

The Season of Advent



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2015

Advent : A Time of Alpha and the Omega

Introduction

When Christmas decorations appear before the fall foliage is completely off the trees and the countdown to Christmas starts earlier and earlier each year, it may seem hard for us to imagine that in the early church celebrations of the birth of Jesus were rare. Indeed, when we turn to the four canonical gospels we find that Mark, the earliest of the gospels, and John, the latest of the gospels, do not even include birth narratives. It is only in Matthew and Luke that we hear of the birth of Jesus and careful reading of these provide us differing details. Nowhere in the Bible do we find the familiar scene of shepherds and magi gathered together in adoration around a babe in a crèche. In fact, this image did not make an appearance until the time of Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. Legend tells us that while visiting the village of Greccio, Francis prepared a live nativity as a way to excite the inhabitants to celebrate the birth of the infant Jesus. During the midnight mass, Francis preached in front of that crèche about the nativity of the poor King who he called the Babe of Bethlehem.

Again though it may seem strange to us that Christians would need to be encouraged to celebrate Christmas, church history tells us that the early church chose to emphasize the Paschal celebration, Easter over the nativity. This is seen in the writings of third century church leaders such as Clement of Alexandria (who condemned any speculation regarding the birth of Jesus as superstition and Iranaeus and Tertullian who both agreed that only sinners celebrated birthdays. But not all agreed with this interpretation, Origen, another third century theologian and native of Alexandria, was the first of the church fathers to suggest a celebration of Jesus birth on December 25. Origen chose this to coincide with winter solstice celebrations. His suggestion for the date was practical as it made the celebration of the birth of Jesus less conspicuous in a time when Christians were still being persecuted and it provided a touch point for pagans who were converting to Christianity.

But while Origen was an early advocate of celebrating Christmas, the tradition took some time to take hold. Customs, date of the celebration, and length of time for preparation before the celebration differed from place to place. In the fourth and fifth centuries in Northern Italy we find evidence of the celebration of Christmas preceded by a time of preparation (Advent). Some of the earliest evidence of the Advent season comes to us from the writings of Ambrose of Milan (late fourth century). Similarly, Filastrius of Brescia wrote of four times of fasting that were observed by the early church, at Christ's birth, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost. Filastrius was the first to mention an Advent season. A bit later, the writings of Peter Chrysologus, Bishop of Ravenna, points to the Advent season as a time of preparation and penitence. Writing at a time when the meaning of the incarnation and the divinity of Christ was being debated in the great councils of the church, it is not surprising that Peter Chrysologus' Advent sermons focused on a theology of the Trinity and an understanding of the humanity and divinity

of Jesus the Christ. Even later in the seventh century, writings refer to Advent being observed in Rome for four Sundays. These writings seem to suggest that the focus of this Advent season was two-fold, the historical coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus at the end of time. Finally, while the season of Advent was taking shape within the churches of Northern Italy, evidence of a three-week Advent season is also found in fourth century Spain.

While Christmas celebrations and traditions varied from time to time and place to place, the celebration of Epiphany on January 6 was more common. The earliest celebration of Epiphany, meaning "manifestation" or "appearance", dates back to the third century and was generally associated with readings about the baptism of Jesus. Today in the Eastern Church, the major celebration of the nativity of Jesus continues to be Epiphany with an emphasis on the baptism of Jesus and the first miracle at Cana. In the Western Church, Epiphany concludes the Twelve Days of Christmas and focuses on the coming of the Magi. In part this is due to Gregory the Great who established a four Sunday period of preparation for Christmas and switched the focus of that time of preparation from a time of preparation for baptism to a time of asceticism and worship.

While today some speak of the so-called war on Christmas, at one point in history the celebration of Christmas was in fact illegal. During the Puritan Era, there were laws in-acted that outlawed the celebration of Christmas for the Puritans considered it a undesirable remnant of Catholicism and an excuse for frivolous behavior. In Massachusetts, Christmas was outlawed between 1659 and 1681 and it did not become a legal holiday in the state until 1856.

While the Christmas cycle with a four Sunday preparatory time of Advent took some time to develop, today this seems to be the norm. Four Sundays before Christmas Advent wreaths and accompanying liturgies make an appearance in most churches in the West. While we are generally familiar with a four Sunday observance of Advent, this devotional will begin with suggested readings on the Thursday before the First Sunday of Advent. This reflects an understanding of the lectionary cycle in which Thursday, Friday and Saturday lections prepare us for the Sunday readings and Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday readings encourage us to reflect and respond to the Sunday readings.

More than Just a Remembrance

Today when observed to the fullest, Advent has a three-fold focus. First, it asks us to consider the historical coming of Jesus at the time of his birth. Second, it asks us to consider the current in-breaking of Jesus in our lives today. Finally, it asks us to focus

on return of Jesus which signals the consummation of the kingdom of God. This three-fold focus was first suggested by a medieval theologian Bernard of Clairvaux. In his fifth sermon for Advent "On the Intermediate Coming and the Tree Fold Renewal", Bernard speaks of the first coming of Jesus as the time when he took on our "flesh and infirmity". He identifies the second coming of Jesus as the time when he takes on "spirit and power." And, Bernard concludes that in the third coming, Jesus will take on "glory and majesty." While the world around us focuses on Santa and gifts and festal celebrations and many in the church limit its celebration to an act of remembrance of the coming of a baby, Advent with its three-fold focus asks us to consider the in-breaking of the reign of God all around us and to hope-filled consideration of the upcoming fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This devotion maintains this understanding that Advent is a time when we do not merely remember the coming of a baby but a time when we reflect on the current in-breaking of Christ and when we look forward to the fulfillment of the kingdom at the end of time.

Why Mark Time According to the Seasons of the Liturgical Calendar?

For many today, the holiday season that begins with Thanksgiving and ends with New Year celebrations is one of the most frantic and commercialized time of the year. Worship at the altars of malls and department stores begins with Black Friday and ends in remorse at mailboxes in January as the Christmas credit card bills make their annual appearance. For many today, significant time with friend and family have been replaced by making the rounds of gatherings and parties and by Christmas newsletters that present a somewhat idealized view of the events of the calendar year. For many loneliness and feelings of hopelessness and alienation surround the holidays like tinsel surrounds the Christmas trees. For many the cynicism of Christmas songs like *Grandma Got Run over by a Reindeer* has come to characterize what the season is all about.

And for many in the church, the idea of a season of waiting and anticipation seems foreign and unnecessary. A time for anticipation and longing that is captured in the lyrics of hymns such as *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is truncated as the lighting of the first Advent candle takes place in services in which the congregation sings *O Come All Ye Faithful* and *Joy to the World*.

In light of these realities, engaging the themes and practices of the Advent season provides us with an opportunity to slow down and to consider the presence and the promise that is associated with the Incarnation, past, present and future. As we slow down we can create a time and a space to consider the true meaning of Christmas, preparing our hearts and our minds and realigning our lives in accordance with the in-breaking of the one who declares:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Luke 4: 18 – 19.

And, then goes on to say "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" Luke 4: 21.

Finally, Advent invites us to a beginning, to consider the depth of God's love and desire to be in relationship with us that is shown through the Incarnation. It reorients us towards an end that through the grace of God can and will be accomplished as we order our lives according to what has been revealed in the Incarnation. It is the time of the Alpha and the Omega.

About the Author

The Reverend Dr. Beth Rupe is Senior Minister at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Moline, Ill. She served congregations in Kentucky while attending Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) and in Illinois. Prior to going to seminary, Beth was an Outpatient Therapist at a community mental health center. She received a BS with honors in Psychology from Western Illinois University (1988) and a MS in Clinical Community Mental Health Psychology from Western Illinois University (1990). Beth received her MDiv from LTS (2002). She was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) by the Christian Church in Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW). She received her DMin from LTS (2014). Her doctoral project was on reclaiming a model of biblical lament in contemporary worship in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).



Beth is a member of the CCIW Ethic's Investigation Team and the Worship/Study Chair of the CCIW Women's Ministry Cabinet. She is Co-Chair of the CCIW Pro-Reconciliation Anti-Racism Committee/Team and is a member of the CCIW Regional Counsel. She served as the Worship Coordinator for the 2010 International Disciples Women's Ministries (IDWM) Quadrennial Assembly that was held in Greensboro, N.C. Beth has written study materials for the IDWM and has published book reviews in *The Lexington Theological Seminary Quarterly*.

Beth is married to Mark. They have two children (Sarah, who is married to Aaron, and Benjamin), one granddaughter (Chloe), and are expecting a second granddaughter in December. She enjoys reading and learning new things, especially computer skills. Her other hobbies include knitting, quilting and listening to all genres of music. She enjoys cooking, especially for her family and friends. Beth and Mark love to travel. She finds strength in contemplative prayer and studying scripture and feels called by God to work for justice.

Daily Advent Readings 2015

Year C (NRSV Bible)

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				<i>Psalm 25: 1-10</i>	<i>Psalm 25: 1-10</i>	<i>Psalm 25: 1-10</i>
				<i>Nehemiah 9: 6-15</i>	<i>Nehemiah 9: 16-25</i>	<i>Nehemiah 9: 16-25</i>
				<i>1 Thessalonia- nians 5: 1-11</i>	<i>1 Thessalo- nians 5: 12-22</i>	<i>1 Thessalo- nians 5: 12-22</i>

First Sunday of Advent (November 29)

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<i>Jeremiah 33: 14-15</i>	<i>Psalm 90, 2</i>	<i>Psalm 90</i>	<i>Psalm 90</i>	<i>Luke 1: 68-79</i>	<i>Luke 1: 68-79</i>	<i>Luke 1: 68-79</i>
<i>Psalm 25: 1-10</i>	<i>Numbers 17: 1-11</i>	<i>2 Samuel 7: 18-29</i>	<i>Isaiah 1: 24-31</i>	<i>Malachi 3: 5-12</i>	<i>Malachi 3: 13-18</i>	<i>Malachi 4: 1-16</i>
<i>1 Thessalo- nians 3: 9-13</i>	<i>2 Peter 3: 1-18</i>	<i>Revelation 22: 12-16</i>	<i>Luke 11: 29-32</i>	<i>Philippians 1: 12-18a</i>	<i>Philippians 18b-26</i>	<i>Luke 9: 1-6</i>
<i>Luke 21: 25-31</i>						

Second Sunday of Advent (December 6)

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<i>Malachi 3: 1-4</i>	<i>Psalm 126</i>	<i>Psalm 126</i>	<i>Psalm 126</i>	<i>Isaiah 12: 2-6</i>	<i>Isaiah 12: 2-6</i>	<i>Isaiah 12: 2-6</i>
<i>Luke 1: 68-79</i>	<i>Isaiah 40: 1-11</i>	<i>Isaiah 19: 18-25</i>	<i>Isaiah 35: 3-7</i>	<i>Amos 6: 1-8</i>	<i>Amos 8: 4-12</i>	<i>Amos 9: 8-15</i>
<i>Philippians 1: 3-11</i>	<i>Romans 8: 22-25</i>	<i>2 Peter 1: 2-15</i>	<i>Luke 7: 18-30</i>	<i>2 Corinthians 8: 1-15</i>	<i>2 Corinthians 9: 1-15</i>	<i>Luke 1: 57-66</i>
<i>Luke 3: 1-6</i>						

Third Sunday of Advent (December 13)

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<i>Zephaniah 3: 14-20</i>	<i>Isaiah 11: 1-9</i>	<i>Isaiah 11: 1-9</i>	<i>Isaiah 1: 11-9</i>	<i>Psalm 80: 1-7</i>	<i>Psalm 80: 1-7</i>	<i>Psalm 80: 1-7</i>
<i>Isaiah 12: 2-6</i>	<i>Numbers 16: 1-19</i>	<i>Numbers 16: 1-19</i>	<i>Micah 4: 8-13</i>	<i>Jeremiah 31: 31-34</i>	<i>Isaiah 42: 10-18</i>	<i>Isaiah 66: 7-11</i>
<i>Philippians 4: 4-7</i>	<i>Hebrews 13: 7-17</i>	<i>Acts 28: 23-31</i>	<i>Luke 7: 31-35</i>	<i>Hebrews 10: 10-18</i>	<i>Hebrews 10: 32-39</i>	<i>Luke 13: 31-35</i>
<i>Luke 3: 7-18</i>						

Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 20)

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday Christmas Eve	Friday Christmas	Saturday
<i>Micah 5: 2-5a</i>	<i>Psalm 113</i>	<i>Luke 1: 46b-55</i>	<i>Luke 1: 46b-55</i>	<i>Isaiah 52: 7-10</i>	<i>Isaiah 9: 2-7</i>	
<i>Psalm 80: 1-7</i>	<i>Isaiah 42: 14-21</i>	<i>Micah 4: 1-5</i>	<i>Micah 4: 6-8</i>	<i>Psalm 98</i>	<i>Psalm 96</i>	
<i>Hebrews 10: 5-10</i>	<i>Luke 1: 5-25</i>	<i>Ephesians 2: 1-22</i>	<i>2 Peter 1: 16-21</i>	<i>Hebrews 1: 1-16</i>	<i>Titus 2: 11-14</i>	
<i>Luke 1: 39-45</i>				<i>John 1: 1-14</i>	<i>Luke 2: 1-20</i>	

Daily Meditations

Advent One

LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Psalm 90: 1

Thursday – November 26, 2015

⁴Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation for you I wait all day long.

Psalm 25: 4-5

Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest who was a part of the German Resistance during World War II states, “Advent is a time for rousing. We are shaken to the very depths so that we may wake up to the truth of ourselves.... We must let go of all our mistaken dreams, our conceited poses and arrogant gestures, all pretenses with which we hope to deceive ourselves and others.”¹ When we wake up to that truth we come to realize that our ultimate source of hope and security is God. This truth is deeply challenged during this time of year when we are bombarded by the marketplace that seeks to convince us that our security comes from that which we accumulate and that our relationships are based on giving the right gift so that we will be loved. It is deeply challenged by this time of year when we are bombarded with messages to buy now and pay later.

Psalm 25 is a prayer for help. Rather than seeking immediate gratification, the psalmist understands that security does not come from personal resources but comes from offering oneself to God. Today, we join the psalmist in calling out to God, asking for guidance and instruction. In doing this may we come to the truth, about ourselves and about the world so that we may come to depend on the LORD for all things in all times.

Today, ask God to help you identify the “mistaken dreams,” “conceited poses” and “arrogant gestures” that you must let go to

find your true self. What are the lies and illusions of the marketplace to which you are drawn? Ask God to help you let them go and instead seek your security in offering yourself to God. What gift of time, talent and resources can you offer the Lord this Advent season and beyond?

¹ Alfred Delp, Days of the Lord in An Advent Sourcebook. Thomas J. O’Gorman (Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988) 9.

Prayer

God, you are the Alpha and the Omega, in you I find truth and salvation. Teach me your ways, O LORD, that I may grow in wisdom as I trust in you today and always.

Amen.

Friday – November 27, 2015

¹⁷they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

Nehemiah 9: 17

In verses 12 – 15 of Nehemiah, we are reminded that while the children of Israel wandered in the desert, God was with them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night feeding them with manna and providing water for them from the rocks. In spite of God’s constant presence and loving care, the Israelites were not faithful to God. Verse 17 is part of the confession of sin that begins in verse 16.

In this verse, we see the contrast between God’s character and human nature. Humans are disobedient and stiff necked while God is forgiving, gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and steadfast in love. God makes covenants and God keeps covenants. Humanity is not always as faithful.

A monastic liturgy states, “Turn

toward us, Lord, if only for a moment. Hurry to your servants!” The season of Advent reminds us that God has done just this. Through Jesus the Christ we have the clearest revelation of God’s character turning toward us. We are reminded of the closeness of God who came to us, is with us and will continue to be with us through eternity. We see God’s mercy and compassion in Jesus’ healing and feeding ministry. We see Jesus reaching out to reconcile and initiate right relationships as he interacts with sinners and outsiders. We see God’s justice as Jesus challenges the institutional status quo with parables of kingdom living where people are compelled to come in off the streets to sit at the banquet table.

Today, consider how you have experienced the forgiveness, mercy and love of God in your life. At the end of the day, consider where you have experienced God’s presence today. Finally, consider where you hope to experience God’s presence tomorrow.

Prayer

God of clouds and fire, as I wander through the wilderness of the now and not yet of the kingdom stay by my side. Thank you for the gifts of manna and water that you continue to provide which nourish and restore my soul. Help me to trust in your abundance to seek daily bread knowing that you are sufficient for today and all the tomorrows of my life.

Amen.

Saturday – November 28, 2015

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5: 16 – 19

It is easy to live life with qualifiers. Sometimes these qualifiers focus on the conditions that must be met before we take some action. Like: "I will spend more time with my family and friends when I get that promotion for which I am working. I will give/tithe to the church when I meet my financial goals and balance in my retirement plan. I will participate in the outreach ministries of the congregation when they start singing the hymns I like and worship in the style I prefer." Sometimes these qualifiers relate to attitudes or beliefs that we hold like: "I will finally be happy when I graduate from college, get the right job, meet the right person. I will be lovable when I lose that last ten pounds. I will be acceptable to God when I conquer my depression/alcoholism/flaws and shortcomings."

Take a moment and consider how you qualify your actions, attitudes, and beliefs. Are there things in your life that cause you to question the unconditional love of God? Do you have qualifiers that prevent you from responding unconditionally to God's blessing and love?

1 Thessalonians is the earliest of the New Testament books. In this passage, Paul provides instruction on living life without qualifiers. He states that we are to engage in praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. Noted theologian Karl Rahner writes, "We should note that Paul does not say thanks should be governed by circumstances. The thanks is governed by the life of worship. Whether good or bad be the lot, a life of worship (of seeking to please and honor God and doing God's will) means perpetual thanksgiving."²

Advent calls us to a life rooted in the promise that Christ came, Christ comes, and Christ is coming, and therefore I can live without qualifiers for I can trust in the Lord. Today take some time and consider what you have been putting off until _____. What have you been waiting for in order to experience happiness? What would be different if you rejoice always, pray without ceasing and live with gratitude in all circumstances? How would life be different if lived as an endless act of worship?

²Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writing*, Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, eds., Harvey D. Egan, trans. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992) 511.

Prayer

Today, O God, I will rejoice in you. I will give thanks for your presence and I will seek to be grateful for the experiences of this day. Help me to live the unqualified life where I claim your unconditional love and seek to love others unconditionally. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Sunday – November 29, 2015

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Jeremiah 33: 14 – 15

During Advent and Christmas, we have many opportunities to engage in acts of charity. We leave the grocery store or the department store in the mall and right outside the door is the Salvation Army bell ringer soliciting donations. Hardly a day of December goes without one receiving a solicitation for donations to this or that cause. And then there are the special projects at church – mitten and hat drives, food baskets, angel trees, etc., etc. Many worthy causes that are well-deserving of our contributions and support, many opportunities to feel a warm glow as we provide assistance to someone whom we have deemed as less fortunate than ourselves.

And yet, Advent calls to remember that the Christian life is more than annual charity appeals. It is more than just reaching out to assist the poor and the marginalized during the Christmas season. Advent calls us to remember that the coming of Jesus the Christ is about the

establishment of God's kingdom with God's justice. It is about working for the restoration of God's order and renewal of God's purpose each day.

Today's passage speaks of the restoration of Jerusalem. It is about a future hope made possible as God's promise is remembered in the midst of terrifying judgment. It follows an indictment of past leaders who have failed to render justice and righteousness. And, it promises a future in which leaders will do better.

Jeremiah 33 is a vision of social restoration in which personal forgiveness is linked to a renewal of social and economic systems. It is about the reordering of society as a whole more so than annual acts of charity and concern for those who are marginalized by our economic systems. It is a vision of life in which righteous people order their lives according to God's law by living honest, generous, loyal, merciful, and just lives every day of the year.

This Advent season may we make the most of the charitable opportunities as we grow to a deeper understanding of God's call to live lives of justice and concern for others every day of our lives. May we speak out for and work for God's vision of kin-dom living.

Prayer

Generous God, this Advent season may I respond to the opportunities to love as I have been loved by you, to care as you have cared for me. May I grow to live this way each day, to work for a society that reflects your compassion, mercy and justice. Teach me to be a voice for justice and advocate for righteousness.

In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Monday – November 30, 2015

¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3: 13

Throughout history individuals and groups have seen signs that they have identified with the second coming of Jesus. In the Bible, Paul suggested that the second coming would occur in the lifetime of those to whom he is writing. The writer of Revelation also understood that the return of Christ was imminent. This common belief is portrayed in a recent movie "Agora," in which Christians of the fifth century saw the split of the Roman Empire as a sign of the imminent return of Jesus in their lives. In the history of the United States, Puritan minister Richard Mather believed that the Civil War was a sign of the second coming. Richard seems to have followed in the footsteps of his ancestor Cotton Mather, who was an ardent supporter of the Salem witch trials and who was sorely disappointed when his dating of the second coming did not coincide with Jesus's return.

While individuals and groups have pointed to various signs throughout history and have named various dates for Jesus' return, it also seems that as early as the late first century some within the Christian community had become impatient about Christ's return. The author of our scripture today apologizes for the delay in Jesus' second coming and offers some suggestions for faithful living as the community waits. A letter to the universal church rather than a single congregation, 2 Peter encourages us to remain faithful by centering ourselves in Scripture and the traditions that are handed down.

This is an important message for believers of the twenty-first century and it is a central message of Advent which orients us toward the ultimate victory of God while at the same time asking us to pay attention to what God is doing in the here and now.

Advent asks us to consider how God acted in human history through the Incarnation while never forgetting that God is not done with us yet. God continues to act and today we as the body of Christ are called to be participants in his ongoing mission. Advent also reminds us that we do not passively wait as Jesus continues to come into our lives and into our world today.

In the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, "He [Christ] became man that we might be made God." The Incarnation means that today we have access to the mind of Christ. Today we are given the opportunity to reach out in love to Christ as he reaches out in love to us. And in this love we are brought closer to humanity and all of God's creation.

Today consider the opportunities that you have to reach out in love. Consider how your words and your deeds reflect the mind of Christ. How are you living because you claim the truth that God has chosen through the Incarnation to be vulnerable and enter freely into partnership with human beings?

Prayer

God, throughout this day stay close by my side, reach out to me in love as you instruct me in reaching out to others. Feel my heart with compassion and guide my words and my ways according the path of righteousness. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Tuesday – December 1, 2015

¹²"See I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Revelation 22: 12 – 13

In recent years, many have suggested a war against Christianity is being carried out in the United States. Battles in this war include when store workers say "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas" or when the Menorah and Kwanzaa displays appear along side the Christian crèche. But is this truly the war that Christians are called to fight?

The Book of Revelation presents us with images of a war of good and evil. An apocalyptic writing, Revelation is crisis literature that holds out the hope God is in control despite what is happening all around. It is a war against the forces of empire that attempt to dominate and force others

to submission. It is a war against economic forces where the poor are kept down for the benefit of the rich. It is a war against exploitation and alienation of the stranger because of the fear of the insider. It is a war against smug self-satisfaction and triumphalism and apathy and lack of compassion for the other. It is a war against conditions that maintain peace while sacrificing justice.

The Book of Revelation strives to inspire us: 1) to worship God giving honor and praise for our present and future salvation, 2) to serve God as we carry out the mission and embody the values that were shown to us in the ministry of Jesus the Christ, and 3) to hope for the day when God finally defeats all evil and all that denies the promise of abundant life to God's creation. In today's scripture, Jesus Christ, although not identified as the speaker in the passage, reminds us that the hope for Christians to which Revelation attempts to inspire us to, begins and ends in him.

Thomas Merton, Cistercian monk and theologian, writes, "The Advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ."³ In our passage today, we are reminded that keeping the words means working for the end of all that is not yet Christ. According to theologian Michael Gorman this happens when our words and deeds result in "the culture of the beast has been replaced by the culture of the Lamb, the culture of death by a culture of life, the culture of insecurity and fear by a culture of peace and trust...."

³Thomas Merton, Seasons of Celebration (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1965).

Prayer

Lord Jesus may we turn to you as our source of hope. May we not be distracted as we seek to continue your mission in the world today. Help us to work for the culture of the Lamb, the culture of life and the culture of peace and trust. We pray these things looking to the day of promised fulfillment.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 2, 2015

²⁷Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent by righteousness.

Isaiah 1: 27

I am always amazed when I hear public figures who self-identify as Christian speaking of natural disasters or tragedies as the will of God. I find this troubling and somewhat puzzling in light of passages such as today's reading from Isaiah.

In the final section of the first chapter of Isaiah, the prophet addresses the meaning of justice. While there is some ambiguity about whether it is the justice of God or God's people that is at work to redeem Zion, what the context seems to suggest is that God's justice linked to human behavior will bring redemption. Throughout the Bible, redemption can be understood in a variety of ways. At times, "redeemed" refers to the release or ransom of a slave from their owner. At other times it is associated with release from some kind of trouble. Thus, we see that God's will is not seen in the trials and tribulations, but in the release of humanity from that which enslaves and oppresses. God's will is seen as we are released from trouble and established in wholeness and well-being.

At the 2015 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, those in attendance were introduced to the Mission First initiative of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I have recently joined the Mission First group on Facebook. On this page congregations have been sharing how they are a part of God's redemptive work. Stories are being shared of sack lunches being prepared for individuals who are living in emergency shelters, assisting in Neighbors helping Neighbors programs, assisting in building a campus for nonprofit organizations, providing community meals for the hungry, and much, much more.

Take some time today to visit the Disciples.org website to familiarize yourself with Mission First, sign up to be a part of the discussion and/or

join the Facebook group and share how you see Zion being redeemed by justice. Remember that this is the season when we celebrate the One who came not to judge, but to redeem the world.

Prayer

Gracious God, help me to remember that salvation is not a gift that is merely given to individuals but is your intention and your plan for all of creation. Help me O Lord to be a part of your redemptive plan. I pray this in Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday – December 3, 2015

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1: 78 – 79

The scripture today is part of one of the three canticles (songs) that are included in Luke's gospel. Traditionally known as the Benedictus, or the Song of Zechariah, is a song of thanksgiving that was sung at the occasion the circumcision of John the Baptist. It speaks of the hope that is associated with the birth of this particular child. It comes after months when Zechariah has not been able to speak. Now words of joy, of expectation, and of hope spill forth. His words point us in the direction of a future, the dawning of a new day on which we will be guided by God and when real peace will become a reality.

Starting with verse 76, Zechariah addresses his son John's role in God's plan of salvation. In verses 78 – 79, he links the plan of salvation with this day of peace and well-being.

Jürgen Moltmann writes, "The birth of every child is the beginning of life. With every child something new comes in to the world." He goes on to identify three reasons why every child is an "incarnate hope[s] for a fulfilled life and are also God's

true promise[s]." First, each child is original, unique and incomparable whose character is fully revealed as we grow in love of the child. Second, the birth of a child brings the possibility of fullness of life and hope in this unredeemed world. Third, the birth of each child is the beginning of what is possible as that child grows as the embodiment of God.⁴

Advent and Christmas is the time when we consider how life can be because of the birth of one particular baby. It is also a time to consider the part that we are called to play in God's plan of salvation. What does Jesus' birth and Jesus' presence mean to this "possibility of fullness of life and hope for this unredeemed world" that each of us represents in this world? Consider how your relationship with Jesus impacts your embodiment of God in the world today.

⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End the Beginning: The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 241 – 273.

Prayer

God point me in the direction of hope and fill me with songs of possibility. May today be a day when I fully claim the fullness of life and when I embody Christ in the world. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.



Friday – December 4, 2015

¹⁶Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name. ¹⁷They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spares a child who serve them. ¹⁸Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Malachi 3: 16 – 18

While we are only a few days into December, by now you have probably heard *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*. Written in response to Eddie Cantor's request for an upbeat Christmas tune to bring hope in the midst of the Depression, you might be surprised to learn that its lyricist James Lamont (Haven) Gillespie initially refused Cantor's request. Grieving over the recent death of his brother, Gillespie only agreed to write the song because he needed the money. His inspiration for the lyrics came from childhood admonishments from his mother that he and his brother "better be good because Santa Claus is coming to town." While some saw the song as nothing more than a morality play designed to keep children in line, the song was an instant hit selling more than thirty thousand records within days of its release.

A casual reading of our text from Malachi might lead us to a similar message about how we better be good. However, a more nuanced reading will show us that while Malachi is concerned with the wicked and the righteous just as Gillespie is concerned with the naughty and nice, and while Malachi assures us that God is constantly watching over us, just like Gillespie states that Santa is watching, there are differences in the messages.

Rather than merely watching and keeping a list of our good deeds and our bad deeds, Malachi suggests that God cares and actively provides instruction so that we might find our

true identity as the righteous people of God. In Malachi both Moses and Elijah are sent as helpers to the people to bring reconciliation and to heal relationships. Unlike the Santa of the song, God does not leave us on our own 364 days of the year only to return to evaluate us on day 365. God sends helpers, God answers our questions, and God remains at our side urging us to proper respect of the LORD.

Today, be attentive for the urging of God. Who is God sending to be your helpers? Remember the promises of Advent that Emanuel came to be with us and that Emanuel remains by our side.

Prayer

Open my ears O LORD, that I may hear your voice. Open my eyes, O LORD so that I may see your face in those around me. Help me to do good in your world today. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Saturday – December 5, 2015

¹Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

Luke 9: 1-2

This past August, three congregations in the Quad Cities in Illinois and Iowa had the privilege of welcoming three young adults, Anna, Cris, and Sarah, into our communities and into our hearts. These three young people are participants in the National Benevolent Association XPLOR Program, a program that calls young adults to simplified living, to work for justice, and to engage in vocational and spiritual discernment. In seven houses across the United States, young adults are living in community because they chose to respond by going on the adventure of discipleship as Jesus sent them from their homes, their friends, and the familiarity of how they had been doing church. Anna, Cris, and Sarah

came to the Quad Cities to work with community non-for-profits, St. Joseph's the Workers House, Quad Cities Interfaith, and Braking Traffik, to proclaim the kingdom of God and assist in the healing of the world.

As the pastor of one of those congregations that received Anna, Cris, and Sarah, I am aware that they are not the only ones who are being sent by Jesus. We who received them are also standing on the edge of what is familiar, and comfortable. We are also responding to Jesus, as we are sent into our communities to participate in proclaiming the kingdom of God and the healing of the world as we partner with community nonprofits for the work of justice in our community and in our world. We are being called to step out of our friendships into a new territory of hospitality to both teach and learn with Anna, Cris, and Sarah, what it means to go and grow as Jesus' disciples.

Just like the disciples in Luke 9, we are a part of the expansion of Jesus' ministry. And just like the disciples in this passage we are learning that a natural part of the being called by Jesus is being sent by Jesus into the world to preach the kingdom and to participate in the healing of the people.

Anna, Cris and Sarah and the other residents in the XPLOR Program, three congregations in the Quad Cities in Illinois and Iowa and other host congregations for the XPLOR program, have said "yes" as Jesus gives us the authority and power to go, to proclaim and to heal in the name of Jesus Christ. But it does not stop there! Each disciple of Jesus is offered this same authority and this same opportunity to be sent into the world on a mission of healing and wholeness.

Today, what are you being called to do as a disciple of Jesus Christ? What is your congregation being called to do? Where do you see the need for Christ's healing power? Where are you being sent to proclaim the kingdom of God? And how are you choosing to respond?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you stand beside us and offer us the opportunity to be your partner in the work of the kingdom. Open our hearts and give us the courage O Lord to step away from the familiar and the comfortable. To hear the cries of pain and outrage in a world that is broken and fragmented. Help us to claim our authority and go into the world as your agents of healing. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Advent Two

⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. ⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126: 5 -6

Sunday – December 6, 2015

The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Luke 3: 4b

Originating as songs of hope in the midst of the inhumanity and brutality of slavery, African-American spirituals are also songs of defiance and upheaval. These songs name injustice and identify justice as those who sing them identify with the children of Israel and claim the hope for freedom and a future of justice. These songs cry out in the wilderness a call to make straight the paths of the Lord who comes to set all things right.

The origins of these songs are sometimes difficult to trace, as slave owners prohibited slaves from being educated and did much to strip individuals of their identity. Like so many other spirituals that were handed down through oral tradition, we do not know who is originally responsible for *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. What we do know is that John Wesley Works, a professor at Fisk University, published the song in 1907

in a songbook of African-American folk songs. We also know that Peter, Paul, and Mary recorded the song as a Civil Rights theme in the 1960s. Since 1907, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has been recorded by over 20 artists. Today it is sung as both a Christmas carol and in some congregations as a praise song.

The song speaks of the power of Jesus' birth to overcome the fear of shepherds huddled in response to the heavenly announcement that the Savior is born. Today's scripture calls us to be heralds of the Savior just as the angels were as they sang in the nighttime skies and just as John the Baptist was as he cried out in the wilderness.

The birth of Jesus the Christ continues to have the power to overcome whatever fear silences us. The birth of Jesus has the power to lead us to the future of hope and promise that is central to the African-American spiritual. Like John and the shepherds of Bethlehem and the slaves of the antebellum period, we need to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, pointing to Christ as he continues to break into our world and into our lives.

If you get an opportunity today, listen to a recording of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. How are you huddled down and what help do you need from Jesus? How are you sharing the good news of Jesus Christ everywhere? Today might be a good day to organize a group of carolers to visit local homebound and nursing homes as you share the good news of Jesus through a ministry of presence.

Prayer

Loving God, give me eyes to see and courage to take advantage of the opportunities all around me to share the good news of Jesus Christ. May my actions be living testimony that Christ is with us and that the kingdom of God is unfolding before us. In Jesus name.

Amen.

Monday – December 7, 2015

²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8: 24 – 25

In 1944 in the midst of World War II, Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane working on the score for *Meet Me in St. Louis* gave Judy Garland their original composition of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. While the mood of the scene was to be melancholic, Garland rejected the initial lyrics as too sad stating that audiences would reject it. She insisted that Martin and Blane rework the composition. What they came up with was the blend of melancholy and hope that characterizes this beloved Christmas song which speaks of a future when troubles will be out of sight and faithful friends will gather once more.

Today's scripture also speaks of a hoped for future when all things are renewed. It assures us that because of the Incarnation we can look to the future with confidence and certainty. Just as Martin and Blane wrote of a future where troubles were over and friends were present in the midst of the horrors and uncertainty of World War II, centuries before Paul tells the Romans that even suffering is a cause of celebration because it produces patience, character and hope. He tells them, and us, that the appropriate Christian stance in the midst of all circumstances is anticipatory hope and patient expectation.

Martin's and Blane's song holds out hope but qualifies this hope with the words "if the fates allow." Paul holds out hope to the community in Rome with no such qualifier. He assures the community that through the coming of Jesus there will be a day when all troubles will be over. He assures them that there will be a day when the promises of God for wholeness and shalom are fulfilled.

Prayer

Gracious God, in the midst of all circumstances help me to live with hope and in anticipation of the kingdom. Create within me a grateful and generous spirit; give me patience and the ability to seek to find the goodness around me. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Tuesday – December 8, 2015

³His divine power has give us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. ⁵For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷and godliness with mutual affection and mutual affection with love.

2 Peter 1: 3 - 7

In the early centuries of the church there was more emphasis on the celebration of Epiphany than on Christmas. Meaning manifestation or appearance, Epiphany was associated with the baptism of Jesus. In keeping with this, Epiphany was often a time for individuals to be baptized. And this seems appropriate when we consider how baptism is the public sign of one's recognizing the presence of God in their lives. According to the Disciples website, "Baptism is a public act by which the church proclaims God's grace, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the use of a visible sign of God's gracious initiative and the human individual's response in faith.... The meaning of baptism is grounded in God's redemptive action in God's redemptive action in Christ, it incorporates the believer in the

community in the body of Christ, and it anticipates life in the coming age when the powers of the old world will be overcome, and the purposes of God will triumph."

In these words, we see that baptism is associated with one individual recognizing what God is doing through Jesus Christ. It is the moment when we publicly acknowledge our desire to participate in the work and mission of Jesus that was initiated through his birth and continues today. Just as the coming of Jesus was beginning, it is important for us to realize that our baptism is also a beginning. Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit we begin the ongoing process of living for Christ.

Today's scripture is a part of what may be considered a part of a primer (2 Peter 2: 13 – 11) for living that life.

In this passage, we are reminded that knowledge of Christ is gained at our conversion and grows through service and communion with those who follow him. It reminds us that to live for Christ is to love. As Arthur C. McGill states "like Jesus, we too only live to give our received selves away freely because we know our being is not thereby ended, but still and always lies in the Parenting of our God.... Those who love in the name of Jesus Christ... serve the needs of others willingly, even to the point of being exposed in their own neediness.... At the center of their life – the very innermost center – they are grateful to God, because they do not fear neediness. It is what frees them to serve the needy, to companion the needy, to become and to be one with the needy."⁵

Today, take some time to remember your baptism and the journey that began in those waters. At the end of the day consider how you have shown the love of God throughout the day. Consider how you have served the needs of others. Express your gratitude to God for those opportunities and ask God for an openness of heart to recognize the opportunities that present tomorrow.

⁵ Arthur C. McGill, *Dying Unto Life: On New God, New Death, New Life* (Cascade Books: Eugene, Oregon, 2013) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 766 – 829.



Prayer

Gracious God, I give you thanks for all those who I have encountered today. Thank you for the blessing that they bring to me. Help me live in ways that I may be a blessing to others. Help me to grow in knowledge, to persevere with godliness, and to serve with love. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 9, 2015

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

Isaiah 35: 5 – 6

In a desert world, water is a rare thing. Thus to a desert people, Isaiah's words ring with the promise of life in a garden when God walked in the cool of the night with humanity. They call to mind the promise of a land of milk and honey. In our passage from Isaiah, the renewal of creation is paired with the healing of humanity as the blind can see, the deaf can hear and the lame can walk. And they serve as a bridge as the book moves from words of judgment and calls to repentance to words of hope and a future in which exile ends. Isaiah speaks of the impact of God's arrival in the world and proclaims the good news of God's care for the people.

As the church spread the good news of Jesus and Christianity took

hold in the Northern Hemisphere, in the Medieval Period symbols of renewal and new life began to decorate sanctuaries during the Christmas season. In the midst of the coldest and darkest days of the year, evergreens such as holly, ivy and mistletoe came to symbolize the hope of fecundity and renewed life. These greens came to symbolize elements of Jesus' life and birth. For example, the circular shape of the Advent wreath symbolizes God who is without beginning or end. The evergreens represent eternal life through Jesus Christ with specific greens having specific meanings; cedars represent healing and strength and laurel represents the victory over persecution, suffering and death. Holly berries represent the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Pinecones represent life and resurrection through Jesus Christ.

Isaiah speaks of the promised day of renewal, the decorations of our sanctuary point us to the same promise. Today consider the signs that you see in the world around you. Where is God's healing taking place? Where is God's new day taking shape? Where is there new life taking root in the chaos of death and destruction? And, most importantly how are you taking part?



Prayer

God, today let my lifesong be one of joy and praise for the blessing of your presence and the hope that comes as your future is revealed. Give me eyes to see the signs of kingdom living and a heart to be your hands and feet in kingdom work. In Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday – December 10, 2015

¹⁵*As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."*

2 Corinthians 8: 15

O. Henry's (William Sydney Porter) *Gift of the Magi* tells the story of a young married couple's struggle to buy Christmas gifts for one another despite their limited finances. Out of their desire to please the other, Della and Young Jim sell their dearest possessions, Della's long hair and Jim's heirloom pocket watch, to provide a gift for the other. With the ironic twist for which O. Henry is famous, when it is time to exchange the gifts, the couple discover their gifts are now useless for Jim has purchased combs for Della's hair and Della has purchased a fob for Jim's watch. O. Henry ends his tale by relating the sacrifice of the young couple to the gifts of the Magi and states, "But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest."⁶

Our scripture today is also about gifts. On his first visit to Corinth, Paul had established the congregation with whom he now corresponds. While theirs was not always an easy relationship, here Paul encourages the congregation to participate in the offering for church in Jerusalem. Paul believes that it is God's will that the believers share all things (1 Corinthians 3:21). Here he hopes to motivate the people to give faithfully by comparing their zeal to that of the Macedonians.

In O. Henry's story Della and Young Jim are motivated by love. In

our scripture, Paul suggests that those who have experienced the presence of God in their life also need to be motivated by love. He encourages them to see the concerns of others and be moved by compassion and by love to respond. Paul believes that those who draw close to God subsequently draw close to others and live accordingly. Paul encourages the people at Corinth to finish what they have begun. He encourages them not to turn their backs on their brothers and sisters.

O. Henry ends his short story with the admonishment that the wisest gifts are motivated by love. This Advent season, may our lives be motivated by love of others for the love of God has been revealed to us.

⁶O. Henry, *Gift of the Magi* (Dover Publications, New York, 1992) Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 122 of 1812.

Prayer

Gracious God you heard the cry of your children from slavery and led them to freedom providing manna, water, and quail in the wilderness. You sent your Son in the fullness of time to fully reveal your nature and your love. Give us generous hearts and a gracious spirit so that we may reflect your love and your generosity. We pray these things in Jesus Name.

Amen.

Friday – December 11, 2015

I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

Amos 8: 10

This past September, people were shocked as photos of a drowned toddler fleeing from the conflict in Syria appeared in news reports all around the world. This haunting image tore hearts and put a face on the plight of 4.5 million Syrian refugees who are displaced outside of Syria due to the ongoing conflict in their country. It brought a focus to

what Dr. Mary Mikhael, one of Global Ministries partners in the Middle East has called the “tragedy of the century.” The estimated 10.5 million Syrians (6.5 million within Syria and 4 million outside the country) join millions of Palestinians, Afghani, Sudanese, Burmese, Somalis, etc... who have been forced to migrate out of fear of violence or persecution. Many Palestinian refugees have been displaced from their homes for nearly 70 years. And, let us not forget the hundreds of thousands of children from Central America who are waiting to have refugee status determined.

The prophet Amos’ ministry took place around 76 BCE when there seemed to be political and economic stability with the Northern Kingdom of Israel. However, one did not need to look far to see that peace and prosperity was not everyone’s reality. The gap between the rich and the poor was growing; the legal system was corrupt. Reading the signs of the times, Amos concludes that injustice leads to destruction and that unfaithfulness was tied to scarcity. Amos calls for repentance and preaches that repentance results in compassion for the most vulnerable.

In our passage today, Amos details Israel’s sins describing a lifestyle of the wealthy that supports the oppression of the poor. He speaks to the corruption in the law courts and the marketplace. Amos calls for the people to stop preying on one another and to show compassion.

In September, Church World Service called for pledges from the United States to resettle 100,000 Syrians by 2016. In the face of four million refugees this may seem like a small number, but it is a huge increase when we consider that to date the United States has only received 1,500 Syrian refugees. Today let us remember the call of Amos for compassion for the most vulnerable of society. As Christmas approaches let us remember that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled the threat of violence and persecution. Consider how you can be a voice for the displaced. Visit the Global Ministries website globalministries.org/meinitiative to learn more about the plight of the peoples of the Middle East, learn more

about our global partners in the area, and learn how you can respond to the call of Amos to stand in solidarity and show compassion for some of the most vulnerable of our world.

Prayer

Incarnate One, we know that you understand what it is like to be homeless and to have to flee from your homeland. We know that you understand what it is to live under the threat of terror. Help us, O God to know what we may do to care and to show your love in the world. Help us not to turn our eyes away from that which distresses us and help us not to become overwhelmed. Give us the courage to do what we can do even when it does not seem to be enough for we trust O Lord that you are sufficient for all. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Saturday – December 12, 2015

¹You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

³With joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation.

Isaiah 12: 1 - 3

On a shopping trip, our daughter Sarah answered to our granddaughter Chloe’s request for a toy by saying “not now but perhaps you can have it for Christmas.” Since that time Chloe has been developing a mental list of potential Christmas gifts. As the list has grown, Sarah has begun to suggest that some of Chloe’s requests may need to wait until her birthday that occurs several months after Christmas; Sarah has even suggested that Chloe will probably not receive everything that she is requesting.

Chloe’s response generally involves her communicating the importance of the item and a statement of her need for whatever she is requesting. At age three, it may take some time for her to grasp the concept of deferred gratification and the ability that Sarah is trying to teach her to differentiate between a want and a need.

All around, individuals struggle with these very same concepts. Christmas lists are written and wants are blurred with needs as the marketplace scorns deferred gratification and encourages us to demand what we want when we want it. Gratitude is short lived as the marketplace encourages us to consider what we do not have rather than give thanks for what we do have, and as the world encourages us to go for what we want even if it results in the needs of others growing.

The passage from Isaiah today focuses on thanksgiving. Written in a time of need, the prophet encourages the people to renew their trust in the LORD. While the passage does not specifically address thanks for the material gifts, it does identify expressions of thanksgiving, trust, and praise with God bestowing gifts of strength, song, and salvation. In the midst of crisis, the prophet’s words turn to individual and communal prayers of thanksgiving. For even in the midst of crisis, the prophet expects a future filled with the God’s presence and God’s blessing of justice.

Swedish diplomat and Second Secretary-General of the United Nations, Nobel Prize winner, and mystic, Dag Hammarskjöld stated, “For all that has been, Thank you. For all that is to come, Yes!” In his words, we are reminded to respond with gratitude for the blessings that we receive. And, in his words we are reminded that even if we must wait for the blessings we can trust that they will come and give thanks.

This holiday season, take some time to make a list of the blessings that you have received. And rather than making a list of what you want, practice saying “thanks” for what God holds for you.

Prayer

God, you have loved us from the time before time and seek the blessing of your people. May we learn to express thanks in all circumstances of our life. We pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Advent Three

³Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalms 80: 3

Sunday – December 13, 2015

¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize with water; but the one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in the hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Luke 3: 16 – 17

Standing in the baptismal of my home church, on my 18th birthday, the Senior Minister of the congregation asked me the following question: "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God and do you accept him as Lord and Savior?" I answered yes and felt the water wash over me as I was lowered into the baptismal waters. Almost twenty-three years later in my first seminary class, a course on feminist theology, I was asked to write a response to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" While my understanding had deepened, my theological reflection paper began with the understanding that Jesus is the Christ who I accept as Lord and Savior. Now, nearly twenty years later I have had the opportunity to discuss what it means to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior as well as to ask the question to both young and old before the waters of baptism washes over them. Take a few moments and consider when you responded to the question, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God and do you accept him as Lord and Savior?" What did

that mean to you at that time? What does that mean to you today?

Luke 3: 16 – 17 is part of a larger passage that begins with verse 7 and ends with verse 18 and that focuses on John the Baptist's preaching regarding the coming of the Messiah.

John's words are a confession of Jesus as Messiah, a call to justice and compassion, and a prophecy of judgment. It points us to a deeper understanding of Jesus' coming into the world and what that means for us and for the world as a whole as John describes the Messiah with a winnowing fork in hand. This ancient agricultural method is a way of separating grain from chaff and other pests. John's image would give rise to the wisdom teachings of Proverb where the king winnows out evil and wickedness (Proverbs 20: 8, 20: 26) and with that of the prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah).

Advent reminds us that God continues in the necessary work of winnowing. Where do you see God's work of winnowing today?

Prayer

God, I come to you today asking that you take my life and throw it to the winds of the Spirit so that the grain may be separated from the chaff. Give me wisdom to assist in the winnowing of good from evil in the world around me. May I begin with my own life so that I may demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in all that I do and say. In Jesus.

Amen.

Monday – December 14, 2015

¹²Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. ¹³Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Hebrews 13: 12 – 14

Lucia of Syracuse (283 – 304) was a young Christian martyr who was killed during the persecution of

Diocletian. Born to Roman nobles, Lucia (Lucy) dedicated herself to Christ and pledged her virginity to God. Following the death of her father, Lucy's mother Eutychia who was unaware of Lucy's plan to give her dowry to the poor arranged for Lucy's marriage to a rich man. When Lucy refused to marry him and gave the dowry away, he denounced her as a Christian to the governor of Syracuse. Legend tells us that Lucy was sentenced to be burned to death, but the wood would not light and Lucy was put to death on the sword. Iconography frequently pictures Lucy, whose name means light or lucid, holding a candle or wearing a crown of candles. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox churches honor Lucy on December 13.

The legend of Lucy and her martyrdom reminds us that the coming of Christ calls us to a life of discipleship that involves risk taking and cross bearing. It involves us trusting in God rather than trusting in the securities and certainties offered by the institutions that promise to cushion life.

Lucy was willing to give up the security of family and marriage, in order to help others. Today, consider what you might be called to give as you join Jesus in his mission.

Prayer

Jesus thank you for the blessings of life, give me the courage to follow you into the places of pain and unease as I pick up my cross and offer you my all. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Tuesday – December 15, 2015

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am send me!"

Isaiah 6: 8

Like Isaiah in our passage today, Francis of Assisi began his ministry with a theophany. Born in 1182 into the family of a prosperous merchant, Francis spent his youth partying with

other nobles. He dreamed of a life of chivalry and adventure and at age 20 joined the war between Assisi and Perugia.

In this war, Francis was wounded and taken prisoner. After spending a year in the dungeons, Francis was ransomed by his father. He returned home ill with malaria. Upon his recovery, he again pursued knighthood. On his way to Brienne to rejoin the war, Francis first heard the voice of God. Two years later, Francis again heard the voice of God at the Church of San Damiano. This time the voice was calling him to rebuild the church. Over time, Francis realized that God's call was not to be limited to the rebuilding of the physical structure at San Damiano. Instead, Francis was called to be a part of a larger rebuilding and renewal of the church. He came to see himself as called by God to live the teachings of the gospel in all things.

Francis of Assisi has a strong connection to medieval traditions of Christmas. Francis was the first to create a Nativity scene with animals watching over and a manger to hold the Christ child. He was instrumental in popularizing the use of carols (songs with spiritual or religious themes contemporary with their time) over hymns in worship. Francis wrote many of the carols himself. He has been identified as one of the first individuals to use music as a tool for evangelism. Subsequently,

the Franciscans are responsible for bringing carols to England in the late thirteenth century and for introducing a new era of music.

Francis heard the call of God and responded. He devoted his life to the renewal of the church, to preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Today, listen for the voice of God and look for opportunities to be a part of Christ's mission of renewal of the world around us.

Prayer

As Francis heard and responded to your voice, open my ears, O Lord, so that I may hear you. Create within me a humble and compassionate heart and a wise mind, so that I may understand what you would have me do. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 16, 2015

³¹"To what then will I compare the people in this generation, and what they are like? ³²They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance: we wailed, and you did not weep.' ³³For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; ³⁴the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you

say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'
³⁵Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Luke 7: 31 – 35

With all the conversation on the war on Christmas it may seem strange that for 22 years, Christmas was outlawed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Indeed historical records reveal the following ban.

For preventing disorders, arising in several places within this jurisdiction by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others: it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shilling as a fine to the county."

From the records of the General Court, Massachusetts Bay Colony May 11, 1659

Reasons behind the ban were numerous. The Puritan leadership believed: 1) Christmas celebrations were a reminder of European traditions that they sought to escape, 2) Christmas was not truly a religious holiday, 3) Christmas celebrations were associated with drinking, feasting and playing games that was not in keeping with the Christian character.

When Edmund Andros, an English-appointed governor, revoked the ban in 1681, many continue to refrain from observing the holiday, in part as a way of rejecting English authority.

What appears to be a passage that compares and contrasts the ministries of Jesus and John, in fact reveals to us the similarity of the crowd's response to both. Bringing their own expectations for John and Jesus, Jesus reveals how with both the crowd is more ready to criticize and find fault rather than to join in work for God's



justice and shalom.

Refusal to celebrate the announcement of the good news to the poor and the oppressed. Our challenge is to recognize the surprising work of God and not to be overtaken by our own expectations of what God can and cannot do.

How do we let our own expectations of God and how God works in the world prevent us from seeing what God is doing in our generation.

Prayer

God who is the source of all good things and blessings, help me to stay focused on the coming of Christ and what that has meant, does mean, and will mean for the world around me. May I live to praise you and to rejoice in the things that please you. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also testifies for us, for after saying, ¹⁶“This is the covenant I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” ¹⁷he also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” ¹⁸Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Hebrews 10: 15 – 18

Prior to responding to God’s call to ordained ministry, I was a counselor at a Community Mental Health Center. In that capacity, many of the individuals who I spoke with had entered therapy because of difficulty in coping with change. For some, the difficulty arose in not having developed adequate coping mechanisms. For others, the difficulty was rooted in too much change occurring in too short a period of time resulting in their being unable to recover from one thing before having to deal with something else. Whatever brought them into therapy, one thing all shared in common was the reality that change is inevitable and, in many instances, not only inevitable but

necessary and valuable. Motivational speaker Denis Waitley states, “You must welcome change as the rule but not as your ruler.”

Today’s passage that draws on the prophet Jeremiah also speaks of the inevitability of change. Indeed, it seems to suggest that for religion to be vital, individuals and communities must be able to be self-reflective so that they can move beyond former things and follow God into the new thing that is happening.

Change is necessary for growth. And yet when many are confronted with change they feel uneasy and uncomfortable. They focus on what is familiar and comfortable feeling overwhelmed with the unknown. Three hundred and sixty-times in scripture we are told to “fear not.” The announcement of the birth of Jesus begins with angels proclaiming to Mary and then to the shepherds that they are to “fear not.” Here in Hebrews we hear that we need not fear for the covenant with our God is now in our hearts and that the forgiveness of God opens the door for the new thing.

Each day is a new beginning, a new opportunity to start over. Today take some time to consider what new thing God is calling you toward. Consider what it means to live fearing not.

Prayer

God help me to be open to change and to new possibilities. Write your covenant on my heart and guide my life by its precepts. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Friday – December 18, 2015

¹³The LORD goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.

Isaiah 42: 13

One of the earliest Christmas songs is the Latin hymn (a devotional hymn), *Veni Redemptore Gentium* (Redeemer of the Nations) written by Ambrose of Milan in the late fourth century. Sung by the clergy and

most likely incomprehensible to most ordinary worshippers, the song praises the birth of Jesus and speaks of the promise of salvation. Like many of early Christmas songs, the hymn focuses not so much on the coming of the child but the theological understanding of what it means for the child to come. In the medieval church this theological emphasis of the lyrics resulted in hymns being used as teaching tools for the medieval church.

Isaiah 42 includes a hymn that expresses the activity of God in the end times. Here in verse 13, warrior imagery is used to identify the work of God in human history. God the divine warrior is shown to come to save God’s people and to lead them into a new future. In this future the foes of God’s people will be eliminated and all that prevents God from being known and acknowledged in all the earth will be eliminated.

Advent calls us to sing the new song of the new day when evil is finally defeated and there is a cessation of hostility against God. Advent calls us to join with Jesus in waging the battles against evil and injustice in our world today. We prepare for these battles by clothing ourselves with the helmet of salvation, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the gospel of peace.

Prayer

God we claim the victory that has already been won through the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Empower and arm us with the Sword of the Spirit that is your word so that evil may be defeated and wholeness and peace may be established to the ends of the earth. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Saturday – December 19, 2015

⁹Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says you God.

Isaiah 66: 9

In Mexico and parts of the Southwest United States this is the time of Las Posadas. Beginning on December 16 and going through December 24, the celebration of Las Posadas consists of a procession led by Joseph, Mary seated on a donkey, and an angel going from house to house seeking shelter. As the people go from house to house, songs are sung and food is offered by the homeowners. Las Posadas is time to open doors and provide shelter to the coming Messiah. It is observed with joy and by doing good works as the people celebrate that the Messiah will come again.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God is about new birth and new beginnings.

How do we give shelter to Jesus the Christ?

Prayer

Divine and eternal Word, who descended from the Father into the heart of Mary, your love for humankind lead you to Bethlehem where you were born in a poor and humble stable.

In truth, thousands of angels accompany you on this journey, and yet we, whom you come to save and lead to that Bethlehem of eternal joy, stubbornly turn away from you.

Forgive us, God and Lord of the universe, and help us to walk alongside Mary and Joseph, thus giving us the courage to fight against and triumph over every adversity.⁷

Amen.

⁷Celestina Castro, Posadas Prayer in Thomas J. O’Gorman, An Advent Sourcebook (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publication, 1988), 98.

Advent Four

²Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore. ³From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.

⁴The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.

Psalm 113: 2 – 4

Sunday – December 20, 2015

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Luke 1: 45

The Gospel of Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel visited Mary announcing that she was to be the mother of Jesus. In Greek, and in the Orthodox Church, this has resulted in Mary having the special title of *Theotokos*, meaning God-bearer or Birth-Giver of God. In the early church this title became dogma as the Council of Ephesus in 431 decreed that Mary is *Theotokos* because Jesus is both human and divine.

In our passage today, Luke speaks to what happens because of this birth. Luke 1: 45 is part of the *Magnificat* one of the three canticles (songs) that are included in Luke’s gospel. The *Magnificat*, is a song of praise and reversals.

One of my favorite contemporary Christmas songs is *Mary Did You Know*. Written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Green, this song speaks to the reversals that occur and the impact of Christ’s birth by asking Mary a series of questions.

*Mary did you know that your baby boy
Will one day walk on water?
Will save our sons and daughters?
Has come to make you new?
Will give sight to a blind man?
Will calm a storm with his hand?
Has walked where angels trod?
Is Lord of all creation?
Will one day rule the nations?*

In the song, the *Theotokos* is asked to look at her sleeping child and consider what his presence means.

Today, each of us is called to be *Theotokos* for we bear Christ into the world today. Each of us is called to believe that God will fulfill God’s promises to us and through us. We are called to be God-bearers as we work to bring about the reversals and the justice that is portrayed in Mary’s song. We are called to consider the same questions that Lowry and Green pose to Mary and to consider how our life choices reflect our answers.

With Christmas drawing close take some time to consider how your individual and family traditions

and rituals reflect this reality of the Incarnation. How are you blessed because God has spoken to you? What promises has God fulfilled in your life? What promises are waiting for fulfillment?

Prayer

Today, O God, may I live the reality of Christ’s coming in how I reach out to others and how I demonstrate God’s love in the world. Help me to give birth to the promises of God as I seek to serve others and as I work for justice in God’s world.

Amen.

Monday – December 21, 2015

⁵Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, ⁶who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? ⁷He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, ⁸to make them sit with princes, with princes of his people, ⁹He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!

Psalm 113: 5 – 9

For the last twelve years, on December the 21st I have led a Longest Night Service in the congregations that I have served. Scheduled on the day of the year that has the most nighttime hours, and sometimes called a Blue Christmas Service, this time of worship acknowledges that for many the holidays are a painful time of year. Surrounded by sounds of celebration and refrains of “Joy to the World” many ache and are heartbroken as they experience the first Christmas without a beloved family member, the anguish of broken relationships, the weariness of ill health, the despair of addictions, and/or the pain of isolation. Longest Night Services are a way of recognizing the pain of many and providing a space to acknowledge, our concerns and our fears, this service is centered in the hope that Christ lightens our burdens and helps us carry our pain. This service provides space to remember that we are not alone. Emmanuel comes even on the long, dark night of the soul.

Our passage from Psalms carries

a similar message. A song of praise, Psalm 113 celebrates God's power manifested in gracious, compassionate care for the poor. It speaks of God's sovereignty and the revelation of God as seen in his care of the weak and the lowly. Psalm 113 reminds us that God enters into our places of pain and brings relief for our suffering.

John of the Cross, a medieval mystic, wrote, "In the dark night of the soul, bright flows the river of God." In this Advent season, may we remember that Jesus is living water that comes to us today.

Today take some time to reread this passage. Light a candle and invite God into your places of pain and emptiness. Light a second candle and pray for those individuals who you know are mourning, who are lost and lonely, and who are feeling weighed down by the burdens of their lives. Finally, light a candle and pray for the many refugees who are far from home.

Prayer

Creating God, we acknowledge that our present world is incongruent with how you would want things to be and that your vision for wholeness and justice seem far away. And yet O God, we can come to you in the midst of these incongruences and pain knowing that you will not abandon us. Through your Son we experience you entering into the places of pain bringing hope. Help us, O God to live in that hope. Help us, O God to be agents of hope for others In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Tuesday – December 22, 2015

"My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to

generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to his ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1: 47 – 55

As the world prepares for Christmas, we are bombarded with messages of accumulation. We are conditioned to believe that we are failures if we can't make everyone happy with the perfect present or the perfect party. As the world prepares for Christmas, our mail boxes fill with annual holiday letters that speak of the successes and triumphs of those who have mailed them to us. Each letter presents the perfect family in which every member has succeeded and every moment has been a filled with celebration. Little is said of the mundane or the ordinary, and even less is said about trial and failure.

In the gospel of Luke, we find quite a different narrative. In our passage today, we hear the words of the *Magnificat*, the song that Mary sings in response to the announcement that she is going to have a child. In this song we are reminded that Mary, the God-bearer, is numbered among the lowly. She is one who is has not quite made it in the society of her time. And in her song, we are reminded that because God enters the world the lowly will be raised as the powerful lose their power. The hungry will be filled as the proud are scattered. The *Magnificat* is a wonderful reminder that God acts through and on the behalf of those who are often forgotten and overlooked.

While culture tells us Christmas is about accumulation and successful and triumphant lives, the *Magnificat* reminds us that Christmas is about God's bringing good things to the lowly. It is about the good things of God coming to those who are often overlooked and forgotten. Oscar Romero, Salvadoran Archbishop and

martyr, stated: "No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need of God - for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God."⁸

Take some time today to consider, what it means to you to have poverty of spirit? And where you need God to come on your behalf?

⁸ Oscar Romero, December 24 Homily from *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero* (Chicago, IL: Harper and Rowe, 1988).

Prayer

Gracious God, create in me a humble heart and a lowly spirit. Guide me in the paths of righteousness and help me to cling to your ways. In Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 23, 2015

¹In 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. Peoples shall stream to it,² and many nations shall come and say; "Come, let us go up to the mountains of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.³ He shall judge between the peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more;⁴ but they shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

Micah 4: 1 – 4

In 1971, the Coca-Cola Company introduced one of its most successful advertising campaigns as a television ad featured young people singing:

*I'd like to build the world a home
And furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees
And snow white turtle doves
I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to hold it in my arms
And keep it company
I'd like to see the world for once
All standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills
For peace through out the land*

Songwriters: B. Backer, B. Davis
R. Cook and R. Greenway

While the imagery has been reworked several times, the song has appeared over and over again in Coke's advertisement campaigns for forty years. In 2007, this campaign was named as one of the most beloved and influential advertisements in the history of the company. One of the reasons for the success was this song tapped into a universal longing for peace and unity, for abundance and harmony.

Throughout the Christmas season, the promises of Coke's successful marketing campaign are reworked and represented to encourage us to spend more and more. We are told that the right car will assure the safety, well-being and delight of our loved ones. We are told that the right toy will assure success and popularity of our children. We are told that our love lives depend on jewelry purchases where a kiss begins with K.

Today's scripture presents us with a very similar vision of peace and harmony as the song *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*. However rather than relating these promises to something we can find in the marketplace, the Psalmist identifies God as the source of this peaceable kingdom.

In the psalm we are reminded that the day is coming when God's kingdom will be established. With the establishment of this kingdom, nations will live in harmony for God will be the arbitrator. With this kingdom, all will have sufficient means to meet their needs for all will be satisfied with God's provision of daily bread. With this kingdom, humanity's deepest

yearnings will be for the righteousness and justice of God as the covenant of God comes to be inscribed on our hearts. We see this kingdom as Habitat for Humanity houses are built around us. We see this kingdom when individuals and communities seek to resolve conflict through peaceful means and nonviolence. We see this kingdom when blacks and whites all acknowledge Black Lives Matter.

Today, pay attention to what promises the marketplace is offering you during this Christmas season. Take some time to ask yourself where you find your security and where do you turn for your hope. Consider how you sing *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing* with your life.

Prayer

God, we are drawn to the promises of the peaceable kingdom. Help us to be able to distinguish between true peace and well-being and the illusions and mirages that try to draw us in. May we be architects of houses of wholeness and agents of love in the world. We pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday – December 24, 2015

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own

people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1: 1-14

According to the popular Christmas song *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*, we can tell that Christmas is drawing near when candy canes appear in the store and children begin to daydream about the newest toys that they will soon receive. And, if we only tune into what culture is telling us today, it is easy for us to make similar assumptions. Stores will gear advertisements for those last moment shoppers and many clerks and stockers will work late into the night preparing for the post Christmas returns.

When we turn our attention to the scripture of the day we are pointed toward different signs. The Prologue of the Gospel of John is reminiscent of early Christian hymns. It's words resonate with the creation story and point us to the cosmic presence of God that draws near through the Incarnation.

Instead of seeing signs of Christmas in candy, toys, and decorations, the evangelist points to God's love as a sign of Jesus's coming. He points to the cosmic pre-existence of the Word and the Word becoming flesh so that we may see the glory of God all around us.

Now the evangelist also points out that it is easy for the world to miss this reality – to miss the meaning of Jesus' coming. The Advent season calls us to pay attention to Christ's coming, in history, in our lives today, and in the future. It reminds us that it begins to look like Christmas when the world sees the glory God has revealed through the mission of Jesus Christ.

It is beginning to look like Christmas as Christmas baskets are given to the hungry. It is beginning to look like Christmas when we invite the homeless in from the cold. It is

beginning to look a lot like Christmas when others needs begin to take precedence over our wants. It is beginning to look a like Christmas when _____.

Today is Christmas Eve and for most of us the decorations of Christmas are hung and gifts are wrapped and waiting beneath the tree for those we love. And so what is left is to consider how we fill in the blank to assure that it continues to look like Christmas. What are the actions we need to take to live the reality of the glory of God revealed in the Son?

Prayer

Incarnate One, as we prepare to celebrate with family and friends help us to remember that your coming is not merely a historical event. Gift us with faith and hope and love, so that today and all days we may point to Christ's coming in all that we do and all that we say. May we walk in the light reflecting the glory of God.

Amen.

Friday – December 25, 2015

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the

glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"*

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2: 1 – 20

Mark and I were the first of our siblings to have children. Two children and a few years later, we were quite

excited when Mark's sister let us know that we were to be an aunt and uncle. As the "experienced" parent, I remember trying to stifle back the laughter when my sister-in-law and brother-in-law casually announced that the birth of their first born was not going to make a difference in their leisure time activities. My amusement came from the fact that Debbie's and Rory's leisure time including skiing, boating and enjoying outings in the Arizona deserts four-wheeling. In fact they had just recently bought a new boat and one vacation had included Debbie biking through Ireland. I was convinced that their child would also learn to love those things. But I was equally convinced that the birth of their child would cut into time on the slopes and the water. I was convinced that new priorities and a new ordering of their time would take place. Many years, and two nephews later, my assumptions have been proven accurate.

To quote the words of one of my favorite Christmas songs, "A baby makes a difference." Advent is the season that points us to the reality of just what a difference the birth of Jesus makes in our individual lives, in the world, and in our hope for the future. It reminds us that the appropriate response to his coming is the reordering of our time and our priorities. The needs of others and the well-being of the community taking precedence over individual preferences and desires.

Today we celebrate and remember



the entering into history of this one for whom we have waited and continue to wait. We do this with the narrative from Luke that reminds us that Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem by engaging in the business of life while the shepherds arrive by divine intervention. We do this with the story of scandal and insinuation about an unwed pregnant woman and a group of social outcasts who hear the news of God's promise of reversal and transformation.

Jean Danielou⁹ theologian and Jesuit French cardinal who died in 1974 writes, "We always live during Advent. We are always waiting for the Messiah to come. The Messiah has come, but is not yet fully manifest. The messiah is not fully manifest in

each of our souls, not fully manifest in humankind as a whole: that is to say, that just as Christ was born according to the flesh in Bethlehem of Judah, so must he be born according to the spirit in each of our souls."

As we celebrate the Christmas story, may we remember a baby makes a difference. May we remember that this baby is the Alpha and the Omega, who brings the beginning and the end of the fulfillment of God's promises and God's kingdom. May we live so that it may be so.

⁹ Jean Danielou, *The Advent of Salvation in An Advent Sourcebook*. Thomas J. O'Gorman (Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988) 159.

Prayer

God of scandal and promise, today we rejoice for Emmanuel has come. We thank you God that you come to us in moments of ordinary life and in moments of divine intervention. We thank you that you enter scandal and bring hope. Open our hearts so that we may receive you. May we grow and mature as the Christ child grew and mature so that we may live in fuller communion with you, your children, and your world. May our lives give glory to you in all we do and all we say.

Amen.





Min. Sheila Spencer

Director of Christian Education and Faith Formation
Assistant to the President of Disciples Home Missions

Telephone: (317) 713-2634

E-mail: sspencer@dhm.disciples.org

Wilma Shuffitt

Ministry Associate

Telephone: (317) 713-2639

E-mail: wshuffitt@dhm.disciples.org



www.discipleshomemissions.org