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Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
Delivered on Sunday, December 6, 2020 (Advent)

### You Are Here

Last week Pastor Scott kicked this series off with what to my mind is *the* quintessential question of the Advent season: “Where are you, God?” In doing so he rehearsed a range of intonations, with varying degrees of fervor and anguish, all of which resonate powerfully with the theological, scriptural, and indeed existential depth of living that marks this season. And this is so very important because too often I think churches, at least many churches I’ve attended in my life, *play* at Advent—they sing the songs, light the candles, speak the prayers, and perform the cantatas. But the stakes feel unmistakably low. Nothing is ventured and so little if anything is really gained. We may walk away from such services more cheerful than we entered (and there’s nothing in the world wrong with that), but there was never any risk involved—no real sense that God would not show up. God was taken for granted. But this year is not like any other year. We have felt the agony of isolation, the loneliness of distance, and, I dare say, in a very real sense, we have experienced the crushing defeat of exile, from each other and from our church home—together our most important means of making God’s presence felt in our community. This year is a year to *do* Advent, and so here we are.

We are here. You are here, at the end of a year that truly justifies asking, “Where are you, God?” It began, you might recall, with bushfires in Australia, which began in 2019 and carried over into 2020, according to Australian Government sources, killing 33 people, destroying more than three thousand homes and more than 42 million acres of land, and claiming the lives of an unfathomable one billion animals. The end of January also saw the early emergence of the coronavirus infection, which the World Health Organization then named COVID-19. In short order, as we know, this made its way across the world, landing on our shores in February or March. The past eight months have seen hospitalizations peak at an all-time high in numerous cities across the country, in many cases overwhelming the capacity of local and regional hospitals and health

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systems to treat infected patients. To date, we have lost 1.5 million people worldwide and 279,000 in the U.S. to this pandemic, to say nothing of the millions who've lost jobs and livelihoods, prompting the worst economic recession this country has known since the Great Depression. The end of May brought the murder of George Floyd, painfully reminding us (those of us who had forgotten, anyway) of America's longest running pandemic of white supremacy and racism, and kicking off another wave of protests and rioting. This, of course, stoked the existing polarizations which certain political actors (I can't bring myself to call them "leaders") have shamelessly inflamed for their own cynical purpose, culminating in an election with unbelievably high stakes, which to this day teeters ever so delicately on the edge of a constitutional crisis. This year has also seen key environmental regulations rolled back, huge multinational conglomerates now emitting and polluting with impunity as a record number of protections are gutted and the U.S. exits what was, for all its faults, the most significant climate pact we had. In fact, it was the day after our election day that simply will not end, November 4, that the U.S. officially withdrew from the Paris accords.

Now despite appearances my objective here is not to bum us all out or depress us more than we already are. But I do think it's vital to take stock of where we are because it's not enough to ask where God is; we need also to find ourselves in this question. Implicitly the question says a lot more: It says, "We are here. Where are you, God?" We have endured a year of unspeakable lows, a year that any reasonable person might regard as being devoid of any semblance of God. Our passage today has a way of speaking directly to this absence. There is in Mark what I can only describe as an anticipatory fervor—throughout the Gospel, but especially in our passage. And there is I think a rather straightforward explanation for this, which is when the Gospel was written. The Gospel could have been written as early A.D. 66, but very likely it was a little later, just as the Romans were closing in on the Judean rebel factions that had rioted and taken control over Jerusalem, culminating in a most devastating event—the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70. To understand the mindset, the mood, the pervasive sense of hopelessness of Mark's

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audience, we need only refer to the author's invocation of Isaiah 40. (Now a quick note is in order:

Although it bears the name of a single prophet, the book of Isaiah was actually compiled over two centuries and is attributed to at least two and possibly three different contingents of authors corresponding to two or three distinct periods in the life of Judah, the Southern Kingdom of Israel. These are known as First Isaiah, which encompasses chapters 1 through 39; Second Isaiah, encompassing chapters 40 through 55 or 66, and/ or possibly Third Isaiah, which covers chapters 56 through 66.) This is significant to our conversation because Mark cites the very beginning of Second Isaiah, chapter 40, in beginning his good news amid a swirling vortex of devastation and hopelessness. Last week, Pastor Scott told about how the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 720 BC. Well the other half of the kingdom, the kingdom Judah, fell to the Babylonians in about 586 BC, and the conquered were exiled to Babylon. The words "comfort, o comfort" that begin Second Isaiah are written to console and encourage these exiles for whom the God of Israel must have seemed a cold and distant memory. These words of comfort and encouragement were written around 539 BC just as the Persian King Cyrus II was conquering their conquerors, making possible their return home to Jerusalem, where once again they might rebuild their lives.

On the horizon, Second Isaiah sees a radical transformation in store for Israel, from conquered and displaced to "exalted" and "prosper[ous]" (Isaiah 52:12). "Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem" (Isaiah 51:17, NRSV)." Rouse yourselves, act like God is fighting for you, because God is. The prophet in Second Isaiah is calling the exiled of Israel to stop waiting and start anticipating. And so, too, is Mark attempting to rouse the hopeless from the despair of an interminable wait to that of anticipation. From a life of languishing in the shame and indignity of conquest, of displacement, of unspeakable loss to one marked by the joy of repentance. That's right—here, we should remember, repentance is an occasion for joy. Because to repent isn't just to feel contrition and shame and "do better," it is to radically upend all of the ways—large and small, glaring and tedious—that our lives affirm, validate, and perpetuate the systems of injustice and

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oppression that characterize our society and culture. It is, in other words, to prefigure the kingdom of God in our everyday, embodied witness. There's a fancy theological term for this, which I love, called *proleptic witness*. It means simply living in anticipation of the world we most deeply believe is real. How we show up in the world witnesses to the future we believe is possible, and this in turn actively shapes the future. Where so many see the world as it is and say, "Such is life. C'est la vie! I wish it were otherwise, but you deal with the world you have, not the world you want," the faithful proleptic witness which seeks to make what is real in God's kingdom, says, "No! This cannot stand, will not stand!" We can and must accept reality as it is, but this does not mean confusing reality for what ought to be. This is how it is possible to understand and affirm that the kingdom of God is both on its way *and* also here now, within and among us. You are here, in this tension between the world as it is and the world as we know in our hearts it must be. We have an active role to play right here, right now, where and when we are, and enacting that role is what we do in and for the kingdom of God. We don't just wait, we don't just ask, "Where are you, God?!" That is a necessary question, and we will probably never stop asking it, just as Jesus did himself as he hung on the cross. We do ask that, too, but not just that. Likewise, during Advent we don't *just* wait. We anticipate. We live the hope that we expect, by witnessing to it in advance of its arrival, thereby making a way in the wilderness for its arrival. We live the kingdom here and now, and in this way, we make straight the way of the Lord, just as surely and truly as did John the Baptist.

If you ask me, Mark is the most Christmas-sy of all the Gospel accounts, because if we study it closely, we come to see the full meaning of Advent everywhere we look. Before we get to the serene stillness of silent night, before we get to the exquisite contentment of O holy night, before we are ensconced in the deep peace of the nativity, we must know the pervasive darkness of God's silence—caught between the world as it is and the world as we know in our bones it must be. This is the moment we recognize that while we wait on God, God waits on us. In his book *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, the great theologian John D. Caputo writes a fitting tagline for

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Advent: “God does not exist. God insists.” This may seem somewhat confounding, but it’s actually

rather intuitive. The idea is that by taking God’s existence for granted, we may wait indefinitely for an event of God that never comes because we don't recognize our role in making God happen in and to the world. When we merely wait for God, we run the risk of succumbing to a cynicism that infects our very soul. We run the risk of forgetting that our lives are the way that God enters this world. When we comfort those who mourn, feed those who are hungry, stand with the lonely and rejected, offer kindness to strangers, stand up for those who are without standing and protect those without protection, and when we extend mercy and compassion to those who hate and curse us, mock and condemn us—when we do these things, we ourselves give birth to God in the world.

Make no mistake, dear friends, we are an integral part of the nativity. Lest we forget, the author of the Gospel of Mark tells us that this gospel bears only the *beginning* of the good news (Mark 1:1). We are here. And soon, God, you will be, too. Hallelujah. May we choose this Advent and beyond, to anticipate God’s kingdom in and through the witness of our lives, may we choose always to give birth to God in our world. Amen.