

Advent

devotionals

What is Advent?

Advent means coming. It is a season to prepare for the birth of Jesus. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas day and ends Christmas Eve, Christmas day or the Sunday following Christmas.

Advent originated as a three-week fast to prepare for baptism at Epiphany and it evolved into preparation for the coming of Christ as judge, and so assumed a repentant mood, an almost shorter Lent. However, today Advent is seen as a season of hope, of joyful anticipation. It is a time we are to reflect upon the fulfillment of the rule of God and in Christ's coming in the future.

Latin *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *parousia*, commonly used to refer to the **Second Coming of Christ**. For Christians, the season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ from three different perspectives. "Since the time of Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153) Christians have spoken of the three comings of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem, in our hearts daily, and in glory at the end of time." The season offers the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, and to be alert for his Second Coming.

Advent is a time to:

- ⇒ Focus on Jesus, God's gift of everlasting life
- ⇒ Renew Yourself Spiritually through prayers, thoughts and deeds
- ⇒ Share your Joy and Hope with others who await Christ's birth

Rev. Stella Dempski Causey

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2017 Advent Devotionals



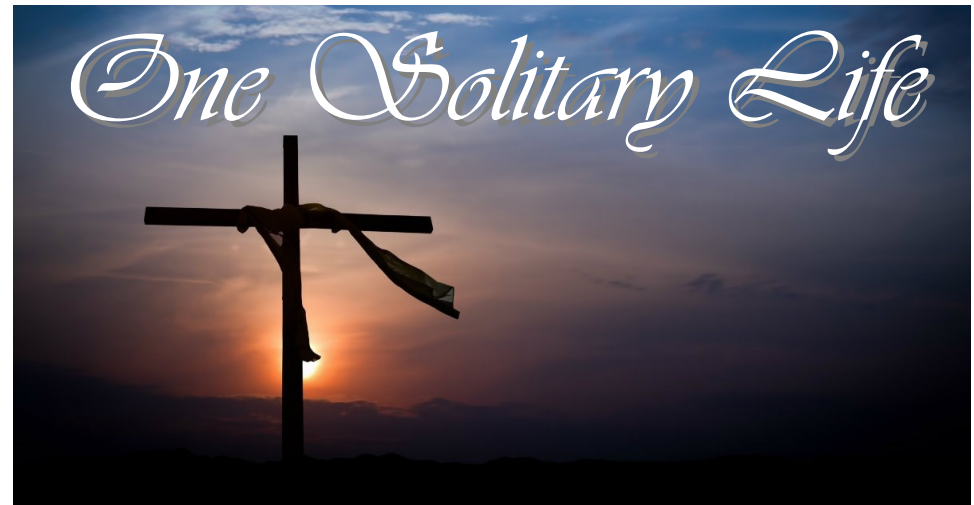
The Advent Wreath



The history of the Advent wreath is believed to have originated from the Lutheran tradition. However, it has been appropriated by many other traditions. The Advent wreath is a large wreath with four candles in the wreath itself, and often with another candle in the center. A candle is lighted the first week and an additional one each week. The center one finally lit on Christmas Eve. Ordinarily, the wreath candles are purple the color traditional to the liturgical season, and the center candle white. In some churches, the candle that is lighted on the Third Sunday of Advent is pink. The candles do not represent any particular doctrine. What the candles do signify and communicate is the increasing crescendo of light throughout the season. The closer we get to Christ's birth the brighter the light gets. Some churches do chose themes for each candle of Advent. Our church follows the most popular Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The center candle is always the Christ candle.

May each of you find a way to grow closer to God this Advent as you prepare for Christ' birth.

Rev. Stella Dempski Causey



Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself..

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race. I am far within the mark when I say that all of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life.

This essay was adapted from a sermon by Dr. James Allan Francis in "The Real Jesus and Other Sermons" © 1926 by the Judson Press of Philadelphia (pp 123-124 titled "Arise Sir Knight!").

All glory, laud and honor to God and to our Lord, Jesus Christ, who from the beginning of time was so filled with love for us that he came as an infant and willingly pitched a tent to live among us.

Amen

Rev. Ruth Roberts, Associate Pastor

Sunday, December 31, 2017

Luke 2:40 And the Child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

The Sunday after Christmas Day is a very special time. The excitement and celebrations of Christmas Day have passed, leaving time to reflect and grasp the illuminating event of Jesus's birth. This is the time to truly and deeply celebrate our gift of salvation. It is a time of joy and to hold close of our faith and our church family.

One of my favorite stories of the bible is in Luke, Chapter 2, Verses 22-40. This is where Luke tenderly writes about Jesus being presented in the temple. Luke explains how Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God stating that Jesus would be a light for revelation to all. This included Gentiles as well as the people of Israel. Mary and Joseph marveled at what was said and began to understand the magnitude of Jesus's destiny. They returned home to Galilee and raised Jesus to be strong, wise and filled with the grace of God.

As we think about Jesus's presentation in the temple, we may remember our own children. In fact, my daughter, Amanda, was baptized on this very special Sunday after Christmas. As I made a promise to raise her in Christ, the congregation also promised to support her. As Christians, we should take this promise into the world, not only supporting the children of our church, but all children. Just as Simeon states that Jesus shines His light on all, so should we. We are bestowed this awesome gift of everlasting life, which begins with the birth of our King. In his name, let's share this gift with our children and nurture their souls with love

Suzie Poole Moore, Elder

Activity Ideas for Advent

- Here is a question to discuss with your family or church friends: What does getting ready for Christ's birth mean to me? How do I do it? What makes it special from other parts of the year?
- Come to worship on a regular basis.
- Make or purchase your own Advent wreath for your home.
- Make or buy an Advent calendar to count off the days until Christmas.
- Read an Advent devotional.
- Help decorate the church for Christmas.
- Set up a nativity set (crèche). Wait until Christmas to add baby Jesus.
- Contribute to a toy drive for needy children.
- Mail Christmas cards to church staff.
- Call someone you haven't seen for a long time.
- Forgive someone who has made you angry or sad. Matthew 18:21-22.
- Make a special effort to be kind to someone.
- Make a list of some of the good things that have happened to you in the past year.
- Make a donation in someone's name.
- Make a plan for how you can share your talents with others.
- Donate canned food to a food pantry.
- Bake some Christmas cookies.
- Watch a Christmas movie.
- Make Christmas ornaments.
- Buy a gift for someone you don't usually buy for (not expecting one in return).
- Read a Christmas book or Christmas story from the church's book store or county library.
- Visit a sick friend or homebound member from church.

Families with Young Children

Two alphabet book recommendations based on the nativity story that can be found on Amazon are:

"M is for Manger" by Crystal Bowman & Teri McKinley, published by Tydale 2015

"B is for Bethlehem" by Isabelle Wilner, published by Penguin Books 1990

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Mark 13:24-37

As we enter into the Advent Season, we prepare ourselves for Christ's coming. The text from Mark points us to teachings about Jesus' Second Coming. As Christians we celebrate Jesus' birth, life, and resurrection. But the story does not end there. After he ascended into heaven, recorded in Acts 1, the disciples stood gazing into heaven. Two men in white robes told them, "Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." The disciples then went into Jerusalem, and waited for the gift of the Spirit. After the Spirit came, they faithfully entered into the ministry that Jesus gave them to do.

Jesus told a brief parable in the Mark text. A man went on a journey and left his servants in charge of his house, each with his work. He commanded the doorkeeper to remain on the watch for his return. Our call as stewards of God's house is to be faithful to our task. We are to live as if the eyes of the householder were upon us. And Jesus truly is with us. We know that our eternal future is secured. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus comes alongside us now to give us strength, hope, purpose, and direction.

As we enter into the season of watchfulness, and preparation, let us renew our commitment to our call. Let us seek to be faithful stewards of the work that God has entrusted to us. Our work is summed up in Jesus' new commandment; "Love one another as I have loved you." Let us continue to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit to the glory of God and in service to Christ's Church. The fruit of the Spirit according to Paul is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Christ Second Coming is not meant to make us feel guilty, or afraid. Christ will come to us in the end in the same way Christ comes to us now. Christ is sent to us because God loves us. So let us watch, work, and prepare with joyful anticipation of the One who already loves us, and proved that love in his sacrifice for us.

Rev. Dr. Jack Heinsohn, Pastor

soften as our candles are lit and my dad begins to play "Silent Night". Afterwards, friendly handshakes and hugs are exchanged, as well as wishes of "Merry Christmas!" as everyone excitedly realizes that the burden of the season was worth it and the only remaining necessary step to prepare for Christmas morning is returning home and putting on our pajamas.

Dear Lord, as the Advent season draws to a close, I pray that you give me the wisdom to reflect on the feelings that the season has brought; to anticipate with excitement and to let go of stress and burden. I thank you for my church family, with whom I can share these feelings, and for the wonderful burden and anticipation that Mary experienced as she prepared for the very first Christmas. Amen

Zack Roper, Interim Director of Christian Education

Monday, December 25, 2017

John 1:1-4

A few years back, while I was leading an Advent and Christmas study, I asked the group, "Which of the Gospel accounts has the story of Jesus' birth?" Nearly everyone in the room responded quickly with Luke's wonder-filled account. Others added Matthew's narrative with his emphasis on Joseph's place in the story. Only one lone voice spoke of John.

Yet, for me John is the most powerful and moving of the Christmas stories. Please understand, I hold very dear the Gospel accounts of angels, shepherds and wise men. But John takes us back to the very beginnings of existence – the origin of all creation, of all life and assures us that the infant whose birth we celebrate is indeed God Incarnate – God's very Word, come to dwell among us.

The truth of John's story may not fill us with the seasonal warmth of the Luke and Matthew narratives; but it offers joy and hope that last well beyond the last Christmas carol. The Word, God's Word, spoken as new life in the birth of an infant, brings life to death, order to chaos, light to darkness. The Word made flesh, the gift of God's self comes to us as grace, mercy, forgiveness, renewal, joy, peace, love and resurrection.

his glory. Let us do His work every day. Perhaps we can all ask ourselves – what does Advent look like to me? After Christmas, I ask you to find someone – anyone – with whom you can share your joyful spirit. Connect with them, pray with them, and open a dialog towards a year-round joyful spirit. Have a blessed Advent and Christmas season.

Vince Osisek, Elder

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Luke 2:1-14

It's here! The day that you've been preparing for has arrived. Your shopping, wrapping, and traveling are likely, scratch that, hopefully done; you've welcomed family into your home and are ready to eat some yummy food and settle down for your long winter's nap. Many of us have likely felt burdened by the financial cost of the season or by making travel plans and buying gifts that please everyone and now we are waiting in nervous, excited anticipation to see if everything works out. Of course, these feelings are nothing new to this season, in fact, they are guiding themes. The burden of carrying a child to term and the nervous anticipation of knowing that that child would be the salvation of Man.

Christmas Eve is the time we can finally take a deep breath and reflect on all the important feelings the Advent season has brought us. We can look around and see that all we have been anticipating is coming to fruition.

To me, this is what the Christmas Eve service is all about. Family has arrived, the presents have found their home under the tree, and the sun begins to set, not to rise again until the big day! We watch the sanctuary fill with warm, familiar faces who are all here to celebrate the greatest gift we were ever given. Voices joyfully sing beloved Christmas hymns then

Monday, December 4, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

...Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! (v.9)

How strange it is that this passage of scripture is also used for Palm Sunday. Matthew 21 gives the account of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey with his death by crucifixion appearing imminent. I find this a significant reading as we celebrate Advent and consider the birth of the Christ child in a most humble setting. The barn was full of animals (most likely a donkey or two included as foreshadowing), a crude manger from which live stock would feed, and the guttural animal sounds giving recognition that something unusual was happening in this rustic abode.

Suddenly, we are reading the prelude to the last week of the Savior's life. Perhaps it is to remind us how we receive redemption, forgiveness, and peace. It comes through the birth of a precious little boy who ultimately has been given a death sentence. And yet, here is a message of hope, joy, love, and peace for all of us who have placed our faith and trust in an ever loving and compassionate God.

As I enter the Advent/Christmas season, I can easily get “wrapped up” in the shopping, the cooking, the music, and the parties with superficial joy. But this Lenten passage brings it all into focus for me. This gives a deeper, more spiritual and somber reason, as well as a more joyous and sincere reason, to celebrate God's ultimate gift of eternal life through the Son of David. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Amen.

Rev. Leila Evans

Tuesday, December 5, 2017

First Reading Amos 3:1-11

Second Reading 2 Peter 1:12-21

Gospel Reading Matthew 21:12-22

Amos 3:11 reads:

11Therefore thus says the Lord God:

“An adversary shall be all around the land;
He shall sap your strength from you,
And your palaces shall be plundered.”

In the Fall of 2017, sometimes that feeling seems to surround us daily – in the form of wind and rain – hurricanes laying waste to entire islands, in the form of humans – raining gunfire on innocents enjoying an evening concert, in the form of politics – which seem to try to divide us from each other minute by minute and in countless other forms that we encounter individually and collectively. But it is in this time of adversity that we are called to remember the meaning of both advent and Advent.

Webster defines advent as “a coming into being or use” and Advent as “the coming of Christ”.

2 Peter 1:19 reminds us of the word, “which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”. The word which reminds us of the coming of the Christ Child and tells of His majesty. It is in the comfort and joy of these words that we can navigate through the feeling of the adversary mentioned above, and keep the faith from day to day.

Dear God, walk with us as we deal with the adversaries that seem to continue to show up in our daily lives. Help us keep the faith, live the faith, and share the faith with others as we look to the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen

Joanna Greene, Elder

December 6, 2017

Second Peter 3:1-10

This scripture lesson addresses those who doubt the steadfastness of Christ Second Coming. Readers are reminded that we think that we have all the time in the world to prepare for the Christ’s Second Coming. However, we must be ready now because He will come like a thief in the night.

This reminds me of how we spiritually prepare for Christmas. How much

Friday, December 22, 2017

Luke 1:57-66

The Lord’s hand is with us. If we allow God’s hand to grip us tightly, gracefully, and lovingly, He holds us very close. The Advent season is about a miraculous birth. Through this miracle, God gives us his most peaceful hand. His peaceful hand is not only for the Advent season. His peaceful hand is not a mystery. It is his hand given to us and for all his people. His hand is blessed with the Holy Spirit. We are blessed through his guiding light and steadfast hand to be able to serve his earthly kingdom.

His hand is part of his promise to us that lasts forever.

Jim Nyland, Elder

Saturday, December 23, 2017

Luke 1:57-66

As we prepare for the arrival of Jesus at Christmas, the Advent season brings Christians together in joyful spirit of expectation for the celebration of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Luke writes how Zechariah’s neighbors were “filled with awe” with his spoken words when naming his son John after his birth. Then they said “what then is this child going to be – for the Lord is truly with him.” As a Servant of the Lord, John’s life was preparation for Jesus. Imagine a lifetime of preparation (our Advent is four weeks). Joyful spirit year-round – I like that.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, we were fortunate to pray thanks and celebrate the birth of Jesus in church, and open presents on Christmas day. My best memories are our family searching for the ‘right’ tree to carry into the living room, running trains under the tree, plus all the in/outdoor Christmas decorations (and snowball fights). We kept our tree up until the New Year (then removed all the needles). Thanks be to God. And thank you Jesus, Mom and Dad, for always making Advent and Christmas a special time of the year.

Life in general, should feel like a preparation for the return of Christ, in

Thursday, December 21, 2017

2 Samuel 7:1-17

In our scripture, we find King David thinking he knows what he should do. The people of Israel have settled down for a while, their enemies vanquished, and leadership secured. David's feeling pretty good about the way things are going. He's just built himself a grand and glorious palace, and he realizes that he hasn't done the same thing for God. The Arc of the Covenant is sitting out back in a tent. David realizes that doesn't seem right, and decides to build a grand temple to the glory of God. After all, doesn't the Arc of the Covenant deserve to be somewhere special? Isn't it time to give back to God? As so often happens, though, God surprises David. He reveals to David two things, one of which this passage is famous for, and the other of which is also quite important, but tends to get glossed over because of the magnitude of the second revelation.

The second revelation here, is of course, a new covenant between God and the people of Israel, in which God reveals that he will send a Son to live among them. He promises that that the Son will be loved, and through that Son, the love of God will always be with those who follow Him. This revelation is the covenant of all covenants, and must have been comforting to David even if David will not be around to see the story unfold, he now knows how it ends. So do we, and it's the reason why this passage is being read today.

The first revelation is a bit more subtle, but is also great import, especially this time of year. David wants to build a temple for God, but it turns out that God is too big to be contained by a building. God wants to be out and about with his people. It's easy to be reverent in church this time of year, but somewhat more difficult in our daily lives. We tend to be running hard, trying to get things done before the big day. We all have a tendency to wish that the "reason for the season" was more prevalent outside of worship services. God is telling us here that he is, whether we see it or not. Take a few moments today to observe the love of Jesus outside of church. You're guaranteed to find it. Let it make your day better.

James McCallum, Elder

time do we really spend on preparing in those sacred ways? We always think there will be more time to get around to praying and thanking God for what a wonderful gift He gave us through the salvation of Jesus Christ.

It seems the shopping and parties drown out time for the focus on preparing for the Christ Child. Know that he'll be here soon and His Second Coming will be here soon too. Prepare your hearts, cleanse your souls, and Rejoice!

Rev. Stella Dempski Causey

Thursday, December 7, 2017

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:11-18

During the Advent season we wait in anticipation for the birth of the Christ child every year. There is so much "wonderment" in the season of Advent. As children we are told we must "be good" in order to earn our gifts on Christmas morning. My maternal grandmother used to put "Coca Cola" images of Santa Claus around her house to remind her grandchildren to "Behave!" Did anyone else experience that type of "behavior coaching"?

In the Scripture, Peter is anticipating the second coming, rather than the birth of Christ. He is telling his "flocks" that they "ought to live holy and godly lives as they look forward to the day of God." "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him." He exhorts the people to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

At first I did not see a reason to use this scripture for Advent, however, there are parallels to the Advent season in the scripture of 2 Peter. How do you get ready for the birth of Jesus? As a young child, we tried our best to "be found spotless and blameless", especially before Christmas. As an adult we study the Bible, pray, attend church and "prepare" our hearts and minds for the birth of the Christ child each year.

For adults Advent is still a time of "wonderment" as we wait with

anticipation to honor God's greatest gift to us of his Son, the baby Jesus.

"To Him be glory both now and forever." Amen

Lynn van Dijk, Elder

Friday, December 8, 2017

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Revelation 21:1-6a

Devotional for the start of a New Year

If you follow the suggested readings for the church calendar, New Year's Day always includes Ecclesiastes chapter 3. If you are of a certain generation, you might know this better as the song "Turn! Turn! Turn!" written by Pete Seeger and made popular by the Byrds. If you check the bibliography in your Bible, I'm sure you'll find that the writer of Ecclesiastes gave due credit to Seeger for his work.

So at the close of the 2017 that for many brought angst and tragedy, and at the dawn of a new year at the very least pregnant with uncertainty, the preacher in Ecclesiastes offers words that feel more cynical than hopeful to start the year.

To everything there is a season. A time to live, a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to party, and a time to pay. Here we are, the new year stretching out ahead of us like a fresh sheet of paper, like a field of snow glistening in the morning sun, like a perfectly calm lake in summer, just waiting for you to dive in... and then in comes the Preacher, Ecclesiastes, the one who says "all is vanity and striving after wind," with this "a time for everything" speech.

A lot of people seem to like this speech. I confess I don't know why. A time for everything under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time for war and a time for peace, a time for planting and a time for harvest, a time for love and a time for hate. Some of this is just the seasons of life. Some of it is more disturbing, because it doesn't seem to distinguish much between love and hate, between war and peace, between killing and healing. There is a time for all of it.

hubbub and busy-ness of preparing for whoever might be making it home, includes quiet contemplation and praise for the reason we celebrate -this Gift of abundant joy.

Zephaniah 3: 14-15 "Shout for joy.. Shout in triumph...Rejoice and exult with all your heart! The Lord has taken away His judgements against you. He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst..."

Amy Cassibry, Elder

Wednesday, December 20, 2017

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Advent is a special time of year when we reflect back on the year and think of our journey as Christians as we get ready for the celebration of Christ's birth. An important part of my faith journey began when my then middle-school son asked me to join him on a foreign mission trip, and my attendance was necessary for him to be able to go. At the time, I was sure of two things: (1) I did not want to go; (2) a foreign mission in the heat of summer was not for me. Little did I know what God planned for me. Despite the challenges of the heat and the living conditions during that trip, God opened my eyes to two things: (1) a community of Christians far from my home who had little material wealth but who had immense spiritual wealth; and (2) our church's amazing youth who served with joy, love, and compassion. The spiritual growth I have received from a small church in Belize City and our own youth over the past 7 years since my son first ask me to go with him has been amazing for me. Sometimes God has plans for us that we do not even think are possible. In this season of joy and celebration, we should all open our hearts and discover what God has planned for us. I hope that each of us will take the time during this busy, hectic, and sometimes crazy holiday season to focus on the special times in each of our faith journeys that have brought us to be part of our community of faith. Then we will really be preparing for and celebrating Christmas.

Michael Hogue, Elder

On Christmas morning, I would act surprised to see the presents I had seen the night before. And then it was over. The joy of the Christmas season would come to a sudden end. I always expected more. I'm not exactly sure what I expected; but the crescendo had fallen flat and I expected more.

As I have aged, and hopefully matured, I have come to realize that the true joy of the Christmas season is not found in the gifts opened on that singular Christmas morning; it is found throughout the Advent season leading up to Christmas Day. And it is found in the knowledge that Jesus came to us with the promise (gift) of eternal life. Each day during this Christmas season, I plan to be intentional with my time, activities and relationships, focusing on the true joy of God's gift to us, celebrating the light that overcomes all darkness.

Joel Atkinson, Elder

Tuesday, December 19, 2017

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

The Christmas season has always been a mix of melancholy and absolute joy for me. As a small child, being the youngest of four – my three older siblings having moved away from home as early as I can recall- I experienced great angst that everyone in the family would make it home for Christmas. In my mind, missing even one of them would make the holiday less bright, less special. And growing older, the angst would involve my own ability to make it home in the same time frame as all the family. Now that my own children have moved out of our home to make their own paths, that bittersweet angst has grown exponentially in the days preceding Christmas.

But my father told me during one of my melancholy holiday moments when I was 8 or 9, that Christmas is about God's spectacular gift of His Son to everyone – and especially to ME – no matter where we are, who we're with, or what we've done. This gift is available to everyone, everywhere, all the time. As a result of this gift, we will not be separated from God or the people we love for all of eternity. It made me feel better then, and it still does. My preparation for Christmas, amid all the

A time for everything, turn, turn, turn. The times of our lives wash over us like waves at the beach, the times of our lives seem to happen to us; it's all out of our hands. A time of prosperity, a time of recession, a time to work and a time to be unemployed, a time of joy and a time of pain, a time of health, and a time of sickness.

What will be the times of 2018?

The Preacher, Ecclesiastes, doesn't have a lot of advice for the turning of the seasons of life. Enjoy your work as much as you can. Be happy, do your best. You can feel the ups and downs, you can remember the good times and the bad times, but don't bother wearing yourself out – you WON'T be able to figure out what God is trying to do in the midst of all this. Eat, drink, be as merry as you can in work and rest.

I guess that's pretty realistic.

It's true – the times of our lives will just happen to us. Sometimes good, sometimes bad.

It's true – it's better if we can find a way to enjoy our lives, however the times turn for us.

I get the cynicism of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes thinks that there is nothing new under heaven. It's all cycles, we've seen it all before, the seasons turn, turn, turn. For realists like Ecclesiastes, we're getting older, year by year, getting old, the stories are getting old, the news is getting old. Second verse, same as the first, a little bit older, a little bit worse.

But juxtaposed alongside Ecclesiastes is this dream-vision in Revelation – almost the last words of the Bible! – proclaiming that in the midst of these seasons and cycles, we are being made new. Whatever God is doing as the seasons of life turn, and we get grey and wrinkled and experienced, is making us new.

As we get older, we are also being made new. That's the spiritual life. That's what happens to us as we practice our faith. That's what you see in Desmond Tutu's eyes and in his laughter, and in the Dalai Lama. We

are being made new.

To me, these are two sides of the same coin. Ecclesiastes does have it right. The seasons of life happen to us. Bad years and good years. Joys and tragedies, life and death. And there is not a lot we can do to control them.

But in the midst of those cycles is the hope that we might experience new life, new birth, leaving the past and being born again into a new day, a new world. And we do that, I think, by practicing resurrection.

If you have any interest or do any reading in the development of Christian worship through the centuries, you will probably come across the phrase *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* – which roughly translated means “as we worship, so we will live.” In other words, the things we spend time practicing reform and reshape our beliefs and our lives. When we act in life-giving and life-affirming ways, by making space for relationships and honoring others and being open to the Diving Presence, we are practicing resurrection.

Practicing resurrection doesn't eliminate the cyclical nature of life, but it does, I think, offer us newness, spiritual regeneration, growth, and hope in the midst of those cycles. Behold, I am making all things new.

Let us step into the new year, then, knowing that the seasons will turn and we have little control of them. It may be weeping and it may be laughing. It might be planting seeds and it might be harvesting. We don't know.

But God is here, in this new year with us. And behold, God is making all things new.

Devotional Submitted by Jane Wyatt, Elder
Written by Rev. Dr. Brian Wyatt

Saturday, December 9, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

In Matthew 22:15-22 Jesus asks the Pharisees to show them a coin as they attempt to trap Him with a question about paying taxes. When shown the coin Jesus asks “Who's head is this, and who's title?”. After they

come. And like John, I want to do my best to gratefully and courageously share aloud man's greatest gift and hope to all.

Patsy Bower, Elder

Monday, December 18, 2017

John 3:16-21

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

As Christians, we all know that the gift that we celebrate this season is the greatest gift of all, God's gift of His son, Jesus. And we all know that later in the gospel of John, Jesus tells us “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” So, during the Christmas season, it would seem most appropriate to celebrate with gifts and lights.

Despite growing up in a loving, Christian home, I may have missed the point during my childhood. We engaged in all of the typical Christmas activities: made an advent wreath for the home (lighting the candles and reading scripture), decorated a Christmas tree, put a few Christmas candles in our windows, helped my mother make fruit cake and decorate Christmas cookies, enjoyed Christmas parties at school and church, rode around and looked at Christmas lights, watched the Christmas parade on Main Street, attended the Christmas Eve candle light service, and opened presents on Christmas Day. I would sneak out of my bedroom in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve to see what Santa had brought.

With all the evil and wickedness in the world today Jesus has said that “men’s love will grow cold. But, he who endures to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:12-13).” So, what can we do when we feel that our love might have gotten a little colder?

As I have learned in life, as things change (which they always will) or get messed up, for me it is back to the basics. I hope to find the shade of the branch of that greatest tree, the greatest of all shrubs, planted from “A Seed of Love” and planted by God through Jesus Christ on Christmas day in Bethlehem many years ago.

Roger Wachob, Deacon

Sunday, December 17, 2017

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I love tiny white Christmas lights, everywhere, and in numbers likely representing a fire hazard. Although I'm partial to white lights, all varieties and colors announce to me, "Christmas is on its way." Lights inside and outside herald to all that this is a different time of year.

Lights at Christmas are a symbol. They represent Jesus, the light and hope He offers. What a powerful symbol I mostly fail to think about as I string Christmas lights everywhere. I'm announcing the birth of Jesus Christ, the light of the world! At the least, I should be mindful of the symbolism, but at best I should model the words from John 1:23, "Make straight the way of the Lord," likewise announcing and sharing his coming.

When we read these verses about John the Baptist, what a strange figure we think of him making. He dressed differently and said things men had not heard, making his mission to announce the coming of mankind's greatest gift, Jesus Christ. All those Christmas lights we see everywhere, every year, in every color, shape and size, shine as symbols of that great gift.

This year at Christmas I want to think more about what the thousands of lights stand for I see everywhere. I want to see more clearly hope and promise and the good news that Jesus Christ, the light of the world has

acknowledge that the coin bears the image and title of the emperor, Jesus responds “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus has a way of achieving incredible depth with simple statements.

What are the things that are God’s? All of creation is God’s, but most importantly we are God’s. What is it that we should give to God? No one will argue with time, talent and treasure, but what is more valuable? In a word - Ourselves. Our hearts, our trust and our thanks.

During Advent we celebrate God’s gift of salvation and grace through the birth and life of Jesus. At what time would it be more appropriate to give to God the things that are God’s? Let us look within ourselves and open our hearts to God.

David McNeice, Elder

Sunday, December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40: 1-11

The passages from Isaiah offer us comfort, confidence and conquest. Comfort comes to us as God forgives and offers us a new beginning. Our confidence is found in knowing His Word stands forever despite our human weaknesses. Our conquest is demonstrated when we share and spread the good news of Jesus. This may be in the form of our voices or actions. Have you shared the grace and love of God with those around you through word or deed?

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” Isaiah 40:8

As we prepare, experience and enjoy the season of Advent, let us be mindful of our daily choices. Choices are not always between right and wrong, but often between something good and something better. Let us all pray during this Christian season of celebration, our actions and lives will honor and glorify the birth of Jesus.

“Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 40:5

Ruth Adams, Elder

Monday, December 11, 2017

Matthew 22: 23-33

Successful marriage has eluded me. My first husband passed away very unexpectedly and early. Before we even had any children I was already a widow. He was the oldest of three sons. I, the younger of two daughters. Although our families approved of the marriage I was young and not very accustomed to the harsh nature of boys. His younger brothers teased me, often to the point of tears. At best, my husband would ignore them, at worst, laugh with them. But they were a highly respected family and cared well for me. As a Levite, my husband was on the way to becoming a rabbi in our community. Then tragedy struck. His family was brokenhearted but respectful of me. True to the Mosaic tradition, I remained a member of their family... by being wed to his brother.

He was still very young and, in my opinion, too immature to become the head of our household. He made it clear that he resented me for the responsibility now thrust upon him. I suppose it didn't help when I countered with several not-so-subtle comparisons to my first husband. Over time our mutual disdain developed into polite disregard. Not surprisingly, no children came along.

Ten years have gone by and my husband is now a young rabbi himself. He spends a lot of time with the elders discussing deeply spiritual matters. In my opinion, it's a lot of wasted breath. Lately the conversation around the community is on a new rabbi who travels around Judea. He reportedly has miraculous healing powers and exudes an overwhelming combination of empathy and confidence. My sister tells me he is coming through town today so we join the crowds to see what will happen.

We succeed in getting a clear view of him near the town square. We see him smiling at children and laying his hands on the infirm. I find myself mesmerized by his sincerity and care. Then a group of our local elders approaches. They say they have some questions for him. He politely directs his attention to them and to my surprise I see my own husband step forward from the group.

Then, when Sunday morning comes, and the thought of trying to get up early enough in order to get ourselves and our children ready for Sunday School and church becomes a daunting task, so we think, "What's one Sunday missed?" But then, the same thing happens, the next Sunday has come and gone with the same results, and all of a sudden, it's Christmas Eve, and even though we have the best intentions to make the Christmas Eve service, it means another late night getting ready for the events of Christmas morning, so that service is missed as well.

As we continue through the Advent season, let us not leave our temple in ruins while we spend so much time working on our own house. God promises us that he will be with us. The least we can do is be there for him.

Chip Collins, Elder

Saturday, December 16, 2017

Matthew 24:1-4

As we approach the Christmas season this year the parable of the seed, a mustard seed sticks out in my mind (Matt. 13:31-32). The mustard seed starts off small but when fully grown it is the greatest of all shrubs. Birds come to it for its shade and to nest in it. As Christ was born on Christmas day he was a seed of something, but a seed of what?

We need to look no further than the book of John (John 15:12). "This is my commandment to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this".

So then what is this love that he speaks of?

According to Paul - "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love doesn't insist on its own ways; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the right. So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (I Cor. 13:13)."

Love then is an action word and not just a feeling! So how does this then relate back to Matthew 24:1-14 you might ask?

Matthew Henry, the 17th- and 18th-century Welsh Presbyterian scholar and minister, put it this way: “We can only judge according to outward appearance; but God searches the heart.”

What a comforting thought! To know that, contrary to much of what we experience in our day-to-day human existence – being judged on how we look – God sees us for what we truly are in our souls, in our hearts, in our very being.

Suddenly, we can view a recitation of woes from a decidedly different perspective. Rather than giving us a depressing list of don’ts, Jesus is letting us know that we can rest assured that what matters is on the inside.

Or, as Henry wrote:

“We are really what we are inwardly. Outward motives may keep the outside clean, while the inside is filthy; but if the heart and spirit be made new, there will be newness of life.”

And there it is: newness of life.

What better thought to keep here at the midpoint of Advent, when we await the newness of Jesus’ life – the life created solely for the purpose of our salvation.

Dan O’Mara, Elder

Friday, December 15, 2017

Haggai 1:1-15

It happens to all of us during the Advent season, even more so for those of us with young children or with people whose well-being for which we are responsible. Too much to do and not enough time to do it. We all run around like chickens with our heads cut off, usually trying to find just the right decorations for our home, purchase just the right gifts for family and friends, attend just the right number of holiday parties and get-togethers. Usually, in order to do that, we work harder and longer at our jobs trying to make all of these additional ends meet. By the end of the week, we are exhausted.

“Rabbi, Moses told us that if a man dies without leaving children, his brother must marry the widow and raise the offspring for him.”

I was mortified.

“Now there were 7 brothers”

I was frozen with my mouth wide open. My heart pounded so loudly I could barely follow the rest of his ridiculous scenario. Everyone in town knows of our situation. I felt every eye of every person staring squarely at me. The only one who didn’t know of my misfortune was the young rabbi – and now my own husband was laying it bare before him.

“... so at the resurrection, who’s wife will she be?”

So that’s it. In front of everyone he seeks some religious-based way to disown me.

But the young rabbi doesn’t follow his reasoning. He tells my husband, and seemingly all the other elders with him, that they are in error. He continues to correct them publicly then pauses. He looks around the crowd until his eyes rest squarely on me. “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living”.

Ever since that day, I started putting aside the past, that is, my departed husband. I’ve made myself more available for the living people surrounding me. My husband seems to have done the same, regarding me for who I am today, rather than an unwanted responsibility from yesteryear.

God Bless the traveling rabbi – in a few caring words, he has changed the course of our lives together.

Lance Roper, SVPC Member

Tuesday, December 12, 2017

Matthew 22: 34 - 46

We’ve all felt it. That sinking of the stomach and heating of the face when a teacher asks us a question in class one day that we just don’t know how to answer. Then the embarrassment of discovering that the answer was

right in front of our face all along -- maybe written on the board or in the notes we've just taken. As a student myself, I can confirm that it's not a good feeling!

In this passage, an expert Pharisee asks Jesus a seemingly impossible question: What is the greatest Commandment? Jesus, the wisest teacher, not only has a perfect answer for him. He has a question of his own. In essence, Jesus asks, "Whose son am I?" How embarrassed the Pharisees would be if they found out that the best person to answer that question was right in front of them!

It's easy for us to ask things of Jesus. During Advent, we may be asking for Jesus to protect us while traveling, to heal our sick loved ones, or to strengthen a strained relationship with a family member. But in a season full of visiting, shopping, and decorating, it's very easy to forget to listen for what Jesus may be asking of us. Busy lives may prevent us from seeing the answer even when it's right in front of us. But in Matthew 22: 37-39, Jesus makes His call to us very clear.

Take some time today to listen for what Jesus may be asking of you. Luckily, we know that however difficult answering His call may seem at first, Jesus will be right in front of us every step of the way.

Elizabeth Dillon, Youth Elder

Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Amos 8:1-14

Revelation 1:17-2:7

Matthew 23:1-12

Advent is a season of waiting; it is also a season of reflection. One of the things we should reflect on is what we've done wrong, what we could have done better and what we should have done instead of not acting at all. Repentance.

Our three verses today give us perspectives on repentance. In Amos, God promises vengeance against those who defied him and offers the specifics in great detail (including a potential reference to an eclipse!) He includes the ultimate punishment at the end, that God will

abandon them. As He says: "People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it." Repentance will come too late.

In Revelation, God has a message for John to deliver. God is reasonably satisfied with his people's conduct, but warns them that they too have things that need to be corrected. "You have forsaken the love you had at first." Here, the issue is that the church is doing good things but has lost sight of its central mission. This is such an easy trap for Christians to fall into. We become comfortable with the routine of worship, but we tend to forget the purpose of it. We see it as a job, not a joy. God is warning his people.

The last reading is a verdict on hypocrisy. Jesus himself delivers these words and has always made known his dissatisfaction with hypocrites. His message isn't to the hypocrites though, but to his followers, warning them to avoid falling into this lifestyle. Although hypocrisy seems pious and righteous, it's actually the opposite.

Repent.

Mathew Eberhardt, Elder

Thursday, December 14, 2017

Matthew 23:13-26

The blessed season of Advent elicits a host of emotional reactions – anticipation, joy, hope, generosity, kindness, love, peace.

But woe? We Christians don't typically associate the coming of our Savior with great sorrow or distress.

Still, today's Gospel reading centers on five of what have come to be known as "The Woes of the Pharisees" or "Jesus' Woes."

In a series of dramatic denunciations – most of which begin, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" – Jesus criticized church and legal scholars of his time, illustrating what author Marcia Ann Kupfer termed "the differences between inner and outer moral states."