don’t know when you felt that way. You were probably a child when you first said it, staring through the window of a bake shop or a candy store. I think that’s the way most children feel at this time of year. Esperanza and I were watching the Disney channel the other night and the Christmas advertising was overwhelming. I have sympathy for parents, because I’ll bet the younger children are exhausted by the months of promises with no fulfillment - yet. It’s hard to be “nice” for a month when you’re 5.

Aren’t we the same? It’s hard to be nice for a month when you’re 65!

I’m not talking about our Christmas wish list now. I’m talking about our desire for real change in our lives, our health, our job, our family or our nation. We have real problems at home and in our neighborhoods. Add to that the fact that we don’t see our leaders or institutions helping very much with the problems plaguing our cities, state or nation, and we really start to doubt.

It’s not hard to face reality as we begin the season of Advent in 2017.

Only a short time ago, we were watching news stories about parts of Texas, Louisiana and Florida that were underwater. Another hurricane swept through the Caribbean and demolished many islands, including the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. The waters receded, leaving people face-to-face with their new reality. Many have lost everything. It will take years to rebuild. The loss of human life, animals, food sources and infrastructure is a heavy blow. At about the same time, a massive earthquake hit Mexico, a monsoon flooded India and wildfires raged across the Western U.S., including our own neighborhoods here in Corona.

In the meantime, DACA was rescinded, leaving nearly one million young people who immigrated illegally with their parents uncertain about their futures. Tensions between North Korea and other nations, including Japan and the U.S. have many people on edge. Authorities in Hawaii are restarting monthly tests of the nuclear warning system.

Guns were used in violent acts in Las Vegas at a concert, and in homes, neighborhoods and shopping malls. Sexually improper behavior was on display, leading to the rightful termination of some who have abused their position, with many more in denial and under investigation. Sadly, it's easy to imagine there will be other disasters, catastrophes, challenges and fears occupying the headlines in the upcoming months and years.

When we consider the pressing problems of poverty and it's diseases, threats of war and violence, climate change and terrorism, we're brought to that position outside the window, looking in at something we want - peace, but we don't know how to get it.

We're left with questions:

Is it worse now than in years past? Could this be the end?

Maybe. We don't know. No one does. Jesus tells us, *“Nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming”* (Mark 13:32-24, CEB). We must live as those who are ready, prepared for God's kingdom, for Jesus to return to his earthly home so that God's will can be done on earth as it is in heaven. But, that's puts back in front of the window looking in ... wanting something so badly, we can hardly stand it.

I believe this feeling flows from our desire to be in the Kingdom of God. Not in a “sorry, you have to die now” way, but in a “I want to be filled with light and life” way.

We're longing for Jesus to come and put everything right, with power and authority. Instead, it's like the words kids hear when they do something bad: you'll see ... you just wait ... 'til *your father* gets home!

Even the psalmist Asaph gets into the act. In Psalm 20 he sings to God, *“You put us on a diet of tears ... You make us look ridiculous to our friends; our enemies poke fun day after day. God-of-the-Angel-Armies, come back! Smile your blessing smile: that will be our salvation”* (Psalm 80:5-7, The Message).

**We’re watching and waiting in the window, God.
When are you going to do something?**

We heard some difficult words from the prophet Isaiah earlier.

“Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend, make the mountains shudder at your presence ... to shock your enemies into facing you, making the nations shake in their boots!” (Isaiah 64:1-2).

Doesn’t that strike a chord? We want God to come – now! So did Isaiah, 2,700 years ago. If only God would come and wipe all of these problems away, we’d feel better. These words are important, because they help us to see our current problems with a wider lens.

Isaiah reminds us that, no matter where we go around the world, human beings have always struggled with our fears, failures and issues. There are always times when it feels like God is angry or absent. We’re always prone to blow about like fallen leaves on a breezy autumn day: sin leads us to do wrong. We need special times in our life to help us return to God, right our ship, and realign ourselves to God’s mission. The Season of Advent, as we prepare the way of the Lord, is one of those special times.

Where do we get the idea that things can be different?

Paul wrote this to a group of believers going through a hard time, *“Brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions we taught you... Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say”* (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17). Jesus is the God of comfort and compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3). He gives us hope when things are hard.

Jesus said, *“Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen”* (Mark 13:28-30).

Some of us are living through a season of winter in our lives.

People seem cold. We feel like darkness is surrounding us, no matter

where we turn. We don't feel comforted. Our spiritual life seems dry, almost like it's dormant. We're like the fig tree in winter. Never fear, the sun will return and God's grace will fall on you like rain, renewing your spirit and bringing you to a season of new life and hope.

The Kingdom of God is present on earth. That gives us hope. Christmas shows us that Jesus' birth makes it possible. God gave us his Son to light our lives and showers grace on us. Let's gather together so our spirit will be fed. Advent is the time to come home and remember: Jesus came to give us hope. Jesus will come again to set all things right.

We ARE longing for Jesus to return. But, in the meantime, God's kingdom here on earth has been left to us to tend.

Boy, do we have work to do!

When you want someone to come home for Christmas, what's the first thing you do? Invite them.

What's the second? Clean your house.

That's our work: inviting people to God's house and then doing our part to make it ready. I'm not talking about fussing over the details like Martha. I'm talking about resting at the foot of Jesus like Mary, being fed spiritually. That's what comforts us and restores our confidence, no matter how difficult our situation may be. And, once we're confident in ourselves, we're more able to love and care for others.

An important note: part of our work is to pass our blessing on. I'm talking about having the confidence to teach our children, grandchildren and our neighbors about Jesus. If we've just sitting back, waiting on the end times, we aren't watching out for others or helping them prepare. That's on us. Teaching our child is the “*this generation won't pass away*” promise Jesus gives us (Mark 13:30).

There's no doubt: we need the Lord! It doesn't matter whether the seas are calm right now or you're facing a catastrophic storm. We need to hear God's voice speaking clearly. We need reassurance. We need to trust Jesus' promise. We want to hear that God is not like us. Humans keep records of things when they go wrong. We cite “an eye for an eye” but don't realize that you can't bargain for grace.

Thankfully, our Lord doesn't keep a record of our wrongdoing.

We can be confident that *“the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”* (Psalm 103:8, NRSV).

God's grace is given freely. All we have to do is believe and accept it.

Let's take seriously God's call on our lives. Let's embrace all of the unique traditions of our church and families during Advent and Christmas, as we move toward the celebration of the birth of the one God sent to save us from the law of sin and death. Let us make our confession of sin, as individuals and as a community. Let us embrace our need for a Savior. Then we can join the song leader Asaph and sing, *“Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!”* (Psalm 80:3,19; CEB).

Welcome home!

Come on over, the coffee's hot, the food's delicious and the company is great. Come, Lord Jesus.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come to you as your children, looking through the window at the treasures before us. We need your grace, yet we struggle with issues and self-interest. Fill us with a spirit of love and truth. Free us from the tyranny of the urgent, show us how to find peace with you this Advent. Give us the courage to turn away from self-destructive attitudes and behaviors, and follow the course you set. Show us how to truly follow you home, so that we may live and care for others in your name. Amen.

Isaiah 64:1-9 (CEB)

If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!

Mountains would quake before you
like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.

If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.

When you accomplished wonders beyond all our expectations;
when you came down, mountains quaked before you.

From ancient times,
no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him!

You look after those who gladly do right;
they will praise you for your ways.

But you were angry when we sinned;
you hid yourself when we did wrong.

We have all become like the unclean;
all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.

All of us wither like a leaf;
our sins, like the wind, carry us away.

No one calls on your name;
no one bothers to hold on to you,
for you have hidden yourself from us,
and have handed us over to our sin.

But now, LORD, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.

Don't rage so fiercely, LORD;
don't hold our sins against us forever,
but gaze now on your people, all of us:

Mark 13:24-37 (CEB)

“In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.

Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he’s near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”