

# Joy of Every Longing Heart



The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Advent 2010

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ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
2010

- Sunday, November 28 ..... First Sunday of Advent
- Tuesday, November 30 ..... Assembling “care packages” for  
college students, Mary  
Anderson’s home, 9:30 am
- Wednesday, December 1 ..... Vespers Service, 6:30-7:00 pm
- Friday, December 3-  
Saturday, December 4 ..... Advent Retreat at Meadowkirk
- Sunday, December 5 ..... Second Sunday of Advent  
(Communion)
- Tuesday, December 7 ..... Women’s Circle 2, 1:30-3:30 pm  
Marilyn Seiber’s home
- Wednesday, December 8 ..... Vespers Service, 6:30-7:00 pm
- Saturday, December 11 ..... Christmas pageant rehearsal
- Sunday, December 12 ..... Third Sunday of Advent
- Tuesday, December 14 ..... Joint Boards Meeting, 7:00 pm
- Wednesday, December 16 ..... Vespers Service, 6:30-7:00 pm
- Saturday, December 18 ..... Christmas pageant rehearsal
- Sunday, December 19 ..... Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Children/Choir Christmas  
Program, 11:00 am service
- Wednesday, December 23 ..... Vespers Service, 6:30-7:00 pm
- Friday, December 24 ..... Christmas Eve Services - 5:30 pm  
and 8:00 pm (Communion)

## Spirit amidst the Sales

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14.

Sunday, Nov. 28

Friends, once again we have come to the new year; this is the first Sunday of our liturgical New Year. A fresh start. That is why our 4 lectionary passages are about miraculous events: the beginning of the reign of peace in Zion, the end of wars, the “beating of swords into plowshares,” the turning of stealth bombers into hospitals, the sudden arrival of the Son of Man. Or as Paul says, “Prepare, for salvation is nearer than you expect.” Isaiah urges us, “Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”

Notes from the end of 2010: gratefully, no devastating pandemic (H1N1), no economic depression yet, no new wars, no terrorist attacks in our cities, God protect us. And December is coming which is our most spiritual, musical and celebratory time of year. I look forward to it as a time to enjoy family, friends, our church community and to remember all that God has given.

Yet interrupting this list of gratitude, just in time for the shopping season, in golden letters is news of “**The Super Power Sale!**” Really? Super Power? How do I hold onto the Spirit in this onslaught of marketing? Sadly, once I buy into these bargains and lists of what I and others lack, I’m pushed towards December 25 in a great rush, then it passes quickly and leaves behind only bills and bags of crushed wrapping paper.

Do expensive presents prove how much we love someone? I think that is at the heart of this ad-induced, buying frenzy. Do great gifts prove great love? They certainly create a childish delight and momentary abundance. Yet I wonder whether there’s more to celebrate by holding onto a list of gratitude than reaching out for a pile of new things.

One of the main influences on how we celebrate Christmas is a “ghostly little book” that Charles Dickens wrote in 1843. In the 1840’s cheap alcohol was a huge problem, and Christmas was an excuse for many men to skip work and get royally drunk. Then Dickens wrote The Christmas Carol, which emphasized an old British custom. Back then landlords, shopkeepers and aristocrats would give presents and holiday food to their tenant farmers, lowest paid employees and servants. The gifts were unexpected and there was no thought of a gift exchange. The well-off were showing their gratitude to those who worked for them.

So the prosperous gave heart-felt gifts to let the least prosperous know that they were appreciated, valued, remembered. It was not a multi-billion dollar crossfire of expensive gifts prompted by a multi-million ad campaign urging everyone to buy extravagantly. I find this earlier, one-way giving is much closer to the Spirit of Christmas. I feel that in this Spirit, God gave us the Christ child as a heart-felt gift, a great light to a dark, war-guilty world. We should take it to heart and walk gratefully into the light of God.

**Prayer:** LORD, how wondrous are your gifts. What more do we need to receive? Your grace dissolves our sins just as light dispels the darkest night.

Tom Dunlap

## The Wedding Blues

Matthew 25: 1-13

November 29, 2010

*“So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour.”*

As Mom related it to me many years later, she was mortified. She was only 19 years old and had known my father for only six weeks when she agreed to marry him. They had eloped by train to Cumberland, Maryland, but my mother was so homesick that they returned immediately to her hometown of Webster, Pennsylvania, where my father was principal of the junior high school. They were together on their first night when the crashing of pots and pans outside signaled the local custom of the shivaree. All the men and boys of the town made a great and building hubbub. There was no hope that they would stop the racket unless the newly married couple came out. Mom and Dad dressed enough to be presentable, were ushered outside the house and climbed into the wagon, from whence they were escorted with appropriate crashing of pans through the streets of Webster. The embarrassment was still painful to Mom sixty years after the event.

That’s the story that came to mind as I read Matthew’s account of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. You can’t avoid or ignore customs and rules when you get married. It is simply part of the reality of the event. In Palestine of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, there was apparently a custom in which the bridesmaids accompany the groom to the site of the marriage feast. The timing of the feast and, therefore, the execution of the bridesmaids’ responsibilities are entirely at the discretion of the groom. As a bridesmaid you cannot predict when he will come; you can only be prepared. Note that in the parable all ten bridesmaids, wise and foolish, get sleepy and fall asleep. Despite the lesson that Jesus apparently draws, “so stay awake”, none of the bridesmaid in the parable is actually held to that standard. Rather, the wise maids have enough oil in their lamps *when the groom comes* so that they can light the way. The foolish maids do not. The lesson is all too clear.

I don’t see how we can take the Second Coming out of Advent. We liberal Christians, I know, have a hard time with the parousia, the Second Coming, but it’s everywhere in the Advent accounts. The first Christians believed with all their hearts and minds that Christ was going to come again, and, that, in his coming, the promise of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection would be made complete. That expectation may have been a source of comfort, but it also brought with it discomfort, division and discombobulation. There is judgment bound up in grace. The shivaree and the nuptial bed go together. Since Andrew’s death, I find myself clinging more and more to the hope that a time of completion will come, when everything that is incomplete is made complete, when everything that is broken is made whole. My wish doesn’t make it so, I know, yet that has been the expectation of a cloud of witnesses since the beginnings of the faith.

*Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come! And, when you come, let us be prepared. Amen*

Paul Dornan

Isaiah 2:12-22  
Matthew 25:14-30  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Tuesday, November 30, 2010

What is it that we want from God? What is it that God wants from us? The writers of Isaiah, Matthew and Paul work on this question, each in his own way.

In these stories and prophecies we recognize God as stern authority figure, a judge, a terrifying presence who doles out punishment in baffling ways on a schedule we can't and shouldn't try to understand.

Then, at the end of Advent, we get a baby, born into the lower strata of society in an oppressed population in a small town, born to an unmarried, teen mother and watched over by nomads and animals, born as a subject of a dictator so afraid and so loathsome he kills the Jews' boy children to shore up his power and keep the population in check.

And we believe that that defenseless baby is the same as the terrifying, the all-powerful, the fearsome.

It's a profound reminder of the strange nature of power. It plays out over and over in the life and times of Jesus, and culminates in the sacrifice of that very defenseless and very powerful God.

These passages suggest three steps for Advent:

Clear away the encumbrances. The writer of Isaiah describes God's desire to strip down the towers we build, the pride, the stuff. We use these things to protect ourselves from ourselves, from each other, from what God wants us to do. This requires a certain level of honesty about why we do what we do, a certain clarity of vision, because my motivations for building the self same tower might be different from you building yours, and I have to be see my own actions clearly. It's not straightforward.

Examine the gifts we've been given. In Matthew Jesus tells the story of the servant who takes one talent and buries it because he fears the wrath of his master and misses opportunity. And clearly God wants us to make use of what we have, and not be afraid.

Open our hearts to the unexpected, the presence of God in our lives, the coming of the Messiah. Paul suggests we operate in the time-between-time, not knowing what the future holds, not knowing when God will make God's presence known, but knowing that God will. We need to be willing to make changes, even at this late time, even when we thought we knew what we were supposed to be doing.

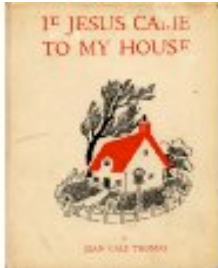
This is somewhat difficult because of the busy-ness of the holidays, but it's more difficult because our problems are real, immediate and significant. God's presence is quiet and steady, and we live in it as a fish lives in water, and it takes concentration and love to feel it around us. Fortunately God demonstrates it most profoundly in the coming of the Immanuel: God, with us.

*Let me be still, and know that you are God. Amen.*

Rebecca Davis

**Scripture for December 1, 2010:**

- ***Isaiah 3:8-15***
- ***Matthew 25:31-46***
- ***2 Peter 3:8-18***



While reading the verses for this day in Advent, I recalled a book I enjoyed as a child and still have: *If Jesus Came to My House* by Joan Gale Thomas. Originally published in England in 1951, this little book with its black, white, and red illustrations had enjoyed 19 printings by the time my parents bought it in 1956 or so to read to my younger brother and sister and me.

In the book, a little boy imagines what he would do “if Jesus came to my house”— of course, as a child of about the same age and height. The boy anticipates that he would treat Jesus as an honored guest, offering Him the best seat by the fire, serving Him tea, showing Him favorite spots in the house and the garden, and playing with the boy’s favorite—and nicest—toys. The boy would not let Jesus leave without inviting Him to choose the best of these playthings for Himself.

And then He’d smile and wave goodbye,  
and so would end our day—  
but all the house would seem to smile  
because He’d been our way.

The boy then acknowledges that Jesus can never call on him in the way that he has imagined. He quickly consoles himself, however, saying that he can go to Jesus’s house and “sing and worship Him and talk with Him in there.” And something more—*the tale’s punch line*: The boy can invite others into his home, his life; he can reach out to and help them.

And I can make Him welcome  
as He Himself has said,  
by doing all I would for Him  
for other folk instead.”

Author Thomas has taken Matthew 25 and made this powerful scripture accessible to a child—to all of us children of God:

<sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and

you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Where the child's story leaves off, the scripture continues, detailing the consequences of failing to care for others:

<sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

*A prayer:*

*Oh, God, we wait for the birth of your son and with Peter 'for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.' May we treat others as we would treat you. Thank you, dear Lord, for your abiding patience with us. And when your kingdom comes, 'may you find us at peace, without spot or blemish.' Amen*

~Edith Holmes Snyder

Isaiah 4:2-6

Thursday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>

John 1:6-13

**Acts 10:9-16**

Three verses simply put. God has a beautiful vision of His kingdom to come. God provides us the Light in Jesus, and witnesses to lead us towards His vision. We too often cannot get past ourselves to embrace and enjoy what God does provide.

“What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” – Acts 10:15

This phrase just resonates for me.

How often has that tiny voice in the back of my head picked away at me and gotten me down? I am a harsh critic of myself, and constantly feel guilt about what hasn't been accomplished in my life. In thinking about what I do not have and have not done, I fail to appreciate the abundant blessings that surround me. It is my own considerations, my own perceptions that depress and anger me.

But has not God cleansed me. That is the point of baptism, right? That was the purpose behind the birth and sacrifice of Jesus. So if God has cleansed me, why would I consider myself anything less?

How many of God's gifts have I ignored, turned away from or taken for granted in my life, because they did not fit MY vision, MY expectations or MY timeline?

God already has a greater, more loving vision than I could ever create. God already sees the clearest path for me to get there. Why am I trying to drive from the backseat? That only serves to stress out everyone in the car. It's up to me to get out of God's way, sit back and enjoy the ride. And hopefully remember to thank the driver every now and then.

***Prayer: Dear Lord, Help me to remove the blinders I choose to wear every day attempting to ignore your vision for my life and the gifts you provide to me. Thank you for the witnesses you place in front of me to show me the way. Your vision is great Lord, and I'm happy to be a part of it.***

Chris Rehling



## *“Seeking Christ the Savior”*

Isaiah 5: 1-7; John 1: 19-28; Revelation 5: 1-10

December 3, 2010

The Isaiah verses lay forth an unexpected outcome: despite the clearing of heavy stones from the land, careful planting of the choicest vine, and devoted nurturing of the vineyard, it fails to yield more than wild grapes. God had expected justice and righteousness within the House of Israel but found instead inequity, oppression and a cry. John also speaks of a cry, echoing the voice in the wilderness which shouts “make straight the way of the Lord.” To questions from impatient and puzzled Pharisees and priests, John responds that even though he baptizes others in the name of the Lord, he himself is not the Savior. Rather, Christ is another who is **right there in their midst.**

Advent is a journey, replete with excited anticipation and a sense of mystery. It evokes childhood memories of hope coupled with impatience, warmth and wonderment accompanied by a gnawing sense of longing. I volunteered to contribute to the Advent booklet this year because I wanted to write about Martin, a man I met in our Radcliffe Room and 11:00 am worship services. Martin and I had a great deal in common: we were both seeking Christ the Savior. Week in and week out, Martin listened very carefully to “Dr. Roger’s” sermons and discussed his reactions with me after each service. His insights were often stunning in their sophistication and I came away from our conversations feeling that I had a lot to learn from Martin. I admired his earnestness and sincerity and my fondness for him continued to grow. After one of Dr. Roger’s sermons on hospitality, Martin’s response alluded to the Isaiah verses I have in-artfully interpreted above. He noted that the Bedouin, a people renowned for their hospitality practices, were being thwarted at every turn in today’s Middle East.

After one NYAPC service, when Martin said that he needed luggage that would suffice for two, I didn’t take him as seriously as I should have. The following week, Martin told me that he was going away and I would see him no more. He would be taking a bus to New York City and was hoping his friend Carol would join him in that journey. He wasn’t certain about Carol’s relationship with God and hoped to show her some tangible evidence that God worked through people. His friends at NYAPC could help by providing some used luggage. I agreed to meet Martin at a GWU food court between 12 noon and 3pm on Memorial Day. After all, not only were Martin and I both seeking Christ the Savior, Martin was trying to bring another into the fold.

I must confess that part of me worried that failing to come through for Martin would be tantamount to snubbing Jesus. As underscored eloquently in John’s gospel, Christ is he who “standeth among you.” So even though I was behind schedule in finishing a consulting assignment, after lunchtime on Memorial Day I hurried to Filene’s Basement, purchased a roll-on suitcase, and hailed a cab to GWU. As I walked down the steps into the GWU food court, I saw Martin seated at a table ahead, with some of his drawings spread out before him. He showed me his latest drawing and interpreted some of the historical and literary references for me. Martin was happy I had shown up and pleased to have the suitcase but expressed dismay that I had spent money as opposed to bringing him something old, no longer of any use to me. Then too, Martin was concerned that the

suitcase might not be large enough to accommodate both his belongings and Carol's, so he planned to give it to Carol. When I appeared flustered and stated that I wanted him to have the suitcase, he mentioned that "Frau Weiss" (Barbara Lancaster) might also be bringing him a bag. Although she and her husband Mark had already used every spare suitcase to put household goods into storage, Barbara offered to go to Marshall's, buy another suitcase and then join us at GWU.

Barbara and I got to spend several hours with Martin that afternoon. We helped him pack his things into one of the suitcases and accompanied him to a park nearby, where he was to meet up with Carol for dinner, courtesy of the Miriam's Kitchen Van. Other homeless men in the park greeted Martin warmly, referring to him as "Professor." Although Carol never showed up, Martin left a message for her with another man named Jacob, who appeared to know every homeless man and woman in the park. When we parted, Martin remained hopeful that Carol would join him at the bus stop the following morning.

This Advent, I'll be thinking about Martin. Through his own deliberative race of faith, Martin has given me much to contemplate and I pray that wherever he is now, he is warm, well-fed and surrounded by love. After all, Martin and I seek the same Savior. Albeit from separate locales, we each plan on joining NYAPC's faithful – alongside Christians from New York to New Guinea – in celebrating the birth of Christ the Savior and seeking to follow him all the days to come.

Marsha Elizabeth Renwanz

Isaiah 5:8-12  
John 1:29-42  
Romans 3:21-31

Saturday, December 4

## Hindsight

*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

It only takes a sentence for John to identify Jesus. It's a moment of clarity. There's John, standing near the river, people crowding around him, getting ready to baptize someone. He looks up, sees Jesus, and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The story is simple: John sees the Spirit descending like a dove and doesn't hesitate to proclaim who Jesus is. Why is Jesus coming toward him? This gospel doesn't say. John doesn't talk to Jesus. In this gospel, he doesn't even baptize him.

It doesn't take long for the disciples to see Jesus either. They don't appear to need more than a nod from John. "Look," says John, "Here is the Lamb of God." And off they go after Jesus.

But there are other characters in this story. There must have been a crowd around John, silent bystanders who didn't follow John's pointing finger. I imagine myself standing with them, watching the scene. I might have wondered about it, might have thought, "I'll check out this Jesus tomorrow," and then gone on to finish chores, until the day's activities pushed the idea out of my head. Later, as news of Jesus travels through my village, maybe I remember Jesus. Maybe I hear about his crucifixion, about the mystery of his resurrection. Maybe I join an early Christian community, remembering the scene with John the Baptist, understanding it in hindsight.

Hindsight. How many times have I looked back at something, only then understanding what happened or what I should have done? "Hindsight's 20-20." We usually say this in a rueful, "there's no way I could have known" way. It makes me wonder, though: What do I miss seeing today? Life often feels messy and murky. Moments of clarity are few and far between. How could I better see God in my life in the present?

The other two passages for today give me some guidance. Isaiah warns Judah about its worship of big houses and strong drink. And Paul writes about the supreme importance of faith, of trusting in God through Christ.

As a reader of today's passages, I have the benefit of hindsight. I am not one of those silent bystanders watching John the Baptist. I have the whole gospel, the whole New Testament, the whole Bible, the history of Christianity, and the teachers in my life right now – a host of fingers pointing me to the way.

*Meg Hanna House*

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Romans 15:4-13

Sunday, December 5

Advent is a time of anticipation, but even before the anticipation it is a sort of pre-dawn time of reflection on hopes and dreams for the coming year. In the context of the whole year on earth and particularly in Washington, Autumn has now drawn to a close, and we are thankful for the gifts of recent spring, summer, and harvest time. Many trees are now bare, the air is cold, and the sun stays lower in the sky. This is a perfect time to pause in reflection and perhaps preparation for the new year: what is God's vision for us? What is God's vision of a King and Kingdom for us?

We find that vision in Isaiah: As for a king, "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, ...wisdom and understanding...counsel and might...knowledge and fear of the Lord." And in the kingdom, "*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.*" The Psalm also describes an ideal King and some details of an ideal Kingdom. It is a glorious vision where there is abundance and freedom from the conflicts of the world, and where the king is both righteous and powerful.

This is a radical vision, an inversion of the suffering and unrighteous condition of the world. And it gets better! In Matthew when Jesus goes to be baptized, John the Baptist at first resists, because it is John who should be baptized by Jesus, and John knows it. So Jesus, the King, is being sanctified not by powerful military or political or even religious figures of the day, but by John, a man so low he eats locusts and honey for his food.

In the same passage we also see that this vision is not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well. In other words, God's vision is not just for the genetic descendants of Abraham, but for all of us. We are all chosen, if we have the hearts and minds to see it. What a radical departure from the notion that only certain people are chosen to be in God's club!

In Advent, as the coming year approaches, this is God's vision for us: a King who inverts the power structures of the world, and a Kingdom of abundance. What an amazing vision of hope for the new year: "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*"

Jim Spearman

Isaiah 5: 13-17; 24-25  
John 3: 22-36  
Acts 10: 34-43

Monday, December 6

These scripture passages all offer powerful testimony to the importance of heeding God's message and call to us. Even when hearing that call may be a challenge.

The prophet Isaiah uses striking visuals and strong words to warn the Israelites of the consequences of rejecting God's law. I wonder if the "lack of understanding" for which Isaiah admonishes is really more a lack of appreciation – for all God has given us and all that we take for granted? In a world where so many have so little and in which I am confronted everyday by the contrast of staggering wealth and staggering poverty, all in a 30 minute drive home from work, I must gratefully acknowledge all that I have been given. And yet, I must own up to the fact that so often, I still ask for more. It seems hardly a day goes by without the news media spotlighting some story of abuse. Abuse of power. Abuse of privilege. Abuse of trust. Have I abused the gifts God has given me by ignoring my own potential or by not sharing and using my gifts to the benefit of others?

In John 3, John the Baptist encourages his disciples to follow Jesus as God's true messenger and bearer of eternal life. But he also warns of the consequences of rejecting Jesus and, by extension, God's message and plan for us. For me, this passage is a reminder that sometimes we must work to open ourselves up to hearing what the Spirit is really trying to tell us, and perhaps to the most unlikely of messengers. Especially when things get busy, it seems easier to simply say "not right now" or "I'll get to that later." Or sometimes, we shut someone out entirely simply because we perceive that their values or way of living just doesn't fit with ours. When we fall into these patterns of thinking and acting, what new experiences and what new insights might we be shutting out as a result?

Acts 10 reminds us of the ultimate forgiveness of sins that is offered to all through a belief in Christ and by following the just path. We are reminded through Jesus' crucifixion that often, the just path is not the easiest path to take.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, in this season of preparation and reflection, I ask for your help to better prepare myself to truly receive and be a living witness for your call to us. Help me to find new ways to use the gifts you have given me to your greater glory always. Amen

Jennifer McIver

## Searching for Understanding

**Isaiah 6:1-13**

**John 5: 30-47**

**Revelation 22: 16-20**

The lectionary for this day presents challenges; the passages are puzzling, even disturbing as we search for understanding.

**Isaiah 6: 1-13** is considered by scholars to be a personal, visionary account of Isaiah's call to become God's prophet to the people of Judah. The date is almost six hundred years before the life of Jesus; a time when Jerusalem is threatened by foreign invaders. The call scene is a heavenly realm with God enthroned in splendor and attended by winged seraphs. It is a scene that is foreign to our day and our way of thinking. And God's message to Isaiah is one predicting that the people will not listen – their ears will be closed and their minds made dull to Isaiah's proclamation. Why would God call a prophet and put such obstacles in his path?

**John 5:30-47** is a passage even more enigmatic than that from the book of Isaiah. Jesus, addressing his disciples, seems to be saying that they and the authorities among the Jews reject him as one who comes from God. This is a rejection of the very word of God – the Word made flesh dwelling with us. Because of the harsh condemnation on rejection of Jesus, and because the narrative identifies that rejection with “the Jews” even though a closer reading makes clear that the accusation is for *Jewish leaders* rather than the Jewish people as a whole, the text has been called “anti Semitic.” In our time we have the responsibility to correct this misinterpretation of the passage. The task is not an easy one because its language and methodology are so obscure.

**Revelation 22:16-20** is a passage from the very closing chapter of the New Testament canon. It affirms that prophecy has now been completed. Nothing more needs to be added or deleted. Readers are warned to accept what has been given in this apocalyptic narrative of the new heaven and new earth. When we are puzzled by the revelation of St. John, we should note that many persons – even the Reformation leader Martin Luther himself, find the book and its message difficult to comprehend.

How, then, do we glean understanding from obscure and difficult passages of our scriptures? First, we should recognize that the bible was passed to us from an oral tradition that arose many, many years and generations ago. When the scriptures were compiled and written down, judgements were made by the authors and redactors. Because these early texts were composed in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, all translations into vernacular languages, such as English, are *interpretations* by the scholars who were the translators. When we engage an ancient and difficult text we have the obligation to seek out a meaning for our lives. We must not succumb to facile pronouncements of those who give their “authoritative” interpretation. Encountering scripture becomes an *individual* responsibility and struggle. We do have tools to help, including historical inquiry archeological and sociological insights, linguistic studies, and references to scholarly discourse. Although individual inquiry is where we begin, it is not sufficient. We need the assistance of the **total community of faith**. Within that community of faith we will feel a **reverence for God's Spirit** working with us. When a particular passage is difficult, we must also take a wider view of scripture. We need to feel the grand, supportive and comforting presence of God as revealed in Biblical stories, poetry, prayers and hymns of praise.

**Prayer** Dear Lord, we thank You for your revelation in Scripture in lives of saints who have gone before us, in the lives of those around us, and supremely in the life and resurrection of Jesus, whom we confess to be the Christ. Amen

Jay Davenport

**Wednesday, December 8** (Galatians 6: 1-10, Matthew 11: 1-6, Isaiah 7: 1-9)

***Galatians 6: 2, 9-10***

*“...Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.... So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially those of the family of faith.”*

Bearing one another’s burdens is, I think, a bit like the inverse of exchanging Christmas gifts. Rather than giving someone something at a time of joy, instead offering to take something at a time of a need. Lifting the load someone carries, the pain or guilt or regret she cannot shrug off. Buying a present seems so much simpler. Once unwrapped, the exchange is complete. Bearing a burden for someone, on the other hand, is an ongoing arrangement. It’s a commitment of empathy and support.

It’s easy to tell ourselves that our own burdens are more than enough. Or we couldn’t possibly help anyway, so why get involved? But what better time than Christmas to remember that God does not call us to a life of pursuing individual plans in disconnected ways? Christmas is a time to try to rebuild and expand communities, bringing together loved ones in celebration.

The crèche is one of my favorite reminders of community at Christmastime, with wise men from the East standing alongside shepherds and barnyard animals. These unusual suspects are brought together by the marvel of our Savior—the baby Jesus—wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

And not only do the Wise Men arrive from distant origins to witness and worship the Messiah, they do so after a long and difficult journey. Surely they felt weary and dispirited on the way. As I look towards Christmas this year, I feel a little weary myself. Some days, there doesn’t seem to be any hope for affecting change or for transforming the world. And so Paul’s call to “not grow weary in doing what is right” rings true, as does his call to act upon moments of opportunity to work for the good of all.

In this Advent, let us stay alert to opportunities, knowing that God calls us to seek out ways of bringing hope to our broken world. Let us remember and celebrate the way that a baby, born in a manger, could change everything. And amidst the hustle and bustle of the season, I hope that the Nativity scene can be a constant reminder not to grow weary, but to be resolved to search for those moments to bear another’s burdens and to build God’s community.

*Prayer: God of all seasons, help us to not grow weary, but to be perseverant in pursuing opportunities to show your love and bring about your vision for our world, carrying one another’s burdens and working for the good of all. Give us the strength of spirit to start each day in this Advent season with a renewed sense of opportunity and of hope, celebrating the coming of our Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Kristin Ford

## Sufferings

***Isaiah 7:10-25, Matthew 11:7-15  
Hebrews 10:32-39***

***Thursday, December 9***

Two of today's passages are seasonally appropriate prophecy of Jesus' Birth and His own hints that He is the promised one. Then there's the third.

Who would have expected the season of joy and celebration to include a focus on "sufferings ... abuse and afflictions", as the unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews does? And of what relevance is that to us? This is 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and when have I ever suffered abuse and afflictions for my faith? Teasing, perhaps, or awkward conversation, at most, or maybe a lost vote or two, but never put to the test, at economic or physical risk.

At bedtime, I nestle into my soft pillow, safe and comfortable under the warm covers, and it is bliss. At least, until it occurs to me that there are hundreds of millions on this earth who will never in their entire lives experience a single moment of such luxury, or privacy, or lack of hunger or fear. For most of them it will be for reasons other than their belief in Jesus, but they suffer nonetheless. For Elder Yousif and his flock, and other Christians in Iraq, their faith has put them in fear and danger, as it has our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters in Abraham, around the world and even in our backyards. And there's nothing I can do about it.

Or perhaps there is. I can pray harder, give more generously, and most important, not just hear but *be* the "voice of peoples long silenced", speaking out, to our denomination, and through our denomination's Washington office, when our national policies will put people at risk, and in our own communities when we see intolerance at home. As I write this, we have just come through an election that not infrequently reeked of intolerance and fear of the "other" in our midst, whether because of faith, ethnicity or disapproval of someone else's political leanings. On the latter I'm guilty as charged. But speaking truth to power in an attempt to alleviate or prevent the suffering of others is not a matter of party but our faith calling. We need look no farther than NYA, to see our own Roger Gench and David Snyder marching off to jail together in bipartisan opposition to the Iraq war.

Today's scripture is instructive: "...sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction [ourselves], and sometimes *being partners with* those so treated." (emphasis added) When our brothers and sisters, in Christ or in common humanity, are abused or afflicted, we are called to be their partners, whether in the Radcliffe Room, the Middle East or our own front yard.

***Loving God, please give us the courage and wisdom to be partners with your people in their suffering and oppression, and the words to be the voices of those long silenced.***

**Amen**

Mary Krug



## Social Networks

Isaiah 8:1-15  
Matthew 11:16-24

December 10, 2010

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 reminds us of God's design for our lives together. God calls us to live out our faith in a loving social network. The density, strength and character of the web of relationships in a social network can vary. We are called to clothe ourselves with the protective coverings of faith, hope, and love, and thus protected, boldly reach out to comfort and edify (KJV), encourage and build up (RSV) one another, and accept such ministrations from others. While the size and density of the network has value, fidelity to God's design is measured in the quality, not mere quantity of relationships. We are called to be connectors of people and people to God, not mere collectors of people.

During Advent I invite you to examine your participation in the social network that is the family of faith. How are you connected to the family of faith? To whom are you connected and how? How many and how strong are your connections? Have you let your needs be known to others? Are the relationships that connect you to the network loving, comforting, edifying, encouraging and upbuilding? Do you accept and celebrate support from unexpected sources? Are you actively and creatively engaged in lovingly comforting, edifying, encouraging and building up one or more persons? Are you broad in the scope of your concern, emboldened by the knowledge that you are clothed in the protective coverings of faith, hope and love? Do you reach out to those who may not be very well-connected or supported? Are the giver and receiver roles comfortable or uncomfortable for you? Are you challenging yourself to grow both as giver and receiver? Do you seek God's guidance in your participation in the loving social network, and trust God to guide you? Can you see and celebrate God working God's purposes out within the social network of the family of faith? What efforts do we and might we make individually and corporately to follow God's design and increase the breadth, density, strength, and loving character of our social network? I hope that we might reflect corporately on these issues.

A word about how we use communications media in our social network. Internet-and electronically-mediated social networks have been much in the news and increasingly in use of late. This fall, a movie titled *Social Network* described the origins of Facebook. Inspired by bitterness and desire to get revenge for perceived past wrongs by a former girlfriend, a college student creates a web site where male students can rate the attractiveness of female students that eventually morphs into a broader social networking tool for use among "friends". Its design does not appear to have followed God's plan, and it has not always been used in loving ways. Nevertheless, can it and others of the hundreds of new electronic social networking tools of the new era be used according to God's plan? Presbyterians have begun experimenting. PC(USA) has Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites. NYAPC has a web page, list serve, Facebook users, Twitterers, text messengers, e-mailers and bloggers. Some church committees communicate and conduct business via the internet in lieu of meetings. All communications technologies hold both promise and peril. As we seek to answer God's call to participate in a loving social network, are we using today's communication technologies wisely and lovingly in ways that comfort, edify, encourage, and build up one another? Are we sensitive to the "digital divide" and are we respectful of the time, privacy, and preferences of members of the community? Does the medium chosen to communicate serve the purposes and message? Might we benefit from some discussion, etiquette, or policies? Might focusing on God's design as expressed in Thessalonians guide us in structuring our life together?

God, we give you thanks for your design for our lives. Help us to live, love, communicate and relate according to your design. May our actions and the social network they create serve your purposes, glorify you, and witness to the world. Amen.

Karen Mills

## DARKNESS - - - - -

Isaiah 8:16-9:1  
Matthew 17:9-13  
Romans 13:8-14

Saturday, Dec. 11

Why do we keep so many things in the dark? Why do we think some things should remain secret and not be talked about? The first two passages for today point to two different reasons.

In the first passage, Isaiah says: “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord.” He will no longer speak about the messages he has received from God. His reasons for retreating to darkness were disappointment and failure. King Ahaz of Judah had rejected Isaiah’s advice and allied himself to the Assyrians. The people followed their king. And Isaiah knew that the Assyrians would bring destruction to Israel. Isaiah fled to the darkness of secrecy.

In the second passage Jesus, after the transfiguration, swears the three disciples who were with him to secrecy. Why should the great light that appeared on the mountain be covered by the darkness of secrecy, even if only temporarily? We can only speculate. There were only three disciples privy to the transfiguration. Did Jesus realize that there was no way that all twelve could be restrained from revealing then and there his nature? And did he fear that spreading that word then would arouse the Jewish leaders to arrest and kill him while he was still in Galilee and prevent him from continuing his teaching and moving into Judea and Jerusalem?

However, the darkness in neither case lasts. In the very next chapter of Isaiah a new king gives the prophet hope: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”. And Jesus was able to keep on teaching and move on to Jerusalem.

The passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans reminds us of one of the greatest teachings of Jesus that came after he swore the disciples to secrecy. It was in Jerusalem that he told the Pharisees that the two greatest commandments were:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and  
with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love  
your neighbor as yourself.

As Paul says; “One who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

*Creator, who the light this day  
Out of darkness did create,  
Shine upon us now, we pray,  
While within Thy courts we wait,  
Wean us from the works of night,  
Make us children of the light.*

*Julia Elliott*      Phil Hanna

Advent Meditation 2010  
December 12

Isaiah 35: 1-10  
Psalm 146

Matthew 11:2-11  
James 5: 7-10

Promises, promises. Most people in our United States, indeed even more people throughout the developing world, stake survival on the possibility that their lives will improve. For some, existence is reliant on the spirit within. The spirit of Christmas can inspire that hope, anticipation, and love. The Biblical passages that relate to today should cause us to rejoice in the majesty of God, to believe in miracles, and to have faith in Jesus. At the same time, James cautions patience.

My heart turns to my friend Lynne who will be imprisoned for 10 years. Is it possible that even she can come to believe that there is purpose in her suffering and promise in her anticipation of life beyond this one? Or, more profound, is it possible that she will find miracles in the difficult life that she now knows? Isaiah predicts miracles—most remarkable, the birth of Jesus. He promises "sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

In the passage from Psalm 146, we are encouraged to believe in these miracles, predicted by Isaiah. "Happy are those whose help, ... hope... faith (are) in the Lord my God." Jesus will set the prisoners free, open the eyes of the blind, lift up those who are bowed down, watch over the sojourners, uphold the widow and the fatherless. These, then, are the real gifts of Christmas.

But, we Americans, who are married to possessions, captive of comforts, and lacking in patience, are strained to believe. As I examine the life of Lynne, I know that she believes her calling—to serve as a defense lawyer of the downtrodden—is finished. She has never been a patient person. So, for Lynne, it is none of the material privileges that she is missing or longing for—it is to achieve justice for "the least of us." I have trouble imagining her ability to translate her incarceration as a Christmas gift. Yet, her spirit may move her to exactly that.

In the James passage, we learn that patience is in the waiting. We must always be preparing. James' prophecies of foresight and insight might be the Christmas gifts we are all hoping for. He says, "...you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

*Prayer\*: Though we choose to walk in the footsteps of the condemned, we refuse to relinquish hope. Though we accept to accompany the ones who suffer, we do not yield to despair. Though we offer to help shoulder the burden of those rejected and excluded, we are not vanquished by death. Though we stand in solidarity and witness the persecution of the innocent, we are not resigned to apathy. Though we wrestle with our own guilt and complicity in the injustice that surrounds us, we refuse to be paralyzed. Though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we shall not fear for with You is found forgiveness and peace. Heal us with your forgiveness, calm us with your peace, inspire us with your love. Amen*

\* Martin Luther King, Jr.

Beth DuMez

## The Righteous Reign of the Coming King

Isaiah 9: 1-7

Monday, December 13, 2010

Hebrews 12: 18-29    Matthew 21: 23-32

Three very different scenarios for this day. The passage from Isaiah originally served as an oracle for the coronation of a Judean king, possibly Hezekiah, and is describing events in a land eventually divided into three provinces by Assyrian kings on their way to the Mediterranean. The language includes an announcement of a divine birth that probably came from an Egyptian coronation ritual but from our perspective can be read as the forecast of the birth of Jesus:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God. Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, by an unknown author possibly greeting friends from Italy, the text urges the faithful to follow Christ's example and live as he did.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Not exactly a typical Sunday service.

Finally, in the passage from Matthews, following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is asked by the chief priests in the Temple by what authority did he act and who gave him the authority, and responds by asking them whether John's ministry was divine or merely human in its origin, to which the priests replied that they did not know, since the first answer would suggest they believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the second would anger those who believed in John being a messenger of God. Since the priests did not answer the question posed by Jesus on authority, Jesus said neither would he answer their question.

Prayer: Creator God, keep us mindful of the perseverance and messages of those who preceded us in our faith history.

Robert L. Doan

*Isaiah 9: 8-17*  
*Matthew 18:1-6*  
*2 Thessalonians 2: 1-3, 13-17*

Tuesday, December 14<sup>th</sup>

I reflect on today's verses after Skyping with my sister and her two-year-old son, Nathaniel, in Australia. The connection isn't great—the picture blurred, like I'm seeing my nephew's face from a distance without my glasses, his edges all fuzzy. Yet, even through this imperfect medium, the pleasure I feel in his presence is visceral. Delight, when he calls me by name--Aunty Nicki. Happiness, to see him wear the gift I sent him, a cowboy vest from Wyoming. Such pleasure, that he looks so much like my sister, until he smiles, when he is suddenly the image of his father; and yet to know that he is entirely himself, a wholly unique little person.

As I read the verses, Nathaniel fills my head. Perhaps for this reason, the verses from Matthew resonate with me most in this moment, focussed as they are on children. These very familiar verses seem to give two distinct lessons, united by their context; firstly, that a person must humble themselves, and become like a child, to enter the Kingdom of God; and secondly, a dire warning against causing a child (or, by implication, anyone) to lose their faith. My reflections here are focussed on the first question.

The Father's great love for those who are least in the eyes of the world is one of the defining themes of the gospel. Obviously, and without question, we are called to humility. I wonder, though, in specific terms, what it means, to humble oneself and become like a child?

I'm no biblical scholar or historian, but my understanding is that the children of the bible were deemed as chattel, the property of their parents. A rudimentary knowledge of the Proverbs suggests they were subject to the strictest discipline and obedience. They were also considered a great blessing from God, the hope and future of their families and communities. In a nutshell, it seems to me that they were both powerless and of enormous value. Perhaps there is a lesson here.

Perhaps God calls us, first, to own and acknowledge our weakness. Children are absolutely dependent, in ways that adults usually are not. In simplest terms, young children die, if the adults in their life don't provide food and clothing and shelter. And so, lacking the capacity to care for themselves, they give themselves up into their mothers' arms. Perhaps this, then, is what it is about—recognizing that we cannot save ourselves. Though, for the most part we can feed and clothe ourselves and make choices for our lives, we are ultimately vulnerable. Life and death are out of our hands. And so, like children, we offer ourselves up into the Father's arms.

The Taize Community points out that, shortly before the exchange related in these verses, Jesus tells the disciples that "The Son of Man is about to be handed over to those who will kill him," (verses 22 and 23) and suggests therefore that it is little wonder that Jesus identifies with the child. Understanding that humans often crush the vulnerable, He is approaching the moment of his greatest vulnerability. Thus, even God, the Lord of the Universe, models to us this humility he requires. He did it when he was born a baby to a poor, unwed mother. He did it again on the cross.

To cast us in the role of children, also speaks of the Lord's relationship to us. Unless given reason not to, a child trusts its mother implicitly. It trusts without thinking, without questioning. It knows where comfort lies, where there is safety, where there is sustenance. And it goes there. It's that simple.

In this equation the mother, ostensibly, is the one with all the power. However, she is vulnerable, also, to her child, in a relationship of mutual dependence and mutual delight. Her own health and happiness are inexorably linked to her child's, who is capable of bringing the greatest possible grief to her life—by death, yes, but also by rejection.

When we long for Him, when we look for Him, does God feel the joy of a mother when her baby reaches out for her, milk drunk and rapturous? I believe He does.

It is wondrous that the God of the Universe, the Almighty One, assumes this role of vulnerability, through His love for us.

*Nicki Gill*

**Works cited:** Taize Community. "Children: What does it Mean to Welcome God's Kingdom Like a Child?" Taize. 13 Mar. 2006. Web. 5 Nov. 2010.

**Isaiah 9:18-10:4**  
**John 10:31-42**  
**Hebrews 10:19-25**

**December 15, 2010**

### **Whose Wrath? Whose Forgiveness??**

The Isaiah passage is full of fire, fury, smoke, and scorched land. But it did not strike a meaningful cord until I read it a second time – three days after Sunday, October 31 when 58 worshipers at Our Lady of Salvation Church, the largest Catholic church in Baghdad, Iraq were gunned down by terrorists. Elder Yousif al-Saka emailed photos of the church in the aftermath of this horrific act: everything in the church was scorched, sooty, broken, destroyed. You could feel the grief, disbelief, anguish, and desolation in those pictures. The cry of pain in the words and faces of the Christians in Baghdad was haunting. Why do people persecute one another? Why does religion pit brother against brother? A recent book by Eliza Griswold, [The Tenth Parallel, Dispatches from the Fault Line between Christianity and Islam](#), describes in horrific detail the chaos and murder that has characterized religious relationships in Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. No wonder “the land is scorched by the fury of the Lord of Hosts, and people have become fuel for the fire.” But for all this, God’s “hand is stretched out still.”

In John, we read that the Jews picked up stones to stone Jesus, not for his good deeds, they explained, but for blasphemy, calling himself the son of God. The anger created by perceived notions of what is wrong or right, the true way with religious tradition apparently is as old as the Scriptures. Two thousand years later, we still live with intolerance, a perceived righteousness, and stones to throw (actually, much worse) at those whom we believe do not follow the right religious path. So we find wrath among and between faiths, and we confront God’s wrath against the behavior of his people.

The question is, how do we get around this wrath, this violence? Isaiah and Hebrews tell us: forgiveness. If God can forgive his people with a hand that is “stretched out still,” then we must forgive one another as well. We must see the best in one another, accept differing views and beliefs. As Hebrews says, “We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness...encouraging one another...”

The violence and wrath in the world calls each of us to do our part by reaching out in love, by showing compassion and support, indeed by being our brothers and sisters’ keepers. Hebrews says, “...the blood of Jesus makes us free to enter boldly into the sanctuary by the new, living way...” In Jesus’ name and in his love, let us forgive and pray for peace and seek to end violence and wrath in our worldly midst.

Prayer: Dear God, you have extended your hand in forgiveness for our sins. Show us the way to extend our hands in love and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters everywhere. Amen.

Marilyn J. Seiber

**Isaiah 10:5-19**  
**John 4:1-15**  
**Romans 4:1-8**

**Thursday December 16, 2010**

**Water, Water Everywhere, Nor Any Drop to Drink**

I do not like hot weather. I mean I really do not like hot weather. This is quite ironic since I have spent so much of my life living in tropical climates. First was St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. While I was in college in Philadelphia, I visited my parents several times while they were living in the Middle East. Later, for work, I was constantly travelling to warm destinations year round. Then, my wife and I lived in Georgetown, Guyana, a city directly abutting a large rainforest. Now I live in Okinawa, Japan. I keep asking my wife if we can perhaps do an assignment somewhere other than a tropical climate, like Vladivostok or Ulan Bator, Mongolia. I do not think this is going to happen very soon...

Other than slowly learning to tolerate constant sweat, I have learned a lot about water while residing in consistently warm climates. First it is critical to life, and second, you always ensure that you have an adequate supply before you travel anywhere. It is this idea of water that I want to highlight in today's readings. John's Gospel tells us, "and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon." The two hour period from noon to 2 p.m. is generally the hottest time of the day. It is no surprise that Jesus chose to rest from his travels at this time of day. It is also no surprise that he chose to rest near a constant supply of water.

Upon rereading the passage, I am struck by the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. So here is Jesus, during the hottest part of a day, asking a person for water. Yet, he is in immediate proximity to a well. Wouldn't this passage have greater strength if it occurred in a remote area far away from any water supply? In the middle of the desert or on a mountaintop would add a certain drama to the narrative. Yet, Jesus is at a well. As water is crucial to life, it is an ideal metaphor for God's salvation. But, Jesus offers the water of salvation next to an ample water supply. It makes me think of the most famous line from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

"Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink."

As we once again approach Christmas and the totality of the Holiday Season that now seems to start in mid-October and end in mid-January, don't we find ourselves in a world that has ample access to water, but is unable to drink it? Do we find ourselves so distracted by the briny noise and confusion in our everyday world that we cannot look to the manger in Bethlehem and the miracle of a small yet tumultuous supply of crisp and fresh water that is once again flowing? Drink up, it's worth it.

**Dear Almighty God,**  
**May we always be cognizant of the glory of your salvation and *that your love, mercy, and grace are always present throughout our lives and in our world.***  
**Amen.**

Matthew Weitz

Isaiah 10:20-27  
John 4:16-30  
Romans 4:9-15

Friday, December 17, 2010

These passages from John and Romans share a message of Christian inclusiveness and salvation through faith that challenges us to examine how we worship and live in community at New York Avenue. In John, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus rejects the behavior that his contemporaries would've expected – either avoiding her because she was a Samaritan or refusing to engage in substantive conversation because she was a woman. He responds to the theological dichotomy she presents between Jews and Samaritans by embracing a vision that includes all

*<sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."*

He shares with her a message of salvation through faith.

*<sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in the spirit and truth.*

This encounter is the first time in John that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah. In the text immediately following the encounter we learn that the disciples were shocked that Jesus would even speak with the Samaritan woman. Jesus' choice of an indisputable member of the underclass, a concrete example of "the least of these," as the target of this revelation demonstrates the radical inclusiveness that he embodied, and with which he challenges us all.

The message of inclusive faith is also present in Paul's letter to the Romans. He addresses other false requirements of salvation that have acted as barriers to salvation. His message is that it is faith, not exclusive characteristics we carry that bring us salvation.

*<sup>11</sup>[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, <sup>12</sup>and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.*

Paul continues by stressing that the path to salvation is not through works, nor through blind adherence to a dogmatic code, but through faith.

*<sup>13</sup>For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.*



In these passages and throughout the New Testament, we encounter the message of radical inclusiveness and the reminder that salvation comes through faith. We must challenge ourselves to live this message by asking uncomfortable questions. Is our community as inclusive as it could be or do we construct barriers to entry based on class, age, and education? Do we meet the challenge of Rev. Gench's August 29 sermon and treat our ideological opposite as a brother, or do we encourage his absence from our Sunday morning? Do we act as if being active "Church people" by pledging and serving on boards is our path to salvation?

New York Avenue is important to me because within its community we meet these challenges together. Most days I fail to meet the challenges I've described above. By grace, each day I'm greeted with the example and encouragement of a congregation of brothers and sisters facing the same struggle.

For a moment of inspiration and a reminder of our daily gifts of grace and faith, I encourage listening to "Jesus Gave Me Water," Sam Cooke & the Soul Stirrers' celebration of the encounter in John.

*Jesus gave her water  
Jesus gave her water  
I want to let his praises swell  
Jesus gave her water  
He gave that woman water  
He gave her living, loving, lasting water  
And he was not in the well*

Mike Smith

Isaiah 11: 1---9  
Matthew 1: 1---17  
Romans 4: 16---25

Saturday  
December 18, 2010

## Faithfully Waiting, Hoping, Acting

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)*

From the perspective of a life-long Presbyterian approaching the mid-point of his eighth decade, this fanciful description of the Peaceful Kingdom fits the cover of a Christmas card but little else that is recognizable as either real or even possible.

In our public life we yearn for but see not the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. In our private lives we aspire for righteousness, but our actions are too often fear-based or otherwise without regard for the meek of the earth.

*So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew: 1:17)*

Forty-two generations is a long time for the fulfillment of a promise, but Matthew tells us that forty-one generations lived and died, reproduced themselves, and finally the long-awaited Messiah arrived in the forty-second generation.

What motivated and empowered those forty one generations, for hundreds of years, to keep behaving as though the promise was real, to wait both patiently and impatiently for its fulfillment?

*Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendents be." (Romans 4: 18)*

Dare we hope against hope along with Abraham and his countless numerous other descendents?

Isn't Advent all about our learning to hope against hope? Living, voting, acting, forgiving, being forgiven, yea even believing, that some day we might govern ourselves for the common good, that we might resolve conflict and overcome evil non violently, that we might wisely and reverently use the resources of the earth, that we might someday deliver to our children a Peaceful Kingdom where the spirit of the Messiah lives in the hearts and minds of all God's people? Seriously, is it any more unrealistic that a particular centurion couple would conceive, deliver and raise a child, than it is for Tea Partiers and Democrats to listen to each other and learn to govern God's people wisely and effectively, than it is for each of us to realize that God so loves each and every one of us that God has acted to redeem each and every one of us, thus enabling us to live together in unity, loving and caring for one another, with a just, sustainable tax policy, food, shelter and health care for all of us?

This life-long Presbyterian has come to understand in his nearly seven and a half decades of studying, thinking, sinning, voting (for over five of those decades), praying, befriending, being befriended, loving, being loved, fearing, working, playing, eating and breathing - that our fundamental challenge is, like that of Abraham, continuously to hope against hope and to live that way, rejoicing!

*Prayer:* God of all creation, we praise and thank you this Advent season, particularly, for creating a universe in which we can experience unspeakable joy and freedom from fear. Dare we ask that you graciously give us the power to live each of our remaining days hoping against hope that we might be endowed with the spirit of the Messiah? In the name of the long---awaited one, Amen.

- John H. Quinn, Jr.

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25  
Romans 5:1-7

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2010

## JOSEPH AND EMMANUEL

The fourth Sunday in Advent has generally been the time of the Christmas pageant at NYAPC. The children and youth of the church look forward to preparing and participating in this activity each year. For them, it is the opportunity to retell and reinterpret the story of the birth of Jesus, as they give much creative thought on how they would like the story to be shared. It is as much a journey as a pageant, for all involved.

In the past, however, there has not been much focus on Joseph, as compared to some of other “players” in the Christmas story. Not a huge surprise for, as we’ve seen in past pageants, who doesn’t enjoy making a grand entrance (and exit) as does King Herod or the wise people, or climbing up to the pulpit as the Angel Gabriel, or chasing after young sheep down the sanctuary aisles as shepherds?

Perhaps, that is why the birth of Jesus as told by Matthew struck a different chord with me. Today’s passage focuses on Joseph, his unique role and perspective, in the story. Joseph is confronted with a dilemma: A “righteous” man, Joseph learns that Mary is with child and, therefore, unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, plans to “dismiss her quietly.” But, Joseph is transformed by the announcement of the angel to take Mary as his wife and to name the child, Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.” With great courage and deep faith, Joseph does just that. Facing possible ridicule, he goes against what he thought was right in order to do what is right. He chooses to take an unmarried pregnant woman as his wife and names the child, Jesus.

This story from Joseph’s perspective demonstrates that what is righteous or the right thing to do is not always obvious and indeed can be difficult to ascertain at times. During the Advent season and always, we are reminded to listen for the voice of God, to reflect, and to seek what we should do, as we wrestle with the complexities of our lives. There are individuals and groups who wish to divide the world today into good and evil, moral and immoral, and right and wrong. But, what we are commanded to do by the love and grace of God is not necessarily what is dictated by society’s norms.

For as the prophecy in Isaiah, as referred to in Matthew, reveals, “God is with us.” We are reminded that Emmanuel comes. With the promise that God is always with us, God’s love is “poured into our hearts,” Romans 5:5, in whatever predicament or challenges that we face. Now that’s a story for our youth to tell in preparation of the coming of Emmanuel. Perhaps a few might even vie for the role of Joseph in this year’s pageant.

*Prayer: Come, Emmanuel, Come! Come amidst our doubts and our fears. Come and deepen our joy, strengthen our hope, and grow our love. For in our knowing God is with us, we need not be afraid -- and with all people can experience God's love pouring out into this world!*

Evelyn Ying

December

20, 2010

## THE CONVICTION OF THINGS SEEN

### Scripture:

Isaiah 11: 10-16

John 1: 14-18

Revelation 12: 1-9

As I struggle to transition my mother into assisted living and mourn the passing of my favorite uncle and godfather, I am reminded of the importance of Jesus' humanity. The readings today tell us that Jesus was a flesh-and-blood human being who had parents and other family members and who came from the line of Judah-- the root of Jesse and the dynasty of David.

Faith may be "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," (Hebrews 11:1) but we want to see and experience things. We can see our ancestors, if only in pictures. Ancestors are important in most cultures, but they were especially important to the ancestor worshippers in Indonesia 150 or so years ago. Missionaries in that area discovered that people could name their ancestors for over 20 generations, and that the ancestors were venerated as kings. These missionaries spoke about Jesus coming from the line of Jesse and King David the patriarch and portrayed Him as Christ the King. Today, the Lutheran Church in Indonesia is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest Lutheran Church body in the world, with nearly 3 million followers.

We want to see Jesus, to experience him. The Incarnation, or Word made flesh, is a pivotal event. It was necessary for God to take human form, to feel our pain, and to experience our joys. How lucky for the people who could hold His hand and listen to Him speak! My spiritual advisor encourages me to "see" and experience Jesus, to envision Him sitting next to me and sharing my world with me.

We want to see the Christmas story. We may prefer the shepherds and lambs in our manger scene to the dragon presented in the Revelation passage, but at least the author kept the pregnant woman in the story. (!) We can see her struggling with Satan the dragon, and recognize our own challenges. Advent may be observed in a very physical way.

**Prayer:** Loving God, please help us to observe your tangible presence during Advent.



Ella Cleveland

Isaiah 13:6-13  
John 3:1-8  
Revelation 12:10-17

21 December 2010

## Born Again

The assignment of the scripture passage from John, I have to believe, was divine providence, for it is one that brings about very strong, and emotional feelings in me for the memories it awakens from my youth.

When I was a tween, my Dad was proudly serving as the Senior Chaplain at the U. S. Naval Academy. He served there from 1967-1970, which was a very historic and volatile time in our Nation's history. I was a 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grader at that time in schools that were recently desegregated. This is a confusing time in anyone's life apart from what was happening on the national stage.

It was while I lived at the Naval Academy that I first ran into the term "born again", and it took me years to recover from it. One of my Dad's favorite parts of his job was to invite guest preachers to the Academy pulpit (one per month). These preachers were considered the top theologians of our time, or at least according to my Dad, and sometimes controversial. Once a month, not only would the guest preacher grace the Chapel's pulpit, but would also stay in our home and be the guest of honor at a luncheon after Chapel in our home. My mother gave the luncheon (with help from Hazel – the maid, hired at my parents' expense for such functions, and me) for roughly 36 people (3 tables of 12), which would consist of the guest preacher, midshipmen, professors and their spouses and officers and their spouses.

One particular Sunday we had a group of "born again" Christians, and I really don't remember their faith group, or where they were from, but it is really not key to the story. Their actions I will never forget, for how they treated my Mom, their hostess, was not Christian, yet they claimed to be born again. When my Mom was asked at her own dining room table when she had been saved, my Mom answered that she was raised in the church, and that she had grown up in a Christian home, and had always believed in God. She couldn't name an hour or a day. When my Mom stopped talking, the woman turned her head away from my Mom and didn't look or speak to her again.

I grew up with that story, so needless to say, I have struggled with my understanding of this passage because of that haunting memory. I don't believe Jesus is requiring us to be able to name the hour or the day either, but if you can that's great! What Jesus does expect of us, however, is for our lives to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. You can't just carry on as before, because you have been called to a new life in Christ. When someone finds out you are a Christian, they shouldn't be surprised. Your actions and behaviors towards others should go hand in hand with your declaration of Jesus as Lord.

Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Dale Orzalli

Isaiah 28:9-22  
John 3: 9-21  
Hebrews 2: 1-9

December 22, 2010

## **Paying Attention**

*“Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.” (Hebrews 2:1)*

When I was growing up, Attention Deficit Disorder had not been identified. Those who were affected by ADD before it was a recognized diagnosis coped by using strategies and supports to learn and concentrate...or they didn't. I'm sure they heard, "Pay attention!" many times a day as they struggled to focus on everyday tasks. Even for students (and adults) who don't have ADD, paying attention can be hard!

Today, there are more and more things clamoring for our attention: phone, television, radio, partner, child, boss, friend, hobby, health and fitness, the latest book, Internet, and yes, church. To whom should we listen? Where should we focus? To what areas should we give our limited time and resources? The answer is, of course, D. All of the above. We take care of the urgent and then the pleasurable, and sometimes the important stuff can just drift away from lack of attention.

In the busy-ness of Advent, taking the time to read a devotional might feel like one more thing to check off the day's list, but today's passage from John reveals an amazing message from Jesus, the teacher. In his lesson for Nicodemus, Jesus tells us something that we have read many times and even memorized: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)* What an astounding declaration! Yet it is so familiar to us as to almost go unnoticed. Pay attention!

So during Advent as we wait for the coming of Jesus, let us focus on the spiritually important things: regular services that help us center every week; special services that remind us this is an extraordinary time; beautiful music and familiar scriptures that bring us back to focus and help us to *pay attention!*

*Lord, as we wait for Jesus during this extraordinary time, we ask for help in paying attention to what is truly important. Forgive us when we give way to the busy-ness of our lives and drift away from your word. Thank you for your love and forgiveness we can claim through your Son. Amen.*

Kris Golden

## God's Unconditional Grace

Thursday  
December 23

Isaiah 29:13-24  
John 5:19-29  
Titus 1:1-16



Today's lectionary passages are a challenge for us because ultimately we believe in God's offering of grace to all without preconditions or threats. The passages from John and Isaiah, in particular, sound ominous: either behave or be condemned to certain damnation. For a person who takes their faith seriously, the prospect of eternal condemnation will discourage that person from *freely* choosing God.

When Jessica and Emma were very young, we would, on occasion, resort to bribes or threats of punishment—an extra cookie or a timeout—to encourage good behavior. Immediate gratification or punishment—experienced parents usually agree—can work with children who are as yet too young to be reasoned with, who do not yet understand more abstract concepts of fairness or justice, or who have not yet developed the ability to understand the full consequences of their actions.

These particular Biblical passages sound like the voice of someone instructing a young child who does not yet have the capacity to engage in, and begin to comprehend, a discussion of God's grace. John and Isaiah resort to clear, unambiguous threats of what will happen to those that do not behave. Paul's letter to Titus, similarly, is a rather straightforward checklist of do's and don'ts on being a good Christian leader.

Our daughters are now 21 and 17 (almost 18, actually). Using bribes results in temporary or indifferent success; and they are certainly too old for a timeout. Influencing their behavior and choices now requires us to reason with them and appeal to their conscience and good nature to do the right thing and/or avoid bad choices. If, however, we are unable to convince them, we shrug our shoulders and shake our heads with exasperation. Yet *we still prepare to support them* come what may. Our love for them is unconditional.

Ultimately, there are many paths to accepting God's grace. The way in which we come to accept God's grace is immaterial to God; whether it is through instruction (bribes and punishments), study of scripture, the counsel of a friend, or some other path. We can accept the lectionary as part of our Bible but not as our chosen path to Grace. We believe that preparations for Advent -- for the Coming of Christ -- remind us that God bestows grace as we choose to accept it, freely.

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard



## Signs and Wonders

*Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 1:1-20; Titus 2:11-14*

*December 24, 2010*

Christmas Eve draws us to the precipice of hope and expectation. Practically speaking, we may be anticipating the arrival of guests or a journey to celebrate the holidays. Gifts have been wrapped, stacked beneath evergreen trees topped with golden stars. So often, the days preceding Christmas unearth magical thinking, excitement, and joyful anticipation. We recall childhood days, lying awake on Christmas Eve, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Santa and the promise of white snowfall and frosty winds. At some level, this element of wishful yearning never completely leaves us because the Christmas story evokes similar feelings – the promise of new birth and miracles.

Traditionally, Christmas Eve centers on the story of Mary and Joseph, having been turned away by the innkeeper, giving birth to a son in manger. But other Bible verses allude to unprecedented miracles about to occur. In *Isaiah*, we learn that those walking in darkness will see a great light. A babe will be born who will be deemed to be a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, and an ambassador of peace. In *Luke*, God answers the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth with the news that they will bear a child who “will be great in the sight of the Lord.” And Paul’s letter to Titus assures him and the Cretans that the “grace of God will appear, bringing salvation to all.” We open our hearts to the unexpected at this season. Hymns tell us of angels singing, stars shining brighter than ever, roses blooming amid the bleak midwinter. In Bethlehem, the “hope and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” Signs and wonders abound, perhaps making even skeptics reconsider their impervious stances for one amazing night.

We can easily get swept up in the holiday festivities, feeling hopeful and optimistic, maybe even stretched, as we journey through the season. Candlelight services, familiar music, seeing old friends and family all can be part of a joyful celebration. Imagine how excited and abashed the shepherds felt in the fields as angels appeared in the sky, and how awed those who witnessed the star in the east must have been. Signs that confirm the existence of a Mighty Counselor who will bring peace to a warring world must have been met with wonderment, curiosity, and excitement.

But how do we live the rest of our lives – the days that no signs appear in the clouds, telling us which way to turn? The Reverend Craig Barnes recently wrote an article for the *Christian Century* suggesting that signs don’t always lead to the joy we’d hoped for, or perhaps signs do not even appear at all. Many of us have large decisions to make in our lives and while we long for a sign pointing us in the direction we want to go, sometimes that simply doesn’t happen. We wonder if we should retire to a new location, or take a job that we’re not sure about; we long for angels or bright stars that will lead us. But we walk in darkness; we do not see the great light! Barnes suggests that our faith will be tested in situations like these. We will have to act without signs; we will have to have the courage to move forward without clear directions or great promises that everything will turn out well. Sometimes we have to wander in a “wonderless” desert.

Therefore, we must rely on the witness of God’s great mercy, as shown through repeated Biblical texts, to propel us forward. Dark days may cover our earthly existence, but sooner or later, we will reap a bountiful harvest. The yoke upon us will be broken. Righteousness and justice will ultimately reign. The community of faith will shelter us, rejoice with us, and keep our crooked paths straight.

**Prayer:** God, keep our eyes open to the signs and wonders of your kingdom. When we walk in great darkness, carry us across the chasms of despair. Shore up our faith this Christmas season and in the days that follow. Amen.

**Elizabeth Young**

## Shepherds and Sheep

Luke 2:8-20

December 25, 2010

*<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" ...<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

Imagine yourself as a shepherd, living near Bethlehem, where King David was born. You know your flock and they follow you as you lead them to pastures where they can forage for greens and water to drink. You sleep in their midst; you protect them from wolves; you even know their names. They know the sound of your voice.

One evening, just as you and your flock have settled in for the night, you look up. The sky is full of stars, including an especially bright one nearby. All of a sudden, a creature comes out of the sky, in brilliant raiment, and talks to you and the other shepherds. And if that were not enough, the winged creature was joined by a chorus of other brilliant creatures praising the birth of a new king.

Frankly, I would have been scared – my fear and unbelief would have taken hold of me. Why would strange creatures with wings want talk to me? But the angels did not scare you and the other shepherds – most likely your brother and other relatives -- that night. Instead you overcame your fear and, curious, decided to find out the truth.

True enough, there was a baby in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Amazed, we told our families, friends, and neighbors – literally broadcasting Jesus' birth.

As I re-read this passage, I was struck at how appropriate it was that the shepherds were the first to be told of Jesus. Shepherds were, after all, the mainstay of the pastoral economy during those ancient times. Wealth was counted in terms of the number of sheep your family had. The more sheep you had, the more milk, meat, and wool you could produce.

Indeed, shepherds and sheep figure prominently in the Bible. Many of the prophets in the Old Testament were also shepherds – Abraham, Amos, Jacob, Moses, and David. Just like them, Jesus was referred to as a shepherd – a good shepherd; the chief shepherd; the great shepherd; and the one shepherd. Like a shepherd, Jesus feeds the flock, gathers the lambs in his arm and carries them in his bosom.

That fateful night, we who were shepherds became the sheep for we had found the One Shepherd who would lead us through life.

*Help us to be like the shepherds of old, dear Lord, who overcame their fear and believed in the infant Jesus. Help us to be like sheep faithfully following the Great Shepherd throughout our lives. Help us to proclaim God's love today and forever. Amen.*

Adlai Amor