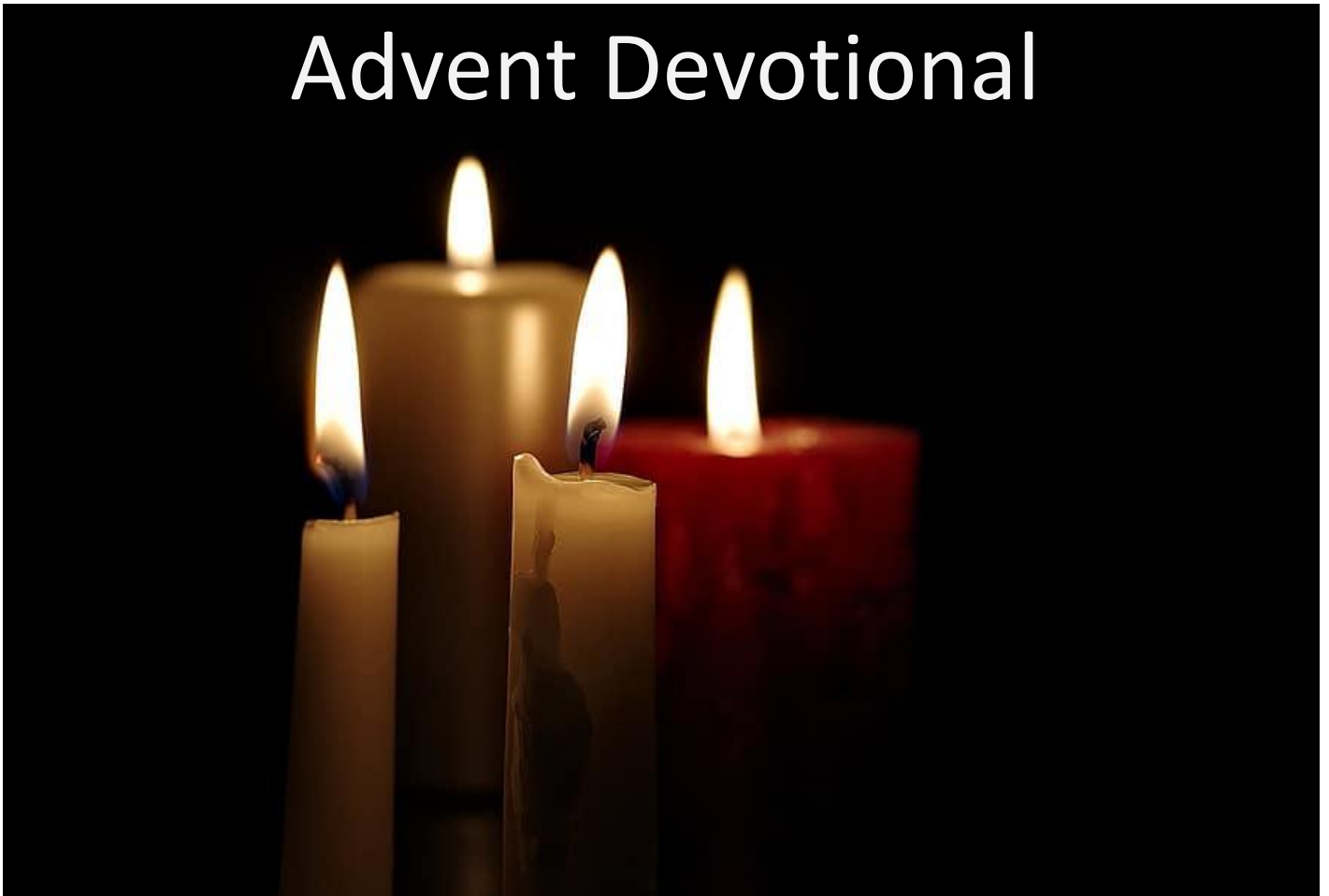


2021 Covenant

Advent Devotional



Daily reflections offered by the people of Covenant

**Compiled by members of the
Spiritual Development & Adult Learning Commission
(SDALC)**

As we wait for Jesus' birth, there is much hope--so much to be thankful and hopeful for! The Book of Zephaniah expresses this hope well:

¹⁴ Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The LORD has removed your judgment;

he has turned away your enemy.

The LORD, the king of Israel, is in your midst;

you will no longer fear evil.

¹⁶ On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:

Don't fear, Zion.

Don't let your hands fall.

¹⁷ The LORD your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory.

He will create calm with his love;

he will rejoice over you with singing.

¹⁸ I will remove from you those worried about the appointed feasts.^[1]

They have been a burden for her, a reproach.

¹⁹ Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time.

I will deliver the lame;

I will gather the outcast.

I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth.

²⁰ At that time, I will bring all of you back,

at the time when I gather you.

I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples

when I restore your possessions and you can see them^[2]—says the LORD.

Footnotes

1. [Zephaniah 3:18](#) Heb uncertain

2. [Zephaniah 3:20](#) Or *before your eyes*

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Common English Bible (As found at biblegateway.com)

Dear God,

Thank you for this time in which we can joyfully anticipate the birth of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. As we enter the Season of Advent, our planning for the Christmas celebration is especially meaningful this year. May we remember the hope of the season and rejoice!

Amen.

Ever since I chose this passage, Tom Petty's "The Waiting" has been playing in my head non-stop; my reminder to be patient even though the dream seems far away. The after school children at our children's center have been counting the days until Christmas since early October, the anticipation of Santa blending with ninjas and princesses. Petty credits the idea to a Janis Joplin quote about touring, saying that she loved being onstage and everything else was just waiting.

Our lives often seem to be nothing but waiting. We wait in traffic, wait in line at the grocery or the BMV, wait for Netflix to stop buffering, wait for the water to boil for tea or pasta. Those of us of a certain age remember waiting for the phone to ring. We wait for packages to arrive, for meetings to start and end, and for the other person's point to be over so that we can speak. We also wait for a chance to see our faraway loved ones, for babies to arrive, for exam scores to be released, for diagnoses to be revealed, for proof that medical treatments are working, for the pain of grief not to be so immobilizing.

The psalmist speaks in a despairing lament of feeling abandoned, focusing on the mental struggles and subsequent predictions of outcomes if left alone. My initial reaction to the beginning was *Really?! 4 lines in and your enemies are rejoicing over their victory?* On further thought, I realized that is what anxiety does. It piles up situation after situation and feeling after feeling, thus turning molehills into mountains in about 20 seconds.

Waiting is hard, but is it hard work? It can be. The work often means returning to trust, building on the foundation of what we know to be true: we are God's beloved children and nothing we are going through separates us from God's love. The psalmist moves immediately from despair into an assurance as strong as the hopelessness was in the beginning. As we wait for the perfect birth of perfect love, may we find our moments of peace, trust, and grace.

"The waiting is the hardest part

Every day you get one more yard

You take it on faith, you take it to the heart

The waiting is the hardest part."

Tom Petty

Tuesday, November 30

Please read John 1:1-25

Louise Davidson

Good news, bad news

Poor Zechariah! First, he is terrified witless with the appearance of the angel, Gabriel. There he is, chosen by lot for this special opportunity to enter the sanctuary of the Lord simply to burn incense and there's this angel standing there. What would you do? What would you think?

Then the angel says not to be afraid, he has good news. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, an older couple who were childless, learn they will have a child. Further his name is to be John and many will rejoice at his birth. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, will bring many to the Lord of Israel, preparing the people for the Lord.

Sounds great! Then he asks a perfectly ordinary question for confirmation, and what happens? He loses the ability to speak until the baby arrives.

Well, that works out eventually and he can speak. But we know the rest of the story, John does do great and wonderful things, even baptizing the Messiah, only to come to an end that, if his father and mother are still living, would be absolutely heartbreaking.

Have you ever received really wonderful news that ultimately had a reverse side, consequences that were totally unexpected and not so great. Yes, the family can get together at a wonderful place! Then, suddenly, no! There is a pandemic and travel isn't safe and no, there are no refunds! You are healed from surgery, but then are told test results make chemotherapy necessary.

Good news, bad news. Through it all, we can be confident God is present and whether the news is good or bad, God's presence is a comfort and support both as we rejoice and as we mourn. Thanks be for the God of love, with us always.

Prayer: Loving and compassionate God, as we prepare day by day for the birth of the Son of God, we can rejoice in your constant presence in our lives in joy and in sorrow, when life is good and days when troubles abound. Grant each of us a sense of your presence in all our days. We pray in Christ's name.
Amen

Wednesday, December 1

Luke 1:26-28

by Gail Messick

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name was Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you." The Message

Wow – a lot is packed into these two verses. "God sent" - the entire Messiah birth is God directed and orchestrated. Just in case you were wondering.

Gabriel is 1 of 7 archangels, specifically sent to comfort and announce miraculous events. He was also the one who spoke to Zechariah, while he was in the inner sanctum of the temple, to announce Elizabeth's conception of John (the baptist). The only other time we meet Gabriel is when he spoke to Daniel to help interpret his dreams. When Gabriel comes, it's time to listen, because something important is going to happen.

At that time, Nazareth was a truly insignificant village in Galilee – located north of Samaria, whereas Jerusalem and Bethlehem are south of Samaria. Why would Gabriel come to Nazareth?

Joseph is a descendent of King David, which is very necessary to fulfill the prophecy of the Messiah's birth. Yet, by that time, David had many descendents. Why choose Joseph?

All we know is that God decided Mary would be His chosen mother, because, as Gabriel clearly stated: "You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out. You are highly favored". Clearly God does not measure a person's worth by secular means; that is wealth, intelligence, status.

So, what does this message mean to you and to me? For me, it says that no matter where you live, God is there, actively working & paying attention to what happens there. More importantly, no matter who you are, God recognizes you as important and worthy of His attention. When have you felt closest to God?

For me, I feel God's presence most when I respond in a positive way to serve Him. It's usually after the fact that I realize how God blessed the events that happened when I took that first tentative leap of faith into unknown territory. From foster parenting to adoption to Peace Corps service to kidney donation, God opened pathways I never expected, but which guided my steps and supported my journey. Life has certainly not always been smooth sailing, but when the journey gets rocky, I know there's His hand ready to steady me on the path. If all of us could have even a portion of the faith Mary had and the willingness to obey God's direction for our lives, we'd all be closer to Him.

May you all feel God's presence this Christmas season.

39: *Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.*

40: *She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.*

41: *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

42: *With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry."*

43: *"Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*

44: *"As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy."*

45: *"Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."*

56: *Mary stayed with Elizabeth about 3 months and then returned to her home.*

Mary has newly discovered that she is carrying the Holy Babe, and her gracious words of acceptance at this news were glorious. However, even though Mary trusts God's promise, she was still a young pregnant girl who was most likely facing the social stigma of being unmarried. God opened up a respite for her in her cousin Elizabeth, and in her eagerness, the Bible says she hurried to the Judean highlands for a visit.

Mary would spend 3 months in the safe and loving home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. She surely craved the support of someone who understood her situation and offered her a safe haven to ponder her situation. Elizabeth takes the role of prophet by proclaiming (blurting) what Mary has not yet told her: that she is pregnant and is the mother of her Lord. Elizabeth was clearly honored at Mary's presence, and provided her with love, support, and the understanding that surely uplifted her at this time. Elizabeth also blesses Mary; exhibiting joy, delight and praise. If Mary had any doubts about facing the social expectations as an unmarried pregnant woman, Elizabeth's honoring and blessings must surely overturn them.

Another aspect of their comradery was that Elizabeth, who was now pregnant with John the Baptist, has experienced the social shame of the inability to bear children, as is the expectation of her culture.

I truly understand that the Bible is the living word. We can read the same familiar passages and receive new nuggets of truth each time. Most of us, I think, are faced with a time we also need and rely on the support from others. Recently I have experienced this firsthand as I heal from the complicated surgery of a broken leg. I have been gratefully blown away by those who have stepped in to support me with unsolicited meals, beautiful cards of encouragement, calls to uplift me, and a loving husband at my side. God supplies in our moments of need!

Ephesians 3:20: Glory to God who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask for or imagine by his power at work within us.

May your heart be illuminated with love, joy and peace this Christmas, Sandy Tullett.

Friday, December 3

Luke 1:46-55 a.k.a. The Magnificat

Martin Spencer

“Mary’s Song” is a New Testament canticle (psalm) that is hewn deeply into my Episcopalian heritage. Think of a 13 year old choirboy in cassock and surplis proclaiming the musical glories of “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit doth rejoice in God my Savior”. Treat yourself to listening to one of the many versions of the Magnificat on YouTube. I suggest versions by Herbert Sumsion, Charles Wood or George Dyson. These settings are amongst the crown jewels in the great English cathedral choir tradition. Turn up the volume!

Interestingly, the Magnificat is always paired with the Nunc Dimittis (Simeon’s song) and is regularly sung during choral “Evensong” services at St. Mark’s, just down the road from Covenant, several times per year starting at 4:00. I am fortunate to sing with their Chancel Choir on a regular Thursday night and intermittent Sunday basis. We just sang George Dyson’s setting of the “Mag and Nunc”, and it was heavenly. I look forward to singing daily services with the choir when we are “in residence” at Wells Cathedral in England next June.

Back to the Magnificat. Our Covenant mens’ group has been reading/talking through Richard Rohr’s “Universal Christ”. A recent chapter entitled “This is my body” was focussed on Mary. We Protestants downgraded Mary after the Reformation, but she’s still a very big deal in Catholicism. Maybe we threw the baby out with the bathwater. Ouch. Rohr informs us that Mary was the only woman present for Christ’s birth (incarnation), Crucifixion (death), and Pentecost (raised from the dead and now realized as the Holy Spirit); the really important parts of the Jesus story as narrated by Dr. Luke, and espoused in our intermittent recitations of the Apostles’ Creed.

Mary was solely human but intimately connected with God, Jesus, and the risen Christ. Her purity, humility, vulnerability, dedication, discipline, nurture, faith and love are an example to the rest of us. She is the female counterpart to a heavily patriarchal New Testament.

So listen anew to Mary’s song (and watch one of the performances listed above!):

My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden:

For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath magnified me; and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

He hath showed strength with his arm;

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted the humble and meek..

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

He hath holpen (helped) his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

As he spake to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed forever.

Saturday, December 4

Luke 1:57-80

Roberta Adams

“All who heard them pondered ... and said, ‘What then shall this child become?’ For the hand of the Lord was with him.” Verse 66

For as long as I can remember, the joy of Christmas really begins with the lighting of the first Advent candle. This reminds me of the joyful anticipation for the birth of not only the Christ Child, but of any child, and that is just the beginning.

Think of the collective joy at Covenant when a child is brought forth to be baptized. Think of the excitement we feel as we celebrate the happiness of knowing the hand of the Lord is with that child.

Today though let us also remember the pain some people sitting in Covenant’s sanctuary experience during the excitement of the baptism. Let us remember those struggling with infertility, when the joy of the baptism is also a reminder of their own pain. Let us always remember that each of us, no matter our age, the state of our health, or the zip code where we live... is a beloved child of God. Yes, even when we feel very alone or rejected, we are held in God’s hand.

No, we don’t know at this point what the child (in Luke’s scripture, John) will become any more than today’s parents know what their child will become. We just recognize that all of humanity is cherished by God. Until we take our last breaths, we are all somehow in a state of God’s becoming. Each day let us be led by God’s hand to be ourselves at our best. Let us continue to grow in Christ and in love for each other. May it be so.

Sunday, December 5

Matthew 3: 1-12

Sarah E. Starr

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus were cousins. Although it's never really spelled out, John and Jesus, who were six months apart in age may have played together as children. For us, the story of their relationship does not unfold until they are grown men. While this passage is from Matthew's gospel, John's story appears close to the beginning of all four Gospels. John appears as the announcer for the coming of the Messiah.

Some considered John to be a prophet even though he appeared as a bit of a wild man. John lived in the wilderness of Judea, wearing clothes made of camel's hair, pulled together with a leather belt around his waist. His diet consisted of locusts and wild honey. In spite of this appearance people still came from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of the Jordan to be baptized by him.

He baptized people with water as a symbol of their repentance. He understood that his very reason for being was to "prepare the way for the Lord". This passage sets out to describe the road to repentance, John especially warns the Pharisees and the Sadducees that they have a tough road to redemption! He proclaims that he will baptize them with water "but the one coming after me" will baptize with "the Holy Ghost and with fire"!

As I read this passage I wonder what this has to do with Advent and Christmas. While we are preparing for the birth of Jesus, perhaps we are really preparing and renewing the path for Christ to lead our lives. We recite a prayer of confession in worship every Sunday, reminding us of God's forgiveness - our redemption. What better time than Advent to consciously prepare that path anew.

Monday, December 6

Romans 12:9-21

By Terri Hayes

Love is sincere.

Love is genuine.

Love is kind.

Love shows affection.

Love honors.

Love is good.

During this season of waiting and anticipation, in Roman 12:9-21, we learn about Love over evil. As Christians, we should hold fast to what is good. Through hospitality we share and show brotherly love with affection to one another. Be passionate, rejoice, be patient, live in harmony, live in Peace, live in goodness and mostly do so by serving the Lord.

After reading this passage a few times, the hymn *They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love* comes to mind. Yes, WE are Christians! So Keep loving each other, keep faithful in prayer, keep blessing others. In doing so, we will overcome evil.

Lift up in prayer, LOVE!

Love one another.

Love serving the Lord through hospitality and Peace.

LOVE!

(Happy Birthday Betsy...keep loving others!)

Tuesday, December 7

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

by Diana Rogers

Don't Skip the Genealogies

I chose this scripture because on November 14, 2021, our family added a new baby girl. She is the granddaughter of my brother Joe and the great-granddaughter of my mother June. We can track her lineage on my dad's side of the family back 6 generations, and 7 generations on my mother's side using Ancestry.com. Knowing where you come from and your family history is of interest to so many as evident by the websites selling ancestry information. For us, we are proud of our family and share this information from generation to generation. For Jesus, the Bible provides His lineage back 76 generations. They must have had a better system than we have now. If you think about the information in Matthew, it was writing AD 250.

Why is it important to think about the genealogy of Jesus during this advent season? Mathew's genealogy of Jesus Christ reveals the Savior's prophetic and divine right to reign on earth. Through the genealogy, he not only traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and David, but states that the Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah 9: 6-7 and 32:1 are fulfilled. With the Savior's birth, Jesus is the promised Messiah and descent of King David.

Is Jesus the new Adam? Does Jesus descent as far back as Adam? How do we know? In Matthew 1: 1- 17, Jesus's genealogy begins with Abraham, but is Abraham a descendant of Adam. So let's read the genealogy in Genesis chapters 4, 5 and 11 that reports the male descent of Adam and Eve that includes Abraham. According to Luke chapter 3, there were 76 generations from Adam to Jesus. Both Adam and Jesus are sons of God. So in fact, Jesus is the new Adam, God's perfect man, and it is clearly reported in Matthew that Jesus is a descendent of Abraham and David.

Matthew goes on to explain that there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to Babylonian exile, and 14 from the exile to the Messiah. The point is that Matthew did not set out to make an exhaustive genealogy of Jesus. He is interested in making a historical and legal case. His claim is that Jesus has a legitimate right to claim His position as a direct descendant of both Abraham and David. Matthew is telling you the “History of Grace.” Jesus has come to save His people from their sins.



The seventeenth verse is the conclusion to the section where the genealogy of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus is listed. We don't know the lineage of Mary, but through her marriage to Joseph she enters his family and legally becomes, she and her son Jesus, a part of the House of David. This is a second way that Jesus is known as a member of the House of David.

Take a moment to read this scripture:

Matthew 1: 1-17

The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah

1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

⁷ Solomon the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
Abijah the father of Asa,

⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,
Jehoram the father of Uzziah,

⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham,
Jotham the father of Ahaz,
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,

¹⁰ Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amon,
Amon the father of Josiah,

¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jeconiah^[c] and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

¹² After the exile to Babylon:

Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

¹³ Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,
Abihud the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,

¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok,
Zadok the father of Akim,
Akim the father of Elihud,

¹⁵ Elihud the father of Eleazar,
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,

¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Prayer: God help us to understand that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and through his genealogy, and the scripture of Matthew, we are assured that God has sent a Messiah to save us from our sins. We acknowledge that as "children of God" we are part of the "family of God." Because Jesus Christ, our brother, purchased with His blood the right for us to call "his Father" "our Father" we share one divine Parent. Thank you for accepting us into the family of God through His Son Jesus Christ. Amen

Kid's Prayer: God help me to learn that Jesus was born on Christmas to a beautiful family with a mother and father, just like me. I am also glad that I also belong to the family of God. Help me to be more like Jesus and to love God with all my heart, soul and mind, and love my neighbor as myself. Amen

Final Thought: How far back can you trace your Christian genealogy? When did you become a Christian? When were you baptized? When did you become a born again Christian?

Prayer: Most Holy One, as I come to this time, please open my heart and mind to all I might find in and through these words. Amen

Let us revisit the Birth of Jesus – verse by verse as it is found in Matthew 1:18-25 (Common English Version)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

The birth of Jesus is this simple, and this full of mystery!

Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

In this time, there were customs about pre-marital sex and men would react brutally when they found out, but Joseph was not such a man. He was compassionate and planned for Mary not to suffer.

As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph was both thinking about Mary and suddenly was asleep and dreaming! The angel said not to **be afraid** to marry) what a relief for Joseph! An angel appearing was an awesome occasion! Mary was carrying a child of the most Holy One.

She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Again, in one verse a summary of Jesus' life and perhaps his purpose. Jesus will save the people so he will be their **Savior**. What a lovely dream. Now back to Matthew:

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: (Isaiah 7:14) Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us")

It must have been such a comfort for Joseph that his future son would be both a savior and a sign that God is with us.

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Joseph remembered the dream (what an awesome dream!) and heeded it. The cool thing is, Joseph wanted to marry Mary, but it was dangerous in these times; he might be ostracized.

But he didn't have sexual relations with Mary until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

In this way, the early church leaders defined Jesus' birth a Virgin Birth. I wonder if Joseph called him Emmanuel as a nickname, or just, you know, Emmy?

Thursday, December 9

John 3:25-30

Steve St. Martin

When I was just beginning my career, I wanted to do big things, have a large impact. I wanted to be acclaimed, at least by others in my profession.

How my attitude has changed! Now I find my reward in little accomplishments, like tossing a few stray pop cans into a recycle bin or coaxing a smile from a toddler.

About the people who brought their comments to John the Baptist in verses 25 and 26 of this passage: They had been arguing some fine point about purification, and then, seeing John, they approached to goad him by suggesting he was a second-rate prophet. Were these the kind of people who take pleasure in stirring up conflict and jealousy?

Look how the Baptist handles them: he doesn't take the bait, he doesn't get mad; rather, he asserts that he is quite happy, thank you, to play second fiddle to someone (Jesus) who is the real thing.

When I consider that John the Baptist was about the same age as I was when I entered my career with such big dreams, I realize that he was much more mature than I was.

From God's viewpoint, isn't there just as much pleasure in someone else's success than there is in mine?

Friday, December 10

Mark 1:1-15

Tori Vazquez

Both of my children attended VBS every summer, from the age of two through graduation. Kim Halsey was our enthusiastic music leader for all those years. VBS are not written for adults but rather to engage the children and help them remember Bible stories. Charlie's favorite was one about the life of John the Baptist, with this chorus: "He ate bugs for lunch-- yuck, yuck, yuck!"

In this Bible passage, John, eater of bugs and wearer of itchy camel hair outfits, proclaims the coming of Jesus and tells the story of Jesus's life in a few paragraphs. Jesus went directly from John's baptism to spending forty days in the wilderness among wild beasts, and while there, was waited on by angels.

Wilderness and wild beasts could be metaphors for feeling lost or unsafe amidst scary beings. We Presbyterians do not talk much about angels. I have been through times when I felt lost or unsafe-- divorce, and now my mother's health problems are big ones-- and there are people (angels?) in my life who show up with listening ears and caring words. And sometimes I just wake up feeling a little stronger and cheerier. Could that be the comfort of an angel?

The book of Mark was written well after the fact, in hindsight, 66-74 AD per the "authoritative" Wikipedia. I wonder how many people believed what John said at the time he said it? Did they believe the prophet Isaiah at the time he foretold that John would prepare Jesus's way? I sometimes (well, often) wish for the gift of *foresight*, especially during hard times-- to be able to see what that light actually is, at the end of the tunnel. Doubters are my people.

The idea of an afterlife is a struggle for me. If I behave fairly well most of the time, it is not because I fear the loss of one. I *hope* there is one, but nothing so far has led me to a firm *belief* in that. It is amazing to me that Jesus by all accounts knew how his life would go and stayed on that path regardless. He must have known what that Light was.

Prayer: Beautiful God, we thank you for the angels who walk with us through our wildernesses and help us get past our wild beasts. And thank you for that reckless and wiley Holy Spirit, Who breathes a little more Life into us when we need it most. Amen.

Saturday, December 11

2 Samuel 7: 1-11; 16

Susan Imel

A House for God?

The season of Advent is frequently associated with gifts—finding just the right thing for a loved one. But what happens when the recipient neither wants nor needs the gift? In this passage, the king—David— is living in a cedar palace while the Ark of the Covenant, containing the two stone tablets inscribed with the ten commandments, is housed in a tent. David has had success in battle and has consolidated political power in Jerusalem. To honor God for all his successes, David wants to build a house (or temple) for the Ark.

David talks it over with his advisor, the prophet Nathan, and Nathan agrees that building a house for the Ark would be a good thing. But that night Nathan has a dream in which the Lord tells him a temple is not on his wish list. In fact, God points out that in all the years the Israelites had been traveling around with the Ark in a tent, God had never asked that a temple be constructed for it. God tells Nathan to inform David that he, David, is not going to be the one to construct the temple for the Ark. It is not a gift God wants or needs from David.

Instead, God is going to build a “house” for the Israelites. In verse 11, God promises to make a dynasty for David but it will be God’s doing not David’s. In verse 16 God promises that, “Your dynasty and your kingdom will be secured forever before me. Your throne will be established forever.” Later in the New Testament, this promise holds. The book of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus stating “A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham...” and in Luke 1: 26-27, Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed, is identified as a descendent of David’s house.

David did not need to do anything to receive God’s gift of the dynasty (house) for the Israelites. It was an example of God’s grace—an expected and “unearned” gift from God.

Prayer: Holy Creator and Loving God, help us to understand that we do not need to do anything to earn your love and approval, that it is available for us without asking through your gift of grace. Amen

Reprinted from 2019 Advent Devotional

Sunday, December 12
Our Faith is In Christ

Colossians 1:13-20

Cathy Levy

From THE MESSAGE:

¹³⁻¹⁴ God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.

¹⁵⁻¹⁸ We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—*everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so expansive, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

Sections of this message feel especially relevant at this time when our world seems to be so *broken and dislocated* and divided. Some of the words and phrases that catch my eye include:

*Spacious... expansive... universe... properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies...
We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen...
We see God's purpose... Everything... visible and invisible... finds its purpose in him*

Such phrases remind me how Jesus showed us The Way to live. In Jesus, we see an example of a counter-cultural, radical approach to living that is the SECRET to abundant life and our true purpose.

What, exactly, is **The Way of Christ**? Are there a simple set of rules to follow? Yes and No.

For example, Jesus told us we were forgiven, and he told us to forgive others (how often? 70 times 7.) Simple, right? Until you try to live it all day every day. But the benefits? Big time!

Jesus cared about justice, too. From Micah, "Do justice, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with your God". Jesus' brand of justice wasn't about punishing people for offences (love mercy!). Rather, when Jesus talks about justice, he means human rights and a justice where everyone has enough.

Jesus demonstrated a radical love; he loved God, neighbors, enemies, the poor, the tax collectors and the Samaritans (who were despised back then!). Jesus reached out in love (rather than judgement) to people who had sinned or were otherwise marginalized, oppressed, or rejected. Jesus loved family and friends, sure. But Jesus loved Everyone with a capital E. Jesus practiced an unconditional love that expected nothing in return. Jesus' compassion opened hearts and filled lives with a freeness and meaning that astonished, astonishes, and will always be astonishing!

This type of living “In Christ” requires focus and intentionality. “The world” draws us away from Christ-like living. But, worship, working within the church community here, listening to sermons... all this helps keep us focused In Christ, in The Way. In the last few years, I’ve rediscovered another way to refocus on The Way: I’ve joined a few book groups, including Covenant’s spirituality book group. I also pick up books recommended to me through friends and media. Through these books, we’ve learned more about how our actions impact others, about how we can help others, and importantly, we’ve learned to see the world through the eyes of other people. Such reading inspires me and connects me to living In Christ! I feel like this reading helps me see through the eyes of God! Here’s the reading list, mostly non-fiction (in reverse order of when I read the book), and I recommend each and every book. Some include horrific events, so let’s consult if needed. What books do you recommend to me?

1. [Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World](#), by Katharine Hayhoe (*currently reading...looks very good!*)
2. [The Sympathizer: A Novel](#) (Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), by Viet Thanh Nguyen (*set after the fall of Saigon, a complex novel that explores failings of all sides of the Vietnam War*)
3. [We Were the Lucky Ones](#), by Georgia Hunter (*about an extended Jewish family from Poland surviving the Holocaust*)
4. [Fruit of the Drunken Tree](#), by Ingrid Rojas Contreras (*focused on childhoods in Columbia during the reign of Pablo Escobar in the 1990s*)
5. [The Dovekeepers](#), by Alice Hoffman (*about people fleeing the Romans to a Jewish stronghold on a mountain top (Masada) and the Romans’ attack*)
6. [My Grandmother’s Hands: Radicalized Trauma and the Pathway the Mending our Hearts and Bodies](#), by Resmaa Menakem, MSW, LICSW
7. [Everywhere You Look, Discovering the Church Right Where You Are](#), by Tim Soerens
8. [After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life Beyond](#), by M.D. Bruce Greyson
9. [Broke in America: Seeing, Understanding, and Ending US Poverty](#), by Joanne Samuel Goldblum and Colleen Shaddox
10. [Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City](#), by Matthew Desmond
11. [Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist](#), by Eli Saslow
12. [Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents](#), by Isabel Wilkerson
13. [Humankind: A Hopeful History](#), by Rutger Bregman
14. [Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race](#), by Debby Irving
15. [The Girl Who Wrote in Silk: A Novel of Chinese Immigration to the Pacific Northwest](#), by Kelli Estes
16. [Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood](#), by Trevor Noah
17. [The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life](#), by David Brooks
18. [So Far from Home, Lost and Found in our Brave New World](#), by Margaret J. Wheatley
19. [Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#), by Bryan Stevenson

Prayer:

Holy God, help us to live in The Way of Christ.

We thank you for showing us how to live through Christ Jesus.

We need reinforcement: worship, church-work, prayer, bible study, books, any way you place before us.

We thank you for revealing an abundant life where all people are accepted, loved, and respected.

Thank you for forgiving us so that we might proceed without fear; we will forgive others likewise.

Use us as instruments of your peace.

Together, God, may we heal communities so that all may enjoy the vibrant harmony of creation. Amen

“Guilty or Innocent”

Today’s Advent reading is a Psalm of David praying for repentance and a plea for cleansing and pardon. While never describing any certain sins, scholars agree that it is based on David’s sins when he ordered Bathsheba brought to him, sent her husband into war knowing he would be killed, and then claimed Bathsheba as his. In this Psalm, David prays for God to cleanse him of his sins. He acknowledges his sins and failings and recognizes that his sins are not only against man but also against God. If God cleanses him, then he will teach others of the need to seek repentance from God.

Overall, the Psalm is a lovely, moving prayer that starts with the stirring words “Have mercy on me, God”. I always think the next line should be “Hear my Prayer, God”. The Psalm shows a path to repentance that starts with a recognition of sin; an honest statement of sorrow for the sin; a plea to not forsake us because of our sins; and a pledge to perform restitution and forgiveness of others. Not a bad recipe for repentance.

However, Verse 5 has always disturbed me. It reads...“Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” Being a father of two and grandfather of four, I have held babies and looked deep into their faces. Simply put, newborns are not guilty of sin at birth. They are magnificent creations who seek food, warmth, and love. Look hard at a newborn and soon you will see recognition of their needs—a smile that cannot be faked when happy; a gurgle of satisfaction that sounds like a choir from heaven; and flailing arms and legs that says “I’m happy”.

Sins of the world may surround babes, but they themselves are innocent. Perhaps the psalmist meant that babes are born with a sense of right and wrong. Warmth is right and cold is wrong; a full stomach is right and empty stomach is wrong; Love is right and being lonely is wrong. So perhaps babes are born with some sense of guilt based on what is right and what is wrong. And as a child ages, they become aware of guilt because they have this natural notion of right and wrong. But I believe that only when they learn from others do they manifest guilty behavior.

During Advent, let us all feel the wonder of babes and bask in guilt free behavior.



Tuesday, December 14

Ezekiel 36:26

Ann Teske

The Lord said: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you: I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."



This is part of God's promise to restore his people to their own land that was given to their forefathers. He will clean them with clear water to cleanse them of impurities and their idols. The Lord will put his Spirit in each and move them to follow his decrees and to be careful to keep His laws. They will be God's people once again.

When the Israelites turned away from God and worshiped idols, their hearts had turned to stone. God forgave them and softened their hearts from stone to human flesh to make their hearts flexible, healthy and beating with life, and love to return to be His people. Thus, the Lord transforms their relationship into a new covenant.



Thanks be to God for His forgiveness for our "hearts of stone" and helping us to be transformed through His unfailing love for us. Amen.

The Birth

Come with me to Bethlehem to David's city, Joseph's "house".
To be counted in a census so the government can know
How many people filled the world as it was in Joseph's day,
And help them plan a way to make their current tax base grow.

The trip is long and very hard as it is far to go,
And Joseph brings his promised bride who must be counted too.
But Mary's very pregnant and the traveling is rough,
And she will be so very glad when this whole trip is through.

As they near their destination Mary comes to realize
That her time has come to deliver so they seek a place to rest.
But because so many people have taken all the space,
There is no inn or hotel that can welcome any guests.

An innkeeper along the way tells them he has no rooms,
But there's a stable near the inn that's dry and filled with hay.
So glad they are to have a place to stop and lay their heads,
While waiting for the baby's birth, a comfortable place to stay.

Then she gave birth to God's own son though no one knew it then,
She wrapped him into swaddling clothes and put him in a manger.
She kept him safe for all of us and loved him all her life,
And showed that love was for us all - each family, friend and stranger!

So come with me to Bethlehem where our dear Lord was born,
But you won't see that baby, as He grew into a man!
He came to save us all with grace and filled our lives with love.
The firm foundation of our church - Indeed the great "I Am."

Christmas, 2021

Thursday, December 16

Luke 2:8-20

Jeff DuBois

Wow!! What a night. I am reminded of those beautiful crisp, clear winter nights back on the farm when we could clearly see the Milky Way. That was awesome. But nowhere near what the shepherds experienced.

I can imagine them enjoying the beautiful clear winter sky with all the stars and the milky way. Then, boom, additional light and sound comes down from above. No wonder they were scared. On top of that angels singing and praising God. Certainly a lot to take in, in such a short period of time.

Then the message "unto you is born this day your Savior." "I wonder if everyone has gotten the message?" Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us.

After they saw the child in the manger they were so overwhelmed that they told everyone they saw and everyone they knew. They couldn't contain their enthusiasm for being among the first to know of this wonderful birth.

What a night for the shepherds. This was one moment in time in their lives but I'm sure they never forgot these Wow moments. May we feel the joy, the excitement and wonder the shepherds felt as we celebrate the birth of Jesus this year.

Friday, December 17

John 1:1-18

David Connolly

Today's Advent passage is that wonderful "mini-Genesis" at the beginning of the gospel according to John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In contemplating this summary of the Creation, I always pause at the strange wording offered most vividly (to me at least!) in Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament from 1524: "All things were made by [the Word], and with out it was made no thing."

In this season in which we contemplate creation of new creation, new life, and new hope, I appreciate Tyndale's two word reminder: "no thing". Not you, not me. Not the church. Not cities or countries or TV's or babies. Not laughter or sadness. Nor the words offered electronically on this page. To revise a popular recent bumper-sticker: No God – no things; know God – know things.

I have been reading Richard Rohr's 'Universal Christ' recently (Convergent Press, 2019), and for me today's passage from John 1 resonates with one of Rohr's ideas: He observes that Christian belief follows the "perennial tradition" – "Everything that exists... is the offspring of some Primal Source, which originally existed only as Spirit (which we know as God)". "Everything visible," Rohr continues, "without exception, is the outpouring of God. What else could it be?"

In this context, God's creation (Genesis 1; John 1) is a "first incarnation"; and the "personal, second incarnation" was Jesus, who would live and preach and become the Christ. Rohr, then ascribes "Christ-ness" to the wholeness of God's own self or essence—"the transcendent within of every 'thing'

in the universe". In becoming the Christ, Jesus was both human and divine, personal and universal, the full embodiment of a "Christ-ness" that was baked into God's creation from the Beginning.

Rohr's thoughts seemed pretty radical to me at first, but I am settling into them these days.

In remembering the birth of the baby Jesus as a vulnerable little human being, let us thankfully remember how this baby would grow up to set the perfect human and perfect divine examples to embody a "Christness" that we can imagine being in and with God from the Beginning of all things. Wishing you peace and joy this holiday season.

Saturday, December 18

Luke 18:15-17

By Charlotte Sharpe

Christmas Miracle in September

September 18, 2010, was a Friday. That day our son and daughter-in-law, Steven and Melisa, had the court hearing in South Carolina, where baby Nicholas' birth parents live, and that day Nicholas James Sharpe became legally and forever ours.

A court-appointed guardian was present on Nicholas' behalf. The judge himself has an adopted child, and Steven and Melisa's attorney had also been the judge's attorney for that adoption.

Steven and Melisa each had to swear on a bible while sitting in the witness chair for questions like where were they born, how old are they, where do they live.

Theirs was the final case on the docket that Friday. The theory is that all week long the judges hear dreadful, horrible, terrible stories, so they leave adoptions for the last cases on Friday, to end the week on a happy note. Their judge told them that the adoption was not coincidental but, rather, providential.

The file is now sealed, and it would take a court order to open it. Steven and Melisa are listed on Nicholas' birth certificate as his parents. Thanks be to God and hallelujah for our family!

Quote attributed to Albert Einstein: "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous."

Holy One,

We give praise and gratitude for the ever present love that you shower upon us as we attempt to live our lives with love and justice. Amen.

Sunday, December 19

Read: Romans 8: 28-39

Susan Imel

This passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, has always been one of my favorites, particularly the phrases, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (v. 31) and "I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created" (v. 38-39 CEB).

Paul was writing to members of a community made up of Gentiles and Jews who had become followers of Jesus. Earlier, the Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome but by the time Paul was writing this letter, they had been allowed to return. These verses were a small part of what Paul wanted to convey to the Christians in Rome. Regardless, they surely were meant to provide comfort to people who had been subject to persecution because of their religion, reassuring them that God was with them and that nothing could separate them from God's love through Jesus Christ.

What about us? How easy it is to forget that God is with us, especially in the past year with tensions over vaccinations, wearing masks, critical race theory, abortion, and election outcomes, to name a few areas of dispute. People of faith were on both sides of these issues but I don't think God picks sides. God is on the side of justice and love.

In a few days, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, whose life represented God's love in the world. It is the love that Paul says assures us that we cannot ever be separated from God's love. What a gift that is and how reassuring when we face whatever life brings to us.

Prayer: Loving and Gracious God, In the day-to-day happenings around us, it is easy to forget that your love is a constant support. Help us to pause and remember that nothing separates us from your love no matter what happens to us and those we love. Amen

Monday, December 20

Luke 21:25-36

Pastor Joel Esala

For me, Advent is the most wonderful time of the year. I love Advent even more than I love Christmas. Advent is all about hope—a stubborn, defiant hope in the midst of disappointment and heartbreak. There's nothing saccharine about Advent hope. It's not naive or optimistic. Advent hope isn't about accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative. Optimism says, "Don't worry, things will get better." Hope says, "things are probably worse than you realize, but there is still reason to keep on living." Advent hope is an orientation of the soul that stubbornly lifts one's head, no matter how many reasons there are to despair.

In this passage, Jesus describes the coming apocalypse of the Temple's destruction, which to those who endured it seemed as though the world was coming to an end, which of course it was and still is. Biblical apocalypses are not predictions of some promised future doom, but descriptions of the inevitable conflicts that arise in a world that understands power as control and refuses to care for those most in need. Until we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, we can expect "dismay among nations in their confusion" (21:25).

Amidst turmoil, Jesus invites us not to despair but to: “Stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near” (21:28). God is totally committed to freeing us from our worst predispositions. Through the long arc of history, God’s dream for the world is still coming to bear. Those first-generation Christians were right. The world was coming to an end, and a new world is being born. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “When you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near” (21:31). When the world looks most tenuous, that’s when we are to look for the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. God refuses to give up on us, and that’s why we hope. With straight backs and raised heads, we join voices with our ancestors, praying:

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

Tuesday, December 21

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Roberta Adams

A few weeks ago I attended a Celebration of Life service at Covenant, worshipping with many friends I haven't seen in years. When I commented to Weldon later about how old everyone had gotten, he (not so) tactfully asked if I had looked in the mirror lately! 😞

Later I wondered about the stresses my Covenant family had experienced, at the same time thinking of all I had gone through over the past decade. I wished I had hugged everyone there... or at least given them a masked elbow bump!

Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians give us a gentle glimpse into Paul as pastor. When Paul was with the Thessalonica congregation, which had experienced great turmoil, he tenderly showed them love and support. After he left, he prayed for them, but in addition still wrote to them of that same love and support.

During Advent, let us reach out to others... to those we love and often take for granted, to those we know who are struggling, to those who are alone, to those who need to hear encouragement. Let us especially contact people in our lives who have slipped away through time and distance.

Instead of marking our Advent calendar with a daily piece of chocolate, how about a note, an email, a phone call to someone? If you are reading this for the first time on December 21, why not start your notes today to celebrate the birthday of the Christ Child?

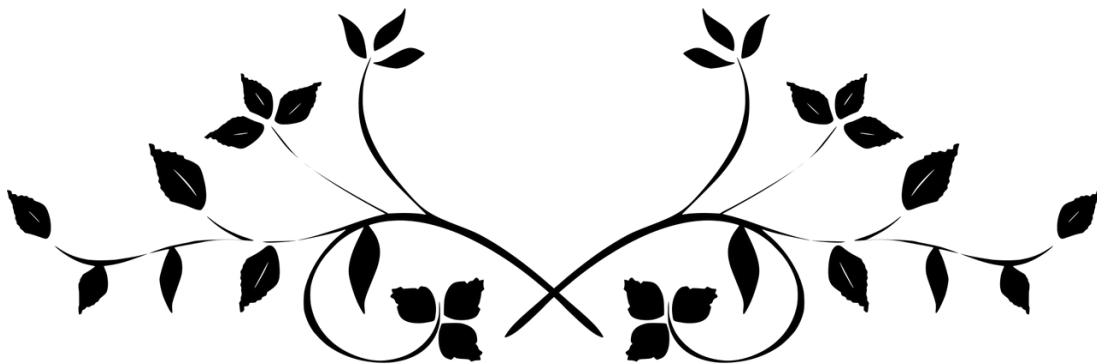
How blessed we are to have the gift of each day to reach out in love! Let’s not simply THINK about it. Let’s do it!

No one has seen God, and we all, in one way or another, struggle to know and to understand this spiritual being we call Lord, God. In this regard, the strains of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord . . . I really want to know you Lord" have always resonated with me. In many ways, 1 John 4:16-21 is a comforting passage. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them." We know love when we see it – be it intimate love, the love of parents for their children, or especially empathetic love for a stranger in need. We can see God in our better selves and in the lives of those around us, and this passage gets even better in verse 18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;"

But then comes the tough part, verse 20: "Those who say, I love God but hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." This is the recurring theme of Jesus' ministry, the second Great Commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This love may be easy to understand and even practice, at least with those close to us – members of our family, our next-door neighbor, or members of our team. It is often far more difficult to love and control our hate for someone who has harmed us or those who do not share our convictions on the socio-political issues of the day. It is difficult to understand, let alone love, those who oppose us. It goes against our human nature, but as we seek to love our neighbors, of all sorts - only to fail, to ask for forgiveness, and to strive again – we abide in God.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we really want to see you, really want to be with you – to abide in love. In this Advent season with our increased sensitivity to the needs of others and our abundant opportunities to serve, help us to love, forgive us when we fail, and bless us with your presence when we succeed. Amen.



Thursday, December 23

Phillipians 4:8-9

Beth Askue

“From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace be with you.” (CBE)

There is something called “nesting” during late pregnancy. It is a burst of energy a few days before labor begins, and it finds the pregnant woman cleaning everything, reorganizing the nursery, folding and refolding the baby’s clothes, even starting major household projects. Is Advent our “nesting”, our last-minute push to clean out those things that block our understanding of this new beginning?

Paul asks us to center our thoughts “on the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.” (The Message) It is easy to dwell on the negative when life is hard, disappointing, or painful. Especially these days when the news is full of floods, drought, protests, mass shootings, famine, people divided into warring tribes and prone to violence.

We are told by Paul to be intentional in what we choose to make most important. “We are invited to go beyond the minds that we have to minds and hearts that are shaped by the Spirit of God. We are invited to go beyond the minds that we have – minds dominated and blinded by conventional categories, identities, and preoccupations – to minds and hearts centered in the Spirit, alive to wonder, alive to seeing, and alive to compassion.” (Days of Awe and Wonder: How to Be a Christian in the 21st Century, Marcus J. Borg, p. 129)

And how are we to know what is true, or just, or pure? Paul answers this question. “Put into practice what you have learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized.” (The Message) There are two parts to his reply. One is ‘practice’ – make it a habit, a part of our being. The second is to live as Jesus lived – as taught and demonstrated by Paul.

And what is the promise at the end of the passage? “Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into [God’s] most excellent harmonies.” (The Message)

Why is this passage part of Advent? Remember that very pregnant woman we left at the beginning of this reflection? She’s vigorously cleaning the house, preparing for an impending new life. I detest cleaning because it just gets dirty again. That’s where ‘practice’ comes in. It is not easy to sweep out the old ways of thinking/dividing/fearing, and to become a new being in God. We must do it over and over again.

I am reminded of Psalm 51, verse 10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Every day, as we prepare for this baby, may the Spirit shape our minds and hearts, clearing away the old and fearful ways of thinking, preparing us for a new way of being.

Blessings in your “nesting”.

Friday, December 24

Matthew 25: 31 – 46

Erin Wise

The Least of These

“Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’ Matthew 25:40

I think we can all agree that some Jesus stories are easier to read than others. Some of the lessons seem clear and easy to follow while others can prove to be a real challenge. I think it is easier for us to get behind the idea of taking care of others when we consider them to be good people who are worthy of our care. Feeding someone who has worked hard and fallen on hard times seems to be easier for us than loving someone who suffers from addiction and has hurt those around them. When Jesus says, “the least of these,” he is not talking about those whom we would consider to be worthy. Jesus is the one who ate with the sex workers and tax collectors. Jesus healed beggars and those others wouldn’t consider worthy of his time. This is who Jesus loved and cared for and this is who we need to care for as well.

During advent, the youth participated in “The Drop.” This is an outreach of Continue the Story, a non-profit whose mission is to build stronger families impacted by the prison system. This mission is based on their belief that every person has a story and no matter what chapter you find yourself in, you have the power to write the ending. The Drop is their effort to flood the Ohio prison system with Christmas Cards and messages of hope and joy. They know prisoners probably aren’t at the top of many Christmas card lists. There is a reason that each person is in prison, however, that does not mean they are undeserving of love and compassion. The holiday season can be an especially lonely and difficult time for people who are in prison. For many, the card we send may be the only piece of mail they will receive all year. Christmas is the time of year that every person, no matter where they are, deserves some holiday cheer.

Every person we meet is a child of God and should be treated as such. Sometimes it can be easier than others and Jesus reminds us again to care for the least of these. May we all remember to love and care for each other as the beautiful masterpieces that we are. Imperfect, incomplete and beautiful just as we are. There is enough hope, joy and love for all.

“You are loved. You are wonderfully made. You have a purpose.

You are a masterpiece. God has a great plan for you.

Merry Christmas.”

-The Drop Christmas Card, sent to 21,000 prisoners 12/17/21