



The Season of Advent



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The season of Advent has come. Advent is a Latin word which means "coming". Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar, and what a beginning it is! Advent is a time of celebration and renewal. The season begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. In 2011, Advent begins on November 27th.

We (Christians) look forward to "the coming" of the Christ child each year. Each Advent brings another opportunity to deepen our relationship, draw nearer to God, and share the Christmas Story. Expectation, anticipation, hope, longing, preparation and renewal, are words often used to describe how we feel about this season, as it is a very special time in the Christian year.

As Disciples, we celebrate with public events in our congregations, our homes, and with our families. As with most Christian events and celebrations, there are symbols and rituals that are common to the season. We begin the season with the ritual ceremony of "hanging of the greens", which is the decorating and preparation of the church. A wreath is placed as the central part of the ritual ceremony. Special music, scripture reading, and devotion are used as a part of the ceremonial ritual. The liturgical colors of the season include purple (violet), symbolizing suffering, blue which is the symbol of royalty, and green which symbolizes hope.



Advent symbols include the circular "advent wreath", which consists of evergreens and five candles. The wreath is one of the main symbols for sharing the Christmas story. The evergreen in the wreath can be real or artificial. It is formed in a circle. The circular wreath symbolizes the unbroken and unconditional love that God has for us. The ceremony involves lighting of one of the candles on each of the four Sundays.

The five candles each have special meaning. There are four candles of color formed in a circle, with a white candle in the center. Each week a new candle is lit. The first candle is the candle of "Hope". It is purple. The second candle (purple) is "Peace". The third candle is "Joy". The color of this candle is traditionally pink. The fourth candle is purple and it the candle of "Love". The fifth candle, which is white, is traditionally lighted on Christmas Eve. It is the "Christ" candle.



Suggestions for Reflection

The following are some suggested Advent activities, for families or individuals. Questions to ponder and reflect each week:

Week One November 27th (the theme is HOPE)

Scriptures:

Psalm 80: 1-7 (17-19), Isaiah 64: 1-9,
1 Corinthians 1: 3-9, Mark 13: 24-37

What is the meaning of hope?

Why is the word hope considered to be a key in the life of a Christian?

How has hope been personified or demonstrated in a meaningful way in your life?

What hope do we cling to, at this time?

Week Two December 4th (the theme is PEACE)

Scripture:

Psalm 85: 1-2 (8-13), Isaiah 40: 1-11,
2 Peter 3: 8-15a, Mark 1: 1-8

Why is the word peace considered to be a key in the life of a Christian?

How has peace been personified or demonstrated in a meaningful way in your life?

What is needed for the world to find peace?

What role do I need to play, in seeking peace?

Week Three, December 11th (the theme is JOY)

Scriptures:

Isaiah 61: 1-4 (8-11), Psalm 126 or
Luke 1: 46b-55, 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24,
John 1: 6-8 (19-28)

Why is the word joy considered to be a key in the life of a Christian?

How has joy been personified or demonstrated in a meaningful way in your life?

In what ways can you grow and extend your understanding of joy in relation to your faith walk?

What brings you joy?

Week Four, December 18th (the theme is LOVE)

Scriptures:

2 Samuel 7: 1-11 (16), Luke 1:46b-55,
Psalm 89: 1-4 (19-26), Romans 16: 25-27,
Luke 1: 26-38

Why is the word love considered to be a key in the life of a Christian?

How have Christians come together and demonstrated love to those in need?

How has love been personified or demonstrated in a meaningful way in your life?

What difference does it make, if we love one another?



Daily Meditations

Sunday – November 27, 2011

*Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7 (17-19),
1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37*

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down... *Isaiah 64:3*

Throughout human history, people have found themselves turning to God as a source of hope. Sometimes the hope was that the one hoping would be rescued from whatever situation he/she had created. On other occasions, the hope was that adversaries would be prevented from prevailing. We often hope that our plans for the future will succeed. In each of these circumstances, there has been a pattern in which people have written God a prescription to fill. We like to combine God's power with our ideas.

At Christmas time, children often get very specific with their shopping lists. They name the desired presents, along with model number, color, and available accessories. No amount of alternative gifts or useful items, such as clothing, will satisfy such children. They like to combine our buying power with their ideas.

In Isaiah 64, the writer acknowledges that God has produced the most pleasing results when our designs were ignored. God can always see better ways of doing things than we can. The responses that we neither imagine nor expect continue to represent our best hope. Our hope should not be in God responding as we might imagine, but simply in God's response. We can trust God's response.

Dear Lord,

We hope for your action, in addressing our needs. We pray that you will continue to choose your ways, rather than ours, to assure the most ideal outcomes.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

Monday – November 28, 2011

Psalm 79, Micah 4:1-5, Revelation 15:1-8

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be

established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. *Micah 4:1a*

In many families, an undeclared competition is waged continuously. It involves aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings, parents, and even close friends of the family. Most of the participants would deny, even to themselves, that they are involved in this competition. It is a competition for the favor of our children. We all seek to be held in the highest regard possible, being thought of as the "coolest" or whatever the latest equivalent term may be.

Our quest has more to do with appearance than reality. We seek the biggest, most expensive, or most stylish objects and events with which to contest for the affection of our nieces, nephews, grandsons, or god-daughters. In the end, truth emerges. Even if it takes decades to discover, most of us ultimately know who has been most instrumental in our lives. Hills can pretend, but they always end up beneath the mountains.

The mountain that is God is not a geographical location or a geological object. It is God being God. In the end, all that is not God must bow before (and find hope in) that which is God.

Divine mountain,

We continue to climb, in our hope to be with you. You are not to be conquered but encountered. Give us strength to survive the steep places.

In Christ,

Amen

Tuesday – November 29, 2011

*Psalm 79, Micah 4:6-13,
Revelation 18:1-10*

Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power preserve those doomed

to die. *Psalm 79:11*

The ultimate hope of the people of God is not for cardigan sweaters or even fancy sport cars. Every person eventually encounters situations that can not be adequately addressed by the resources at the disposal of the person. An external intervention is needed, to prevent what looks like certain doom. Hope at such times is not for luxuries or frills, but for the meeting of essential needs. These occasions may have to do with health, finances, or even safety.

We tend to celebrate Christmas with great joy and frivolity. This is entirely understandable, given the magnitude of the blessing of the occasion. Jesus is the source of our greatest joy. That joy should be intensified, rather than lessened, if we remain cognizant of the reasons that we were so much in need of this blessing. Jesus is not a selected option on our automobile, but is "standard equipment" for those expecting lives of wholeness and balance.

Lord of Necessity,

In you, our groans are silenced. We see your greatest blessings in our moments of greatest need. We thank you for the privilege of being able to hope confidently.

In expectation,

Amen



Wednesday – Nov. 30, 2011

Psalm 79, Micah 5:1-5a, Luke 21: 34-38

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. *Micah 5:4-5a*

We are in a season in which many campaign promises are heard. One candidate promises to end war. Another will balance the economy and eliminate poverty. Each candidate refutes the claims of others, before offering even greater claims. Some of us work hard to determine what claims to believe. Others cynically discount or ignore them all.

The hope offered by Micah and the other prophets comes from a more credible place than those of our candidates “de jure”. God has no need to do anything for the purpose of garnering our votes or our confidence. We profit when we trust in God. We can trust God and view with confidence those whose efforts are in line with God’s intentions.

In the strength of the Lord, each of us can hope to meet the needs of others, while having our own needs met by God or by others. We can be confident of this hope, because our God has a “track record” that overshadows any other.

God of Hope,

We have been fed by you and used by you to feed others. We hope in you, but this hope feels more like certainty. Feed us and secure us, in this day and in days to come.

In confidence,

Amen

Thursday – December 1, 2011

Psalm 85: 1-2 (8-13), Hosea 6:1-6, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains

that water the earth. *Hosea 6:3*

In every area of our lives, we spend a lot of time and energy trying to find those who can meet our needs. We may call several mechanics to get the best price for an oil change. Larger jobs often involve requesting multiple estimates. We check references and consult with the Better Business Bureau. Even when we know what we want or need, we recognize that it matters who we get it from.

Sometimes we have reason to believe that we know who can meet our needs. A particular agent can yield an audition or a certain photographer is ideal for our wedding pictures. When we know who we want, we need a way of meeting or getting to know them. What they can do for us is only relevant once we make contact and make our desires known.

When our hope is to know the Lord, and to access the available blessings, there is no need for an introduction. We are inclined, by nature, to recognize the very source of our being. We press on to gain deeper understanding of the resources at our disposal. We come to know that we can hope extravagantly and boldly.

Jehovah Jirah (God, our provider),

You know us completely. Grant that we can know you enough to hope with confidence. Bless us out of your abundance and in response to our needs.

In Christ,

Amen

Friday – December 2, 2011

Psalm 85: 1-2 (8-13), Jeremiah 1: 4-10, Acts 11:19-26

The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Psalm 85: 12-13

Most of us spend countless hours

wondering how some experience or event will turn out. We wonder if it will rain on the day of our picnic; will the food at a new restaurant be worth the trip; or whether a hit movie will live up to the hype. The uncertainty is a factor of how many variables figure into the outcome. The more variables there are the greater the extent of our uncertainty will be.

God is represented as a constant by the psalmist in this text. Without any nuance or equivocation, the psalmist declares “the Lord will give what is good.” With the Lord behind the wheel, any other variables make no difference. Hope is experienced as certainty.

The hope demonstrated in this psalm is an active hope. It calls us to experience Jesus, who is also known as Emmanuel (God with us) as God has been with us; God is with us; and God will be with us. It is a bold hope that expresses complete confidence.

God of Faithfulness,

You are not one who is as reliable as old faithful. You are the one who created old faithful. You are the author of all order and give definition to order. In the chaos of our lives, we are sustained by you and place our hope in you.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen

Saturday – December 3, 2011

Psalm 85: 1-2, Ezekiel 36: 24-28, Mark 11:27-33

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. *Ezekiel 36:26*

The human heart is both a muscle and a pump. It responds to increases or decreases in the need for blood throughout the body by pumping faster or slower. A healthy heart is able to accommodate a wide range

of activities. If there is any reason to suspect that the heart will not be able to respond as needed, a stress test is administered. This test increases the demand placed upon the heart to determine if it will handle the increased load and return to normal in a timely manner.

A heart of stone may sound like a very strong heart, but it could not be a very pliable heart. A muscle of stone would be destined to break. It could not be responsive to the varied demands of life. A person with a heart of stone is in need of a heart transplant. We can find hope in the God who promises a heart transplant.

God promises to replace Israel's heart of stone with one of flesh. Each of us can embrace this promise for ourselves. We can hope with certainty. God will restore the pliability of our hearts and our lives. We will be able to experience the stresses of life and remain strong.

Lord of Promise,

We glory in your pledge to restore our strength and vitality. We celebrate your wisdom that redeems us from our misguided efforts to avoid pain with hardness of heart. Restore us to flexibility and life.

With hopefulness,

Amen

Sunday – December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40: 1 – 11, Psalm 85: 1 – 2 (8 – 13), 2 Peter 3: 8 – 15a, Mark 1: 1 – 8

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful to those who turn to him in their hearts.

Psalm 85: 8

We all speak about peace. We trumpet a desire for world peace. We ask the members of our family to allow us some peace, at the end of a difficult day. The largest ocean in the world is named Pacific, meaning peaceful. How could so many people spend so many years, centuries, and

even millennia talking about peace so consistently, without attaining it.

It may be that each of us is personalizing our notions of peace. My evening lacks peace when my plans are disrupted. There is no consideration of the validity of the disruption. Often, the disruption is a family member reminding me of what I have promised to do that evening. Peace can not be a personal possession. It must be shared by everyone involved.

The Psalmist calls for the voice of God to speak about peace. God will not be biased or seek a peace that is self serving. God can be trusted to speak fairly and wisely. In the interest of peace, God sent Jesus.

God of Peace,

We want peace for ourselves. Teach us to share. As we gain the willingness to share your blessings, resources, and love, we will attain the peace that you have intended for us.

In your name,

Amen

Monday – December 5, 2011

Psalm 27, Isaiah 26: 7 – 15, Acts 2: 37 – 42

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. *Psalm 27: 3*

Relatively few of us have actually experienced actual combat on fields of military battle. Even fewer have had reason to believe that the enemy forces were assembled specifically to confront them. Troops from one side oppose troops from the other in a manner that neither knows nor cares who the particular combatants are. The army is not encamped against you. You are just in the way.

In settings that are not military, most of us have perceived armies that are clearly targeting us, as they encamp. There may be persons in the workplace, who are either responding

to some action or statement on your part or seeking to prevent whatever you are trying to do. Often, when attempting to balance a checkbook, many of us envision an army that is determined to keep us as far from solvency as possible.

The psalmist calls for peace. This is not a negotiated peace, but a decided peace. Decide to be unafraid. Decide to be confident. Seek God's direction and empowerment. If you do, there is nothing to fear, nor reason to doubt.

Assuring Lord,

We seek to be at peace with those around us. We also seek peace within ourselves. Help us to vanquish every internal foe, that we might enjoy the peace that you intend for us.

In your peace,

Amen

Tuesday – December 6, 2011

Psalm 27, Isaiah 4: 2 – 6, Acts 11: 1 – 18

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. *Isaiah 4: 2*

Some things can only be accomplished by envisioning the result or finished product before beginning. A center fielder runs to where the ball "will" be. Engineers craft an entire bridge prior to sinking a single anchor. Those who seek peace are well served to give some thought to what it might look like. This provides both vision and encouragement for those who struggle to attain peace.

The psalmist sketches some of the vision of peace that has come to him. This vision involves a landscape of beauty. Nobody could imagine peace that lacks beauty and harmony. Peace will be beautiful and bring pride and gladness to Israel and everyone else.

The athletes, engineers, and theologians who seek to formulate



vision before beginning the work are not just doing artwork. The vision tells us what all needs to be done. We find, in our vision of peace, the work needed to attain peace. We see what is missing and what is in the way. Our work is to remove the obstructions and form the missing pieces.

Lord of Vision,

Show us what peace looks like. Bring to the attention of each of us, our place in the picture. Show us what we are to be doing and what we must cease doing.

By your spirit,

Amen

Wednesday – Dec. 7, 2011

*Psalm 27, Malachi 2: 10 – 3: 1,
Luke 1: 5 – 17*

“With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” *Luke 1: 17*

Peace may be similar, in a very specific way, to a tile floor. Both require clearing away and leveling. In

the case of the tile floor, previous tile, glue, and even dirt must be removed. Even then, some spots may need to be built up, in order to make the floor level. If these steps are not taken, new tile may be attractive for a while, then it will begin to come apart.

The Luke text speaks of John the Baptist, who even before his birth, was charged with preparing the way for the Prince of Peace. His tasks would include confronting, proclaiming, describing, and indicting. This persona would render him a very unpopular person. People are entirely willing to celebrate peace, but not the peacemakers.

John came to prepare us to receive Jesus. Jesus came to prepare us to receive peace. If, for any reason, it does not fit us, we have to do some more scraping and leveling of God's ground.

Equalizing God,

Our ground can not be level if one of us has greater access to your resources of blessings. We thank you, for rendering your love and blessings with equality. Teach us your ways, that we might do our work with your sense of justice.

In Christ,

Amen

Thursday – December 8, 2011

*Psalm 126, Habakkuk 2: 1 – 5,
Philippians 3: 7 – 11*

Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own. *Habakkuk 2: 5*

Greed and peace have little in common. They are mutually exclusive. Greed disrupts peace and peace seeks to eradicate greed. Each is the life's work of many people. It would be insulting to the hosts of truly greedy people to name a few famous despots or tyrants. It is embraced by people great and small. They live and die for greed. It is their god.

The God who is worthy of our individual and corporate commitment to peace is just as committed as we are called to be. God recognizes the harmful effects of greed, even when it comes to the infinite demand for more or costlier toys.

Few of us would think that our Christmas list would stand in the way of world peace. It does not, directly. Instead, our affirmation that the world is made better when we amass more of everything feeds a harmful germ in our spirit. I can never live out a quest for universal fairness while seeking to consolidate the wealth of the world in my house.

Bountiful Lord,

You have offered limitless blessings for all. Your resources far exceed any perception of need. Still, we seek to take from one another. Forgive us for our greed. Grant us your peace.

In unity,

Amen

Friday – December 9, 2011

*Psalm 126, Habakkuk 3: 2 – 6,
Philippians 3: 12 – 16*

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. *Philippians 3: 12*

A popular gospel song urges “Don’t wait til the battle is over, shout now.” The writer suggests that the knowledge that victory is the ultimate outcome should result in celebration, right now. The celebration, in the present, neither preempts nor replaces the greater celebration yet to come. God is committed to peace. God will prevail. We can claim God’s victory as our own, if we align ourselves with God and God’s purposes.

Paul speaks of pressing on. He envisioned more work and more struggle ahead. We too have work and struggle in the present and in the days to come. The value of the preemptive celebration is not to display arrogance, but to dispel discouragement. We struggle mightily, but with the assurance of God prevailing.

Victorious Lord,

We are willing to press on toward your call for peace. We grow tired, but are not weary. Our zeal is defined by our confidence in your righteousness. Vindicate our songs, that they may not be premature.

In Jesus,

Amen

Saturday – December 10, 2011

*Psalm 126, Habakkuk 3: 13 – 19,
Matthew 21: 28 – 32*

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negeb, may those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. *Psalm 126: 4 – 5*

One of the “clean-up” tasks, at the end of a war, is the restoration of the land. Lives are not restored, but land, property, and governments can be. In some cases, the post war reality of a particular land is better than before. Great nations have emerged following devastating wars. We must never allow the effectiveness of restoration to lead us to believe that it was worth all of the losses.

God restores the people of God, even when we share culpability for our losses. Few wars, national or personal, are entirely the result of fault on only one side. God seeks wholeness for all people and every nation. Restoration is not a return to what was, but a new experience that replaces what was, as adequately as possible.

We are called to participate in restoration. We have been participants in the destruction and loss. Our role in restoration must go beyond guilt and remorse, to a genuine desire to seek the integrity of God’s creation. We are insufficient to accomplish this restoration. God is entirely sufficient.

Sufficient God,

Restore our commitment to your ways. Restore your creation, in defiance of our destructiveness. Restore our souls, that we might present ourselves as your children, created in your likeness.

In Christ,

Amen

Sunday – December 11, 2011

*Isaiah 61: 1-4 (8 – 11), Psalm 126 or
Luke 1: 46b – 55, 1 Thessalonians 5: 16 – 24, John 1: 6-8 (19 – 28)*

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “the Lord has done great things for them.”

Psalm 126: 1-2

The joy that the psalmist describes calls forth a biblical equivalent of “visions of sugar plums”. It is so delightful that the response is to think “we must be dreaming”. Israel has experienced being on top and on the bottom. While experiencing suffering and despair, there was doubt that Israel could ever experience its past glory. Laughter and joy are the only suitable ways of receiving the gift of restoration.

We are in the midst of a season of joy. The children wait expectantly for the exchange of gifts and a break from school. Families look forward to gathering with loved ones and eating too much of too many things. All of this is exciting, but pales by comparison to the restoration that God offers.

Most of us desire something more lasting than holiday festivities. We have had some victories and too many defeats. God continues to promise and to deliver restoration. This is the joy that leads us to believe that we are dreaming. Gladly, God’s blessings are real.

God of Redemption,

We glory in your restoration. You have continued to claim us as your own, even though our defeats were often due to our own unfaithfulness. We celebrate your forgiveness and embrace your blessings.

In Jesus’ name

Amen

Monday – December 12, 2011

Psalm 125, 1 Kings 18; 1-18, Ephesians 6: 10 – 17

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. *Ephesians 6: 10 – 11*

Joy and combat are not usually associated with each other. This does not mean that combat can not be

joyful. Championship sports teams look forward with great anticipation and zeal, as they prepare for each contest. Some are even able to joyfully accept defeat, when they have given their best effort. We have not all arrived at this level of introspection.

The armor of God is not worn to engage in doing harm to anyone. It is the uniform of the faithful, who will diligently endeavor to accomplish God's will. There are no losers in this contest; at least no person is harmed by God's victory. Joy and victory are available to everyone. We can be strong in the Lord, with the assurance that God's power is with us.

We must still stand against opposition and difficulty. There will be struggles. Our blessing is that we can experience joy in the midst of our struggle.

Victorious God,

We come before you with laughter. Opposition is present on every side, but we have you. We struggle in battles that are truly yours, to win victories that also are yours. Thank you for including us.

With joy,

Amen

Tuesday – December 13, 2011

*Psalm 125, 2 Kings 2: 9 – 22,
Acts 3: 17 – 4:4*

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore. *Psalm 125:2*

Most of us find joy in remembering various occasions in our childhood. It is unfortunate that this is not true of everyone. A common memory is that of being held in the embrace of a parent or grandparent. Even the largest football player can recall being swallowed up in the arms of a tiny grandmother. In embraces such as this, the cares of the

world are denied access.

God has a knack of outperforming others. A grandmother can surround a growing child; God can surround a grown nation. It gets even better. The song "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" is neither wishful nor hypothetical. God may not hold us with actual hands, but we are all in the hands of God. We are, along with Israel and every other nation and individual, surrounded by God.

Dear Lord,

You hem us in, and we like it. Being surrounded by you does not smother us. It gives us joy. Embrace us. Cuddle us. Comfort us, as only you can do.

In joyful dependence,

Amen

Wednesday – Dec. 14, 2011

*Psalm 125, Malachi 3: 16 – 4: 6,
Mark 9: 9 – 13*

As they were coming down from the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. *Mark 9: 9*

Have you ever experienced the excitement of peeking into the closet where the presents are hidden? This is not an endorsement of such preemptive acts, but most of us have already done it a time or two. In the closet, we saw gifts for ourselves and often gifts for others. In our excitement, we have been tempted, and maybe yielded to the temptation, to run and tell the others about their presents. Those who have "jumped the gun" have sometimes been surprised that our news was not welcomed. Some people would rather receive their gifts (and news of their gifts) at the appointed time.

On the way down from the glorious transfiguration on the mountain, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait until after the resurrection to tell about the events

on the mountain. Having never seen or heard of anything like this, the disciples had to receive this command with dismay. They were full of joy and wanted to spread the joy. Jesus knew that the joy of that day could not compare to the joy yet to come.

We have been richly blessed and experience joy whenever we think of our blessings. God knows what is still to come and how our present blessings fit into the ultimate plans that God has for us. Trusting God to unfold blessings in proper order allows us the optimal joy that God intends for us.

God of Kairos,

We can hardly wait, but we will. You know how best to give us joy and every other good gift. We know that you will continue to guide us in determining what to tell, and when. Use us, as your messengers of joy.

In celebration of the Christ Child, Amen

Thursday – December 15, 2011

*Psalm 89: 1-4 (19 – 26),
2 Samuel 6: 1-11, Hebrews 1: 1-4*

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. *Hebrews 1: 1 – 2*

Years ago, the movie "Crimson Tide" depicted Denzel Washington as a naval officer who was second in command on a submarine. He and the ship's commander became embroiled in a heated dispute regarding the validity of an incomplete radio message that ordered the ship to attack. The commander insisted that waiting for more complete verification would place everyone, on the ship and throughout the world, in extreme jeopardy. Washington's character demanded that they follow the

rules of authentication exactly. Even though the eventual message was to disregard the previous order, it was clear that the situation was difficult for everyone.

We are frequently challenged to know whose message is real and who has offered false information or guidance, whether intentionally or inadvertently. There is usually no way of knowing with certainty.

The messages that we get from Jesus need no verification. They are reliable. They come from one who has participated in creation and remained present throughout human history. Joyfully, we can act immediately when Jesus speaks.

Lord of Clarity,

We thank you for speaking in a clarion voice. Your words are true and believable. Sustain our joy, as you continue to guide us.

In Jesus,

Amen

Friday – December 16, 2011

*Psalm 89: 1-4 (19 – 26),
2 Samuel 6: 12-19, Hebrews 1: 5 – 14*

But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness over beyond your companions.” *Hebrews 1: 8-9*

In movies and books, the king’s court is often presented as a setting of great frivolity and activity. Various subjects and visitors come to bring greetings to the king or to ask for some special favor. Trumpeters loudly play their instruments, bringing flair to every arrival or departure. Jugglers juggle and magicians entertain. Still, the people all seem too focused on and subject to the whims of the king to experience actual joy. It looks like a joyful scene, except for when you look at the

people one by one.

The reading from Hebrews finds God celebrating the enshrinement of Jesus on an eternal throne. It speaks of righteousness. The response to the righteousness of Jesus is gladness. There must be joy, when the king before you anoints your head with oil, rather than threaten to cut your head off. Any king who is worthy of words of praise from God is worthy of our praise and the source of our joy.

God of Gladness,

Reign over us by exercising your righteousness. Bring joy to our hearts, by your mercy. Allow your sovereignty to be a resource for all of your people.

In Christ,

Amen

Saturday – December 17, 2011

*Psalm 89: 1 – 4 (19 – 26),
Judges 13: 2 – 24), John 7: 40 – 52*

They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.” *John 7: 52*

I have been on both sides of the scenario in which one person looks for an item extensively, believing that the entire area has been thoroughly scoured, only to have another person to locate the item almost instantly. The usual problem is that most of us tend to look repeatedly in the same places and in the same manner. We see some spots over and over, while missing others just as diligently. If the item is not in our chosen places to look, we will never find it by our repetition.

Ideas and truth evade us in a similar manner. We often try wrong methods for solving equations repeatedly, finally concluding that the problem can not be solved. Philosophical or theological positions that are inconsistent with our chosen sources of information are dismissed as invalid. A Savior, born in a place

or manner that does not fit our expectations, is doubted.

Joy comes most widely when the entirety of humanity is able to realize that God is able to send a Savior or deliver persons in any place and from any place. Because God has neither limits nor favored places, we are all able to claim access to unlimited blessings.

Omnipresent God,

We need you in every corner of this world. We are jubilant because you hear prayers from every person and in every place. Joyfully, we trust you to reach us with your blessings.

In the name of the Galilean Savior,

Amen

Sunday – December 18, 2011

*2 Samuel 7: 1 – 11 (16),
Luke 1: 46b – 55,
Psalm 89: 1-4 (19 – 26),
Romans 16: 25 – 27, Luke 1: 26 – 38*

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” *Luke 1: 30 – 31*

Finding favor is good news, depending on who you have found favor with. Some people, with whom you may find favor, display this favor by calling upon you to spend your time or resources to advance their issues or causes. Others are able to offer support or encouragement for your efforts or commitments. A power dynamic explains the difference between these very different populations. Some find favor in you as one who is more capable (or powerful). Some have sufficient wherewithal to pursue their own interests. They can appreciate you without needing you.

When Mary was told that she had found favor with God, she had no reason to think that God needed

something. Instead, God was offering something. As an expression of God's love, Mary was chosen to bear the child who would be the source of the world's redemption. Favor with God would come without a price tag. Instead, God's favor resulted in the ultimate gift to Mary and to the world.

God loves me. That is certain, regardless of my performance. I want God's favor. That requires my best efforts to respond to God's love in all that I do. God's favor is an indicator that I am acting in ways that show appreciation of God's love.

God of Love,

Your favor is worth striving for. Your people are worth working for. Your desires are worth dying for. Your love is worth living for.

In love,

Amen

Monday – December 19, 2011

Luke 1: 46b – 55, 1 Samuel 1: 19 – 28, Hebrews 9: 1 – 14

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed. *Luke 1: 46b – 48*

The recognition that one is loved causes all kinds of interesting responses. Some will be found singing or talking to themselves. Others are seen dancing in the streets or leaping as they click their heels. There are those whose disposition takes a drastic turn for the better. Speechlessness is the consequence for some, while more than a few of us find that we can not stop talking. All of these are extreme reactions, but love can be pretty extreme.

Mary loves God. She now knows, without any doubt, that God loves her even more. She opts for the talkative response. Actually, she has no choice. She is found to be

uncontrollably bubbling over with love and appreciation. She is honored to be the chosen recipient of this act of love.

As we come closer to the Christmas event, we would be well-advised to give thoughtful reflection concerning the love that God has for each of us. We are not all chosen to serve the same purposes, but we are each the object of God's empowering love.

Awesome God,

No words can capture the task of describing your love. No description can suffice, in expressing our exceeding gratitude. We are dependent upon your love and you are responsive to our need. Thank you, for opening doors to every possibility in each of our lives.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

Tuesday – December 20, 2011

Luke 1: 46b – 55, 1 Samuel 1: 19 – 28, Hebrews 8: 1 – 11

Now the main point in what we are saying is this; we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in

the heavens... Hebrews 8: 1

It is good to know that you are loved. It is also good to know that you are known to those people who sit in "high places." When those in positions of power happen to be in love with us, we are the objects of tremendous influence. We have witnessed this in the life stories of such persons as Cleopatra, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, or Steadman Graham. Each of these persons may have been great in their own capacity, but the power afforded by love took each to another level.

Jesus is in love with each of us. He is a wielder of great power and influence, which he brings to bear on our behalf. There is nothing unsavory about the ways that Jesus shows favor. His ways are righteous and his favor is available to all. Some might say that it is not favor if everyone can receive it. The love of Jesus has the capacity to give each person the sense that they are getting all of his love.

Great High Priest,

We are favored by your love. Immerse us in it. Cover us with it. Allow every person to wonder how you have enough love to give to anyone else, but teach us to willingly share.

In your abundance,

Amen



Wednesday – Dec. 21, 2011

Luke 1: 46b – 55, 1 Samuel 2: 1 – 10,
Mark 11: 1 – 11

He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. 1 Samuel 2: 8

Everyone likes to cheer for the underdog. The weaker the team or competitor, the more unassociated strangers are inclined to support them. Unknown political candidates often garner votes on the basis that voters want to give somebody else a chance. Those who serve the needs of the downtrodden are celebrated, even among those with no inclination to do likewise. The sense is that somebody needs to be in the corner of those who seem to have no means of support.

God is not seeking to impress anyone. It is simply the case that God recognizes no person as a throwaway. The needs of every person are paramount to God. Love, for all of creation, drives God to act to restore the balance that we have lost, as we strive to outstrip one another.

The love of God, for the underdog, benefits each of us. Everyone, no matter how rich, smart, or powerful, has areas of their lives in which they exist as an underdog. God shows the greatest love for each of us by reaching us in our weakness. We too are raised up from the dust.

Lord of Wholeness,

We thank you for propping us up wherever we are found to be leaning. We realize that only your love can dust us off and restore us to our full capacity. We need this restoration again and again. Thank you, for repeatedly providing it.

By Your Love,

Amen

Thursday – December 22, 2011

Psalm 96, Zephaniah 3: 8 – 13,
Romans 10: 5 – 13

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

Psalm 96: 1 – 2

Love is probably the most common subject of song lyrics. It seems that, through the years, everything that could be said about love has been repeatedly said; "I can't live without you", "You bring out the best in me", or "I was born to love you." Over and over, the point is made that the singer is deeply affected by the object of their affection. God is different.

The psalmist calls for each of us to come up with something new. God's love can not be properly acknowledged or praised with another rendition of spiritual or emotional "oldies". Look at the storehouse of godly blessings and talk about what you see. It must be worthy of some new material or new responses. Throughout 150 psalms the psalmist(s) finds the capacity to describe God's love in new and different ways. God's love deserves new consideration and new description every day of our lives.

Lord of Newness,

Because you bless us in never ending variety, we are loved anew each day. Thank you, for never "phoning it in." If you continue to love and bless us, we will sing, loudly and with fresh responses.

With agape,

Amen

Friday – December 23, 2011

Psalm 96, Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20,
Romans 13: 11 – 14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now that moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation

is nearer to us now than when we became believers... Romans 13: 11

God loves us in dramatic and difference making ways. Somehow, we manage to go through most of our days with little recognition or acknowledgement of God's love. We may notice God's presence or activity in times of crisis, but on typical days we pay little attention to this love. Paul suggests, in this text, that it is time to change our pattern of disregard.

It is time to wake up. We may not be asleep, but we have not demonstrated the kind of alertness or consciousness that God's love or our circumstances call for. We are like cartoon characters who fail to notice the many perils that barely miss harming us. A tree falls just after we cross a path. Our vehicle explodes as soon as we go in the house. These things may seem ludicrous, but not more so than actual people who fail to notice the plethora of daily blessings that sustain each of us.

Salvation is nearer to us now than when we began. It would certainly be regrettable if any of us sleep through the moment of salvation.

Loving God,

We have no way of knowing how much we have slept through. We are in awe of a God who has never gone asleep at the wheel. Your love and blessings have sustained us, even when we did not know it.

In Christ,

Amen





Christmas Eve

Saturday – December 24, 2011

Psalm 96, Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 8, Isaiah 9: 2 – 7, James 1: 17 – 18, Titus 2: 11 – 14, Luke 2: 1 – 14 (15 – 20)

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. *Luke 2: 9 – 10*

The wait is nearly over for us. Somehow, we have come to the conclusion that four weeks is a long wait for the Savior of the world. We have been waiting with the assurance that Jesus has already come. Our wait has been for the purpose of preparing ourselves to process and embrace this great gift of love. We waited with the certainty of a celebration at a known point in time.

The shepherds waited for generations. The hope of Israel, as told by the prophets, was a source of comfort and security for hundreds of years. Every generation of parents motivated their children with the promise that “one day, God will restore Israel.” As always, God’s intentions exceeded the understanding and expectation of the people. Even the appearance of the angel, who came to announce

the event, was frightening to the shepherds. After generations of hoping and waiting, they were not ready for this.

God is still sending messengers. We are often unready for the magnitude or the method of God’s blessings. God is not deterred. Ready or not, here comes Jesus. He is not God’s only gift of love, but he is the greatest.

Loving God,

We stand in awe of your great love. Our time of preparation could never prepare us to understand your love. May this season of waiting equip us to celebrate, without understanding, and to respond as fully as we know how.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen

Christmas Day

Sunday – December 25, 2011

Psalm 97, Psalm 98, Isaiah 52: 7 – 10, Isaiah 62: 6 – 12, Titus 3: 4 – 7, Hebrews 1: 1 – 4 (5 – 12), Luke 2: (1 – 7) 8 – 20, John 1: 1 – 14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” *Luke 2: 13 – 14*

Precious Lord,

You are the object of praise in heaven and on earth. How can we ever allow ourselves to become complacent, and to neglect to praise your name? You were spectacular in creating the earth and all that lives on it. You performed countless miracles, in delivering Israel and all the rest of us, throughout history. You have provided sources of food and drink for all the world, even though some of us deprive others. You, Lord, are worthy to be praised.

Today, we receive Jesus anew. We are as needy as we were when he first came. We are as estranged, from you and one another. We need a savior right now. Even if we promise to accept your loving blessings more appropriately, we will never earn your love or your grace.

Thank you, for the precious gift of the Lord of Life. We join with the hosts of heaven and the people of God, throughout the world, in praise and thanksgiving.

In love, Amen

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