



Advent 2011

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Washington, D.C.

ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
2011

- Sunday, November 27 ..... First Sunday of Advent
- Sunday, December 4 ..... Second Sunday of Advent  
(Communion)
- Tuesday, December 6 ..... Women's Circle 2, 1:30-3:30 pm  
Marilyn Seiber's home
- Saturday, December 10 ..... Christmas pageant rehearsal,  
Handbell choir rehearsal,  
9:00am – 12 noon
- Sunday, December 11 ..... Third Sunday of Advent
- Tuesday, December 13 ..... Joint Boards Meeting, 7:00 pm
- Saturday, December 17 ..... Christmas pageant rehearsal  
Handbell choir rehearsal,  
9:00am – 12 noon
- Sunday, December 18 ..... Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Children/Choir Christmas  
Program, 10:00 am service  
Christmas Caroling, Cookies  
And Crafts, PMH, 11:00 am  
Open House at Genchs',  
4:00-6:00 pm
- Saturday, December 24 ..... Christmas Eve Services - 5:30 pm  
and 8:00 pm (Communion)



Sunday November 27 2011

Isaiah 64: 1-9

Psalm 80: 1-7

Mark 13: 24-37

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

It's been a crazy year. In fact on the first Sunday of Advent 2011 I am anticipating this Advent as an ending as much as a beginning. The combination of beginning and ending may well be one aspect the inventors of Advent intended. At the end of the year - is it the end of the year already?! - there needs to be time to reflect and make peace with the events of the ending year. That's what Advent can be: time to make peace and time to anticipate beginning a new year. This is an extraordinarily useful idea throughout life, and each year it is an extraordinary opportunity to re-align oneself with God.

Read in the sequence above from top to bottom, today's passages together offer a narrative of a great movement: from disarray and confusion to joy and celebration; from chaotic absence of God from us to the real presence of God among us. If each passage can be condensed to a phrase, the narrative might be summarized in four phrases:

From the disarray and confusion of exile,  
to cries for restoration to national greatness,  
to predictions and anticipation of the coming of a saviour unique in history  
to thankfulness for the presence of God here on Earth in our lives.

...But today I'm still in the first phrase. It might be a little early to anticipate something new. Today might be just for bringing the last twelve months to a close. Not that that can really happen in one day, but this day is a symbol of that closure. And I'm hopeful that over the coming four weeks my heart and my mind will be opened to the whole sequence of ending to beginning.

Jim Spearman



NOVEMBER 28, 2011

Hosea 4:1-10, Luke 21: 20-28, 2 Peter 1:1-11

Hosea 4:1-2: *There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

Luke 21: 20-22: *When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near... for these are the days of vengeance.*

2 Peter 3-4: *His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus He has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust...*

The links among these three passages seem to center around several ideas:

- The importance of living according to God's commandments, and the consequences of breaking them.
- Violating God's commandments about righteous behavior for individuals disrupts social relationships among people, the order of the natural world, and human relationships with God.
- God will accuse and take vengeance when His people put themselves and their wrong desires ahead of God and His commandments.

Both Hosea and Luke see in the natural world a reflection of the state of human beings' behavior and relationship with God. When God's people are disobeying his commandments, "the land mourns and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing." (Hosea)

Luke talks about the "days of vengeance" and the destruction of Jerusalem, noting that "there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."

Finally, 2 Peter focuses on the power of God's promise, His call to us, to lead us away from a life of licentiousness and sin. The qualities that grow in faith –goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love -- lead to a restoration of order, of harmony with God, with other people, and in nature. God gives us what we need, if we answer his call to "become participants of the divine nature."

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to hear your call, accept your promises, and follow your commandments. Lead us to grow in the qualities of righteousness that will nurture our faith, strengthen our relationships with others and with You, and bring greater peace and harmony to the world You have created.*

Jean Bordewich

## J/S/P Ratio and Its Impact on Destiny and Determination

Hosea 4: 11 – 16  
Luke 21: 29 - 36  
2Peter 1: 3-21

Tuesday  
November 29, 2011

Is Charles Blow, writing in *The New York Times*, a modern Hosea? He introduced a recent report entitled, "Social Justice in the OECD – How Do the Member States Compare?":

We are slowly – and painfully – being forced to realize that we are no longer the America of our imaginations. ... We sold ourselves a pipe dream that everyone could get rich and no one would get hurt – a pipe dream that exploded like a pipe bomb when the already-rich grabbed for all the gold; when they used their fortunes to influence government and gain favors and protection; when everyone else was left to scrounge around their ankles in hopes a few coins would fall. We have not taken care of the least among us. We have allowed a revolting level of income inequality to develop. We have watched as millions of our fellow countrymen have fallen into poverty, and we have done a poor job of educating our children and now threaten to leave them a country that is a shell of its former self. We should be ashamed. Poor policies and poor choices have led to exceedingly poor outcomes.

Many of us might deny responsibility for this state of affairs because we didn't vote for candidates who espoused the condemned policies, or we are not the "already-rich" grabbing for gold, or we ingeniously create our own excuse. But recent research reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as the inspired authors of the Luke and 2 Peter passages for today's meditation capture each of us as responsible culprits. *"Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life."* (Luke 21:34 CEB) *"This is why you must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they'll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever lacks these things is shortsighted and blind, forgetting that they were cleansed from their past sins."* (2 Peter 1: 5-9 CEB) Lastly, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that jerks, slackers and pessimists reduce group performance by 30 to 40 percent. This same research also reveals that lasting relationships are contingent upon positive interactions being at least five times more numerous than negative interactions. Who of us can claim innocence and deny some role in creating or acquiescing in the "exceedingly poor outcomes" to which Blow (Hosea) calls our attention?

Thus, the Bible and today's newspapers deliver the same message this Advent season: Our God-given *destiny* is to live as God's redeemed children in a loving, caring, sharing world, and each of us daily *determines* whether we and our neighbors will today fulfill that destiny. To the extent our Jerk/Slacker/Pessimist ratio gets too high, our hearts are dulled, and we become unfruitful. The whole community suffers.

*Prayer: Gracious and loving God, enable me to manifest your love for my neighbors and the community in which I live in all my thoughts and actions this day, and forgive me for indulging in anxieties of day-to-day life, for my failure to pursue moral excellence, and for my being a slacker, jerk or pessimist, and thus reducing the positive effects of those who are manifesting your love for my neighbors and the community of which I am a part. Amen.*

- John H. Quinn, Jr.

Wednesday, Nov. 30

Hosea 5:1-14  
Matthew 3:1-10  
2 Peter 3:1-10

### **Fruitful Repentance**

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”*

In Matthew, John the Baptist directs this tirade toward the Pharisees and Sadducees, who are making their first of what will be many appearances in the gospel. Matthew doesn't tell us why they've come, and John doesn't give them a chance to be baptized. Why? Partly because Matthew is writing during a time when the Pharisees are the major religious voice opposing the fledgling Christian Jews. But that's an “outside the story” reason. Back “inside” the story, John knows they are not ready to genuinely repent.

It makes me wonder – what does fruitful repentance look like? Feel like? Repentance means “turn around” and fruitful means “productive.” Fruitful repentance produces real change.

Personally, I don't turn around easily. I'm more like an ocean liner than a sailing dinghy, more like an 18-wheeler than a race car. I'm afraid that for me, it wouldn't be long before I'd forget the spiritual and emotional impact of a dramatic moment being baptized in the Jordan. I would mean to keep on a new path, but I know how easy it is for me to fall back into old habits.

Hosea's Israel has fallen back into old habits, turning to worship of Baal. They are so in the thrall of Baalism that it's nearly impossible for them to turn around – “their deeds do not permit them to return to their God.” Matthew's Pharisees and Sadducees are also relying on old habits, old ways. John accuses them of thinking that claiming Abraham as their ancestor will be enough to assure salvation.

God's much bigger than that, declares John, pointing at the stones on the shore. God can turn stones into sons of Abraham. God can turn anything into anything. The writer of Second Peter also argues against limiting God as he encourages his readers not to give up on the promise of a second coming. God's time is beyond what we see and what we know, he writes.

I have plenty of habits – ways of thinking, ways of living – that put up barriers to God. New habits are hard to come by. I recently began taking flute lessons after a 30-plus year hiatus, and I'm discovering all kinds of bad habits that I didn't know I had – and trying to learn new ones. It's all about muscle memory, and new muscle memory comes slowly, and it comes from practice, from lots of practice.

As for new spiritual habits, I'm glad for Second Peter's assurance of a patient God! How can I practice fruitful repentance? What new habits can I take on this Advent as I await the coming of Christ?

*Dear God. Thank you for your endless patience. Help me to turn away from whatever might be “Baal” in my life, from reliance on old habits, and to look toward you. Amen.*

*Meg Hanna House*

December 1, 2011

Hosea 5:15-6:10; Matthew 3:11-17; and 2 Peter 3:11-18

Blessed Assurance

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

*Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.*

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

This is my favorite moment in the Bible. Here is John, beginning to understand that the call he's been feeling is really going to happen, and recognizing the revolutionary who is bringing the kingdom of God; here is Jesus, who is stepping into his life's work. They are together, in a moment of incredible friendship.

I've been taught that this is Jesus's "Abba Moment," the moment his mission crystallized because he felt an overwhelming sense of being loved, of being the child of God. This is the dove that they feel and see. It was this feeling that taught Jesus what he was meant to do. He spent the rest of his life explaining to people how this love can free them. Because when you feel that level of being loved, you can divorce yourself from the other ways you fill up your life and your time with worry, or money, or status-seeking. You can rest assured that you are a valued, love-worthy, precious person. You rest assured that God will take care of you. You've won the love lottery.

And once you feel that way, you can change the world.

Importantly, this doesn't mean that your life will be without pain or challenge. Jesus, after all, spent three years teaching rather dense disciples, working and traveling nearly ceaselessly, constantly threatened by authorities. Jesus lived to see his beloved friend John killed and felt the pain of Peter's betrayal. Jesus died young. Love does not mean that life is easy.

Yet this is at the core of all that is good: the feeling of community, of being cared for, of the fact that this kind of love EXISTS, even when people fail to be its imperfect vessel. This is the power at the center of the universe, that sustains us and cares for us and comes to us at Christmas, and each day. It is powerful because it IS. In my best moments, I can feel it, too.

Rebecca Davis

## Make Straight the Way of the Lord

Hosea 6:11-7:7  
Matthew 11:2-10  
Revelation 2:2-7

Friday, December 2, 2011

In the passage from Matthew, John the Baptist sends his followers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" In his own way, Jesus confirms that he is indeed the Messiah. Jesus also makes it known that John the Baptist is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." This passage reminds us of the verses from the first chapter of the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist is himself asked who he is.

This episode from John was set to music by Orlando Gibbons, one of England's most important composers from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, who was baptized on Christmas Day in 1583. Between 1596 and 1598 he sang in the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, which is now famous for A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, which is broadcast around the world on Christmas Eve. In 1605 he was appointed the organist for the Chapel Royal, which refers not to a building but to a group of priests and musicians responsible for serving the spiritual needs of England's sovereign. The next year, Gibbons obtained a Bachelor of Music degree from Cambridge University. He was already regarded as a respected composer and one of the country's finest organists. Only a few years before his death at the age of 41, Gibbons was appointed organist at Westminster Abbey. Among his compositions are about 40 verse anthems, including *This is the record of John*, which sets the text from John to music for solo voice alternating with full choir.

In our haste to hear the music of Christmas, let us not quickly skip over the words and music of Advent which speak of preparing a way for the Lord and making the crooked straight.

This is the record of John,  
when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him,  
Who art thou?  
And he confessed and denied not, and said plainly,  
I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What art thou then? Art thou Elias?  
And he said, I am not.  
Art thou the prophet?  
And he answered, No.

Then said they unto him,  
What art thou? that we may give an answer unto them that sent us.  
What sayest thou of thyself?  
And he said, I am the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,  
Make straight the way of the Lord.

*(This is the record of John, Orlando Gibbons, based on John 1:19-23)*

Daniel Stokes



December 3, 2011

## A wayward humanity

Hosea 8:1-10; Matthew 11:11-19; and Acts 17:24-31

Throughout the ages, we human beings have learned to apprehend the laws that govern our environment, to unravel the mysteries of its surroundings. As citizens of the universe, we are subject to these timeless and immutable laws, set by our Creator, among which the law of cause and effect: if you play with fire, you get burned. The same goes with our relationship with God who set the rules we should abide by, in order for us to remain His fervent and faithful servants, and not be the targets of His wrath as the people of Israel experienced when they strayed from His commandments “because they have transgressed His covenant and rebelled against His law”(Hosea 8:1). For every action, there is an equal and opposed reaction even in the realm of the journey of Humankind with God. For each cause, a matching effect followed: “Israel has rejected the good; the enemy will pursue him” (Hosea 8:3); “They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7).

Humanity, in its quest of autonomy ‘*Like a wild donkey alone by itself*’(Hosea 8:9), to influence the course of its life and to better understand the universe and His Creator, has always resorted to diverse means that might give it the illusion of the control of its destiny. Humans have “made idols for themselves from their silver and gold” (Hosea 8:4) , but this work made by man “is not God”(Hosea 8:6). Because “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24), “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising” (Acts 17:29).

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to understand that in our diversity of race, ideology, opinion, and all other differences, we are all Your offspring. Set us of free from the bondage of ignorance that makes us think, we can shape you and put You in the box of the erroneous preconceived, narrow-minded and self-centered perceptions we have of you, or trade you with our earthly material idols that leave no room in our hearts to worship you. In the precious name of Your Beloved Son Our Savior and Redeemer the Lord Jesus Christ.

Youssoupha Nyam

## “How Straight the Path?”

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

Sunday, December 4, 2011

The four passages for this Sunday – besides making me want to stand on the balls of my feet and bounce my way through the peaks and valleys of Handel’s “Every Valley” – paint perhaps the clearest, and in some ways most challenging, picture of why we journey through Advent.

The Advent journey, in our home anyway, has been a time when we almost ritualistically remind ourselves about how important it is to wait. When I was very small -- and I think the same has been true for my son, Alex -- the wait had a very clear pay-off on December 25<sup>th</sup>. But as we have grown older, it seems a little harder (and certainly less tangible) to motivate ourselves around the idea that we wait for a time when goodness and peace shall meet in all the land. As an old New York friend might say, “Yes ... and I am also waiting for the Mets to win another world series.”

So in the past few years, when the first of the purple and pink candles appear, I have tried to turn my thoughts not to the waiting, but to the preparation. Truth be told, this hasn’t been much easier. Every valley shall be lifted up, every hill made low; the crooked made straight and the rough places plain. Really? I mean, we have to get ALL THAT done before we have any reasonable expectation that Christ will come to us again. I take a look at my community, my country and the bigger world and feel pretty grim about the prospects. We seem increasingly unable to speak to each other respectfully in our civil discourse – how are we ever going to make the highway entirely straight for the Lord to come again? Are we even capable? I find the big picture to be, well, pretty depressing.

So where is the hope in Advent? How is it that we (or at least I) can move past the very real feeling of being overwhelmed and out of time? Two thoughts.

First, this is about God’s time – and that is a very different thing from my time. None of us is sure when Christ will come again, especially if that coming is like a thief in the night. The bottom line is that we are highly unlikely to be entirely, 100 percent prepared.

Second, my faith tells me that not having the highway entirely straight is probably OK – as long as there is progress. This is where the journey of Advent becomes extremely personal for me. If the world isn’t ready, can I at least say in honesty that I have done something to prepare – to smooth out the roughest of places in my life or in my community? Making certain that my individual answer is, “yes, I have done something – if even very small – to prepare” makes the Advent journey a time of extraordinary hope and expectation of something wonderful to come.

And I will wait.

Jeff Moore

## From our Fears and Sins Release Us – Be Born in Us Today!

Monday, December 5

Hosea 8:11-14; Matthew 20:20-28; and 1 Peter 1:13-25

As I began studying these passages to prepare this meditation, we had just heard Roger's sermon explaining that the PCUSA Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) approved its report to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCUSA on its engagement with certain corporations doing business in Israel-Palestine, which proposes to add three companies to the divestment list. Roger had just returned from Peoria, Illinois, where one of the companies has its headquarters, a large number of employees, and a good number of Presbyterians. Roger explained some possible reactions to any PCUSA action in Peoria, and in the Jewish community. While upholding responsible investing as an important value, Roger also encouraged us to look at ways our past actions as Christians may have colored the situation, and how at times we ourselves might act like Herod, who delivered the head of John the Baptist when asked for it, and Pilate, who washed his hands of the matter of the crucifixion of Jesus. Since then, I've been pondering prayerfully who are the prophets of today, and how I and how we—as individuals, as members of NYAPC, as Presbyterians, as Christians, as citizens of the U.S., as a human race, ignore or seek to silence prophets and seek to avoid responsibility for doing so. Today's assigned scriptures give us more to ponder.

Below are some of the questions I've been asking myself, which I offer for your consideration, along with some Advent and Christmas hymn references. When we sing these hymns, do we mean what we say? How might we look at the world if we did? What might we do if we did? How might we be changed if we did? How might the world be changed if we did?

Hosea chastised Israel for losing faith in God's promises, and seeking their own security by throwing Israel's lot with Assyria, a local earthly power. Hosea 8:14, "Israel has forgotten his maker, and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied walled cities; but I will send a fire upon his cities, and it will devour his fortresses." As WIN and the Occupy movement call attention to the welfare of the "99%", Congress and local governments wrestle with budget deficits and lobbyists for vested interests, and new terrorism trials begin, I wonder what "walls" have we in the United States have built to protect ourselves from changes to our economic system or from possible threats to our national security from terrorism. Is our building of them a sign that we do not trust God? Do we build them in vain? What destruction do we wreak in the process? During Advent, we profess to remember and await the incarnation of Emmanuel—"God with Us" and sing: **"O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel."** Do we really mean it? Do we really welcome and celebrate and trust "God with Us?" We also sing: **"O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray, Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today."** Do we really want the Jesus of Matthew 20:20-28 to cast out our sin and be born in us? Jesus the suffering servant, who "didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people." Who would we be, if this Jesus were born in us today? What would we do if this Jesus were born in us today? How would we live if this Jesus were born in us today? What might the world be like and know about God if this Jesus were born in us today?

**Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. Born Thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King, born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring. By Thine own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone. Amen.**

Karen Mills

## Prevailing Through Hard Times

Hosea 10: 1-12  
Matthew 17: 9-13  
Acts 19: 1-7

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Today's Scripture selections portray Israel's long, difficult journey from its depths of sin and captivity to a wondrous hope for redemption and a dawning acceptance of the Holy Spirit.

Writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was declining and ultimately falling, Hosea foretells a grim scenario of future events. Recalling the kingdom as a "luxuriant vine that yields its fruit...and increases its altars and buildings," he despairs that "their heart is false and now they must bear their guilt" and the Lord will tear down their altars and buildings. He complains that they had forsaken the worship of God, and made covenants "with empty oaths;" Hosea prophesies that "thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars." He pleaded that Israel "sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love...for it is time to seek the Lord" – a search that ultimately stretched for centuries.

Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 17, relates the miraculous experience of the Transfiguration, when Jesus, with Peter, James, and John went up a mountain and suddenly the figures of Moses and Elijah appeared, a bright cloud shone down on them, and a voice said "This is my Son...with whom I am well pleased." (*The event can be viewed as the point where human nature meets God, with Jesus acting as the bridge between heaven and earth.*) As they walked back down the mountain, Jesus warns them not to tell anyone the things they had seen until he has arisen from the dead. But their first question concerned their understanding that Elijah would come before Jesus. Jesus responded that Elijah had already come (apparently referring to John the Baptist) but was not recognized as such and was treated "as they pleased." And, Jesus added, "so also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands."

Acts, Chapter 19, tells of Paul traveling to Ephesus and finding disciples who believed they had been baptized into "John's baptism" but had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul told them that John baptized with the baptism of repentance; he urged people to believe in the one to come after him – that is, in Jesus. Then the disciples asked to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and when Paul laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Prayer: Dear Lord, keep us mindful of the struggles of early founders of our faith to seek steadfast righteousness, and give us strength to fulfill our Baptism by walking in the Way of the Holy Spirit.

-- Douglas R. Porter

Hosea 11:1-7  
Matthew 23:1-12  
Acts 13:16-25

December 7, 2011

### Editor's Privilege

It has been my privilege for the past several years to serve as the editor of our Advent and Lenten devotional booklets. I love doing it, mostly. I love it because I am afforded the opportunity to interact with many of the wonderful members of this church and to get the first look at their insights and at the parts of their lives they so often share in these pages.

I have the opportunity today to contribute to this year's Advent booklet, as one of our contributors had to withdraw as the booklet was being assembled. It happens sometimes and I have a bag of tricks that I reach into when the deadline looms and words are needed. Usually when I take up the task of writing a meditation, I try not to read anyone else's contribution until I have finished my own. It's hard enough wrestling with these texts oftentimes, without having the inspiring ideas of others swirling in one's head.

All of this preamble is to explain why the meditation for today will not in fact address the texts that are listed above. They are the lectionary texts for today, but Bruce Whitener has done a wonderful job on the Pharisees in tomorrow's meditation and besides, as I was reading Rebecca Davis' excellent meditation (December 1), I was struck by something I hadn't seen before in the scripture passage from Matthew. As you will recall, the passage relates Jesus' baptism by John, including John's protest that he should be receiving baptism from Jesus.

*Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.*

*John consented.* There is something in those two words that speaks powerfully to me about the graciousness and condescension of God. God's purposes do sometimes seem to hinge on the consent of human beings. Mary is probably the most profound example as she allows herself to become the vessel through which God will enter the human experience. John consented and Jesus was baptized into his ministry. The disciples in their turn consented to be called away from their livelihoods and take up a calling that would change the world. Probably none of them had any idea of the ramifications of their consent beyond their own immediate circumstances, which were significant enough.

What about us? I am quite sure that we have all had at least one or two times in our lives when we were conscious of God's asking something of us; something that required our consent and that committed us to a course of action we had never before contemplated. Possibly we have resisted, said no, and walked away. God is always working out God's purposes, however, and the opportunities to say yes to God abound. May God continue to call us and give us the grace to say yes.

Miriam Dewhurst

## Seven Woes on the Lawyers and the Pharisees

Lectionary Passages: Hosea 11: 8-12  
Matthew 23: 13-22  
Philippians 4: 4-7

Thursday, December 8, 2011

Our lectionary passages for today begin with the lectionary tradition of including Old Testament verses foretelling the coming of the Messiah. It is a dialogue familiar to all: the prophet (Hosea) recording the words of God relating His disappointment with Israel. Hosea is one of the so-called *minor prophets*, not for the significance of his writings, but instead for their paucity. The imagery is that of a father to a son (Israel) enumerating the many evil practices that the people have adopted. Especially noted is idol worship occurring as Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Also mentioned was the widespread practice of adultery; in fact Hosea's wife Gomer, who had deserted him, was a prostitute. However, God states that He will not destroy the Israelites despite His anger, "For I am God and not man, the Holy One among you".

The second lectionary passage is from Matthew and relates the unpopularity of lawyers and Pharisees of that era. Probably the most vivid opinion of lawyers comes from Shakespeare's play *Henry VI*: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!" According to many polls for years, the vast majority of the persons that were surveyed about lawyers had a similar opinion. The most used adjectives in the Comments section of the surveys were "greedy" and "dishonest". Some obvious exceptions, although fictitious, are Atticus Finch (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and Frank Galvin, played by Paul Newman in *The Verdict*, a movie about an alcoholic attorney trying to save his career by winning a medical malpractice case. If you have not seen *The Verdict*, it is an intense *thriller* with James Mason and Jack Warden in the excellent cast. *To Kill a Mockingbird* won a Pulitzer Prize for its young author.

The Pharisees were at various times a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought among Jews, and at the time of this excoriation by Jesus, a powerful political movement against Christian believers. Jesus said:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

**Prayer:** The last lectionary passage is well suited as our prayer for today:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

**Bruce Whitener**

## When Will There Be Good News?

Hosea 12: 2-9

Friday, December 9

Matthew 23: 23-28

I Thessalonians 5: 1-7

As I contemplated my Scriptures for today, the above title, actually the name of a book by an author I enjoy, popped into my mind. We know there *will* be good tidings of great joy, and we know when. But first, we have business to attend to. And I *don't* mean Christmas shopping and baking cookies.

Today's passages are anything but good news. God harangues Israel through Hosea, "Ephraim has said, 'Ah, but I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself' [-- through dishonest business practices --] but all his riches can never offset the guilt he has incurred."

In Matthew, Jesus says "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith...Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity."

And Paul tells the Thessalonians, "you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape".

As I write this, Washington and Wall Street are "occupied", and it would be easy to imagine the occupants calling out "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" But could not we ourselves wear those labels? If we are the 99% in America, might we not just as easily be the 1% to many parts of the world? In this season of excess, as we await the arrival of the Good News of Jesus' birth, today's passages can be seen as a call to treat Advent as we do Lent, as a time for self-reflection and repentance, so that when the Good News arrives, we are spiritually ready to receive it and rejoice, and to make of ourselves a worthy gift to the Christ Child.

**Loving God**, help us to see ourselves with the clear eye of the prophets, to renew our commitment to Your expectations of us, of both faith and service, and the "weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith", so that when the Good News arrives, we will be ready to receive it. Amen.

Mary Krug

### **Advent, Advocacy, and Injustice**

*"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets, wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city..." (Matthew 23:34)*

It is fitting that one of today's lectionary readings coincides with the commemoration of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration was written in the aftermath of World War II, by leaders such as Eleanor Roosevelt, and ratified by the UN on Dec. 10, 1948.

The Declaration of Human Rights, asserts that all human beings -- regardless of nationality, gender or religion -- are free, equal, and are entitled to live in dignity, safety and in peace. It condemns discrimination, slavery, and torture -- or any act that prevents the fulfillment of these basic rights.

Although it is now part of international law, this declaration of hope is breached more than it is observed. Remember the genocides in Darfur, the Congo and Cambodia? Or the famine in the Horn of Africa? Today, 990 million people all over the world suffer from hunger and 1.2 billion live on about \$1.25 daily. In our country, 46 million or one in six Americans live in poverty.

We may not be the prophets, wise men, and scribes that God sends to inveigh against injustice, but as Christians our faith moves us to help those in need. As Matthew tells us, the task is not easy. In the Philippines, researchers estimate that more than 830 church workers -- pastors, priests, elders, and Christian educators, some of them I know -- have been killed while proclaiming the Gospel and working for justice. No one really knows who the killers were -- they could have been the police, the military, rebels, or jealous neighbors.

Our Christian faith teaches us to minister to the poor and hungry. We do this regularly, but the reality is that all the help dispensed by our food pantries and food banks only equals 6 percent of the nutrition programs provided by our government or the poor, for mothers, and for children.

We are not required to be martyrs, but we are required to go to the root of the problem and inveigh against the injustices of today. I and thousands of other Christians know that to bring about a better world, we should advocate for one. The act of advocacy requires us to call our member of Congress, write them a letter, or send them a personal email on issues vital to hungry and poor people. We are lucky to live in a democracy that is largely sensitive to the power of constituents like you and I.

In this advent season, let us get out of our comfort zones and speak for the voiceless, the vulnerable, the hungry, and the poor. This way we honor God and all that the Bible teaches us about justice -- letting it roll through our world like mighty waters and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.

))))((((

*God, as we commemorate the UN Declaration of Human Rights and your teachings through the Bible, push us out of our comfort zone. Grant us the courage to speak for the voiceless; to feed the hungry; to care for the sick; to right injustice wherever it may be; to create political will to protect the poor and vulnerable among us; and constancy in prayerful advocacy this Advent and beyond. Amen.*

--Adlai J. Amor



*<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'*

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the inquisitors from Jerusalem must have wondered what they were getting involved in when they approached the Jordan River on that day. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist was clothed in camel's hair and a leather belt and he ate locusts and wild honey. I imagine him waist deep in the water as the questioners approached – he was actively preaching, on fire with the Spirit, and baptizing the willing. His charisma and his message explain why people from all over the region were traveling to him for baptism. His prophetic response to the inquisitors probably made them even more uncertain about what they were witnessing.

*<sup>23</sup>He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" as the prophet Isaiah said.'*

Some of those questioners might have wondered if John was a legitimate messenger foretelling the Messiah's arrival. Some of them might have intuited the gospel's preamble

*<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

Perhaps some of them hoped that John was that witness because they yearned for the Messiah's arrival; they yearned to hear a voice in the wilderness.

In Advent, we too are attentively waiting for that arrival, but do we hear the voice in the wilderness? If John were testifying today, where would we find him? In the Radcliffe Room or the White House; a tent in McPherson Square or a dais in New Hampshire; the Haitian plateau or a CNN news desk; a Rio favela or a Princeton library; in front of a small storefront congregation struggling to survive or elevated on the pulpit of a suburban megachurch? The apparent futility of a search for true prophets in our world suggests that two millennia ago we might have been hopeful questioners facing John from the banks of the Jordan – if he's not the Messiah, then maybe he's Elijah. If he's not Elijah, then who . . . can't he please be someone?

Our wilderness is not a quiet one. We live in a noisy world where the problem is deciding which voice in the cacophony of life merits our attention. Who is testifying to the light? In Advent we try to listen a bit harder and can look for guidance in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

*<sup>6</sup>So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; . . . <sup>8</sup>and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.*

A prayer inspired by all of the passages:

Lord, you have clothed us in salvation and covered us in righteousness. Grant us the wisdom to recognize the crying voice in the wilderness of our world and the grace to witness the light in our midst. *Amen.*

Mike Smith

## THE END IS NEAR or GOD IS NEAR—YOUR CHOICE

Hosea 14: 1-9  
2011

Monday, December 12,

Matthew 24: 1-14  
Jude 1-16

As we prepare for another coming of Christ at Christmas, we wonder about His Second Coming. We know that we should be watchful, but for what? And, how will we know when He will come again, for the last time?

When my grandmother Ella died in 1976, there were no shortages of wars, famines, and moral outrages. She predicted that her end was also the end for the earth; I understand this is quite common. In August of this past year, DC was wracked with floods and an earthquake. Is now the end of times?

In this difficult passage in Matthew, there are quite a few messages about the end of times, or the end of some times. Jesus *does* accurately predict the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, but that was not the final end of times.

The Day of the Lord is a concept discussed in both the Old and the New Testaments. It is described as a frightful time, a complete moral breakdown. However, the frightful things are only a prelude to the actual Day of the Lord--it is not about destruction, but a time of re-creation. The Day of the Lord is when God intervenes in the world in a good and glorious way.

The prophet Hosea calls for repentance and renewal. Indeed, Christianity brings a new conscience into our lives. The Day of the Lord will bring God's universal and eternal rule, and we need to believe that the universe is moving towards this.

So...following the advice of Jude—we should not grumble, find fault, follow evil desires, boast, flatter, etc. (You can add some of your own failings to this list.) How are you preparing for the coming of Christ this Christmas and for the final Day of the Lord?

*Ella Cleveland*

## Advent Meditation 2011: Tuesday December 13

Malachi 3:1-5

Matthew 24:15-31

Jude 1:1-16

The day Jesus Christ returns to Earth will be one of judgment, when those unrepentant will suffer under the trials of the Lord God who has seen all. In those days, true Christians will be saved from the trials of their earthly peers. Those elect Christians must be aware, however, of the many false prophets who will arise and claim to be the Lord. Do not flee, but wait patiently as Jesus Himself will gather up all those who know Him. Though you may be among those saved, you must remain aware of the evil that lives amongst and within our world – rebuking the teachings of Jesus and twisting His words into a life of selfish debauchery and base abuse of themselves and others.

We are not on Earth, you and I, for an easy life. We are not only placed here by God for His purpose, we must also hold close the salvation delivered by His son Jesus Christ. We must honor the teachings of Jesus, with both meditation and the action which follows from those commands. Our lives are not for us to waste in pursuit of all that we *feel* desirable. While never perfect, we must maintain fealty and concerted effort – to live a truly Christian life and to wait patiently for the deliverance of the endless life we've been guaranteed.

We Christians may be individuals of impressive intellectual prowess, yet we lack so significantly in the knowledge which ascertains the greatest danger of mortal life – the promises of false prophets. These idols claim powers and authority the Bible tells us reside only with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Out of our ignorance in such things, we must be skeptical. Indeed, we should hold firm in the teachings we find in the Bible. We need not run towards the restoration and salvation Jesus has secured. He will come to us and deliver directly. Patience and stewardship is all that's required.

Rejoice! Steadfast we must remain in the Lord's teachings, yet permanent is the victory our dedication will earn. We must be aware of the misdeeds that happen every day, many a result of our own straying from a Holy path. We must forgive those sins in others, and repent of those for which we have ownership. Yet, our story is a joyous one. We Christians, those who truly know Jesus, will be gathered together and raised on high – far from the trials which await those unelected.

Gordon Chaffin

## The Coming Messenger, Watchfulness, Patience

Malachi 3:6-12  
Matthew 24:32-44  
James 5:7-10

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Three very different scenarios for this day. The passage from Malachi, the closing book of the Old Testament, addresses the fifth oracle (communication from God) of the six that are presented in the book. It notes that the very existence of sinful Israel is the result of the Lord's constancy, yet the people rob the Lord by their failure to contribute the tithes (one tenth of the produce of the land) that are required under Lev 27:30, Num 18:21-24 and Deut 14:28 and provide support for resident aliens, widows, orphans and levitical priests. Israel is invited to put God to the test. Fill the storehouse and see if the heavens open up and an overflowing blessing pours down, with the produce of the field protected from the locust and the vines in full growth and all nations viewing Israel as a land of delight. In the preceding passages of Malachi, reference is made to a messenger being sent to prepare the way before the Lord; and the closing passages refer to the arrogant and evildoers being burned and the righteous rising. A good lead into the Gospel announcement of the birth of Jesus.

The passage from Matthews covers the last of five major discourses of Jesus (possibly intended to recall the five books of the Torah, attributed to Moses, since the author seems to have viewed Jesus as a new, more authoritative Moses offering a new Torah that fulfills and updates). Jesus presented this discourse to his disciples when they came to him on the Mount of Olives after he had cleaned out the Temple of all who were buying and selling, following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It needs to be read with the earlier portions of Chapter 24 in order to provide context for verse 33 following the Lesson of the Fig Tree: "So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near at the very gates." What is forecast is the Resurrection and possibly the Second Coming.

Finally, the Letter of James, argued by some as being the brother of Jesus, is a recital of the challenges faced by the righteous in the selfish, corrupt "world" of the First Century. The verses for today urge patience in this suffering, without grumbling but with assurance that the Second Coming is near.

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

Robert L. Doan

**Malachi 3: 13-18**  
**Matthew 24: 45-51**  
**Romans 11:33-36**

**December 15, 2011**

**“Gentle Spirits....Trusty Servants...”**

Today is my parents’ 68<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They come to mind as I ponder today’s passages which, for me, evoke a similar message as that of Matthew’s third Beatitude, “How blest are those of a gentle spirit...” (studied in November by Presbyterian Women). It is such joy—but also hard to comprehend—that two gentle souls, ages 91 and 90, have traveled life’s road together for that many years, and through it all—5 children, 15 grandchildren, 3 great-grandchildren—have embodied Jesus’s teachings in a life of daily toil and living.

Matthew 24 tells of the “trusty servant, the sensible man charged... to manage the household and issue rations at the proper time...” Together Matthew and Malachi speak of serving God regardless of “what is gained by observing his rules and behaving with deference.” Eschewing those who “count the arrogant happy and evildoers successful,” Malachi tells us that God keeps a record of those who feared the Lord and tells “good men from bad,” the servant of God from the man who does not serve. If one believes that serving God gains nothing, that the arrogant and rich secure all the riches, that it is just too much time and effort to be “the trusty servant” while the Master is away, then Matthew and Malachi mean to set the record straight.

So how do we become the trusty servants of God, fearing the Lord and doing his will, as prescribed by Matthew and Malachi? I believe it is following the model of my parents: my mother who drives friends and relatives to doctors’ appointments and grocery stores, writes notes of congratulations or condolence, is there unconditionally for whatever is needed. Or my father, who is a model of gentle strength, support, honesty, integrity, and work. They live their lives—independently in their own home--as loving, gentle souls, without grudges or schemes or disrespect. I want to be like them when I grow up....

Prayer: Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is, lead us in Your way, serving as best we can in our daily lives.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Friday, December 16, 2011

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’

“But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

### **Malachi 4:1-5**

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the Lord Almighty.

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him on Horeb for all Israel.

See I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

### **1 Corinthians 2:1-6**

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.

It was initially difficult to find a common link amongst these three passages. The first two have the underlying theme of preparing for and responding to the second coming. Malachi talks almost in terms of fire and brimstone for those who do not follow the Lord. In Matthew, Jesus instead relates a parable with the moral that believers should be prepared when the Lord comes for us. Perhaps it is preparation that links the Malachi and Matthew passages to 1 Corinthians 2: 1-6. As believers we recognize the concept of Jesus’s return. It can be convenient to think of living our faith as a way to achieve this “end game,” that living a faithful life is only to avoid becoming “ashes under the soles of your feet.” But to me it seems the experiences of living a faithful life – remembering ‘the least of these’ in a world of abundance, experiencing the joys of church community, relying on God during difficult times, even simply just being kind to others – is the true “demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Living a life like Christ may prepare us for the day He comes again, and potentially save us from burning like a furnace, but truly living the faith each day may actually be God’s greatest power.

Aryn Myers

Exodus 15:11-18  
Matthew 25: 14-30  
1 Corinthians 2:7-13

Saturday, December 17, 2011

### A Talent Show?

Today's scriptures begin with a portion of the *Song of Moses* quoted in the Book of Exodus in which praise is given to God for bringing the Hebrews safely to the promised land after the escape from Egypt and delivering them from the Philistines, the Moabites and the Canaanites. The selection from Matthew contains the vaguely familiar parable of Jesus, *The Parable of the Talents*. In the passage from 1 Corinthians Paul exhorts the church there to allow the Spirit of God to reveal to them what God has prepared for them. If there is a common thread among these scriptures, it was beyond the scope of my Biblical scholarship. I shall concentrate upon the Matthew passage since it seemed to speak to me.

As you may recall, the master who was leaving for a long trip entrusted five talents, two talents and one talent to three slaves, "each according to his ability". The money involved here was quite a significant amount, one talent being the equivalent of 15 years of wages. The first two slaves "trade" or invest the talents, while the third one, fearful of the consequences of losing it, merely buries it. Upon the master's return the first two are rewarded, for they had doubled their investments, while the third slave was castigated and "thrown into the outer darkness" because he had nothing to show but the original worth.

This parable, like the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, has always been disturbing to me since I identify with the elder brother and hapless slave, respectively. Several of Roger's sermons have guided me through my issues with the Prodigal Son but today's passage forced me to reexamine Jesus' point with this parable. Why, I ask, is it so terrible to be "safe". The third slave did not lose any of the money except in the sense of perhaps not keeping up with inflation! Growing up under the influence of depression-era parents gave me a healthy respect for the value of savings and avoiding risks. Investment is a risky business.

The double meaning of the word "talent" in English has been helpful in interpreting this for me. Talent is a metaphor for our very essence or what we can contribute to others, our value or our God-given ability to pursue justice and love. Jesus' example and exhortation was always about taking a risk, truly accepting the Spirit of God and committing one's being to discerning God's will for one's life. Being safe or burying our talent takes the form of not reaching out to others or exposing our vulnerabilities or confronting injustice or loving those who frighten or anger us. Investing our talents seems to point to turning from the negative, death-driven ways of the world ("burying" is an apt word here) and affirming our need to take that leap of faith for living life as fully and meaningfully as possible. Celebrating the God of Yes rather than listening to the voices of "no". The third slave acted on the basis of fear. Jesus is saying to me, act upon what Paul called the Spirit of God, the God of Yes.

*Most Merciful God, help me use my talents to love more and to seek justice. Dispel my fears and help me affirm the God of Yes!*

Spencer Gibbins

## In Mary's Shoes

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Psalm 89  
Luke 1:26-38, Romans 16:25-27

Sunday, Dec. 18, 2011

Can we walk in Mary's shoes during the Annunciation, proclaimed by Luke in one of the most familiar Christmas stories foretelling of Jesus' birth? We, in the 4<sup>th</sup> week of Advent, are occupied by our Christmas plans, lists and parties. However, what has just happened to Mary? She has been told –“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name of Jesus.”

With these words her life has been overturned. She is a virgin and betrothed to Joseph. Suddenly she will be with child but not married. Will she be homeless as an unwed teenage mother when her fiancé and strict Middle Eastern family find out she is pregnant, under mysterious circumstances? How can Mary explain? “Well, there was this angel...Gabriel...in Nazareth...sent from God...He told me, ‘You are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’”

She is in deep trouble. Who will accept this explanation? Her fiancé's first reaction will be to “divorce her quietly;” her family will renounce her because she has disgraced them. This is a horrible situation for any young woman to face alone.

So her reaction to this news offers a deep insight into her strength of character. Mary does not doubt or argue with the angel; no “why me?”; no bold excuses as Moses give on Mt. Horeb when he is called by the LORD; no disbelief as Zachariah reveals just before to this same Gabriel. Once she comprehends this amazing prophecy: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end,” she complies. Mary declares, “I am the LORD's servant...May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:26-28)

This is an amazing leap of faith, for herself, for her unborn son, for her future. At this moment she has no material prospects, no security, and faces imminent disgrace with her fiancé, her family and her village. There are 100 things to fear, yet her faith is stronger than them all. She is incredibly brave in the face of social ostracism and disgrace. Or she could be stoned to death.

What is guiding her in this fearsome mission that she has been blessed with? Our text does not say, except that she accepts that, “I am the LORD's servant.” With that she has joined the Lord's household and will be protected by Him. And she must see that she has been blessed above all women. From this humble servant will come “the Son of God...whose kingdom will never end.” She will begin the kingdom. Her blessedness is hinted at in the psalm in these lectionary passages of kingdoms foretold.

Blessed are those who have learned to proclaim You,  
who walk in the light of Your Presence, O LORD.  
In Your Name they rejoice all day long,  
and in Your righteousness they are exalted.  
For You are the glory of their lives,  
and in Your light our Savior is exalted! (Ps 89:15-17)

Her choice to become the Lord's servant is both brave and wise. Out of her servanthood comes an exalted kingdom. And I wonder whether it is generally true that one must be brave before one can be wise. With her brave example, Jesus learns to walk fearlessly in the light of God's presence and to embody it. Halleluia, praise the glory of the Lord.

Tom Dunlap



## SING FOR JOY

I Chronicles 16:8-18  
Matthew 26:31-46  
Ephesians 3:7-13

Monday, Dec. 19, 2011

The introduction (v.7) to the psalm of David in today's passage from I Chronicles states that David, on the day that the ark of the covenant was placed in its own home in Jerusalem, "first appointed the singing of praises to the LORD".

Singing the word of the Lord has dominated our — Helen's and my — life in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Sure, we have done other things. Served on various committees and boards, taught church school, worked with committees charged with nominating leaders, but singing has been central to us. Helen joined the choir in 1952, I in 1954. We met there, dated there, and in essence married from there. For almost 60 years, we have been singing for the congregation (and ourselves), first in the Sunday evening service, then in both morning services, and now mainly in the first morning service. The hymns and anthems we have sung have revealed to us, and we hope to the congregation, the meaning of our relation to God.

So many of the words spoken during the worship service bring to mind the songs we have sung. Unfortunately, the tunes can't be reproduced here in the dry written words, but we can't see the words without hearing them being sung.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" or "In the beginning was the Word" both have melodies attached that themselves tell us that everything starts from God. In Advent, we can pray with all "Come thou long expected Jesus ..... by thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne" for Christ to be the source of our salvation. At Christmas we can hope with "Little star of Bethlehem, do we see thee shining through the tall trees?" that all the obstacles of our busy lives cannot screen out the love of God coming to us.

In times of trouble, we can sing with Jeremiah in Lamentations "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end." On Good Friday, we can mourn Jesus on the cross, "two stark crosses between." And on Easter we can sing "Now the green blade riseth." And throughout the year we can rejoice with "O Love that will not let me go."

Music and belief. Inseparable for us. So we sing with Randall Thompson:

Ye shall have a song,  
as in the night  
when a holy solemnity is kept;  
and gladness of heart,  
as when one goeth with a pipe  
to come into the mountain of the LORD,  
to the mighty One of Israel.

*Isaiah 30:29*

Phil Hanna

## Practice! Practice! Practice!

Colossians 1: 29

December 20, 2011

*"So naturally, we proclaim Christ! We warn everyone we meet, and we teach everyone we can all that we know about him, so that we may bring every man to his full maturity in Christ. This is what I am working and struggling at, with all the strength that God puts into me." J.B. Phillips translation*

Throughout his letters, Paul stresses the goal of spiritual maturity, but what does "full maturity in Christ" look like? Is it book knowledge? Is it pastoral wisdom? Is it mastery of spiritual practices? Is it the amount of time you spend in prayer? Is it exhausting work for good causes? Is it the result of facing all your doubts and coming through to the other side with a deeper, more searching faith?

In his recent book, **Outliers**, Malcolm Gladwell argues that what we call "genius" happens where incredible amounts of practice and incredible good fortune meet. He cites a whole raft of studies in which people we would label geniuses have practiced their special proficiency – for hitting baseballs or programming computers or striking the keys on a piano – for 10,000 or more hours, frequently much of that time concentrated early in their lifetimes. As a result, their remarkable skills are etched into their muscles, nerve endings, the very structure of their brains. When that finely honed, special skill emerges in just the right time, the right place, "genius" shows itself.

Perhaps with the exception of monks, few of us practice our faith in anything like the intensity of a concert pianist or a professional ballplayer or even a video game aficionado. After all, we have to live our lives. A week ago I was watching our granddaughter, Maya, at Community Club. She is at that wonderful stage at which she repeats the same actions with absolutely remarkable patience and concentration until she has mastered them. In this case, she climbed four steps, turned around and walked back down. She must have done it 30 times, each time exultant at reaching the top and equally exultant at reaching the bottom. Perhaps, ironically, that is something like "full maturity in Christ", that numinous combination of practice and joy!

Although the core of Luke's account of Jesus' birth is a young persons' story, an unmarried teenage mom and her baby, that story is bracketed between the stories of four older people, Elizabeth and Zechariah at the beginning and Anna and Simeon near the end. Both Anna and Simeon have spent their maturing years fasting, praying, waiting for the coming of the Messiah – practicing in joy – when of a sudden a child, the child, is presented at the temple. All that practice has prepared them to recognize the special child in their midst.

*"Now, Lord, you are dismissing your servant in peace, as you have promised! For with my own eyes I have seen your salvation which you have made ready for all people to see – a light to show truth to the gentiles and to bring glory to your people Israel."*

Paul B. Dornan

1 Chronicles 16: 28-36  
John 6: 27-34  
Revelation 21-1-8

December 21, 2011

## A NEW THING

We found resonance in today's Revelation passages that speak directly to the anticipation which characterizes Advent: "See, I am making all things new" said "the one who was seated on the throne."

Two recent developments in our lives, one highly personal and the other arising out of the corporate body of Christ we share at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, bear evidence of the old saying that "most overnight successes are years in the making."

Our first "new thing" was the recent birth of our first grandson (and sixth grandchild) whose birth obviously represents both a "new thing" and a very long-running thread that traces back through his family history. The miracle of birth, as seemingly routine as modern medicine has made it, remains an awesome experience for the parents, grandparents, and other loved ones who a generation earlier experienced the birth of the mother or father, the long and oftentimes challenging pathway to maturity, and the consummation of a courtship and marriage in God's perfect gift of love—a new child.

While quite different in scale, we have also had the not dissimilar experience of taking part in the realization of the church's decades-long dream of producing a new history chronicling our legacy of more than two centuries as a leading faith institution in the nation's capital. The creation of the loving hands of writers, researchers, fact checkers, proof readers, and other contributors makes the book yet another "new thing" in which its many "parents" can take great pride. We are two of those proud parents.

True, the birth of one of God's children is infinitely more miraculous than the collective telling of the story of even such a venerable church as ours, but there are unmistakable parallels: a conception, incubation, much labor, and finally, the delivery of a "new thing."

For us, both have come at this most wondrous season of the church calendar, and the common joy of these two new things is for us a tangible fulfillment of the anticipation of this Advent season.

*Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come before him.  
Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.  
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.*

*I Chronicles: 28-30, 34*

Kris and Wilson Golden

### Housing and Food, God's and Ours

How are we to understand an infinite, transcendent God? How can that God communicate to us? One way is using and stretching terms and analogies drawn from our own experience. Shelter and food are basic, universal human needs. In these passages God uses these familiar concepts to give us a glimpse of a more profound reality. In 1 Chronicles 17, David, settling in as King, notes the disparity between his house and the tent housing the Ark of the Covenant. He wants to build God a more fitting, permanent residence of cedar. But God through the prophet Nathan vetoes the idea, in the process demonstrating the usefulness and limitations of human concepts to communicate God's messages. The tabernacle has been the symbol of God's presence with his people and a more fancy "permanent" house would be inappropriately limiting. God's plans for the future, while communicated in analogies that people can understand, go far beyond them. Thus God reminds David that he has been elevated from being a "shepherd" of sheep to being a "shepherd" of people. The promises for the future of David's line and people (apocalyptic visions of a home safe from evil and enemies) likewise stretch from the familiar to the boundaries of comprehension.

In John 6, Jesus uses the image of food to connect to the experience of his listeners, but then to press beyond their common understanding to communicate divine truth. He contrasts the manna that came down from Heaven to sustain the Israelites in the desert with his role as the bread of eternal life. The manna fed the Israelites for the day, but would spoil overnight, just as those who ate it (or ordinary bread) will die. Foreshadowing the last supper, Jesus proclaims, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry or thirsty." "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." Uncomprehending, the people struggle to overcome their literal minds and grasp the message: "But we know his parents - how can he say he came down from heaven?" "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" -- In other words, God's gift of faith is necessary to understand the meaning behind Jesus' descriptions.

The description of the Holy City in Revelation 21, contrasting with the primitive tents of the wilderness or even David's dream of a cedar temple, pushes the analogy of human habitation beyond its limits. Filled with all imaginable riches--radiant jewels, gates of pearl, streets of gold--and teeming with symbolism--12 gates (and all measurements in multiples of 12) reflecting the tribes and the apostles, gleaming with gold and transparent as glass, representing beauty and purity, a perfect cube in form like the Ark of the Covenant--the Holy City is calculated to give an apprehension of God's glory, power and nature, but simultaneously suggests that human imagination falls woefully short of divine reality.

*Feed us, o God, with your Bread of Life. Remind us that you are with us every day, in our own ephemeral world, as we wander, searching and waiting for our future. Help us to understand more fully your magnificent vision for our eternal lives, as we strive to live faithfully in response to your call.*

Betsy Merritt & Jim Bird

**Friday, December 23, 2011:** 2 Samuel 7:18-22; John 1:9-18; and Rev. 21:22-2:5

*John 1: 9-13:* “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God...”

Growing up, many of us probably sang songs like “This Little Light of Mine” and learned some of the oft-quoted Scripture verses invoking lightness and brightness; the Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our paths, a way of discerning our direction.

In the passage from 2 Samuel, David says to God: “Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness so your servant may know it.” This passage prefigures God’s promise to us in Christ (God’s true light), the covenant God creates with those who follow and trust in God.

So too does the scripture from the book of John foreshadow the coming of the one who is pure light: “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” This is what we celebrate: Jesus’ coming into the world. But the passage from John also illuminates our responsibility: we are to accept, receive, and believe in Jesus. And through that power, by that light, we could become children of God, born *of* God.

The theme of light takes on a starring role in the Christmas story, in the form of the holy child (think of all the Renaissance paintings that depict the baby Jesus with a glowing halo around his head) and in the bright star that beckons the wise men to the manger. As the third verse of “Silent Night” says:

Silent night, holy night! Wondrous star, lend thy light!  
With the angels let us sing Alleluia to our King!  
Christ the Savior is here, Jesus the Savior is here!  
Silent night, Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from Thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus Lord at thy birth; Jesus Lord at thy birth.

Our God sent us eternal life and eternal light, symbolized in the “wondrous star” leading the wise men from the East towards Jesus. The path that those wise men followed was not a path without complications and challenges, and God certainly expected much from them, but their path was one in which the “glory of God [was] its light and its lamp [was] the Lamb” (Revelation 21: 23). What better to time to remember God’s light for us than just days before we celebrate the birth of our savior?

*Prayer: O God, we give thanks for the light and the lamp, for the glory of God and for the Lamb. We give thanks for the baby Jesus who reminds us of the fullness of your everlasting love and the grace you bestow upon us each and every day. Help us to celebrate the pure light of your Son and intentionally and prayerfully accept, receive, and believe in Him. Amen.*

Kristin Ford

Luke 2:1-20  
Isaiah 9:2-7

Saturday, Dec. 24, 2011

## LOVE CAME DOWN

In these scriptures the words are so familiar that they evoke sounds and sights—earthbound. And that is one meaning of Christmas—God’s transcendent love, not in some vague heavenly sphere but part of our very human lives.

“In the days of Caesar Augustus. . .” begins the Luke scripture, and I’m transported back to Athens, Georgia. On Christmas Eve my father and I have gone into a friend’s woods and last minute, as always, chosen a Christmas tree. At home my mother brings out the ornaments. . . a few delicate ones and various construction paper chains, stars, and Santas. My brother, mother and I sit in front of a fire lovingly stoked by my father as he begins with those familiar words from Luke.

From Isaiah 9 come the words “The people who walked in darkness shall see a great light.” It’s over forty years ago and I’m sitting in a pew at New York Avenue, my belly bulging with our first child. Those words and Handel’s music fill the church. I look at my husband David’s face in the choir, a man, choirboy earnest. I think of the birth of the baby Jesus and the upcoming birth of our own child.

Back to Luke: “Now in this same district there were shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch through the night over their flock, when suddenly there stood before them an angel of the Lord.” I’m transported to many Christmas pageants, especially one in our church in London. There were angels, coat-hanger halos askew, and baaaaing sheep having to be herded back when they go astray. Not in Luke, but in that pageant, two of the three kings, our sons David and Daniel, are unable to control the giggles.

Christmas then and now: Let us like Mary treasure all these things and ponder over them and like the shepherds, glorify and praise God.

Helen Williams



## Christmas Day

*Luke 2:8-20*

*John 1:1-14 and Hebrews 1:1-12*

On this day we, like Mary, have much to treasure and much to ponder in our hearts.

Today we celebrate the birth of a baby who slept in a manger, a feed trough for animals. We celebrate this birth that was announced by an angel in and through whom the glory of the LORD shone, lighting up the night sky — an angel joined suddenly by a large gathering of angels, all of them praising God.

We celebrate the birth that the angels announced to shepherds who lived in the fields — announced not to the powerful, not to the well-off and comfortable but announced to shepherds, those who were often despised, who were considered lowly, who stunk, who lived and slept outdoors.

How do we on Christmas Day make sense of this? Of any of this? How do we in our homes, surrounded by family and friends, gifts and food — more gifts than any of us need, more food than any of us can eat — make sense of this?

Would we today — do we today — notice Christ among us?

Do we know where to look — or are we too busy looking to those with power and money, privilege and prestige? Would we — do we — notice an infant with nowhere to sleep or angels trying to get our attention?

Today bells ring out in Christian churches all over the world announcing the celebration of this birth. May each of us take time during this day to sit quietly with the reality of whose birth we are celebrating — and to consider what that birth means to us and to our world.

May we treasure this birth and ponder it in our hearts.

*---Bonnie Davis*

