

*Advent Resource
2018*

Hope

Faith

Joy

Peace

Introduction

The word *Advent* is derived from the Latin *adventus*, which means “arrival” or “coming.” *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, states the following: “The season proclaims the coming of the Christ—whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and Spirit, and whose return in final victory we anticipate.” That’s a whole lot more than a countdown to Christmas! Allow me to be honest in saying that the whole concept of Advent is pretty new to me. Growing up, it was not something we practiced in my congregation. I thank God for placing faithful men and women in my life to open my understanding of what it means to celebrate the birth of Jesus, while at the same time waiting and longing for His return.

As we journey through the Advent season together, I pray that the Word of God will, once again, accomplish what God desires, and achieve the purpose for which it was sent. I encourage you to read over and reflect upon the lectionary readings each day, and then read the devotional. If there are additional readings, or different translations used, they have been included for reference. Sometimes, the meditations will expound on readings. Other days, the writer lets the readings speak for themselves. And sometimes, there is simply a prayer or a personal reflection.

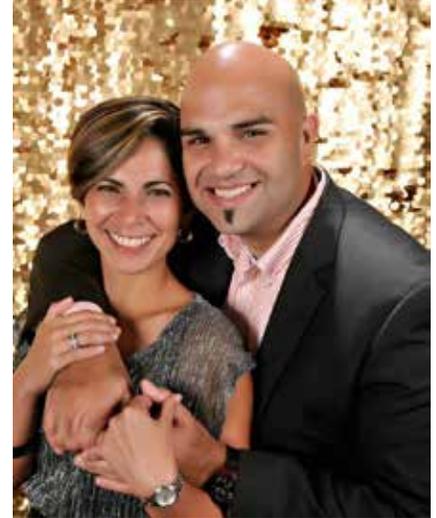
I invite you to begin each day with a prayer asking that God surprise you anew. End your time in prayer, thanking God for his Word and asking God to continue to speak to you through it. During this time of celebration, remembering, and hoping, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).



About the Author

Milca Rivera is a wife and mother of two, and proud Disciples Woman of #laObraNOW. She and her husband, Héctor Iván Santiago, are currently pastoring together as interim ministers at Iglesia Cristiana de Deltona in Florida. Both are also pursuing their Master of Divinity degrees at Asbury Seminary, Florida Dunnam Campus.

A former Spanish and French language teacher in public schools, teaching is her passion. She loves participating in and leading Bible studies, discipleship classes, Sunday school and VBS. God has blessed her with the opportunity to participate in different areas of church and ministry. She sees her current role of pastor as an adventure with lots of learning, and she is excited to see what God has in store next! Outside of ministry, her favorite thing to do is spend time with family, hanging out with her husband (Iván), two sons (Elías and Isaac), and their dog (Kai -'perro').



Milca Rivera and Héctor Iván Santiago

Daily Advent Readings 2018

Year (NRSV Bible)

First Sunday of Advent (December 2)

Sunday Dec. 2	Monday Dec. 3	Tuesday Dec. 4	Wednesday Dec. 5	Thursday Dec. 6	Friday Dec. 7	Saturday Dec. 8
Jeremiah 33:14-16	Psalms 90	Psalms 90	Psalms 90	Luke 1:68-79	Luke 1:68-79	Luke 1:68-79
Psalms 25:1-10	Numbers 17:1-11	2 Samuel 7:18-29	Isaiah 1:24-31	Malachi 3:5-12	Malachi 3:13-18	Malachi 4:1-6
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13	2 Peter 3:1-18	Revelation 22:12-16	Luke 11:29-32	Philippians 1:12-18a	Philippians 1:18b-26	Luke 9:1-6
Luke 21:25-36						

Second Sunday of Advent (December 9)

Sunday Dec. 9	Monday Dec. 10	Tuesday Dec. 11	Wednesday Dec. 12	Thursday Dec. 13	Friday Dec. 14	Saturday Dec. 15
Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4	Psalms 126	Psalms 126	Psalms 126	Isaiah 12:2-6	Isaiah 12:2-6	Isaiah 12:2-6
Luke 1:68-79	Isaiah 40:1-11	Isaiah 19:18-25	Isaiah 35:3-7	Amos 6:1-8	Amos 8:4-12	Amos 9:8-15
Philippians 1:3-11	Romans 8:22-25	2 Peter 1:2-15	Luke 7:18-30	2 Corinthians 8:1-15	2 Corinthians 9:1-15	Luke 1:57-66
Luke 3:1-6						

Third Sunday of Advent (December 16)

Sunday Dec. 16	Monday Dec. 17	Tuesday Dec. 18	Wednesday Dec. 19	Thursday Dec. 20	Friday Dec. 21	Saturday Dec. 22
Zephaniah 3:14-20	Isaiah 11:1-9	Isaiah 11:1-9	Isaiah 11:1-9	Psalms 80:1-7	Psalms 80:1-7	Psalms 80:1-7
Isaiah 12:2-6	Numbers 16:1-19	Numbers 16:20-35	Micah 4:8-13	Jeremiah 31:31-34	Isaiah 42:10-18	Isaiah 66:7-11
Philippians 4:4-7	Hebrews 13:7-17	Acts 28:23-31	Luke 7:31-35	Hebrews 10:10-18	Hebrews 10:32-39	Luke 13:31-35
Luke 3:7-18						

Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 23)

Sunday Dec. 23	Monday Christmas Eve	Tuesday Christmas
Micah 5:2-5a	Isaiah 9:2-7	Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 1:46b- 55 or Psalms 80:1-7	Psalms 96	Psalms 96
Hebrews 10:5-10	Titus 2:11-14	Titus 2:11-14
Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)	Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)	Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)



Daily Meditations

Sunday - December 2, 2018

Be Ready!

During the Christmas season in Puerto Rico, and many other Latin American countries, people love to celebrate "parrandas," a Latin version of Christmas caroling. Friends and families get together and go from house to house with their guitars, bongos, tambourines, güiros, and maracas, singing songs about the season and the birth of Jesus. The group grows bigger as the night progresses, since the people who received a 'parranda' now join the musical entourage.

Many times, the group will wrap up festivities in the early hours of the following morning with a "sopón," a chicken soup that someone's mom has deliciously prepared.

One interesting part of the entire season is what people do to prepare, just in case they receive a 'parranda'. At the beginning of December, people stock their pantries and refrigerators with chips and dip, sodas and ice, 'Chocolate Cortés' to make hot chocolate, crackers, cheese and guava. They want to make sure and be ready. They do not want to be "that" person, the one who only has bread and water to give their guests.

One year, my husband and I found out that a group would be coming to our house. We received a call from a close friend that said: "Guys, they're going to be there in about 20

minutes." We were NOT ready. We had like half a bag of Oreos and some milk. And we weren't sure we wanted to have a bunch of people in our living room. So, what did we decide to do? We left the house. We went to the store to not buy anything, just to wait it out until they realized we were not home and left. We thought we were slick, but the reality was... we missed out! We missed out on something wonderful and fun and unique to our culture, and on an opportunity to spend time with friends and church family... all because we did not prepare.

As I think about the Advent season and read the passage in Luke, I think about that day. Jesus was calling his disciples *to be alert at all times, to BE READY*. No one knows the time or day of his return, but we know that we *will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.'* How are we preparing for that day? Will the day *catch us unexpectedly* because our *hearts are weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life?* Or, are we seeking God *to make us to know his ways and teach us his paths?*

Prayer

Lord, strengthen our hearts in holiness that we may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Amen



Monday - December 3, 2018

Patience

I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be a little impatient. Well... often I can be somewhat impatient. ... Alright! I am very impatient, A LOT! I feel like life (or is it just me?...) is moving at a high speed and some people just can't seem to keep up! I can't possibly be the only one, though...

Do you know people who get upset if there's a delay at the drive-thru because they are making fresh food? Have you ever heard someone honk the horn at the person in front because they took just a few too many seconds to go when the light turned green? Have you ever lightly (or not so lightly) banged your desk when the computer was just not loading

fast enough? Yup... I knew it. I am not alone!

... It's a good thing God is not like that. Peter reminds us that God is patient. If we have not yet witnessed the day of the Lord, it's not because He is *slow in keeping his promise*, but because *he is patient*. He is giving ample time and opportunity because He *doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*. Sometimes I wonder (as a lady in our Bible study mentioned): Is God waiting for me?! Peter goes on to explain: *You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*. That means that if God's people *make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him*, the day of the Lord can "hurry along." (NLT).

Our Lord's patience means salvation. Are we forgetting that *the day of the Lord will come like a thief*, and *what kind of people we ought to be*? Or, are we living lives of holiness, as we *look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*?

PRAYER

God of compassion, who is from everlasting to everlasting, teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom and satisfy us with your unfailing love. May we live holy and godly lives as we expectantly await the day of the Lord. May we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!

Amen

Tuesday - December 4, 2018

Prayer to a Trustworthy God

How great you are, Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you. From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Lord Almighty, we thank you because your covenant is trustworthy. Because of your great love for us, you made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions, and you raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realm in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages you might show the incomparable riches of your grace, expressed in your kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Just as your people Israel awaited expectantly for the Messiah, and were not disappointed, so we too eagerly await your coming soon! We long for the day when those who wash their robes will have the right to the tree of life and will go through the gates into the city. When the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, will give to each person according to what they have done.

In the meantime, as we trust and wait in You, Lord, satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us and establish the work of our hands. In the mighty name of Jesus, the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday - December 5, 2018

The Sign of Jonah

Luke 11:29-32 (The Message)

29-30 As the crowd swelled, he took a fresh tack: "The mood of this age is all wrong. Everybody's looking for proof, but you're looking for the wrong kind. All you're looking for is something to titillate your curiosity, satisfy your lust for miracles. But the only proof you're going to get is the Jonah-proof given to the Ninevites, which looks like no proof at all. What Jonah was to Nineveh, the Son of Man is to this age.

32,31 "On Judgment Day the Ninevites will stand up and give evidence that will condemn this generation, because when Jonah preached to them they changed their lives. A far greater preacher than Jonah is here, and you squabble about 'proofs.' On Judgment Day the Queen of Sheba will come forward and bring evidence that condemns this generation, because she traveled from a far corner of the earth to listen to wise Solomon. Wisdom far greater than Solomon's is right in front of you, and you quibble over 'evidence.'

Even the Ninevites, whose "wickedness" had "come up before" the Lord, when they heard the message Jonah was proclaiming, "believed God" and "turned from their evil ways." Nonetheless, when God himself came in the person of Jesus, there were those who still did not believe. For this reason, Jesus tells them that on Judgment Day they will be condemned. May we find ourselves counted among those who *did* believe and turned from their evil ways, and not among those who continue to squabble over 'proofs' and quibble over 'evidence.'

Prayer

Lord God, as we reflect on the birth, life, death, resurrection and second coming of Jesus, help us to hear your voice and believe. We repent of our sin and ask forgiveness for our rebellion and unbelief. Restore us by your righteousness. In the name of the Mighty One we pray.

Amen

Thursday - December 6, 2018

Savior Redeemer

Luke 1:68-79 (NRSV)

Just as he had spoken through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, God raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David. He looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to Abraham, that we might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

In Genesis, chapter 12, God says to Abram: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." In Luke, chapter 1, Zechariah is remembering the covenant that God swore to Abraham, that he would be a great nation and would be blessed. He blesses the Lord God of Israel for looking favorably on his people and redeeming them, and for rescuing them from the hands of their enemies. He recognizes that salvation will come to his

people by the forgiveness of their sins.

The most amazing part of this whole passage is that, although Zechariah is talking about the people of Israel, we know that it applies to us as well! The author of Ephesians tells us that we were once separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without home and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus those of us who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ... He has made the two groups one... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body reconcile both of them to God through the cross.

So, you see, the mighty savior that God raised up to redeem his people, was raised up for us as well, that we might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Prayer

God of Israel and God of the Gentiles, we thank you that by raising up a mighty savior, you showed the mercy promised and remembered your holy covenant. Thank you for the blood of Christ that brought us near when we were far away and for the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins. In the redeeming name of Jesus we pray.

Amen

Friday - December 7, 2018

Prophet of the Most High

LUKE 1:68-79 (NRSV)

John the Baptist was to be the prophet of the Most High. He would go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. He had a specific task to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.' He was a man sent from God who came as a witness to testify concerning the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (John 1:1-23)

Even before his birth, the purpose of John's ministry was clear. His parents knew it and his father blessed God for it. In adulthood, John was clear in what his role was. He was not the Messiah, but had been sent ahead of him. His relationship and trust in God was such that, even though he himself did not know the Messiah, the moment



he saw Jesus coming toward him he was able to declare: *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* John testified that although he did not know him, the one who sent him to baptize had already told him how he would recognize the Messiah. *"And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."*

Some time later, answering complaints from his disciples about Jesus baptizing, John once again affirms his role saying: *"The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."* (John 3:22-31)

How often we get caught up in wanting to be the light, in wanting to shine brightly to be seen and known by others. John's example should give us pause. Our concern should be to point others to Jesus; to proclaim Christ to all. And when Christ has been revealed to them, to become less so that he may become greater.

Prayer

God of grace and truth, Word made flesh who made his dwelling among us, help us to be a witness to the light. Help us to point others to your light, the true light that gives light to everyone, so that they may receive you and believe in your name, and receive the right to become children of God. In the name of the One from whom we have received grace upon grace, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Amen

Saturday - December 8, 2018

Share the Gospel

Just as John had a specific role and mission, we too, have a task to accomplish and a message to share. As a prophet of the Most High, he was to go before the Lord to prepare his ways, telling how the *dawn from on high would break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.* Jesus has already come, but our message and task in the 21st century is very similar to what it was in the 1st.

We are still in waiting... longing for the day when Jesus will restore all things; when *God's dwelling place will be among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away, and the One seated on the throne will say: "I am making everything new!"*

That is a message worth sharing! There are those around us who *sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*, who desperately need someone who will *guide their feet into the way of peace.* We know who that someone is! It is our mission to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus, news that brings wholeness to a fragmented world. Our task is to testify to the light that will give *knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins*, and hope in a future where there is *no more pain or death or mourning or crying*; where all things will be made new.

Prayer

Father, help us to live up to the expectations of the mission to which you have called us. Enable us to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus, so that others may come to know you as the light of all people. In Jesus' name and by the power of your Holy Spirit we pray.

Amen

Sunday - December 9, 2018

Be Pure and Blameless

Luke 1:68-79 (RSV)

Luke 3

Phillipians 1:3-11 (NLT)

God raised up a mighty savior, remembering his holy covenant, to save his people and rescue us from the hands of our enemies. He also raised up a prophet that would go before the Lord to prepare his ways. When the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John's message was one of repentance. Those who heard and received John's message were baptized *with water*, but those of us who have received the message of Jesus have been baptized *with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* Not only are we called to repentance, but we are called to sanctification, to live *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.* This may not seem like an easy task, but as Paul says, *God began the good*

work within us and will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

Prayer

God our Father, help us to grow in knowledge and insight, so that we may be able to understand what really matters, and so that we may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. Fill us with the fruit of righteousness produced through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.

Amen

Monday - December 10, 2018

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas

by *Sinceramente en Cristo*, Pastor Juan Rodriguez

It's ADVENT! Many would respond to this declaration with a resounding "so what?"

Well... let me try to open our hearts to an "Advent Mindset" that should be our everyday mindset as people of faith, as Disciples of Christ.

Chronologically, on our Christian Calendar, the Advent season follows Thanksgiving (a deeply meaningful civic holiday) and precedes Christmas. So, Advent is between Thanksgiving and Christmas... between gratitude and anticipation... between gratitude for what God has done and hope-filled excitement for what God will do. After all, the birth of Christ signals the beginning of what God intends to bring forth in the world through Jesus the



Christ, the Prince of Peace. In our faith journey, Advent doesn't end with Christmas. As people of faith we live with "faith-FILLED" expectation of what God will do next. *Psalm 126:6* "Those who go out weeping... shall come home with shouts of joy..." That's the Advent Mindset – expecting, trusting what God will bring forth.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, that's how we should live our entire lives as followers of the Christ. That doesn't mean we should live from one turkey dinner to another (OR from pernil to pernil [roast pork] if you're fortunate enough to celebrate your holidays within a Puerto Rican cultural context). We, as followers of Christ, should live with an attitude of gratitude for what God has done AND with hopeful anticipation for what God will do – in us and through us.

Advent... between Thanksgiving and Christmas... think about it. What God has done... what God will do... God will always do more than we can ask for or imagine...

Prayer

God of Love, Truth and Power, we are sincerely grateful for all that you have done, and are doing, so that we may have life in all its fullness. Help us to live as your grateful children, giving freely from what we have freely received. Help us to live as CHURCH, walking by faith, aware of what you have already done through Christ. We wait with excitement for all that you will reveal to us. Teach us, lead us to understand. We "know in part" so "we walk by faith". In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen

Tuesday - December 11, 2018

Grow in Faith

² *Peter 1:2-11 (NLT)*

² *May God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord.*

³ *By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who*

called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. ⁴ And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.

⁵ In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone.

⁸ The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹ But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins.

¹⁰ So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away. ¹¹ Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, thank you for giving us everything we need for living a godly life. Help us to respond appropriately to your promises and to grow in faith. We desire to be among those God has called and chosen, and to receive a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen

Wednesday - December 12, 2018

Expectations

The Psalmist sings of restoration; of bringing back the captives. He sings of mouths filled with laughter and tongues with songs of joy. The prophet Isaiah proclaims the joy of a new land where the desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. He urges the people to "Be strong, and not fear, because your God will come... to save you. When that happens, the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Though they knew the Scriptures, not everyone was able to connect the dots and see how Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophesy. Even John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Do you ever wonder why John asked that question? I mean, he himself baptized Jesus and "saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him" (John 1:32). He goes on to testify that, based on what God told him, "this is the Son of God." So, why the question in Luke? Similar to



others at the time, John did not readily 'connect the dots.' Surely the one *who is to come* would have identified himself as such by performing some striking works of judgement. I mean... John **did** preach about one who would baptize *with the Holy Spirit and with fire, winnowing fork in his hand.*

This expectation, however, was not shaping up quite like they imagined. In fact, when Jesus inaugurates his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4:18), he quotes Isaiah 61:1-2, going "only as far as the commission 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'; it is not yet time for him to complete the quotation, and announce 'the day of vengeance of our God.'" That's the part that wasn't clicking for them, including John. Jesus' response points them right back to

Isaiah. He says: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.

Does that ever happen to you? Does the reality of what God is doing not match with the expectations you had? Does that make God any less real or powerful?

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to perceive and understand what you are doing in our midst. Help us to connect the dots that point us back to you. In the name of your son, Jesus, we pray.

Amen

Thursday - December 13, 2018

God is my salvation

What does that mean exactly...? It means that God has the authority... not us. Christ is *the author and perfecter of our faith* (Heb. 12:2 NASB). Not us. Why do we insist on depending on ourselves?

Did you ever notice how little the people had to do during the Exodus? After exiting Egypt, when faced with a sea in front of them and an approaching army behind them, *they were terrified and cried out to the Lord*. Moses tells them to just stand and watch: *Stand firm and you will see... The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still* (Ex.14:14). Amazing right! God says: "I got this! Just watch."

In the first century, as the Jews were awaiting the promised Messiah who would arrive to free them from the oppressive Roman rulers, God was telling them: "I got this! Just watch." Today, as we look around at the ensuing chaos in the world around us, and wait with longing hearts the return of the King who will end all suffering and *make all things new*, God once again is telling us: "I got this! Just watch."

It is difficult for us to just stand and watch. We want to do something, say something, move something... but God is telling us to *trust... and not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation*. When we can do that, when we can trust and wait on God, then we can *give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the nations, proclaim that*

his name is exalted.

Can you do that today...?
Can you stand firm and be still?
God is telling you: "I got this!
Just watch."

Prayer

God of our salvation, help us to recognize that You are our strength and our might. Teach us to wait on you, to stand firm and be still, to watch what you will do. Then we will sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things. In Jesus' mighty name we pray.

Amen

Friday - December 14, 2018

The Gift Giver

by Sarah Serrano
CCC Coral Gables

I love to give, don't you? More than anything else during Christmas time, I love to see my loved ones' faces as they open a gift given with love. Their faces light up, they smile big, some oohs and aahs are heard around the room. Sometimes the gifts are practical, sometimes they are gag gifts, many are deeply personal, but all are given with love.

If you were to take a picture of my face as my loved ones are opening their gifts, my expressions would be of excitement and glee. Have you ever wondered what God's face looks like as you discover his gifts to you? Was God intently watching Joseph and Mary as they first beheld the newborn King? There was fear and apprehension on the faces of the shepherds as they encountered the host of angels



announcing the birth of Jesus, but once they found the manger and saw with their own eyes the greatest gift given to mankind, I imagine God's eyes, glued to the humble, dirty and tired shepherds who by then were grinning wildly as they realized that the long-awaited messiah was before them. I can imagine God's expression matching theirs. Then the wise men bring gifts, gifts fit for a king... God's eyes fill with pride as his crowning creation recognizes and honors the Lamb who would one day take away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

God is a gift giver, has been since the creation of the world. It is part of his character, of his very being. One of my favorite verses is found in Psalm 37: 4 "Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart."

How many times have we missed the delight of the Gift Giver because we are so caught up in the gift? Our own children, when they receive gifts, forget to thank us in the excitement of the moment; they forget to acknowledge or maybe don't even think about our joy, as gift givers. But many times they do, and oh how sweet it is: "Thanks mom, this is the best," and "Oh, I can't believe you

remembered how much I love this," they say with heartfelt gratitude. "I love you" is my very favorite!

Every day we experience the gifts of God: his everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), a Savior (Matthew 1:21), new mercies every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23), his joy that becomes our strength (Psalm 28:7), the gifts of his Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), hope (Romans 15:13), direct access to his presence (1 John 5:14-15), grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), and the list goes on and on.

Can you for a moment imagine the joy, the pure pleasure, the satisfaction on God's face, as we, his precious children, delight in the gifts he has given us?

This Christmas season, let's emulate the Gift Giver, let us also delight in giving to others, not just with the tangible, but with the very essence of who we are in Christ; extending love, compassion, mercy, and grace to everyone we come across. By becoming agents of peace and reconciliation, change makers, and way makers that will make a lasting difference in the



communities where we live. Let every recipient of the gifts we give see in us the same delight that the Father has in giving to us. May the Gift Giver, our Father in heaven, his greatest gift, our Savior Jesus, and gift giving Spirit, bless you this Christmas and always.

Saturday - December 15, 2018

Joy

Can you remember JOY as a child? Your first big vacation... someone special coming to visit... or Christmas morning before you knew that your parents were the ones who put all the presents under the tree. The happiness of anticipation and the delight of seeing your expectations fulfilled created a feeling of joy that was hard to describe.

Sometimes, I think kids understand joy better than adults. They may not be able to express it in words, but they show it in their whole being. Their eyes stay open long after bedtime, their bodies squirm out of bed before the sun comes up, their voices squeal in delight when they see that the surprise vacation is Disney, or that the present they've "always wanted" is under the tree. They jump and dance and shout and hug and play... for joy!

Isaiah calls us to *give thanks and sing to the Lord; shout aloud and sing for joy*. Why? Because *although [he was] angry with us, [his] anger has turned away and [he] has comforted us (Is.12:1)*. *God is our salvation, the Lord is our strength and our song, he has done glorious things. The Holy*

One of Israel is great among us. That is definitely cause for great joy!

And when you think about Jesus' coming again? What do you feel?... How do you express it? Do you get butterflies in your stomach... Does your body show your joy, even if you can't quite express it with your words? Are you anticipating his return with joyful expectation?

Prayer

God of our salvation, we praise you; you are our strength and our might. We give thanks for salvation through your son, as we joyfully anticipate his return. We want to shout aloud and sing for joy, we will make known your deeds and proclaim your name, so that all the world will know you have done glorious things.

Amen

Sunday - December 16, 2018

Good News

The crowds who heard John's message *were waiting expectantly* for the Messiah and, upon hearing his exhortations, they wanted to know what they needed to do in order to *bear fruits worthy of repentance*. John was not shy in answering their questions. His message of service and justice has the same undertones as Jesus' message in Mark 10, where he tells his disciples that *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (vv.43-44)*. It is also reminiscent of the commandment to *"love your neighbor as yourself."* John is

also sure to tell them that *every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

The prophets in today's readings call us to *sing aloud, shout, rejoice and exult with all our heart!*; to *sing praises to the Lord... shout aloud and sing for joy*; and Paul tells the Philippians to *rejoice in the Lord always*. There is joy and anticipation as we wait for the coming King. In addition, as John's message indicates, there is also preparation that has to take place. Simply saying that we believe that Jesus is the Messiah who came, and died, and rose again will not save us *from the wrath to come*, just as saying *"We have Abraham as our ancestor"* did not guarantee the salvation of the Jews. We must *prove by the way we live that we have repented of our sins and turned to God (v.8 NLT)*.

Ask yourself: How am I awaiting the return of Jesus? Am I *waiting expectantly*? How am I preparing? Does my life *bear fruits worthy of repentance*?

Prayer

God of Abraham, God of Israel and God of our lives, help us produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Show us what we must do, so that on that day when you clear the threshing floor we may be gathered into your granary. May your peace, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen

Monday - December 17, 2018

Looking Forward to Peace

What comes to mind when you think of the word *peace*? Quiet?... Tranquility?...No fighting?... Stillness?...

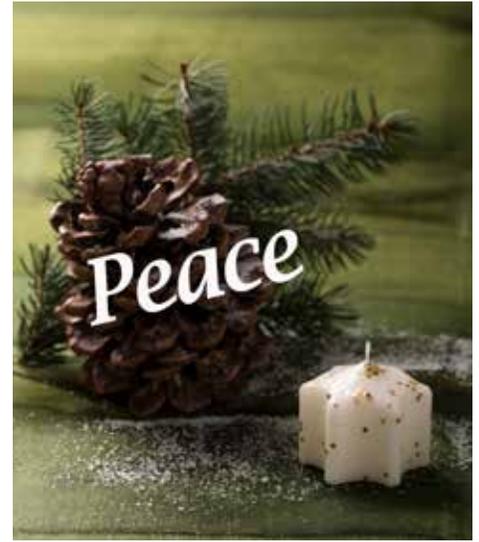
I recently read a book called *the Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbinger Institute. Part of what I gleaned from the reading was the importance of having a heart at peace. If we are able to achieve that, no matter what is going on around us, how loud it is or how much fighting there is, we can react in ways that invite others to change and also find peace.

The peace that Isaiah is talking about, however, seems to go way beyond that. He describes a kingdom that is unlike any we have witnessed. In this "Peaceful Kingdom" there is *wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord*. There is delight, righteousness, equity, and faithfulness. Things that you would not typically see together will dwell with each other and *lie down together*, because the whole *earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord*. What an amazing time to look forward to!

Prayer

God of Peace, we long for the day when we can dwell with you in your "peaceful kingdom." As we wait for that future time, help us to have hearts of peace here in the present. In the mighty name of your son Jesus, the Root of Jesse, we pray.

Amen



Tuesday - December 18, 2018

The More Things Change...

Numbers, chapter 16 is intense! If you didn't read it, here's the breakdown:

Korah, a Levite, gathers a bunch of other Levites to oppose Moses and Aaron.

Apparently, they thought what God had already given them wasn't quite enough they deserved the priesthood. They felt that all the Levites were holy and Moses and Aaron were overstepping their boundaries setting themselves up as leaders. (I think they had gotten a little too big for their britches since the consecration of the Levites in chapter 8, and they forgot what happened to Miriam and Aaron when they opposed Moses. see Ch.12) Even after all they had seen and heard, the rebels still did not believe it was God who had chosen Moses and Aaron.

Moses' reaction shows where his heart is. According to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, the fact that he fell facedown before his opposers "indicated not only his humble and earnest

desire that God would interpose to free him... but also his strong sense of the daring sin involved in this proceeding." A heated discussion ensues, and Moses leaves it up to God to show whom He will choose. Of course, we know who God chooses but, in the process... God is angry! He ends up punishing the three leaders who staged the rebellion, as well as the 250 who joined them.

Jump forward fourteen centuries or so... Paul is preaching in Rome. *Some were convinced by what he said, while others disbelieved.* Sound familiar...? Paul finished with a strong statement quoted from the prophet Isaiah that speaks directly to their behavior. *They are ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving. Their heart has become calloused, they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.* Even after all they have seen and heard about Jesus, they still do not believe that he was the long-awaited Messiah, sent by God.

As we read this, the question we should ask ourselves is: where do I stand? Am I part of "the more things change, the more they stay the same" group? Or do I understand what God is saying and perceive what God is showing me?

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, help us to see with our eyes, hear with our ears, understand with our hearts and turn for you to heal us. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen

Wednesday - December 19, 2018

The Proof of the Pudding

Luke 7:29-35 (NLT)

Funny how *all the people - even the tax collectors - agreed that God's way was right*, except the *Pharisees and experts in religious law, who rejected God's plan for them.* Even funnier is Jesus' comparison and description. He compares them to complaining children... Of John, who *didn't spend his time eating bread or drinking wine*, they said 'He's possessed by a demon.' Of Jesus, who *feasts and drinks*, they said 'He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!' There was no way to please them!

Jesus' concluding statement is this: *wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it.* In other words, as The Message translation says, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." A teaching is shown to be wise based on what it produces. The prophet Jeremiah puts it a different way...

Hananiah, another prophet, was preaching peace in a time when many prophets, including Jeremiah, had been preaching repentance because the judgment of God, and exile, was at hand. Upon hearing Hananiah's prophecy, Jeremiah responds with an *Amen!* *May the Lord do so!* And then he says that "the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord **only if his prediction comes true.**" They would have to wait and see which prophecy actually came true... If we continue to read Jeremiah, we find out that wisdom and God's

voice was in Jeremiah's words. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Does your life prove that God's way is right? Is your life showing that you follow wisdom? What flavor is the "pudding" of your life?

Prayer

God of wisdom and power, we know your way is right. As children of wisdom, help us prove her right with our lives. In the name of Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, we pray.

Amen

Thursday - December 20, 2018

A New Covenant Jeremiah

31:31-34 (NIV)

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the offering of your son, Jesus, who has perfected for all time those who are sanctified; for the Holy Spirit who bears witness to us of a new covenant; and for never again remembering our sins. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

Friday - December 21, 2018

No Turning Back

Hebrews 10:19-39 (NIV)

This past summer, my son was looking for a job. He applied everywhere without much luck. Finally, he got called for an interview at a new restaurant that was coming to our neighborhood. After the interview, he was told he had the job and the restaurant would be opening in November. He was so excited! They would have a new employee training in October, where everyone would get their uniforms and instructions. He started reading the manual and even did his food safety training online.



In September, he received a message that the training was pushed back a week. In October, there was another message: the opening date was pushed back to December and for anyone who was willing to hang on just a little longer, they would love to have them. At the end of October... another message... problems with the permits are pushing the opening date to February of next year. Is he really supposed to wait?...

There are times when we get tired of waiting. We get excited at the expectation of what's to come, and start making the necessary preparations but, when the waiting gets long... we forget that "good things come to those who wait."

The audience of the letter to the Hebrews must have been in just that type of situation. They have heard the gospel. They know that *in these last days God has spoken by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. They even endured a hard struggle of sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.* They had been willing to suffer mistreatment and *accepted the confiscation of property, because they knew that they had better and lasting possessions.* But, the wait is getting long...

The writer of the epistle reminds them several times to hang on, to not harden their hearts, to not turn away, to *hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... he who is coming will come and will not delay.* The writer urges them to *persevere,*

to not *throw away their confidence* because *it will be richly rewarded.*

Do you feel like you have been waiting too long? Waiting for something God promised...? Waiting too long for Jesus to come again...? Are you starting to lose hope? Hold on for *just a little while. We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.*

Prayer

God, you who are patient and kind, who are not slow in keeping your promise, as some understand slowness, help us to persevere. Do not let our hearts harden or turn away. Lord God Almighty, make your face shine on us that we may be saved.

Amen

Saturday - December 22, 2018

Jerusalem

Isn't it interesting how we have such varied images of Jerusalem... Throughout the Scriptures we see the highs and lows - when it was built... under siege... captured... destroyed... rebuilt... The emotions and reactions of the people mirror what was happening to the city - excitement and praise... fear... sadness... mourning... rejoicing.

In Luke 13, Jesus laments over Jerusalem, but not over the physical structures to be found there. Jesus knows his time is near and he is on the way to Jerusalem. There is deep sorrow as he reflects on the history and track record of the city. In his commentary,

Luke: an introduction and commentary, L. Morris states: "It was at Jerusalem, before the Sanhedrin, that trials of prophets took place. It was there that the nation's attitude to Jesus would take its final shape and that death would take place, accomplishing God's purpose for his Messiah."

During advent, our emotions and thoughts also have highs and lows. We remember with joy and celebrate the birth of Jesus. We reflect upon his life and how his death accomplished God's purpose. We rejoice in the knowledge that he rose on the third day, and we look forward with anticipation to the day when He will return. Before his death, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, but on the day when all things are made new, *there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city... and they will reign for ever and ever.*

Prayer

God Almighty, we look forward to the day when there will be no more sorrow or lament, when God himself will be with his people and be their God. We want to be counted among those who overcome. Help us to do so. In the name of he who is the Alpha and Omega, Jesus our Lord.

Amen

Sunday - December 23, 2018

Filled with the Spirit

Do you ever wonder what Elizabeth felt when Mary came to visit? Picture it... Mary goes to visit her older cousin. When she arrives, she opens the door and calls out: "Hey y'all! (Yes, in my imagination she speaks like a southerner ☺)... "Hey y'all! I'm here!" Even before seeing Mary, as the sound of her greeting reaches Elizabeth's ears, the baby leaps inside her. But, babies in bellies move, right? What was different about that leap? ... The child in her *womb leaped for joy!* Though John wasn't born yet, he had a spiritual awareness and could respond to the Spirit of God. God's Spirit bore witness to John's spirit. (*Rom. 8:16*)

There was much more going on inside Elizabeth, though. Luke says: "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." Not only does the baby react, but Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. In his commentary of Luke, I.H. Marshall says that in that moment, "she receives prophetic inspiration from the Holy Spirit... and is thus 'able to know the past and see what is hidden without anyone telling her.' Before Mary tells her anything about what happened, Elizabeth knows that the Lord spoke to Mary, and that Mary believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her. This news was not revealed to her by flesh and blood, but by the Holy Spirit who now filled her.

At the beginning of Luke 1, Elizabeth's husband Zechariah,

had requested more tangible proof to be sure that what the angel was telling him about the birth of a son would actually come to pass. This request brought about his muteness. Elizabeth, on the other hand, when the child leaps in her womb and she is filled with the Holy Spirit, she quickly *exclaimed with a loud cry* the blessedness of Mary and the fruit of her womb. The contrast is striking...

What is our reaction today? Do we continue to ask for signs and proof that what God has promised will actually come to pass? Or do we ask the Holy Spirit to fill us so that we can exclaim with a loud cry, leap for joy, and bless the Lord?

Prayer

God of grace, as we near Christmas Day and reflect on the One who appeared, bringing salvation to all, looking forward to seeing the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory (Mk 13:26), enlighten the eyes of our hearts and fill us with your Spirit. May our hearts respond by leaping for joy and blessing the Lord.

Amen

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