



Advent 2012
The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
www.nyapc.org

ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
2010

- Sunday, December 2 First Sunday of Advent
(Communion)
- Tuesday, December 4 Women's Circle 2, 12:30-2:30 pm
Miriam Dewhurst's home
- Sunday, December 9 Second Sunday of Advent
Pageant rehearsal 10:00 am
Annual Congregational Meeting,
Part 1, 12:15 pm
Gench Open House, 2-5 pm
- Tuesday, December 11 Joint Boards Meeting, 7:00 pm
- Saturday, December 15 Christmas pageant rehearsal
10:00am – 12 noon
- Sunday, December 16 Third Sunday of Advent
Children/Choir Christmas
Program, **10:00 am service**
Christmas Caroling, Cookies
And Crafts, PMH, 11:00 am
- Sunday, December 23 Fourth Sunday of Advent
One service, 10:00 am
- Monday, December 24 Christmas Eve Services - 5:30 pm
and 8:00 pm (Communion)



Happy New Year!

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Psalms 25: 1-10

Luke 21: 25-36

1st Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Sunday

December 2, 2012

Today is the first day of Advent, the beginning of a new ecclesiastical year. Today's scripture passages summarize all Scripture for us, providing an overview for God's word for us throughout the year ahead:

- *The day is coming when the Lord's gracious promise will be fulfilled.*

Jeremiah makes this bold statement in the face of unbelievable destruction and despair.

Think about that.

- *All the Lord's paths are loving and faithful for those who keep his covenant.*

The psalmist who makes this bold statement is alone and afflicted, keenly aware of his many offenses.

Think about that.

- *Stay alert at all times. The Lord returns sooner than you think.*

Luke is writing about the apocalypse, the horrors of the end days. He gives hopeful advice and joins Jeremiah and the psalmist in reminding us of God's steadfast love and the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.

Think about that.

- *Encourage each other and build each other up.*

Paul's instruction to the church at Thessalonica applies to all disciples. Is this not our fundamental task as participants in God's grand scheme for humanity?

Think about that.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, enable me to start this new ecclesiastical year with fresh awareness of your steadfast love for me and all of your creation. Help me to stay alert to this reality as I seek to be your faithful disciple, encouraging fellow disciples as all of us await with hope the fulfillment of your promise. Amen. - John H. Quinn, Jr.

Confirmed

Luke 21: 10-24

Monday, Dec. 3

It's been 57 years since my Confirmation, since I took the plunge and became, officially, a member of the Presbyterian Church. If I had it to do over again, I certainly would. But reading today's Gospel passage, I wonder if I would have, back then.

I remember little of my Confirmation, other than that several of us 13-year-olds at Garden Memorial went through some weeks of class, learning about our denomination and its beliefs, and then had to decide whether to make the commitment to membership. I don't remember much about the process, but I'm absolutely certain that it did *not* include travel, foreign or domestic, or a retreat of any kind, but did involve an affirmation of faith and other promises. What I remember most about The Day was that I was very excited that I would finally be allowed to receive Communion for the first time, but disappointed that I would not be wearing a white dress like the Catholic girls, nor going home to a party and presents as they would. Confirmation was not a ceremonial rite of passage; it was a personal commitment. But it was a commitment without peril. These were, after all, the Fifties. I would have faced more barriers if I had chosen *not* to join the church.

Not so for the people in today's Scripture. They were in the very presence of Jesus, and he did not sugarcoat anything, promising them not parties and new dresses and congratulations, but wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilences, and "terrors and great signs from heaven", and betrayal by family and friends "and some of you they will put to death." How far would the Evangelism Committee get with that invitation? He advised His followers to flee into the mountains, and not to enter the city, and warned them that they "will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations."

And yet, they followed. He was that compelling. I would like to think that, in His physical presence, I too would have had the courage to risk the pain and suffering to come. I have little confidence in my own spine, but there are places in this world yet today where people face those risks in His name and carry on. I hope that, if put to the test, He would give me that same conviction. I could never do it alone.

Loving God, thank you for sharing with the world a Presence so loving, so strong, so compelling, that people today still follow, still face the darkness with faith, hope, trust and commitment. Strengthen us with their unwavering courage, and lead us each day to renew our own confirmation to your love and justice. Amen

Mary Krug

Isaiah 42:5-9

Tuesday, December 4, 2012

Mark 13:14-23

1 Thessalonians 4:9-18

God addressed a community of faith through Isaiah. Isaiah 42:5-7 teaches that God created us individually, and as a faith community. God gives us breath and spirit. God calls us in righteousness. God will hold our hand, and keep us, and give us as a covenant, and light, and liberator to others. God has gifted and graced and covenanted with us. If you are reading this Advent booklet, you are gifted and graced and connected to this family of faith that is New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, and perhaps to other faith communities. What does this prophecy have to say to us today? How do we faithfully respond to God's call to us to live in and witness as a Christian community?

Stephen Doughty, author of Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ, observes that we hunger and ache for Christian community. It enters our lives as a holy gift. Then hunger and gift intersect to create a place of beginning, an openness to and awareness of the kingdom of God that has been born and is among us. Doughty posits that community in Christ can be found in and cultivated by a host of circumstances and practices: shared tasks, responses to illness, conversation, prayer for one another, honest speaking, encouragement, being present, naming and claiming goodness, sacraments, hallowed days and seasons. Living in Christian community stretches us. We are stretched by others, for others, by conflict, and by dealing with tough questions. Doughty acknowledges that communities of faith can be fractured, and our ability to participate in them in a healthy way can be blocked, by fatigue, brittleness, loss of foundation, and despair, but claims these challenges can be overcome. Doughty's book offers many practical exercises for individuals, small groups, and faith communities to discover and cultivate and participate in and repair community. I think it would be wonderful for our whole church to study this book together and see how God might be born in us anew.

God's purpose in calling us to Christian community is for more than our own benefit. Christine Pohl, author of a new book, Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us, suggested that "[t]he character of our shared life in congregations, communities, and families has the power to draw people to the kingdom or to push them away. How we live together is the most persuasive sermon we'll ever get to preach. The beauty of loving communities does not replace the importance of the verbal proclamation of the gospel, but Jesus explicitly linked the truth of his life and message to our life together. The Word who became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, expects that our relationships with one another will also be characterized by grace and truth. ..." Good communities and life-giving congregations emerge at the intersection of divine grace and steady human effort. She singles out four practices that help Christian communities flourish as God intended: expressing gratitude, keeping promises, living truthfully, and offering hospitality.

Intrigued? Where to start? Dietrich Bonhoeffer counseled in Life Together, "If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, ... if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ." So, let us thank God, for the gift and challenge of this faith community!

- Karen Mills

Between the Now and the Not Yet

Mark 13: 24-37

December 5, 2012

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

"Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come." Mark 13:35

All right already! It's been over 2,000 years now, roughly 100 generations. That seems like a long time to stay awake. There seems no doubt that both the Gospel writer and Paul expected the Second Coming and considered it a fundamental aspect of their trust in God's future. But what can it possibly mean for us during Advent of 2012 to be alert, to stay awake? It seems a little unproductive at this point to stand on top of a mountain with our eyes to the sky awaiting a sign, but what's the alternative?

In his account of his conversion experience, Jack McClendon, beloved former pastor of this church, suggests what I think is an alternative:

Our professor taught us and demonstrated that the church could become an instrument for social justice.... There was room in the gospel for comfort and challenge, a preparation for eternal life, and a summons to mold life in the here and now in the image of the Christ....

The scales were removed from my eyes, and for the first time I saw the oppression, the powerlessness, the voicelessness of black people in the South. I discovered that the People of God were mandated to preach and to live the reconciling gospel of Christ. The gospel and the church could become instruments for change rather than the palliative, cheap grace that concentrated on the "Sweet By and By".

Now that sounds like alertness to me. It doesn't shortchange praise and prayer and the interior life, but it places them all in the context of God's desperate love for all the mess of creation, the lesson of the Incarnation. William Stafford puts these words in the mouths of his parents in his poem "Vocation": "Your job is to find what the world is trying to be." And that, I take it, is the challenge of Jesus' command to stay awake. Since we don't know the time and place of the end things, we need to do everything within our capabilities and God's power "to find what the world is trying to be."

Paul B. Dornan



John the Baptist: Haven't We Met Before?

Malachi 1:6-14

Mark 1:1-8

I Thessalonians 5:12-28

December 6, 2012

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" -- Mark 1:1-3

This is the second year in a row that I have been assigned a scripture passage about John the Baptist. As a musician once stated when asked to write yet another review of a recording of the music of J.S. Bach: What more is there to say?

As I write this, it is several weeks before Christmas, but Macy's is already fully decorated for the holiday and many store windows feature wreaths, lighted trees, and other decorations designed to get us in the holiday spirit and spending money. *The Washington Post* is warning us that Black Friday, the annual shopping extravaganza that takes place the day after Thanksgiving, may be replaced this year by Black Thursday, otherwise known as Thanksgiving Day. According to a spokeswoman for the National Retail Federation, there are millions of people who want to grab their coats and go shopping as soon as Thanksgiving dinner has been eaten.

A church in Portland, Oregon, is also observing the season early, but in a very different way. The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist is expanding the season of Advent from four to seven weeks in hopes of restoring the contemplative, preparatory nature of the season. The congregation believes that if they wait until Advent officially starts on December 2, Christmas will already be in full swing and it will be difficult for them to find the contemplative spirit that is necessary in order to appropriately observe the season of Advent. For this congregation, Advent began on November 11 with the lighting of the first of seven lamps that will prepare the way of the Lord. This change in the liturgical calendar seems entirely appropriate for a church whose website is www.wheretradiationwelcomesdiversity.org.

I think that John the Baptist would fit right in at his namesake church in Oregon. As one person has said, "John the Baptist is one of the most distinctive characters in the New Testament. He had an unusual flair for fashion, wearing wild-looking clothing made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He lived in the desert wilderness, ate locust and wild honey and preached a strange message." I'm not at all sure what he would think of the news out of Bulgaria. They think that they have found the bones of John the Baptist. DNA and radiocarbon testing of a knucklebone show that it likely belonged to a Middle Eastern man who lived in the first century; a man such as John the Baptist. The bone was found during an excavation on the island of Sveti Ivan ("St. John," in Bulgarian), in a small marble sarcophagus buried beneath a church altar.

Although stories about early shopping and saintly bones have grabbed the headlines, I think our place is with our friends in Portland, making time for Advent contemplation and preparation.

Dan Stokes

Malachi 2:1-9
Luke 1:57-66
Revelation 1:4-8

Friday, December 7, 2012

Waiting for the Unknown

If there is any common thread linking today's three passages it is the notion that we are all God's messengers, a responsibility that requires our love, devotion and abiding faith, despite our tendency to turn away from God in pursuit of our own agendas or to doubt our own worthiness of God's grace.

In the passage from Luke, Elizabeth has just given birth to John (the Baptist). Earlier in Luke's gospel, the scripture states that Elizabeth has been unable to have a child with her husband Zechariah; and that they are "advanced in years," suggesting that childbirth ultimately is not possible for them. Consequently, when the angel Gabriel visits Zechariah in the temple and reveals to him that Elizabeth will bear a son and that his name will be John, Zechariah is troubled, fearful, and not sure whether to believe the news. (Luke 1:11-19). He literally is unable to speak about it until Elizabeth has given birth to the child, and their family and neighbors begin asking about the child's name. When Zechariah takes the tablet and writes down his son's name for the first time, and then begins praising God, his family and neighbors also react with fear and anticipation of the unknown.

Five months ago, my wife Kim and I began the process of adopting a child. Our families and most of our friends know, and naturally, they want to know how things are going, whether there have been any *developments*, and how much *longer* we anticipate having to wait. The process has been tedious, requiring reams of paperwork asking us to reveal just about every personal, professional and financial detail of our lives. As any adoptive parent knows, adoption requires an open heart, boatloads of patience, and ultimately *faith* – in our case, the faith that we haven't waited too long to become parents, that we'll be chosen by a birth mother, that we'll have the resources to care for a child, and that God will be with us throughout this journey.

I confess that, if an angel (or my case worker) were to visit me to tell me that my child was arriving soon, I would be skeptical, my initial thankfulness giving way to doubts about my abilities and worthiness to be a parent. I am not sure I would have the faith to trust what I was hearing – and it would be impossible for me to speak of it until I saw the child with my own eyes. I find that my reactions to such unexpected blessings often involve this kind of fear and skepticism. I think to myself, *there has to be some mistake*, or I wonder whether I can live up to what I think my faith requires. But I believe the scripture is reminding us that God's grace is here for all of us, as it has been from a time before we were born until long after we are gone. We need only to embrace it.

Rachel L. Browning

The Front Act

Luke 1:68-79

Saturday, December 8, 2012

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79)

These verses are popularly known as the “Benedictus” or the Canticle of Zechariah. This song was uttered by the priest Zechariah when he was again able to speak, following the birth and naming of his son, John the Baptist. It is the first one of the three evangelical canticles in the Gospel of Luke. The two others are the “Magnificat” (Canticle of the Virgin Mary) and “Nunc Dimittis” (Canticle of Simeon).

Among the three, many musicians have set the “Magnificat” into music. Since I am not too familiar with the “Benedictus”, I immediately searched YouTube. Here’s one I found: <http://bit.ly/Qsv6io>. It is performed by the Capilla Peñaflorida, an early music ensemble based in the Basque country. *(Copy and paste the link to a browser to listen to it or read the verses again before continuing with this meditation).*

If our meditation today were a rock concert, the person who inspired this song – John the Baptist – would be the front act to the star, Jesus Christ. John was there to warm up the audience and prepare them for the coming of Christ. And what a front act he was: he was an itinerant preacher who baptized many, including Jesus himself. John was fearless in speaking truth to power. He criticized Herod for marrying his former sister-in-law and niece, Herodias. Her daughter (Herod’s step-daughter and grand-niece) was the one who asked Herod for John’s head.

As we celebrate Advent, let us ask ourselves: How good have we been as a front act to Jesus? Have we spoken truth to power whenever a situation demanded it? Have we been as faithful as John the Baptist in spreading the good news of Christ’s coming -- and not just at Christmas but throughout the year?

If we have failed, let us pray to be like John the Baptist especially during this season:

God our strength and our hope, grant us the courage of John the Baptist, constantly to speak the truth, boldly to rebuke vice and patiently to suffer for the truth's sake; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen (New Zealand Book of Prayer)

Adlai J. Amor

The Coming Messenger, Praise, Proclamation and Prayer

Malachi 3:1-4

Sunday, December 9, 2012

Psalm 150

Luke 3:1-6

Philippians 1:3-11

Today's passages open with Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament (whose title can be translated "My Messenger"), bringing two messages: God is displeased with the lack of piety in the community around the temple and God is about to send a messenger "like a refiner's fire * * * [who] will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness."

The closing Psalm is a hymn in which all of creation is called upon to praise God with every instrument that can make music: trumpet and lute, harp and tambourine, strings, pipe and clashing cymbal; a fitting setting for Advent.

We then have Luke's introduction of John the Baptist as John (before he baptizes Jesus in the Jordan) travels throughout the region proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" "

Finally, in the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians, written while Paul is in prison (at an unknown location but traditionally believed to be Rome), Paul expresses his thanks for the support of all Philippians, both prior to and during his current imprisonment. And he offers his prayer that their love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and insight that will help them determine what things really matter and be pure and blameless when Christ returns.

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

Robert Doan

Monday, December 10, 2012

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

Malachi 3: 6-12

John 3: 22-36

I Corinthians 1: 10-17

Most of us were probably carried into church by our parents to be baptized. I have also been told that I slept peacefully through mine. Yet infant baptism holds a special significance for our biological and church families, as a way of naming and welcoming the new member.

Baptism comes from God. "I will pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:3b, NIV) God pours out His blessings on us as water is poured out in baptism.

John the Baptist also came from God, and was a voice of God. Yet he pointed beyond himself, as did St. Paul. In today's readings (John and Corinthians), the issue of who is conducting the baptism is prominent, and this seemed to be one of the struggles in the early church. Some of today's issues seem to be when, where, how, and how many times the baptism takes place.

As adults we learn of other significances of baptism, such as repentance and conversion. John the Baptist encouraged his followers to repent—to return to God, to turn towards God. Jesus, who was without sin and didn't need to repent, acknowledged baptism as an important step for Himself and His fellow Jews, so that they might convert to a new way of life. So, in remembering our baptism, we are not thinking of a particular time, place, baptismal gown, or even baptizer but rather the significance of the baptism in our spiritual and church life.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for all of the gifts that you pour down upon us, especially the gift of baptism. Please help us to go beyond divisions in our church and remember the true significance of baptism.

Ella Cleveland



Malachi 3:13-18

Matthew 3:1-6

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

Tuesday, 11th December 2012

Ten days before the Mayan End Times "prophecy" is put to the test

Honest, angry conversations with God

Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts

Malachi 3.13-14

As often happens every single time I receive my assignment for the church's daily devotional, whether it is meant for Lent or Advent, I always grapple with the writer's block. In order to find inspiration, my thought process follows the same pattern: a read-through of the biblical passages I have to ponder on, hoping to either find a common denominator between them or stumble across a verse that would spark my inspiration, and then build my contribution around it. However, this time I did not have to rack my brain for a lengthy period of time before experiencing my Eureka moment. My insight was triggered after reading the verse, excerpt from the book of Malachi, heading this text. All of a sudden, I was spoiled for choice in front of this inexhaustible bonanza: unanswered prayers. First, for the choice of the title my mind was bombarded with several options, and I could not decide between borrowing from the Rabbi Harold Kushner's "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", Dr. Smith's "Sit down God...I am angry" and the comedian Susan Isaac's "Angry conversations with God". Although all three books somehow correlate with my faith journey, I eventually opted for the latest, because, unlike the two others which deal with the issue of two devout religious leaders who went through the ordeal of losing a child, it has a more promising outcome.

Indeed, among many other instances drawn from the Bible's characters or from the contemporary world, both these books and the biblical verse quoted above epitomize my roller coaster relationship with the Lord. As human beings, moreover as believers, it is inherent to our nature to envision our walk with God during our earthly pilgrimage like a long quiet river or a smooth ride to a picnic. But then one endures the excruciating frustration of His deafening silence to prayers legitimate, from a human perspective, as they may seem. These "monologue moments" are well summarized by the two following quotes. The first is extracted from the novelist C. S. Lewis' "A Grief Observed" where he writes "...Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence." The second is an excerpt from Pastor Rick Warren's famous best-selling book "The Purpose-Driven Life" in the chapter appropriately entitled "When God seems distant" where he quotes Floyd McClung as saying "You wake up one morning and all your spiritual feelings are gone. You pray, but nothing happens. You rebuke the devil, but it doesn't change anything. You go through spiritual exercises ... you have your friends pray for you ... you confess every sin you can imagine, then go around asking forgiveness of everyone you know. You fast ... still nothing. You begin to wonder how long this spiritual gloom might last. Days? Weeks? Months? Will it ever end? It feels as if your prayers simply bounce off the ceiling. In utter desperation, you cry out, 'What's the matter with me?'. Simply put, F-R-U-S-T-R-A-T-I-N-G. Right?"

PRAYER: Heavenly Father as we inch towards the end of this year, leaving it behind us with unanswered prayers. You who are the Uplifter of the downcast minds, the Faithful Provider of the needy, the Faithful Companion of the lonely and the outcasts, the Perfect Restorer of dashed hopes and shattered dreams, the Perfect Mender of broken hearts, the Perfect Comforter of the grieving. As we step into a new year, help us to always remember every single day, that even in the deafening silence of the wilderness of our unanswered prayers, in the midst of the most fierce storm, in the most raging furnace of adversity Your grace still holds us securely in the palm of Your loving and merciful Hands, and is sufficient to us. In the name of Your Beloved Son Christ Jesus. Amen

HAPPY AND BLESSED NEW YEAR 2013!!!

Youssoupha NYAM

Malachi 4:1-6

“See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble... says the Lord of Hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch...”

Matthew 3:7-12

“...Bear fruit worthy of repentance... Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

2 Thessalonians 2:13- 3:5

“...But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in truth....”

Usually, I read my assigned Scripture passages with an eye towards the Christmas season and preparations for the holiday. But the passages for today didn't evoke anything festive to me—certainly no tree-trimming, gift-giving or family meals. The first two Scripture readings are intense in their darkness and their treatment of those who have erred. “Burning,” “stubble,” trees being “cut down and thrown into the fire”? This certainly isn't the spirit I was hoping for or the tone I'd usually expect when reflecting on Jesus' birth.

But the tricky thing is that Advent isn't just about anticipation of Jesus' coming, it's also about preparation. And while I blithely talk about “preparations for the holidays” (a.k.a. baking Christmas cookies and wrapping gifts), a much more serious preparation is demanded of us. That preparation requires evaluating our spiritual well-being and our readiness for Jesus' message, and considering the fruits of our endeavors, our life and our work. Of course, the good thing is that while we all sin and we'll never be able to wipe away our wrongdoing, we can always count on God's boundless grace.

And the passages, though perhaps not festive, aren't all fire and brimstone. The 2 Thessalonians passage seems particularly uplifting in comparison to the destruction in the earlier readings. We are reminded that *God chose us*. And God keeps choosing us, despite our imperfections and our distractions, which is how I managed to reconcile the discomfort I felt from the harshness of the first two passages. After all, we're all arrogant and prone to sin, but God chose us. God holds us accountable for the fruits we bear, the consequences of our actions and the impact we make on God's earth and on God's people. Ultimately though, we are always God's beloved children and preparing to welcome God's beloved only son, Jesus Christ, may be just the reminder we need.

Prayer: God of all creation, help us remember that you chose us as your children and that you call all of us into community with you and one another. Help us to bear good fruit, readying ourselves for your judgment and celebrating with thanksgiving your constant grace and love. Amen.

Kristin Ford

Thursday, December 13

Amos 2:1-8
John 1:6-13
James 5:7-12

The Best Laid Plans ...

Superstorm Sandy and the election season are behind us, and the combination reminds me that even the most powerful among us are powerless in the face of such a storm. The huge swath of white on the weather maps swirled over red states and blue, the rich and the poor.

Certainly in Amos, all nations are subject to God's judgment, including Israel. The prophet makes clear that no one is exceptional, repeating the same pattern of words, over and over, continuing from chapter one, for nation after nation:

For three transgressions ... and for four, I will not revoke punishment.

Sandy wasn't punishment – I don't see storms with Old Testament eyes - but the storm was humbling. A friend and I chatted on the phone as the storm approached, and our conversation kept looping back to plans. Plans disrupted by the storm, or past plans that we had to change because of an emergency, someone else's priorities, or a work crisis. "That's why I don't make plans anymore," I said, half joking.

But of course, I do. I sketch out schedules for the day, for the week. I plan meals and activities. I want my weeks to be orderly, with neat blocks on my calendar devoted to certain tasks. Then each week presents its own set of challenges and opportunities – a work problem, a beautiful day for a bike ride, an emergency, the chance to see friends, a surprise phone call, a conversation with my son or daughter – so that I end up with sort-of-mostly plans that flex and bend with reality. The flexibility is wonderful, yet it can make me feel unmoored. Where am I standing? What hat am I wearing? What have I forgotten?

I heard a man speak not too long ago about how he radically changed his job so that he could be more authentic, more pure. I admired him, yet I also wondered how successful he'd been. My life is full of competing pulls on my time. Purity is for books and science labs – for controlled environments – and I only struggle toward it along a messy path.

The book of James lays out Christian practices, but as far as I can see, avoiding messiness is not one of them. Instead, today's passage exhorts readers to patience and endurance ... not planning or purity.

Luckily, I don't have to trust in my own practices and abilities to make things pure, good or orderly. I can trust in God's. I can trust in a God who was willing to get messy with us – in the stable at Bethlehem and on the cross. As today's passage in John reminds me:

*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 the will of man, but of God.*

Dear God - Help me remember that we are all powerless. That the only real power we're given is to become children of God, through your will, not through our own attempts to plan and organize. Help us be patient with the messiness, and keep our hearts strong to see glimpses of the holy, which is always near. Amen

Meg Hanna House

Amos 2:9-16

Friday, December 14, 2012

John 1:19-28

Mike Smith

1 Timothy 1:3-11

... instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine stewardship that is known by faith. ⁵But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. ⁶Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, ⁷desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

1 Timothy 1:3-7

Meaningless talk – Paul would certainly recognize a familiar problem in today’s society. A twenty-hour news cycle fed by talking heads that neither understand what they are saying nor the things about which they prattle on. One needs only turn on the television or the talk-radio noise machine to hear examples: financial crises were caused by greedy borrowers or greedy banks, excess spending or insufficient taxes, job-crushing regulation or unrestrained capitalism; global warming is caused by humans, or natural cycles, or doesn’t exist; election outcomes are a product of issues, or ethnicities, or campaign ads, or voter fraud. Often opinion, often speculation, and often spin.

But meaningless talk isn’t only a media product, it reaches us in nearly every relationship: the well-intentioned friend that has never changed a diaper but is full of parenting advice; the neighbor certain to amplify their own virtue but eager to gossip about others; the relative with no experience of poverty but certain about what others should do to escape it.

And unfortunately, as in Paul’s time, the meaningless talk reaches our faith; the public figures that are all too ready to tell us how *our* religion validates *their* policy preferences.

Like Paul, we grow frustrated by the absence of love amid all this meaningless talk. We long for good conscience and sincere faith. And yet we ensnare ourselves in meaningless talk. Or we focus on others’ shortcomings, despite Christ’s command to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we wait for Christ’s return, let us inventory what we have done to prepare his kingdom. How is our heart? Our conscience? Our faith? Have our frustration and our focus on what’s missing overcome our capacity for Christian love?

A reflective prayer:

*Lord, give me the grace to labor with you
without seeking myself –
to live the Kingdom
in its full reality.*

John Futrell, SJ

Amos 3:1-11
Matthew 23: 23-28
I Timothy 1:12-17

December 15, 2012

Alas, Alas....!!

The readings today have a plaintive cry to them, a call that that says, “Can’t you see what you have done, how you have messed up?” These passages, especially in Amos, have vivid emotion and imagery. God made a Covenant with the Israelites and it was broken—but not by God! After a sad lament of “For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world,” God brings tough love to the table: “Therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities.” In beautiful verse, the passages explain the reasoning of why punishment is justified and reasonable—with explanations using examples of lions and roars, birds and traps, trumpets and alarms. Amos describes the “tumult seething among [Samaria’s] people,” the oppression, dishonesty, and the gains of crime and violence hoarded in the palaces. And so God will have an enemy surround the land, and the “stronghold shall be thrown down and . . . palaces sacked.”

Through the centuries, the lesson does not seem to have been learned, according to Matthew. Although the opprobrium is heaped on “lawyers and Pharisees,” the condemnation could apply to anyone—and it is brutal! There is no place to hide for the hypocrites, those who take pains to appear worthy by outward show and deeds, but instead lack compassion, mercy, and good faith. The outside may look laudable, but the inside is “brimful of crime, robbery, and self-indulgence!” Matthew warns, “Clean the inside of the cup first; then the outside will be clean also.” In other words, one must have a clean heart, must walk with mercy and justice.

There is hope in Timothy through Christ Jesus who “came into the world to save sinners.” Timothy makes clear that any sinner—and he admits to being a prime example—can have the grace of the Lord lavished upon you despite past deeds, actions, and self-promotion, with “faith and love which are ours in Christ Jesus.” Timothy assures us that there is a way out from the morass of sin and myopic behavior for all of us. We must only open ourselves to Christ’s love and be a reflection of that love to others.

The Word continues with us: the admonitions, the acceptance and forgiveness, the Way – if we only have ears to hear. In these days of ravaging war and turmoil—in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan; of corruption, greed, and dishonesty; of poverty, homelessness, illness and grief, we must look to God with humility and hope, with conviction to act with a clean heart, and knowledge that we are up to the task of meeting the challenges of our daily lives if we go forward with faith and love in God’s grace.

Prayer: God, keep us in your grace and ever mindful of living our lives with honesty, mercy, and good faith.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Zephaniah and Much More

Lectionary Passages: Zephaniah 3:14-2
Psalm 19
Luke 3: 7-18
Philippians 4: 4-9

Wednesday, December 19, 2012

For those of us, including me, who are not familiar with the meager writings of Zephaniah, a review of the *Wikipedia* (an Internet informal encyclopedia) offers little help. It shows that there is less known about this minor prophet than even the typical vexing Old Testament lectionary. To illustrate, most of what we know about Zephaniah comes from the *superscriptions*¹ attached to his work rather than the text of his writings; indeed, they have a greater volume than the main text. Like most of these pre-nativity prophets, they warn of God's punishment for the shocking sins committed in the temple itself. The idolatry had penetrated even into the sanctuary. Zephaniah threatened to "destroy out of this place the remnant of Baal, and the names of the ... priests"², and pleaded for a return to the simplicity of their fathers. One example of this idolatry was the luxurious foreign clothing worn in aristocratic circles³. The Prophet focuses on Jerusalem: "Woe to the provoking city ... She hath not hearkened to the voice, neither hath she received discipline. The severest reckoning will be required of the leading classes of the civil community, and of the Prophets and priests as the directors of public worship." As usual, this warning fell on deaf ears and thus had little effect.

C. S. Lewis said of Psalm 19: "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." C. S. Lewis (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, et al*) and J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, et al*) were close friends and fellow Christians. Many readers of the works of these two authors have observed numerous parallels between *Aslan*, the great lion, and Christ. The psalm is short, and I commend it to your reading.

In the next lectionary passage, Luke describes an extraordinary scene where John the Baptizer is addressing a large crowd assembled in the city. The people were waiting, expecting *something*. They were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But One who is more powerful than I am will come. I'm not good enough to untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His pitchfork is in his hand to toss the straw away from his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his storeroom. But he will burn up the husks with fire that can't be put out." John said many other things to warn the people. He also preached the good news to them.

The final lectionary passage serves as an admirable **prayer and benediction**:

"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. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you!" AMEN.

Bruce Whitener

¹ A superscription is writing or markings above or around the main text that explain the material.

² Zeph. 1:4

³ Zeph. 1:8

Amos 3:12 to 4:5

Monday, December 17, 2012

Matthew 23:29-39

Romans 12:1-8

ANGER AND LOVE

I don't know about you, but it is often hard for me to read the angry words in the Bible. Whether it's God rebuking the people of Israel and Judah for turning their backs on Him, or it's Jesus lambasting the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocritical ways, I can't help but cringe a little when I read the Bible's angry words.

The first two readings here are good examples. Amos speaks in harsh words of God's punishments for Israel's transgressions. "On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish and the great houses shall come to an end, says the Lord." *Amos 3:14-15*. In Matthew, Jesus denounces the hypocritical speech of some of the Pharisees and scribes who claim they would not have acted as their ancestors had in killing the prophets (knowing that they will be among those who crucify him and persecute his followers). Jesus says, "You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" *Matthew 23:33*.

By contrast, I'm greatly inspired when I read Paul's loving advice to the Romans to offer their "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." *Romans 12:1*. He tells them, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." *Romans 12:2*. He then advises them to discern their individual spiritual gifts – whether it be in prophesy, teaching, leadership, or something else – but, most of all, it seems to me, to "love one another with mutual affection." *See Romans 12:4-10*.

A great challenge for me as a Christian is how to accept not only what inspires me in the Bible but also what disturbs me. I believe one of the beauties of the Reformed tradition in which we participate is that we believe that the Bible speaks to us today as a congregation and as individual believers. I can accept the anger of God and Jesus in the scriptures as teaching me how important it is to abide by God's commandments and to be true to myself in my confession. A healthy fear of God is a good thing! At the same time, the Bible also teaches me how to love my neighbor and inspires me to do so.

Anticipating the celebration of Jesus' birth, I can't help but think that the occasional righteous outbursts of anger are compensated by God's constant and unending love for His human creation. In human terms, it seems to me akin to the unconditional love of a parent for a child. After all, God so loved the world, that His word came alive for us in a stable in Bethlehem.

Adam Bain

Amos 4:6-13
Matt. 12:30-37
Rom. 2:3-11

2012
December 18
Tuesday

Devotions may be considered religious exercises – think of them as ‘Curves’ – whether in common, around the household table or in private.

Advent is first mentioned at the Council of Saragossa in 380 (fourth century). Like the Major League Baseball season, there is an opening Sunday and over the period of four weeks the church is preparing for the feast of the Nativity. The purpose is meditation to dispose All to welcome Christ. While penitential the season also conveys hope and joy – anticipation.

Advent Alphabet (part)

The world has its GNP and GDP. Here we proffer **the Advent EGP**.

E-pistle – Romans 2:3-11

This writing to Christians in the church in Rome argues the good news (gospel) is to be brought to All. With God there is no respect of persons. Righteousness is brought by faith and not by birth as a Jew (or in a Christian family). God takes on the task of removing boundaries or impediments. Conversely, the task that you and I take on is to accept this good news.

G-ospel – Matthew 12:30-37

The writing from Matthew is about words and about power. Confession of Faith is translated into life. Their deeds reflect their faith. “Idle” words are those words which do not bring forth works of love. Words are meant to be effective tools. Words accomplish some useful purpose (Isaiah 55:11). It may be that why words are not working is that the power of God is the Spirit which has come upon Jesus, who has little or no patience with calling good evil and evil good.

P-ropheet – Amos 4:6-13

“Turn” is a widespread experience in the natural world. The Earth turns, the Milky Way turns, even our very DNA is in spirals. The words spoken by Amos repeat, in effect, “Yet have ye not re-turned” (verses 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11). Be aware that there are words of bitter parody: come, enter (worship), bring .. “for so you love to do.” Famine, drought, blight, swarm, pestilence, sword, overthrow – to which you and I might add “fire and super-storm” – all are, in a sense, what God has been doing. Calamities, Amos might believe, lead people to turn to the Lord. “Prepare to meet thy God.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, on this Advent Tuesday that has a number between Stalag 17 and Catch-22, in the church’s Advent season’s anticipation do set our hearts on You that in the fullness of time we, too, might welcome the birth of the Christ.

Bob Braxton

Advent Season 2012
Wednesday December 19
Amos 5:1-17
Matthew 12:39-45
Hebrews 9:11-22

The world seems to be in a period of "Diaspora for All", diffusing our human community and its capacities. Economic polarities forcing us apart. The increasing ranks of poor rioting against austerity as greed overcomes economies leaving more resources held by fewer people. Religious and corporate terrorism abounds callously tearing apart bodies, lives and societies.

Amos was certainly a leader of fire and brimstone who claimed total annihilation was coming to those who had not followed the ways of the Lord. Hardly sounds rapturous. His description of the decimation of those "that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!", "trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain". "For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." Who "hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth."

As one who comes up miserably short daily in the fulfillment of even the small portion of the will of God that I "count myself to have apprehended", the proposition that "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none" then it returns with "seven other spirits more evil than [the first], enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first" is utterly hopeless and dispiriting. It springs from and therefore inevitably leads to spiritual isolation.

My experience in life has shown me much evidence that Amos' words are true. I see humanity accelerating through crisis to crisis with no end in sight. Our society constantly for the last few decades has seen increasing commitment to policies that institutionalize inequity, trampling on the poor and awarding an obscenely unfair portion of resources to a very few. Leaders choosing to spin to the uneducated poor rather than speak truth to corporate power and to "afflict the righteous,...take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." The increasing polarization of society seems to leave no possibility of cooperative efforts on the behalf of the whole community.

Community. For me the great gift of the Advent season. Sharing as the life blood of human community. Celebrating the birth of Jesus, yes. But also more broadly his message of community with each other and with God. And hope. And Redemption. The promise of an inclusive "greater and perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation". Because "he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."

In Hebrews it says, "For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." Let this death be not just a physical one but also a passing/birth into a new life of abundance in communion with both humanity and divinity.

Lord. I do have faith that the sacrament of sharing has power and that it is in communion that we are saved. Thank you for this great present. I pray for the advent of a new season of relentless sharing. And accepting. Peace and Love. Nathan Moon

Amos 5:18-27
Matthew 14:1-12
Romans 8:1-6

December 20, 2012

Change Agent

As I write these words, our nation is finishing another tumultuous election season. Across the nation, candidates for offices high and not so high have represented themselves as agents of change. It's good politics. Change is good. The status quo is bad. The people want change --- or do they?

It turns out of course that the situation is much more complicated than that. Many folks are quite happy with the status quo. Those who do want change have all sorts of ideas about what sort of change they have in mind. Perhaps the common denominator is that most folks have a strong preference for conditions that favor them economically or socially. Of course, there will be losers. There are trade-offs. Office winners who actually try to implement change have a very good chance of becoming less popular – not more popular.

Today's readings are about change and change agents. Amos tells Israel that the "Day of Yahweh" is coming. It turns out that this will be a day of darkness, not light. The Israelites lack justice and integrity. Yahweh despises their feasts and festivals. Trouble is on the way. Amos is not going to win any elections with these predictions. In fact he is shown the door right out of Israel.

John the Baptist is certainly a change agent in Matthew's Gospel. Herod and his family cling to their power. They are afraid of the Romans, afraid of their people, and afraid of each other. The last thing they want is change that may upset the tenuous status quo. It costs John his life.

Paul, of course, is one of the greatest change agents in all of human history. In today's reading he talks about his inward struggle. He serves God. He tells people to change their ways. But he also recognizes that he is "...a prisoner of that law of sin which lives within my body." It is not easy to be a change agent. Only God can rescue Paul from this dilemma.

What are we to make of all of this as we make our way through Advent towards Christmas? It is the season of hope...for change. Do we really wish to be God's change agents in the world? What sort of change does God have in mind? Are we prepared to sacrifice for God's change? I need to ponder these things. I need to pray.

Steve Dewhurst



Friday, December 21, 2012

Amos 6: 1-14
Luke 1: 5-25
Titus 1: 11-15

Divine Interventions

Amos was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel, about 760 B.C.E. His message in this passage strikes a chord, even today, because he is accusing the powerful and wealthy of arrogance and self-satisfaction with no concerns for the troubles (or troubled) of the nation. The “99%” are ill-used and their needs ignored. Sounds vaguely familiar! Even more frightening is that his prophesy of the destruction of Israel came to pass 40 years later. The Assyrian king, Tiglath-pilser III (a favorite OT name of mine because I once knew a cat by that name!) began a campaign to incorporate Palestine into his kingdom, a deed accomplished by his successor, Sargon II when “...the history of Israel came to an end...” in 722/21.

The reading from a letter attributed to Paul to Titus, a companion left in Crete to supervise new churches there, remains a complete mystery to me as to its meaning, particularly for Advent. He quotes “their very own prophet” who said “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.” Perhaps we obtained our derogatory label “Cretin” from this. Let’s just call this passage (if I copied down the verses properly) an Advent mystery.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke is the story of how the birth of John the Baptist was foretold and accomplished through Divine intervention. Zechariah was a priest in the Temple, who, in performing his solitary duties within the inner sanctum was visited by Gabriel, an angel of the Lord who told him that his wife Elizabeth “...will bear you a son and you will name him John.” John will be “filled with the Holy Spirit” and will turn people back to the Lord. When Zechariah expressed doubt about this because he and his wife were “advanced in age” and childless, the angel told him he would become mute, unable to speak until the day the prophecy is fulfilled. Zechariah leaves the Temple, able only to gesture about what has happened. Elizabeth does, indeed, become pregnant and rejoices because her disgrace of being childless is no more.

The story in Luke is a foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus, yet another Divine intervention. It mirrors the circumstances of several Old Testament figures, especially Abraham and Sarah. In each instance, the Lord unexpectedly brings new life, joy and mission into the lives of those facing the end of their days on earth.

I chose this date for my meditation because it is my *younger* brother’s 70th birthday. (Happy Birthday, Steve!) He is not taking it well. Perhaps this Advent message has something special to say to those of us who find ourselves often contemplating our mortality and looking back with nostalgia on our lives. Advent comes to those of all ages, bringing a message of new life, joy and renewal. Gabriel brought this message to Zechariah and Elizabeth but Jesus brought it to all the earth throughout the ages. We have the opportunity each Advent season to recognize and nurture within our hearts the eternal love and joy which is always new, always invigorating and always life giving, regardless of our age.

*Eternal God,
Deliver me from arrogance, self-pity and self-indulgence. Help me grasp and hold onto the meaning of Advent and nourish that gift of eternal love within my own heart so that I might be a more worthy servant of Thy Kingdom.*

Spencer Gibbins

I have always been interested in understanding God's call in our lives. I chose this scripture passage, known as the "Annunciation" because it is a passage that represents the most profound response to the call of God. Examining biblical calls, one often finds that there are all sorts of excuses for NOT responding to God's call – "I can't speak" (Moses), "my clan is the weakest... and I am the least in my family." (Gideon), "All the king's servants and all the people know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law - ...death." (Esther), "I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy." (Jeremiah), etc. – You get the point. But when God calls Mary, a simple peasant girl from a simple town living a simple life, she responds first with amazement – "How can this be?" Then simply says, "Let it be according to your word." It is the most significant answer in its power to transform our lives and the life of the world! This prayer is about aligning our will with the will of God – the creator, redeemer and sustainer of our lives! Jesus' prayer at the end of his life in the Garden of Gethsemane echoes the beginning of his life with his mother -- "not my will but Thine be done."

I am a student from the sixties who greatly enjoyed the music of the Beatles. I can remember as a seminary student doing a contemporary worship service using their song, "Let It Be."

"When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

And in m hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be

Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

(Some will say that this is not a religious song, because Paul McCartney's mother was a Mary. I say, "music is in the ear of the beholder!")

The tune and the beat of the music and hearing over and over again that profound phrase – "let it be," spoke deep in me of my response to God's call. It is eternal and universal. It can make a significant difference in our lives. But what a challenge! Here we are three days before the most significant holy day when we celebrate the incarnation- God became a human being - with all that says about our humanity AND it is the most commercialized day of the year, when we are supposed to have the right gifts for everyone in our lives and all the special foods prepared and our home like "House Beautiful" ready for guests. If we allow ourselves to get caught up in all the consumer energy, we are pretty stressed out at this point three days before Christmas.

Can we step back for a moment and hear in our quiet time of devotion – what we need to hear from God and Mary – "let it be." Mary was able to recognize this "overshadowing of the Holy Spirit" as God's gracious act. This incarnation is God's grace, God's free gift of love for us. Our response? Breathe and whisper – "Let it be!"

Let go of all the expectations of the next few days – let it be. Trusting that God wants to birth Christ in your life this season for we are all called to be mothers of God, to give birth to Christ's love, and hope and peace for the world! Pray – "let it be according to your word." That prayer will change your life.

PRAYER: O Lord of the universe, O Lord of light and life,
O Lord who makes yourself known personally,
O Lord who is vulnerable to pain and suffering,
O Lord who saves us from ourselves,
O Lord who heals the sick,
O Lord who teaches us the power of forgiveness and loving enemies,
Come, Lord Jesus Christ in this Advent season; come and visit us anew!
Let it be in our lives according to your will. Amen

Rev. Beth Braxton

As Steadfast as Mary

Micah 5:2-15; Psalm 80; Luke 1:39-55; Hebrews 10:5-10.

Sunday, Dec 23

Love is given. Grace assured. Christ is near. What do we have to fret about, to lose sleep over, to pile up more things for more security? Still we rush around and strive for all these things. We are too busy to notice serene things like peace. It could be right here, but we don't see it.

99.9% of the people living in and around Jerusalem 2000 years ago had no idea that the Prince of Peace had just been born. It was not a royal or important occasion. And we tend to forget the threats that surrounded His arrival. When local King Herod heard there had been a royal birth, he immediately wanted to know in what city; he pretended to be impressed while planning to murder the baby. The only people officially invited to see the baby were from the lowest and least trusted class – shepherds. Finally the Prince's young mother was in danger of being shunned and homeless as she was an unwed mother. She will face a difficult life.

In spite of all of these bad signs and real dangers, Mary holds true to the promise that the messenger Gabriel gave that she had “found favor with God ... your son will be called the Son of the Most High.” In spite of the dangers ahead, she is calm and full of God's peace. She exalts:

*My soul magnifies the LORD,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For He has looked with favor on the lowliness of His servant.
Surely, now all generations will call me blessed! (Luke 1:47-48)*

Steadfastly she knows that she is blessed. She has received the good news. In fact Mary in Luke is the first to receive the Good News. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... He will reign over the house of Jacob forever (over everyone who believes). His kingdom will never end.” As Isaiah foretold, “He will be the Prince of Peace.”

Knowing of this reign of peace, we should not be so shaken or filled with new doubts. Look at our daily messengers: TV, radio, newspapers. Recently one journalist admitted, “We thrive on chaos.” So the news swirls on; yet the Good News endures. 2000 years ago God came near and dwelt among us – Emmanuel – “God with us.” The Word became flesh. The impossible did happen.

Then I see in this Sunday's *Washington Post* (Nov 4, 2012), in spite of all the terrorist threats, that Americans have been safer from terrorists in the last ten years than in many decades. [See “The World is safer but no one will say so” by Greg Jaffe.] We might be living in a new age of peace and not realize it. Consider what Mary knew about finding peace in a dangerous place through her faith.

Prayer: O, Lord, give us the steadfast faith to hold onto Christmas as a time of deep peace and a time to magnify You.

Tom Dunlap

The Surprise

When I dig deep, down to where the fullness of my joy resides,
 I never linger long enough before I come up short.
 Right beside my joy rests its shadow,
 the darkness, chaos and fear of my multi-faceted life.
 When, O when, O God; Why, O why, O God
 do I find myself here yet again?
 I crumble into myself, beaten down at my own hands.

Do not be afraid, says the angel, for I am bringing you good news of great Joy for all the people!

I turn over and chew on the angel's words, modern shepherd that I am.
 Driven to distraction once again, I find I'm training dogs and polishing crooks
 instead of tending the sheep and watching for angels.
 I hurt those closest to me.

It's an era of distraction, don't you know, and I realize I'm a key player –
 punching out cobbled together messages to send to a thousand temptations.

I love deeply. And when I hurt, I hurt deeply.
 Breath, a walk in the park, an 8-flow prayer.
 Maybe I'll be okay but that's not the point.
 What I really want is to sing a new song, to match the psalmist's step,
 to give birth to a way of being that accepts the joy and the shadow, both.
 I want to move beyond myself into deep companionship
 with the prophet's Hope fulfilled – Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace!

Now He comes close, so close that I nearly miss Him.

Tonight is the night of all nights.
 Tonight the waiting is over.
Release me into your arms, O God,
 into the manger with the lowly child,
 the Child who holds both joy and shadow for me - for all - so that when we're done...
 there is **only** JOY.

“Listen,” He whispers to me by physically touching me in a word I understand:
 “The sea is roaring and all that fills it!
 The field is exulting and everything in it!
 The trees of the forest are singing for Joy!

I am here. I am here.

I am here!”

Kathryn Sparks

Tuesday, December 25, 2012

Isaiah 62:6-7, 10-12

Psalm 148

John 1:1-14

The Light of All People

Merry Christmas! I am sure you are busy with cooking to do, gifts to unwrap, family to visit, etc. So I will keep this short. In fact, today's passage from John's gospel explains the Christmas miracle better than I ever could. So I will allow him to unfold the mystery of the incarnation.

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

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Creator God, you became flesh and lived among us. May we continue to see and praise your glory today, tomorrow, and every day after. Amen.

Matthew Weitz



We have a bonus this year. Our pastor, Rev. Roger J. Gench, has contributed to the publication "These Days" and we have received permission to reprint his meditations in our booklet. We are grateful to Jenean McKay for bringing these meditations to our attention and securing the permission to use them.

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Luke 1:46-55

Sunday, December 23, 2012

Good News to the Poor

"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away." – Luke 1:51-52

These powerful, even radical words are illuminated by Mary's circumstances. They are words of a poor, teenage, peasant girl who finds herself pregnant and about to be herded off by Roman overlords for census and taxation purposes. Going to Bethlehem was not a family vacation!

To this day, the words of Mary have found special resonance among Christians in politically or economically marginal situations. Mary looks forward to a day when, by God's grace, her life's circumstances will be different.

Action Step: How many people do you know for whom these words might be powerful and hopeful ones? Invite a conversation about what these words might mean.

Prayer: God of Mary, help us to the song of praise sung by the mother of Jesus. Amen.

Roger J. Gench

Luke 2:1-7

Monday, December 24, 2012

Table Fellowship

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.” – Luke 2:7

One of the most distinctive features of Luke’s Gospel is the way Jesus eats. From the beginning to the end of this Gospel, Jesus is at table, sharing food with all manner of people. The main criticism of Jesus is that he eats with outcasts and sinners. So it makes all the sense in the world that, in Luke’s story, Jesus would be born in a manger – which is of course, a feeding trough!

It is an easily overlooked detail in Luke’s Christmas story. Jesus was born in a feeding trough, prefiguring his ministry of seeking and saving the lost and of bringing them to the table.

Action Step: During the days after Christmas, find out who in your church or community may be feeling out of sorts, depressed, or excluded, and invite them to dinner.

Prayer: God of the outcast, help us to feed on Jesus, the bread of life, and share this bread with others. Amen

Roger J. Gench

John 1:1-14

Tuesday, December 25, 2012

The Word

“And the Word became flesh . . . – John 1:14

I was intrigued to learn that the Royal Mail Service of the British Isles offered substantially reduced rates for unsealed greeting cards containing no more than five words in addition to the sender’s name. What Christmas greeting might you convey in five words? “Merry Christmas – Happy New Year” would suffice but is not very creative.

I was inspired by the challenge to restraint on this important day of the year; surely there must be a profound five-word message we could share with each other. Then it came to me: “And the Word became flesh.” The “Word,” the very self-expression of God’s creating, sustaining, and redeeming power, “became flesh” like you and me, binding God’s own self to our full human experience.

Action Step: Share these five words with others on this most holy day, and invite a conversation about what they mean.

Prayer: O Word of God incarnate, help us to ponder what it means that you have bound yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Roger J. Gench

Good News

“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”
– Matthew 2:13

If you examine the genealogy of Jesus, most of the kings included in it are bad ones – who oppressed the poor, neglected God, and were vilified by the prophets. And yet they are part of the bloodline of Jesus. The evangelist Matthew then introduces another paranoid and tyrannical ruler, King Herod, who feigns interest in the birth of Jesus only because he wants to kill him, and in response, the holy family flees to Egypt, escaping Herod’s massacre of male infants.

Do you hear the echoes of Moses’ story? Jesus, like Moses, will lead the people of God out of oppression and away from their slavery to sin.

Action Step: How might you share the good news with those in difficult circumstances?

Prayer: O God of the Exodus, you led your people out of slavery in the past and you continue to do so now. Amen.

Roger J. Gench

Expectations

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” – Matthew 11:3

There are many different understandings of Christ in the New Testament. This may be unsettling, but it is actually a good thing. The diversity of understandings of who Jesus Christ is expands our understanding of his significance for our lives and means that no one has a corner on the truth.

The same is true of our own understandings of Jesus Christ, which inevitably include projections of our expectations and needs, which themselves arise out of a longing to become more, a longing to be transformed by the Jesus in the Gospels. Our projections are always limited, but are ever enlarged as we engage in reflection on the diverse presentations of Jesus in the New Testament and as we engage in conversation with others about their own reflections on Jesus.

Action Step: Gather a group of fellow church members and ask each of them to describe their understanding of who Jesus Christ is.

Prayer: O God in Christ, we ask you for an ever-fuller understanding of who you are. Amen.

Roger J. Gench

Hospitality

“He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” – Luke 3:3

Luke’s Gospel tells the story of the hospitality of God in the life of Jesus. To prepare for his coming, John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and forgiveness and then quoted words of Isaiah, proclaiming that God was making a way home from exile. In the ancient world, and in the experience of the exiled, hospitality was the very foundation of the moral life.

Today, the notion of hospitality is often trivialized when we imagine it has to do with parties and such. So how do we recover the practice? Churches can practice hospitality by welcoming the stranger, the homeless, the mentally ill, the outcast, and the unforgiven. When we do so, we are practicing the hospitality of God.

Action Step: Think of ways your congregation can be more intentional about welcoming strangers into your midst.

Prayer: O God of hospitality, in Jesus Christ you prepared a way for us to come home. Help us make the rough ways smooth for others. Amen.

Roger J. Gench

Wisdom

*“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”
– Luke 2:52*

Jesus Christ, God’s work of salvation and peace, didn’t just appear on the scene as a completed work at the moment of his birth. Rather the work of salvation was slow; it took time to mature and to grow. There is nothing rushed about the work of Christ as Luke portrays it. Instead we see Christ engaged in the slow and disciplined work of witnessing God’s new order in our midst.

This is an important reality for us to ponder in these days after Christmas. In a world where the political landscape changes with bewildering speed and where quick fixes are offered as solutions, it is important for us to hear that God’s work of salvation took time to grow and mature.

Action Step: Think about the small steps toward salvation that you can take today: steps toward peacemaking, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

Prayer: God, help us to grow in wisdom as did Jesus. Amen.

Roger J. Gench