



ADVENT devotionals

“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival.” During the season of Advent, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world and watch with expectant hope for his coming again. In its historical origins, the season of Advent was patterned after the season of Lent, a six-week period of penitence and preparation for Easter. Similarly, the four weeks of Advent present an opportunity for communal discernment and personal examination, as the church prepares to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord and looks with hope for Christ’s return.

An excerpt from the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Geneva Press, 2003, 96):

In Advent we expectantly wait for the One who has already come. We anticipate the promised justice of God’s new world, yet we praise God who raised the “righteous branch” to rule with justice and righteousness. We hope for the restoration of the afflicted, the tormented, and the grieving, yet we delight that healing has come in Christ. We long for the beating of swords into plowshares, yet we rejoice that the Prince of Peace has appeared. We yearn for the barren deserts of our inner cities to flourish, yet we laud the desert Rose that has bloomed. We dream of the land where lions and lambs live in harmony, yet we acclaim the child born to lead us into the promised land.

Christ has come! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Taken from the PCUSA Website



Sunday, November 29, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

Are you prepared for Christmas?

For my family, the weekend after Thanksgiving has always meant, “time to break out the Christmas decorations!” With the boys in the living room watching football games and eating leftovers from our Thanksgiving meal, my mom and I would start to take down our festive fall decor and unpack boxes of Christmas decorations galore!! As we unpack, it’s kick-off time! And I’m not talking about the football game the boys are watching... I’m talking about kicking off the season of list making! “We need to get hooks for the bells. Oh and new lights for the tree because these broke. Hey, what about some garland for the porch?! Did you write all of that down???” Time to grab paper and pen...

This time of year calls us to be prepared for holiday parties, family gatherings, and a magical Christmas morning with the people we love. As we prepare for all of these things we put lists together. Christmas lists, shopping lists, grocery lists, to-do lists, you name it. At some point you will put a list together this holiday season. Maybe you’re a list person, too, or your gift from God is impeccable memory... Either way, if you don’t have some way of keeping up with it all, something will be left undone, left to do at the very last minute, or just left behind.

In all this joyful chaos, we sometimes leave the wrong things behind. We get so caught up in holiday spirit, that we push back the Holy Spirit. We are so preoccupied by putting lights on the tree, that we forget to replenish the Light in our hearts.

While you kick off this season in your own special way, remember that you aren’t just preparing for and counting down the days until Santa comes. We are preparing our hearts to carry the Light that was gifted to us so long ago. Don’t let your oil run out. Don’t forget to let the Holy Spirit in. Remember to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. And read along as our church members take you through this Advent season.

Dear God, As we kick off the Advent season, please keep our hearts open to all that you have prepared for us. Remind us that real light shines through our hearts when we make time for You. May this season be a time for us to dive deeper into our faith and inspire us to be prepared to do Your work here on Earth. Amen.

Meredith Orel, Director of Christian Education

Monday, November 30, 2020

Luke 20: 1-8

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

This is a favorite hymn and one that sets the tone of the Advent season. Emmanuel – “God is with us”. We wait in anticipation, wonder and hope for the coming of the Messiah. We take time to prepare our hearts to humbly receive the gift God has in store for us.

Moving forward to Luke 20: 1-8, Jesus is a grown man. He has a following as well as his disciples and is popular with many. He rode into Jerusalem, took things into his own hands and was in the temple preaching the Gospel to the people. The chief priests and scribes (who weren’t fans) took issue with this because they regarded themselves to be authorities deciding who could preach or teach. And they definitely had not granted this privilege to Jesus. When they questioned Jesus’ authority to teach, they weren’t really interested in his answer. They wanted only to prove he had no authority to teach in the temple or elsewhere and expose him as an imposter. Jesus, aware of their intentions, posed a question to them in turn that even the people could easily answer – “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” These leaders knew John’s baptism was widely regarded as divine and John as the prophet who foretold of the one who would be the Messiah. So, if they admitted John’s baptism was from heaven, then they would also have to

acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah. Either way they answered it would not work in their favor. They also had power and position and could risk losing that by answering what they knew to be true about John. They had to back down to save face. They weren't receptive to accepting the facts before them or accepting Jesus as divine, the Son of God. They weren't going to win their position.

The situation in this story is like watching political pundits on cable news today. So much effort over time from the religious leaders to prove Jesus wrong, trap him with a question and show they were right about him. They were the ones taking care of the Temple and keeping the Law and he was not following their rules. He was defying their authority. They were so focused on their agenda, they didn't want to see the truth they came to realize themselves in their answer to Jesus' question. Next time I'm working hard to prove someone wrong or that my view is the right one, I'll look to see the pieces of the scribe in my personality.

This Advent Season we can pray for the ability to see more clearly and accept the truths God presents to our hearts. We can pray to recognize our own binary traits, work to resolve differences with each other and practice tolerance. And we give thanks for the continuing comfort of traditions in the Advent Season and the authority of the Scriptures to guide us through and into a new year.

Jane Hedden

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Luke 20: 9-18

It is difficult to read this scripture passage from Luke with my young family. I typically AVOID talking about violence of any kind with my five-year-old son. But in this parable in the early days of the joyous Advent season, I am reminded of the difficulties Jesus will face during the season of Lent. In this time where my family excitedly waits and prepares for Jesus' birth, we remember Jesus will be rejected by leaders near the time of his death. And although this passage talks about

death, I find joy in knowing God fulfilled a promise to his people through Christ's death and resurrection. God will overturn Jesus' rejection and make that which is rejected the cornerstone. With faith as my cornerstone, I can lead the well-managed and fruitful life that God wants me to live. So yes, talking about death during the Advent season is difficult with a five-year-old. This passage does not depict the baby in the manger scene usually thought about during the Christmas Season. Yet through this passage, I am able to tell my son that Jesus is born to help make our lives more fruitful. To teach us how to live our lives the way God intended us to live.

Kristin Simmons, Elder

Wednesday, December 2, 2020

Luke 20: 20-26

Advent is a season of the liturgical year observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas and the return of Jesus at the Second Coming. As we wait and prepare, it is a good time to reflect on the relationship between Jesus and the civil authorities/religious leaders, a relationship that obviously did not exist prior to Jesus' ministry.

The religious leaders viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority and wanted to get Jesus in trouble with the Romans, hoping that the Romans would arrest Jesus and thereby silence him. Spies were sent to interact with Jesus for the purpose of trapping him into a misstep that would provoke the Roman governor to act. After flattering Jesus, the spies asked: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" On the surface it appears to be a no-win question. If Jesus says that the people should not pay taxes, he risks being arrested for sedition and inciting rebellion. If he says that the Jewish people should pay taxes to the Romans he risks being seen by the people as a Roman sympathizer and having public opinion turn against him.

Jesus' well-known answer was "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are

God's" (Luke 20:25). In so doing, Jesus was saying that Christians have duties to both the civil government and to God. Pay the taxes, but foremost, exercise unquestioned allegiance to God's values in all things. Only when Caesar makes demands that interfere with keeping God's commands is there a conflict. As we prepare this Advent season, may we remain mindful that we are called to exercise unquestioned allegiance to God's values in all things.

Mike Brackett

Thursday, December 3, 2020

Luke 20: 27-40

In this passage, the Sadducees posed a question to Jesus concerning a Mosaic law dealing with marriage to a brother's widow. Who were the Sadducees? Nearly all of the priests and aristocrats were Sadducees who were few in number but were very wealthy. They were the governing class in Jerusalem and largely collaborated with Rome because they were unwilling to risk losing their wealth, comfort and status.

The Sadducees accepted only the written law of the Old Testament. They didn't believe in a resurrection from the dead. Nor did they believe or hope for the coming of the Messiah. This would disturb their carefully ordered lives. Since the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, isn't it strange they would ask Jesus who would be the heavenly husband of a woman who had been married to seven different brothers?

Jesus replied they must not think of heaven in earthly terms because life would be much different there. He countered their belief in no resurrection from the dead by pointing out that Moses heard God speak from the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6) saying He was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus further explained that it was impossible that God would be God of the dead but is the God of the living.

Jesus met the Sadducees on their own ground and they agreed he had spoken well. Jesus talked to people using their own language so they could understand his message. Wouldn't we be far better witnesses for Christ if we learned to do the same?

During Advent we tend to focus on the Christ child in the manger. The reality of why Christ left his heavenly home was to save us by dying a terrible death on the cross. During the Advent season, as well as throughout the year, God wants to use our ordinary lives in extraordinary ways so that His Son can be “born again” in and through us. That is true resurrection.

Deb Lybrand, Elder

Friday, December 4, 2020

Luke 2: 25-38

The Widow Prophetess

"Come home early from work tonight," the young wife said. "I'm making your favorite supper because tonight is our anniversary."

"How could I forget our 7th year?" said her husband. "Seven is a holy number. So I won't make you wait until tonight for your present."

He pulled out a necklace with a big white gemstone and fastened it around her neck. "You always seem to know special things about people. Maybe with this as a 3rd eye you can see even deeper into the future."

Anna thought that was very funny and immediately went to admire the unique gift in her mirror. She showed the gift to her neighbors at the market later that morning. She thought about it and smiled quietly as she prepared supper that afternoon. Then she rubbed it nervously late that evening as supper went cold. Eventually, her husband's partners knocked on her door and gave her some terrible news. That night Anna wandered to the temple to pray and mourn. And she never came back home.

Years later, Anna's father Phanael paid her a visit at the temple. "Your mother sent you this change of clothes . . . and I wanted to talk to you myself. A business partner of mine lost his wife during childbirth last year. It was to be their first child and he was devastated. He also knew your husband and always heard very fine compliments about you, Anna. He has asked me

to consider him as your next husband. Anna, you have mourned for over two years and I have told him you will be his wife."

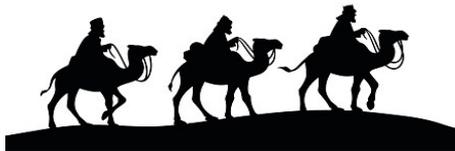
Anna was stunned. "Father, I stopped mourning a long time ago. Now I have work to do here at the temple. I see the new babies who come for consecration. Do you know that I can tell things about them, things that their parents don't know? I saw one today that will go blind many years from now. Another that will struggle with a violent temper. Yesterday I held a baby that will be responsible for employing over 500 people. God shows me things about their future and with this knowledge I pray for them in ways that no one else can."

Phanuel countered, "But you are only 25 years old. You can still remarry and have children of your own. Don't pass up this chance for happiness."

"The firstborn of Jerusalem are my children" said Anna. "And my work praying for them keeps me very busy and fulfilled."

Over many decades Anna had held thousands of children and today was progressing as usual. As the priest finished circumcising a baby, he handed the child to Anna. As soon as she touched Him Anna was overwhelmed with visions of glory and light so bright she couldn't see. Angelic singing so loud she could hear nothing else. A warmth and completeness filled her with such joy that she had no room for any other emotion. She knew immediately that this was the Son of God. She now had the high honor of holding the Messiah in her arms. As the vision subsided she noticed the parents and priests staring at her curiously. But she gazed down at the baby held tightly to her chest. He had reached up his tiny hand and grasped a tarnished, formerly-white gemstone that still hung from Anna's neck.

Lance Roper



Saturday, December 5, 2020

Luke 21: 5-19

Advent is a time for waiting and preparation for Christ's arrival. Advent means the arrival. We reflect on both His coming at Christmas and His coming again. The entirety of Luke 21, known as the Olivet Discourse, describes the trials and tribulation that will occur before the ultimate and triumphant return of Christ. Jesus speaks to his disciples in these verses as they gaze at the beautiful and glorious Temple. He gives them a stark and direct response. This Temple will be obliterated, razed to the ground, and wiped totally away. And that is just the beginning of their troubles. Christ warns his disciples that the journey will be long, full of destruction, betrayal and death before the Kingdom of God draws near.

For us today, verse 11 may be difficult to read. "There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." Pestilence is an infectious disease; the word is derived from "pestis" meaning plague in Latin. We do not have to imagine what a plague can do anymore. While not physically destroyed like the Temple, the virus we are experiencing has emptied our places of worship and disconnected us physically from each other. It has affected the lives of everyone on the planet.

When we arrive at Christmas this year, it will not be like any other one we have experienced. We will not be able to do many of the things we have always done. Traditions will be suspended. Family gatherings will not be the same. For millions, they will be without a job or without a loved one for the first time. Our lives will bear some of the signs of what Jesus described.

However, in verses 18 and 19, we hear the encouragement of Christ. He is going to lead us through the trials of destruction and betrayal in our lives and protect every hair on our head. "Stand firm, and you will win life." So today, I encourage you to stand firm. Be steadfast in your faith. Resist the negative forces against you. Hold your ground. Feel the

hand of Christ on your back supporting you and holding you in place. For this season as we celebrate the birth of Christ and His coming again we have the hope that we will win life and a glory everlasting.

Brent Dillon

Sunday, December 6, 2020

Waiting in Joy, Peace, Hope, & Love

At Christmas time my momma would make this time of year a festival in our home. I would go to school that morning and come home in the afternoon to find our home had been transformed. She would hang red, green and white streamers twisted together from the ceiling, hang homemade felt stockings from the mantle with our names on them and hang a styrofoam Santa face on the door and we would wait for daddy to bring home a tree that was way too big for the house. He would spend the rest of the evening cutting it down in size to fit the space where it always stood!

Momma would ask the four of us what we wanted for Christmas and remind us that we would not get everything we asked for. She loved to surprise us with a gift that we asked for and a gift she wanted us to have.

In turn, we all would ask her what she wanted for Christmas and she would smile so sweetly at us and say “I just want Joy, Peace, Hope and Love”!

So one year we decided she would get just that - we created signs with Joy, Peace, Hope and Love on them and handed her these gifts, announcing our gift to her with a speech on how we identified with it. Of course, she loved every moment of this presentation of her gift from her “babies”! (To this day she calls us this and we are much older now).

This story reminds me of how God must feel as we Watch, Prepare, Rejoice and Behold as we draw near to him this Advent season. I believe that God wants us to present and share our gifts with each other, too, of Joy, Peace, Hope and Love this

Christmas season and always! I know he would love every moment of it too!

Luke 2:10- But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great **joy** for all the people.”

Philippians 4:7- And the **peace** of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Romans 5:5- And **hope** does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

John 3:16- For God so **loved** the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Tonja Caviness, Moderator of the Deacons

Monday, December 7, 2020

Psalm 95: 1-2

On the first day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Blessings from SVPC.

On the second day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Two pastors’ love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the third day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Warm, close friends; Two pastors’ love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the fourth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors’ love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the fifth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors’ love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the sixth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Bill

John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the seventh day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the eighth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Record Stewardship seasons; Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the ninth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Worship virtually streaming; Record Stewardship seasons; Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the tenth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Grand Montreat gathering; Worship virtually streaming; Record Stewardship seasons; Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the eleventh day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Grace all redeeming; Grand Montreat gathering; Worship virtually streaming; Record Stewardship seasons; Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

On the twelfth day of Christmas, Spring Valley means to me: Christ gives us meaning; Grace all redeeming; Grand Montreat gathering; Worship virtually streaming; Record Stewardship seasons; Lively Session meetings; Bill John's a-playing; Anne Perry sings; Mere's joyful words; Warm, close friends; Two pastors' love; And Blessings from SVPC.

James McCallum

Tuesday, December 8, 2020

Luke 2: 11-12

The anticipation of writing a devotion seemed overwhelming when I sat down to do so. There are so many precious Biblical verses, so many memories, and so many customs. But all I kept thinking of were two of my favorite “go to” hymns ... so they became my resource.

“Away in a Manger”

Have you ever noticed that when we sing “Away in a Manger” at church, everybody sings? Those sweet words about that precious baby are embedded in our minds. Will we ever forget the first time we saw a picture of the Nativity in the Bible? Do we look with joy at every Baby Jesus on TV, in movies, and most especially in church plays? As a small child I truly believed God chose which baby to “be” Jesus; maybe He did.

The promise that Baby brought us in our early years is still a part of us. He was our very first real gift ... wrapped in swaddling clothes instead of holiday paper. And, the fact that God sent our Savior as an infant was the perfect setting for Mankind to seek him. After all, doesn't everyone love a baby?

I'd like to think of Advent as a time to take the beautiful image of the Baby Jesus out of our heart's photo album and hold it in our hand. And then show it to others.

But as we learn, life after first seeing the Manger does happen, with all of its joys and sorrows. And through it all we are reminded that the Christmas Baby is always with us ... somehow.

“How Great Thou Art”

I experienced my first real personal tragedy as a young teenager. A dear friend and member of my church Youth Group was killed in his high school football game. I heard it on the radio (he went to a different school), and I will never forget the shock. I had seen him the night before and all he talked about was the game.

His funeral was just after Thanksgiving and our youth group served as the choir. At the end of the service we all sang “How Great Thou Art” ... Mark’s favorite hymn. Just as his parents walked by us I saw his mother's blank eyes. That memory in itself was devastating. I turned away in tears and looked to the side of the church. And there I saw an array of Christmas decorations ready to be put up. The most visible decoration was the MANGER with the BABY JESUS!

Oh what a promise! I knew then, even more “for sure”, that the Love of that sweet baby in the Manger was forever ... that we would all be okay ... and that Mark was fine. O Lord, how great You are!

As “dysfunctional” as this devotion may seem I can assure you that these two hymns are very much a part of my Advent joy. I especially read and sing them (alone in the shower!) at Christmas. I NEVER do so without a few tears. They are both beautiful and comforting. Saying and not singing the words are special too.

I pray that all of us have a little extra special something to hold near during the Advent Season, whether they be memories or songs or whatever. Just something to “pull out” to prepare and enjoy. I pray that these special “things” are visible to others and help us spread the true appreciation of Advent.

May the sweetness of the Baby Jesus and the Greatness of our Lord surround us in this Season and all year.

Laura Griese

Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Isaiah 6: 1-13

The prophet Isaiah speaks to us during the season of Advent because of his scriptural anticipation of the coming of Immanuel – the coming of Jesus, the coming of the Christ and the God that would be with us. Long before the Birth of Jesus, Isaiah anticipates the coming of Christ the King who would bring justice and peace to a sinful world in great need of

redemption and his forgiving love. Isaiah tells us that “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” He describes a King who would be Lord of us all, a child “born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful.” Lastly, Isaiah anticipates the blossoming of a “holy seed” that will “sprout from the stump of Jesse” (Jesus’ lineage) and deliver justice to the poor and afflicted.

We find the prophecy of the holy seed in Isaiah 6. Here, the prophet is depressed and disillusioned over the death of King Uzziah, by all accounts a great King whose throne, Isaiah believed, would not be easily filled by an equally just and capable ruler. He was, as we would say, “down in the dumps.” He wonders how a good and just God could allow this to happen. His mood suddenly gives way to fear and foreboding as the Lord appears before him seated on his majestic throne with an order of angels (seraphim) hovering over him. The six-winged seraphim are calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Isaiah’s mistrust in the Lord’s judgement becomes palpable as God appears on his throne, the only throne, he comes to realize, that really matters. “Woe is me,” says Isaiah, “for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.” Isaiah humbles himself before the Lord, admitting his sin and the sin of his people. Unmasked and prepared for the worst, Isaiah is visited by one of the angels who flies to him from the alter “with a live coal in his hand.” The angel touches the burning coal to Isaiah’s lips saying, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

At that moment, Isaiah hears the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” The Lord is in need of a messenger to go among the people to deliver his word. Without hesitation, Isaiah says, “Here am I, Send me!” “Send me,” exclaims Isaiah, “Send me.” Cleansed of his sin and removed from all doubt of the glory of God, Isaiah is ready to go forth in

the Lord's name to deliver his message. Isaiah's mission, at first glance, will be a thankless task, preaching to people who hear but do not understand, who see but do not perceive, and whose heart will become increasingly hardened to Isaiah's every word. "How long," Lord, do I have to do this, asks Isaiah. The Lord's response to Isaiah's question, more than likely, was not very comforting. He leaves nothing to Isaiah's imagination. Until the cities and the fields lie ruined, says the Lord, until all the houses are deserted, and "the land is utterly forsaken." In the end, however, the Lord leaves Isaiah with a promise that all will not be lost. Some of my people will remain (a tenth), says the Lord. They will be like tree stumps in a desolate land from which a "holy seed," will sprout and blossom into a new beginning. Advent is about the blossoming of the holy seed among God's people and the arrival of the God who is with us and who promises to be with us always. Merry Christmas, Come Immanuel!

Steve Bower

Thursday, December 10, 2020

Luke 22: 1-13

The First Last Supper

How could things fall apart so fast? Yesterday my wife, daughter, and I were busy preparing the Passover for a dozen traveling tradesmen. They were to be our first clients since I built the upstairs room. We were being well-paid for this first job, and even my skeptical wife had started to believe the new business could work. We had spent the day making and buying supplies and preparing the food, wine, and furnishings together.

This morning, they cancelled.

My wife's resolve crumbled. She reminded me of my failure as a provider, took our daughter, and left. By the afternoon I realized my daughter never got water that morning.

So I headed to the well, a grown man drawing water in front of the whole neighborhood. As I returned with the full jug, two strangers followed me. When I got home they asked me about if I have a guest room where their teacher can eat the Passover supper. They didn't seem very confident in their

request. I took them upstairs and they saw everything already prepared. This clearly made them very happy. One said, “We will be back shortly with our group. John, tell Judas to pay him whatever we owe for everything.”

That evening I stayed busy serving them by myself, but the men didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Their rabbi addressed them with such devotion and authority I couldn’t help but eavesdrop. After they left, I cleaned up the room and paused at the Rabbi’s place at the table. There was an untouched piece of bread and his cup was mostly full. I filled a wineskin from his cup and put his bread in my pocket to eat tomorrow.

The next day I was stunned to hear about a young rabbi being executed. By the time I got to Golgotha, Romans were taking his body down from the cross. Not 24 hours ago, he was calmly discussing the future with his friends. No one seemed to suspect anything like this. As I stared in horror at the scene, His words came flooding back.

“This is my body given for you.” I remembered the bread in my pocket and reverently took a bite.

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” I closed my eyes and drank from the wineskin in remembrance of him.

Lance Roper

Friday, December 11, 2020

Isaiah 7: 10-25

Luke 22: 14-30

Promises from God

“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” (Isaiah to King Ahaz.)

Isaiah attempts, unsuccessfully, to convince King Ahaz that Jerusalem would not be destroyed by the armies that besieged them. Ahaz had not done what was right in the eyes of God but Isaiah told him that the Davidic lineage would not be destroyed. “Immanuel” (God is with us) embodies the divine promise of protection to Jerusalem.

In Luke, Jesus makes a promise to his disciples, "...the new covenant in my blood": "You are the ones who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom..."

In spite of assurances from God, through Isaiah, King Ahaz turned away and went on to be a weak and idolatrous king. His reign ended badly.

Peter denied even knowing Jesus not long after participating in the original communion and hearing Jesus' promise of the kingdom to come.

How often do we act poorly and forget what God would have us do, in spite of God's promises to us through Jesus?

As we hear again the announcement of the birth of our Savior, and the promise of eternal life through Him, let us pray that our forgetfulness and lapses in behavior are replaced with renewed faith and actions that demonstrate that renewal:

Dear Gracious God, help us to remember your promises to us and respond by acting accordingly. Thank you for your Son, Jesus. As we celebrate the announcement of His birth, let us renew our faith and strengthen it through our behavior. We pray in His name. Amen.

Ron Swinson, Elder

Saturday, December 12, 2020

Isaiah 9:6, 40:11

Music is one of the best gifts I receive at Christmas. It is a gift I can open early, as I find radio stations that feature Christmas music long before December. I enjoy all the holiday music, but especially the music which is about the true focus of Christmas: God's coming to live with us on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

This Christmas I offer you the musical gift of listening to some

of George Frideric (or Frederick) Handel's well-known oratorio "Messiah." As you probably know the Hebrew word "Messiah" has the same meaning as the Greek word "Christ " which is "The Anointed One." Selections from Handel's "Messiah" are often performed at Christmas. Because of the pandemic we won't be attending a live performance, but why not search for it on YouTube? As we listen, we will be listening to words Handel selected from scripture for the oratorio he composed in 1741.

Here I'll focus on Isaiah 9:6 and 40:11, predictions which came beautifully true in the life of Jesus. Isaiah 9:6 provides the words for a well-known chorus: "For unto us a Child is Born." Later, Isaiah 40:11 provides the words for a contralto aria:

*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and
He shall gather the lambs with his flock
and carry them in his bosom
and gently lead those that are with young.*

These words bring to mind Jesus' words recorded in John 10:11 - "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This prediction of the prophet Isaiah was beautifully lived out by our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the "Messiah" all the words are from scripture and the music blesses us by helping us repeat the words over and over in our minds. The words and music capture our hearts as well, especially as we stand to sing the Hallelujah Chorus.

This Advent Season—today—why not give yourself the gift of music, whether the "Messiah" or a Christmas carol, music which will help you focus on Christ?

Lois Harmon

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Revelations 7:12

Lyrics from Messiah, based upon Revelations 7:12 —

...power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto

Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.

Christmas Gifts

You ask what gifts I received for Christmas?

The color red, tubas, and winter night skies
Laughter around tables and help with the dishes
Brisk walks, candlelight, and bright shining eyes
Little girls dressed in velvet and plaid
Praise and encouragement, anger aside
Fidgety children bouncing in bed
Light-hearted chatter in concert crowds
Community choirs and warm gingerbread
Preschoolers speaking their lines nice and loud
Sparkling set tables and fresh fragrant wreaths
Cider by fires and poems read aloud
Eloquent prayers said for sadness and grief
Watching through windows for loved ones arriving
Colorful presents tucked beneath trees
Shrieks of welcome and full frontal hugging
Favorite old stories embellished when told
Soft wet kisses and good-natured teasing
Quiet talks treasured while driving backroads
Menus prepared in bustling kitchens
New friends, old friends, and babies to hold
Holiday cards stamped and handwritten
Handel's Messiah that shimmers like crystal
Arms around shoulders and whispers from children
Sermons and scripture to soothe and startle
Gestures of love for the hungry and homeless
Gifts that affirm the goodness in people.

And you? What did you receive for Christmas?

Ann Humphries

Monday, December 14, 2020

Isaiah 8: 16-22

This passage reminded me of a Sunday School lesson taught not too long ago about how to know what God wants you to do. One of the people present explained that they often seek advice from

their many friends, mostly from their friends from church. I remember hearing this and being completely baffled. Of course I had sought guidance from my friends before, and most people do regularly. However, I had never thought about how seeking advice from my friends in Christ could be a way to seek advice from God.

This phenomenon reminds me of the fact that we all have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Such knowledge is comforting for both when you seek advice, and in order to recognize that God is influencing the guidance that you are receiving.

However, it is also nice to remember, when someone seeks your advice, that you are able to assist God's will. In my experience, when you constantly remember that you have the light of the Holy Spirit within you, joy and love become more apparent in everything.

I think this is especially important to remember during Advent. Although I'm not honestly sure what Advent in a pandemic looks like, most of the Advent seasons that I have lived through contain lots of running around making sure that all of our ducks are in a row for festivities, gifts, and service projects. Amongst all of this stress, it is important to remember that sometimes we all need to take some time to seek guidance from one another, or just take some time to remember that you have God's light within you.

Lizzie McCallum, Youth Elder

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Isaiah tells us that the ancient people of Israel were living in darkness, fear, and gloom. Does that sound familiar? This year has certainly been a time of great darkness and gloom for us as well. A deadly pandemic, months of isolation, divisiveness and disappointment, natural disasters, and more. In these familiar verses in Isaiah, God has promised to send a child who would bring light into the world and hope in dark times.

It would be seven hundred years in another time of darkness and suffering before this Promised Child would be born in

Bethlehem—a tiny, helpless baby born to a poor couple in a stable surrounded by livestock. But we are told that this child is a gift *to* us and *for* us and that the child is Mighty God himself. It's hard to wrap your mind around that! The child Jesus, this Prince of Peace, has been born to put an end to the injustice of this world, the shadow of death, and to bring hope in times like the one we are living in now.

Last fall we had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land with a group of about forty other “pilgrims”. We traveled to the historic town of Bethlehem to see the Church of the Nativity which was built in the 4th century on the traditional site of Jesus's birth. We waited patiently for our turn to go downstairs into a cave and to touch a star that marks the place thought to be where our Savior was born. Afterwards, our group gathered in the courtyard outside as we took turns reading the Christmas story aloud. It gave us a chance to reflect on that night two thousand years ago when God sent his Son to be the true Light of the World to people living in darkness.

This Christmas may be different than in years past. We don't know if we'll be having large family gatherings, holiday parties with friends, or joining together singing carols and lighting the Advent wreath together in our sanctuary. But however we celebrate this year, may we rejoice in wonder and awe at this indescribable gift that God has given us in the birth of Christ, which is the assurance of his love and care for us in all circumstances. Hallelujah!

Dianne Meadow

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Mark 1: 1-8

What are you waiting for? It seems we always are waiting – waiting for tomorrow; waiting for this or that to occur as we fill our lives with goals and dreams and aspirations. And we wait for personal and collective momentous occasions. Indeed we even practice waiting for the reappearance of our Lord each Advent.

During Advent we look forward and backward to the birth and

resurrection upon which hinge the entire universe. When we celebrate Advent we are actually practicing looking forward toward Jesus' reappearing and our seeing Him face to face. Not just as a baby, but as the Risen Lord. When we look back we see a man, God incarnate born to a virgin in a lowly stall. We see His submission to His Father's will and God's approval as He is baptized by John; we see His miraculous works and outpouring of compassion. We witness His relinquishment of glory as he hangs upon a cross. We see His glorious resurrection and ascension and we wait for His second appearing.

We fondly look forward to His coming each year, but are actually longing in our inmost beings to see Him ourselves face to face. Do we not know that the aching in our hearts is actually a hunger for the time we will see him in the flesh? When everything seems perfect in life, there is always a "waiting" for more, something else, something that satisfies. We are waiting for Him. We long to love and be loved by Him; to realize peace everlasting. Jesus said in the last verse of the Revelation, "Surely I am coming soon." The verse ends with our response, "Even so, come quickly!"

John saw Him
in the line
toward the end

At once John
was dazzled by His appearing:
The mystery unfolding
The Christ kneeling
The Heavens opening
The Father speaking
The Dove descending
The world and time and space
reeling
From the immensity of
His giving the Immeasurable Gift -
His Son
His loving Son



Jennie Heinsohn

Thursday, December 17, 2020

Isaiah 9:18 - 10:4

Matthew 3: 1-12

The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, son of Amoz, prophesied in the eighth century BCE. According to the Harper Collins Study Bible, Isaiah was rooted in the Zion tradition, which celebrated God as the great king of heaven and earth, with Jerusalem as His holy royal dwelling place. Therefore, God would save Jerusalem, and the many trials and tribulations the people of Israel endured were prophesied as purification. The people watched, waited, and hoped for a new king of the Davidic line to arise. This would herald a glorious time of peace and prosperity for the Israelites. The above referenced verses from Isaiah serve to describe how wicked many of the people had become, and to remind them that God is the supreme ruler over all.

Fast forward 8 centuries. The watching, waiting, and hoping may have often grown dim, yet the light was never fully extinguished. Something was definitely happening in a remote region of Judea. The story now continues in the New Testament gospel from Matthew 3:1-12. A man called John the Baptizer was preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. He warned the people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He reminded the people, "This is the one of whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke when he said 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.'" All 4 gospels record these events with John the Baptist. His part in the Good News is like a warm-up act before the headliner appears on stage. John's twin messages of repentance and baptism into a new life are very important, and do serve as a witness to the fulfillment of the scriptures. John told the Israelites that God would purify them from the inside out. He said, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Fast forward again, this time two millennia. We followers of

Christ, some 2000 years after His brief time spent with His disciples here on Earth, know more about the Good News than the people who listened to Isaiah, or who came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. We are blessed to possess the invaluable words recorded in the Old and New Testaments. We are called by Christ to study, worship, and proclaim the Gospels. My husband Bill and I were very fortunate to be able to travel with 20 others from our church to the Holy Lands. There we witnessed long lines of believers being baptized in the Jordan River. It was an awe-inspiring event, and it left an indelible imprint on all of us that day. Pastor Jack placed the sign of the cross on our foreheads with water from the Jordan.

The season of Advent is a perfect time for all of us to reflect on who we are as Christians. We are given the precious gift of God's grace. The Holy Spirit is truly God with us. We can use this Advent time we have been given to renew our faith and to try to live each day with the firm belief that God is, has been, and always will be ruler of all. Let us resolve in the coming days to heed the words of the Prophet Isaiah, repeated by John, and recorded in Matthew:

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

Jane Staines, Elder

Friday, December 18, 2020

Isaiah 11: 1-9

John 3: 16-21

As we celebrate the approaching birth of the Christ Child, I found the pairing of these Old and New Testament verses to be compelling reminders of God's truth, love, and His continued presence at work in our lives.

Most of us have probably wondered, “How is God relevant in today's world? Does He really care about us and love us? Why does He allow so many bad things to happen? Why do so many people lie, cheat, and trample over others to get what they want? What is “truth” in a world of “fake” news? Is it possible for any of us, much less all of us, to live in love, peace, and

harmony in such a broken world? Just where IS God in all this?"

The questions posed above are not new. Throughout the Old Testament, God's chosen people were also filled with doubt and fear about the evil and dangers at work in their world. From slavery in Egypt, to 40 years wandering in the desert to escape their captors, to defeats suffered at the hands of conquering enemies, His people wondered, "Just where is God? Would He not deliver a Messiah to save them?"

In the Old Testament reading, Isaiah 11: 1-9, we see how God used Isaiah to reassure His people of His (God's) continued presence in their lives, of His understanding of their worries and fears, and to foretell God's plan to send forth the long-sought Messiah. But, this Messiah would not be the conquering Savior the people expected. He would not be a military Savior of the Jews, but He would be a Savior for all humankind. His life, death, resurrection, and teachings would prove to be the fulfillment of God's promise and the ultimate demonstration of His love for all people.

Fast forward to the New Testament scripture, John 3:16-21. It takes us to the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy regarding God's promise to send a Messiah. It is a beautiful recounting of what God has done for us and accomplished through His son, Jesus Christ.

We know (and God knows) how badly we behave, how poorly we treat one another, how selfishly we seek fortune and riches for ourselves at the expense of others, and how we hide from God (in darkness) hoping He does not notice. We know (and God knows) none of us deserve forgiveness and redemption. But, God loves us so much He sent His son. He sent Jesus to teach and show us how to love. He sent Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb who, out of His pure love for us, willingly died on the cross and asked God, in His final breath, to forgive us (you and me) . . . for we know not what we are doing. Jesus didn't have to do this. Yet, He did.

Let that soak in.

Is there any truer love? Jesus loved us so much, he allowed Himself to be killed by the very people (us) who deserved to be on that cross. It is we who are guilty. Not Jesus. But He died for us, anyway. Out of perfect love, he gave up His life. Because He died and three days later was resurrected, the bright light of God's love surrounds us and we are redeemed by His grace.

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus this Christmas season, my prayer is we all take comfort in His redeeming love. He casts a bright light over our broken world and there is redemption and salvation for all of us. If and when we find ourselves hiding in darkness, fighting the love of Jesus, let's not be afraid to seek His truth and come into His light. It is liberating!

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

George Foard, Elder

Saturday, December 19, 2020

Isaiah 11: 10-16

At this Season of Advent

John 5: 30-47

— Preparing the Way

Sometimes it is important to take stock and personally remember how we developed a personal relationship with God; this is vital in our families as well. I (Ruth S.) can think back to the summer of 1951 when I attended G.A. (Girls Ambassadors) at Camp Rawl's. As I sat on the steps of the Chapel looking at the sunset, I felt a calling to dedicate my life to God. Well, since that day, my life has taken many bends and turns but my salvation with God has been a constant for me and at times saved my life along the way.

For my husband Rallie, he found his personal relationship with God at age 13 years old down at Harris Methodist Church in Greenwood, SC. His Mother had died 4 years earlier and he was trying to survive that trauma. God came to him at an altar call during a revival. He, like me, has had many times when his personal relationship with God has literally saved his life.

The first scripture from Isaiah seems to indicate that the

Israelites were tired of warring with Assyria, and they longed for a different relationship with God. He answered their call by sharing that He would send His precious Son to save their lives.

Then in the passage in John it seems Jesus is saying “you have heard from John and then from Jesus saying, God has prepared the way for me to take on the sins of the world on your behalf.” During this wonderful time of waiting and watching for his birth, may you reflect on your personal relationship with God and His will for your life.

Ruth Queen Seigler, Elder

Sunday, December 20, 2020

Micah 5: 2-5a

The Blessing

written by Pastor Emeritus Rev. Dr. Lamar Potts in 2013

“BLESSING” (a definition): “A blessing is a reminder that we are connected to a precious past, and have the promise of a future we will never have to face alone.”

When we speak of God, we have to speak with a certain humility and tone, because to speak with authority and certainty is to say more than we know. God’s way and thoughts go far beyond our ability to fully understand.

And yet though God is a “mystery”, there are those things about God we can know with great certainty. For instance, if we back up just one verse from our Advent passage (Micah 5:2-5a) to Micah 5:1, we are told that God’s chosen people are surrounded (“walled in”) by the enemy and their king is being humiliated (“with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel”).

This scene is written as if it is something going on at the present time. However, according to Church historians, this is an event that happened much earlier. The scene described is that of the Jewish people about to be led into exile by the Babylonians.

At the time of this writing however, the Babylonian Exile had ended and a “remnant” of the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem. But the “remnant” had done no more than just settle in and had just begun rebuilding their homes and their lives when another storm threat began to arise — the Assyrian Empire.

It’s into this “walled in” situation of God’s people (the Babylonians of the past and the Assyrians of the future), that Micah brings God’s “Blessing”! A reminder of God’s Providential care in the past and God’s promise of a future king to be born in Bethlehem — but a child, a Son, who existed long before his birth.

This is a good time of year to remember our own blessings. To remember all the ways God has strengthened, encouraged and in some ways, redeemed us in the past — and God’s promise to go with us into whatever the future might hold.

Merry Christmas! Your life and mine are in good hands!

Rev. Dr. Lamar Potts, Pastor Emeritus

Monday, December 21, 2020

Luke 1: 26-38

The Reason for the Season

The 2020 Advent season is here. The birth of Jesus our Lord and Savior, as foretold in Luke 1:26-38, gives us the hope, faith, and love to say goodbye to 2020. The year 2020 has been filled with challenges due to the onset of the pandemic. We were left with questionings with the hows, the whys, the whats, and whens. I reflected on the scriptures. Then, I realized that Mary was told about the Good News of our Lord’s birth by the angels. At that time, Mary was upset, filled with questions about the unexpected birth of our Savior to the world. In Mary’s times, she was left perplexed, pondering, and wondering about the birth.

The season of Advent gives us a reason to pause. During this trying time, we can read about the Lord Jesus’ birth anew. The miracle of Jesus’ birth is needed, now more than ever due to the

uncertainty in our world. Our lives were interrupted with the unexpected. We miss our loved ones. We experienced heartbreaks from deaths. We faced our own health challenges and other disappointments.

Now is our time to refocus and regroup to think about the joy given to us in the world. The peace of Advent season gives us a calmness. We get to reflect on the joy of family. We get to prepare in new ways due to the interruptions. Then, we can think about Mary who was challenged, but in the end she was at the cross viewing her Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus, we know there are blessings in the storms of life. The season of Advent is a blessing due to our Blessed Savior.

In ending, we can think outwardly to a world of people who are filled with questions and upset like Mary. Therefore, let us be the example of our Lord this Advent season and bring Good News of hope, faith, and love to others. This is the real reason for the season, the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ina Smith, Deacon

Tuesday, December 22, 2020

Luke 1: 39-56

After Mary was visited by the angel and found out she would be with child, she traveled to Judah to visit Elizabeth who was with child, and upon hearing Mary's voice Elizabeth's child leapt in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. While reading this scripture, verse 45 really struck a chord with me. "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." I can only imagine how Mary must have felt after hearing the news that she would be the mother of Jesus, Savior of the world. She had to have such strong faith and courage to accept God's calling and to have a trust that all would be as it should be in fulfillment of the promises from God. Mary went on to praise God for the blessings in store for her, coming from such a humble life.

Oh, to have a faith like Mary's! Praising and trusting God in

what must have been a stressful time in her life, but knowing this was fulfillment of God's promise to us all. As we are navigating these times in 2020, facing the pandemic and all of the changes in our lives, we must also be like Mary – praising God and trusting that he is continuing to guide our lives and will see us through. When times seem bleak and the road seems rough, we need to believe that God is there and will fulfill His promises. The anticipation and waiting, knowing that Jesus would be born to fulfill God's promises, knowing that we too are waiting for that time when we will feel back to a new normal and there will be an end to our time of strife. In this holiday season may we look for ways to praise God and help those around us to see The Light and feel God's love in our lives. Let us all find ways to reach out to our neighbors, friends, and community to share love and praise for God sending his Son into the world. "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name." Luke 1:49 NAS

Becky Coulter, Elder

Wednesday, December 23, 2020

Luke 1: 57-80

Zechariah's song at the birth of his son, John the Baptist, reminds me of this verse:

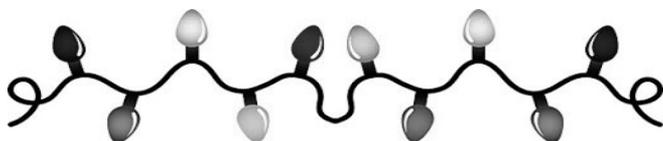
I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations
- Psalm 89:1

This verse instantly transports me to what may be my most 'divine' Christmas experience. There is nothing quite like hearing the innocent, excited and at times frantic voices of children singing as they anticipate the coming of Christmas morning. As a child, I remember being cast as a star, an angel, and yes even a goat, as I helped the adults in my life feel the wonder of Christmas as I sang, often off key and in more of a yell than a tune, the story of Jesus' birth. I remember how hard we worked to learn the words, tunes and motions to show the beauty of that wondrous night. Little did I know that my eight-

year-old self may have been someone's invitation to Jesus. With my homemade costumes, fidgety feet and messy hair I was opening the door to Christmas with my songs and my full participation not limited by shopping lists, meal plans, and last minute to-dos.

The beauty of these childhood moments did not become clear to me until my generation was grown, and God had entrusted me to help with the next fidgety, innocent, excited generation. Now, back to the 'divine' Christmas experience. Several years ago in the midst of my holiday hustle and bustle I 'had to' take time out of my busy schedule to take my kids to the dress rehearsal for THEIR Christmas pageant. Yes, it was now their turn to wear the recycled costumes, and anxiously perform as they waited for that special day. As I checked emails and made lists, something grabbed my heart in a way that I have a hard time explaining with words. This was not the main performance, this was not a polished performance, but God met me there! As I listened to my children sing about the glory of our savior and the beauty of his coming, I froze in my pew. I could not take my eyes off of the cows, angels, and shepherds. I didn't hear off key children, I heard God speaking to me. I heard him telling me that Jesus came for me, for them, for us all. I felt the amazement of that silent night. I felt in a 'divine' way how "singing of the Lord's great love ... through all generation" brought me to perhaps the most real Christmas experience of my life. It was not flashy, intellectual, or expensive. It was a moment my children gave me that they may not understand until one day they are busy and annoyed that they have to take their kids to a Christmas pageant rehearsal. My prayer is that they will put down the phone and emails, forget about plans and experience the Lord's great love through the songs of yet another generation.

Jennifer Raley, Elder



Thursday, December 24, 2020

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Luke 2: 1-20

If there is one thing we all have learned in 2020, it is that the best laid plans can be upended in the blink of an eye. Frankly, that kind of upheaval is something we have all dealt with many times over in our lives.

For example, every Christmas I make a wonderful plan – gifts and cards to give – activities to enjoy, like the Lights at the Zoo and an Advent devotion study to read. It is all set by Thanksgiving and well, that is the high point of the plan. Every day after that I pare down that plan – one less card to send, one less gift to give – and my favorite, “I’ll do that right after Christmas!” and so it goes, because life rarely, if ever, goes according to plan.

In the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph had plans, too. They would be married, make a home together, raise a family. They were getting ready, preparing for their future.

At the same time, God had a plan. One that involved Mary and Joseph – a plan that would shake the entire world; upend powers and principalities; one that in so many ways is still a mystery to us today.

While Mary and Joseph were busy with their plans, God was working out God’s own plan, beginning with the angel’s visit to Mary. Surely she wasn’t ready for that and yet her response was acceptance – not, “wait, I’ve already got plans.” And what of Joseph? A pregnant bride was not in his plans. Yet, he took Mary as his wife.

Could either one have been prepared for the weight of God’s plan? Perhaps, they comforted each other – “It will be fine, Mary. We’ll settle in. I’ll finish the house. We’ll get things ready for the baby.”

And finally, the birth, a baby boy, son of God ...

For a child has been born to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

Mary wasn't ready. Joseph wasn't ready. The nursery wasn't ready.

We aren't ready. Things haven't gone according to plan – the pandemic, the upheaval, the chaos. Perhaps this year there are no gifts, no tree, no lights – just a dark desperation.

Yet Christmas still comes. This Holy Night a child is born once more into the desperation of the world. Angels sing. Light glows all around. Glory to God in the highest. Christ is born.

Friends, we don't have to be ready. God is ready and at work among us – even now. Amen

Rev. Ruth Roberts

Friday, December 25, 2020

Zechariah 2: 10-13

Christmas Day

This passage was written at a time in the history of Israel when the nation had been exiled to Babylon. But God is moving and at work, and God promises to restore his people to the holy land. Through the lens of our faith in Christ, we see the greater fulfillment of this prophecy. Beyond how God restored his people in Zechariah's historical time, we see how God has fulfilled this word for all time in the birth of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

John's gospel in chapter 1 shares that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

Christmas celebrates the truth that God has come into our midst in Jesus Christ. God sent the Son, because God loves the world. This is God's choice. He chooses to send Christ and Christ remains in our midst no matter what the world might choose. We can see in Christ what it means for us to choose for God. When Jesus was confronted with temptation he chose

truth. When Jesus was confronted with sin he chose to forgive. When Jesus was confronted by pain he chose to heal. When Jesus was confronted by hatred he chose not to retaliate, but instead gave his life in an action of selfless love for the whole world. Jesus shows us a picture of life that chooses God every day. John wrote; “We have beheld his glory.” He reveals “grace and truth.”

Zechariah wrote, “Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.” Let us quiet our minds, hearts, and spirits and reflect with joy and thanksgiving on God’s great gift of love this Christmas day.

A young boy was asked to define love. He said, “Love is what is in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.” Love is in the room, because Christ is in the room with you today. He chose in the power of the Spirit to be with you. May we also choose him everyday in the coming year.

May God bless you and grant you and your loved ones a Merry Christmas.

Rev. Dr. Jack Heinsohn

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Matthew 1:18-25

First Sunday of Christmas

If Christianity were up to me, and I got to pick and choose God’s promises, I think the first one I’d ask for would be *no worries*. *Hakuna matata*, the easy life, no changes, cushiness and comfort. Sign me up for that religion!

Unfortunately, if there’s anything these past months of a pandemic have shown us, it’s that God has promised us no such thing. Nowhere in the Bible, that I know of, does God say “just follow me, and nothing will be difficult, complicated, or unconventional.” In fact, sometimes God asks us to do things that are difficult, complicated, and unconventional. This passage is a great example. Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells him to go ahead with marrying Mary, because she has conceived from the Holy Spirit.

Imagine being in Joseph's shoes. Not only does an angel appear to him in a dream (which, I think, would be pretty disturbing in and of itself), but the angel asks him to marry a pregnant woman. At the time, Joseph would've been fully within his rights to expose her to public disgrace, and it would have been considerate of him, under the circumstances, to quietly divorce his pregnant fiancée. But God asked Joseph to do something difficult and unconventional and marry her instead.

I'm glad Matthew includes this story because it reminds us that a life following God does not guarantee no worries. Even to bring His son Jesus into the world, the greatest gift, God asked difficult things of His people. Jesus also sometimes asks difficult things of us.

During this pandemic there have been many worries, hard decisions, and unconventional traditions, and I know many of us have had a different and sometimes challenging time recently. But I hope that you are able to see the ways that God has been present and working through it all. I hope to be cognizant of this as I look forward to the new year. Life will not always be easy, but I take comfort in knowing that God has sent us His son, and He is still with us and working in the world.

Elizabeth Dillon



Away in a Manger

Away in a manger
No crib for His bed
The little Lord Jesus
Lay down His sweet head

The stars in the sky
Look down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus
Asleep on the hay

The cattle are lowing
The poor Baby wakes
But little Lord Jesus
No crying He makes

I love Thee, Lord Jesus
Look down from the sky
And stay by my side
'Til morning is nigh

Be near me, Lord Jesus
I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever
And love me, I pray

Bless all the dear children
In Thy tender care
And take us to Heaven
To live with Thee there





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2020 Advent Devotionals