

We Are Waiting



Advent 2013

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church

Washington, D.C.

www.nyapc.com

ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2010

- Sunday, December 1 First Sunday of Advent
(Communion)
- Tuesday, December 3 Women's Circle 2, 12:30-2:30 pm
Marilyn Seiber's home
- Saturday, December 7 Christmas pageant rehearsal,
9:00am – 12 noon
- Sunday, December 8 Second Sunday of Advent
Annual Congregational Meeting,
Part 1, 12:15
- Tuesday, December 12 Joint Boards Meeting, 7:00 pm
- Saturday, December 15 Christmas pageant rehearsal
9:00am – 12 noon
- Sunday, December 15 Third Sunday of Advent
Children/Choir Christmas
Program, **10:00 am service**
Christmas Caroling, Cookies
And Crafts, PMH, 11:00 am
- Sunday, December 22 Fourth Sunday of Advent
One service, 10:00 am
- Tuesday, December 24 Christmas Eve Services - 5:30 pm
and 8:00 pm (Communion)



An Advent Promise: A Peaceful Jerusalem

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

Sunday
December 1, 2013

Each of us is called to be an applied theologian. Beginning today, the first day of Advent, we have the task and opportunity of asking how the traditional Advent themes to which we are again introduced in today's Scripture passages (watchfulness, promise, preparation and fulfillment) impact our lives as we actually live them. Can they? Do we believe they should? What does Advent study and prayer prepare us to do, to change?

The prophet and the psalmist proclaim that unity is a universal design feature of God's world, not merely a "better" way of life. They envision a unified world in which swords are beaten into plowshares because nations will no longer take up sword against each other, a community in which each of us prays for the good of the other. That vision of social cohesiveness seems farfetched, far removed from the divisiveness we historically have experienced and currently continue to experience. We have long lived with racial, economic and ideological division, not mere differences. Major division caused us to fight a civil war 150 years ago and in recent years and months caused us essentially to shut down the United States Government. Even participants in church meetings have seen angry outbursts or passive resistance resulting from opposition to or frustration inspired by decisions made or not made during the meeting.

The premise of the Matthew and Roman passages is that failure to work toward and achieve social cohesiveness is a lack of conformity to God's will. Given that reality, our task is to better understand the complexity that characterizes our world. We must evaluate differences and either disregard them because they are not significant or negotiate with respect to significant differences to avoid divisiveness. We are called to avoid and ameliorate divisions based on racial, economic, ideological and even religious differences. Both Scripture and experience tell us not to fear each other, to communicate with each other lovingly, to accept God's forgiveness of us and to forgive each other. These are the tools we must use to achieve collaborative relationships.

What sword can each of us beat into a plowshare? What attitude can I change to create greater social cohesiveness? What selfish desires can I abandon? What do I unworthily fear? What unhealthy or dysfunctional behavior can I avoid or change? For whose good can I pray? Am I up to these challenges? The prophet and the psalmist assure us that the promise of unity will be fulfilled as the result of each one of us combating divisiveness.

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, collaborative disciple, encouraging fellow disciples as all of us await with hope the fulfillment of your promise for social cohesiveness. Amen.

- John H. Quinn, Jr.

GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Isaiah 2:6-11
Matthew 25:1-13
Acts 1:6-11

MONDAY DECEMBER 2ND, 2013

Once you've decided to walk with the LORD, you have to go all the way till the end. There should not be any excuses – then the reward will be bountiful. The LORD is merciful. He is a miracle working GOD and His ways are not our ways. He's never early nor late.

Just as it is said by John Groh, prayer is not a "spare wheel" that you pull out when in trouble, but it is a "steering wheel" that directs the right path throughout.

When you put GOD by the side, and try to solve a problem on your own, GOD is going to prove you wrong and you'll learn the hard way. You can never challenge the creator. Do whatever you're called to do with all humility and the LORD will be there to guide you through. If you get arrogant with Him, you'll pay the price. James 4:10 ; 1st Peter 5:5-6 ; 1st Samuel 2:1 ; Isaiah 25:11

Before anything happens to you, the LORD will give you a sign either through a revelation or a vision, that you'll get in a dream or mental image. He uses different things at different times. It depends on the circumstances – if you've not trained your spirit to be alert by having a quiet moment with your Lord on a daily basis or as much as you can, you might miss an opportunity. You should learn to know when the spirit is prompting you to do something specific, and do just that in order to obtain the results desired or meant to be.

When you add fasting to prayers, you'll definitely obtain rapid results. Mark 9:29.

Offu Tataw-Ndjeng traveled out of town on a mission on Friday October 25, 2013. Later on that evening, she was called and told that Daniel the 1st son and 2nd child, was very sick. The next day she went back home.

Three days before his death on October 27 2013, Daniel NDJENG's spirit visited most people in the family. Our children and ourselves were amazed by the love and grace of GOD upon our lives and we give credit to persistent prayers **that allow us to have a personal relationship with our LORD**. Revelations & Visions : Acts 2:17-Genesis 31:24 – Matthew 2:13 – Daniel 2:27-28 here and there, including Mental Images : John 1:48. This is indeed nothing short of the grace of GOD.

The first scripture assigned to me, Isaiah 2:6-11 describes GOD as very jealous, which is normal, because He's the Creator of the universe ; He's not prejudiced because He's given us the opportunity to choose either evil or good. The choice is ours. He does not impose Himself onto us. Once the choice is on Him, one of the responsibilities is to worship Him and Him alone. The members of my family will never believe in soothsayers (liars, crooks, who will take advantage of the vulnerable – each time you visit or consult a soothsayer, you'll definitely pay him/her some fees) but will trust in the LORD who is trustworthy, righteous, faithful.. just to name a few. **Soothsayers will never give you food to eat or send you a message through dreams, visions and revelations.** Luke 4:8 ; Exodus 34:14 ; Deuteronomy 6:13 ; Exodus 23:25 We obtain a lot of these from the LORD, that's why we

shall worship HIM all the days of our lives. When you're on GOD's side, you never go wrong. Soothsayers' actions are temporary – GOD'S actions are permanent.

Friday October 25th 2013 was the kick-off date for the various revelations. Three children from the same generation all had a dream on the same topic and were all reported to my sister Dorothy, because they were very vivid and centered around her home. Genesis 31:24, Matthew 2:13, Daniel 2:27-28

Dorothy Tataw-Bekolo's daughter who now lives in Ivory Coast, called the mum on Friday October 25th, 2013 early in the morning and asked mum can you please call me back? She did and this is how it goes : Mum I had an awful dream and I wanted to tell you about it. I found myself in the house (Yaounde-CAMEROON) The house was full to more than capacity. There were a lot of people all over the place, the whole compound was full of people and everybody was crying. I saw daddy's deceased uncles & aunts. I asked what was going on and nobody will tell me anything. I looked for you and could not find you, I looked for my sister Manuella and I could not find her either. Next I found myself in our house in the village and I saw two men and one woman who were trying to give poison to daddy to drink...Then I got up from sleep. Three minutes after Dorothy hanged up the phone, our niece Agnes Tataw who lives with Dorothy since September 2013 after graduating from high school, and is now in college went to her and said aunty I had a dream. This is how it goes : There were a lot of people here in the house, and everybody was crying. I asked who is dead ? Nobody will tell me who has died. I proceeded to the funeral home. As soon as I got there, the walls of the funeral home collapsed on a dead body. I started screaming saying I've never seen anything like this before and oops I got up from sleep. Three minutes after our niece finished narrating her dream, a phone call comes in again for Dorothy. This time around, it is from her husband's nephew who lives in Kribi – Cameroon. This is how it goes : aunty I had a dream this morning. I was in your house and there were a lot of people all over the place. People were crying. I don't know what was really going on but the sight was not a joyful one. All three dreams took place between Thursday night breaking Friday morning. October 24 thru October 25, 2013. Three people having the same type of dreams at the same time. The timing was too accurate. Dorothy smelled trouble and immediately went to work. Usually, when one of us has a dream or vision, we share it among ourselves and immediately start praying over it, depending on how severe the case may appear, we can add fasting to it or not. She did not take this lightly and that same day, Friday October 25, 2013 immediately called me and our other siblings, including our children. Agreement – we must get into prayers and fasting, not later than Saturday October 26, 2013 which we did. I told her my spirit prompted me on Tuesday night 22nd October 2013 to read some scriptures on Wednesday early in the morning which I did until I got her call on Friday October 25, 2013. I told her all I read on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 5:00AM. – 6:00AM. were Psalms 61, 68, 37 53, 35, 91. She suggested we add Matthew 17:14-21 with emphasis on verses 20-21 and also Isaiah 59:1-2 and use all of these scriptures during our fasting and prayers of Saturday October 26, 2013. Fasting and prayer schedule : 6:00AM. - 9:00AM. – 12:00PM. – 3:00PM. – 6:00PM. {breaking of fasting} She was coordinating prayers in Cameroon and Ivory Coast; I was coordinating here and in Canada. We all knew something was about to happen but we could not tell what or put our finger on it. The prognostics were not good.

On Sunday October 27, 2013 the unthinkable happened. Daniel NDJENG was taken by the dad, Paul NDJENG from Bafia where they lived to Yaounde for better treatment because he was sick. When I take a step back, and having those dreams resonate one more time in my head, I will say without a doubt that the Holy Spirit will never say a lie. Remember, Dorothy's daughter said that in her dream, she looked for the mum and could not find her? Lo and behold, Daniel went from Bafia to Yaounde where he died during Dorothy's absence

because she left that morning on a mission to South Africa. Talking about the grace of Grace? “My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me.” John 10:27 Dorothy’s daughter, who happened to be my goddaughter, actually had a clear vision of what was to come even though we could not tell exactly who, when nor how.

When I got the news only when I returned home after Church service and the new member class from my cousin Rita who lives in Baltimore, we cried on the phone together. My husband was not home – I called him and broke the news to him while crying – he asked me to calm down and he immediately rushed back home. I later on gathered my courage to call Cameroon. When I finally talked to my maternal aunt, she told me three days before Daniel went to be with the Lord, which was between Thursday and Friday, that same period that those dreams were recorded, she was feeling very sick, could not sleep until like 3:00AM., the second night she decided to go to the hospital, they ran all types of tests for her, everything came out negative but yet she could not sleep and felt very sick. Probably Daniel’s spirit was giving her a signal. One of our sisters-in-law also dreamt that she was strolling with our aunt and a wave came from nowhere and plucked them off and in the course of all that, our aunt died. Daniel’s spirit is very powerful. Three days after Daniel’s death, I called my cousin in Albany, NY. to announce the death to her and she screamed and said I now understand my dream. I asked her did you dream also ? She said she dreamt that a prominent politician in Limbe – Cameroon died in a car accident and everybody was converging where the accident took place; she said she was wondering if everyone is going toward that direction, will everyone be able to see exactly who died. Can you image how many people were warned about Daniel’s death? I will not hesitate to say that this youngster’s spirit was so pure and powerful because he shook many people in the family. This is the very first time in the history of our family to loose a child. It was tough. We are thankful that GOD used some of us to send his message and we were blessed to get all these revelations even though we could not interpret them accurately.

Daniel was buried in Makak – CAMEROON on November 2nd, 2013.

My sister who lives in Ivory Coast, Mbeng Tataw-Zoueu was traveling back home after spending a week in Cameroon for a conference that same Sunday, October 27, 2013 – a two hour flight when it’s direct. In this particular case, they had a lay over in Cotonou. She finally arrived in Ivory Coast only on Monday October 28, 2013 because The pilot asked the passengers to be calm because everything was in control. He emptied the fuel into the sea and made a U-turn back to Cotonou for an emergency landing and they had to spend the night in Cotonou-TOGO. Thank goodness no passenger was hurt. It could have been worse but GOD being merciful, he gave us the option to choose fasting and prayers. My suggestion for you all is to fast from time to time and pray all the time. It is rewarding.

When I say GOD is good, it’s not because I hear people say it or I read it in the Bible. I say it because I’ve actually tasted His goodness, I’ve seen His mighty hand on our family, time and again and again, and we surely do have something that not everybody has. I don’t know how many family members somewhere else will have so many visions and revelations announcing the death of a youngster as Daniel. This is absolutely the Grace of GOD.

Prayers are our heritage passed onto us by our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. As I will say again, you can only give what you receive. If we were not initiated into prayers since our childhood, we’ll not be passionate about it today. That’s all we know, that’s what we do best and we must preserve it by God’s grace. Our maternal grandmother used to begin her day with a prayer at 5:00AM. on her knees. There was no other option. Mark 1:35 – Psalm 5:3

I thank GOD that our mother who is of blessed memory [October 14, 1996] planted three wonderful seeds before her death {peace, prayers and forgiveness} and the harvest is bountiful. The children and grandchildren are reaping what she sowed a long time ago.

Don't they also say prayers can move mountains? This is so true because my siblings and myself have so many times upset some situations with our fasting and prayers. The devil cannot convince us to think differently. This particular case was meant to be the way it was and we give GOD all the glory for divine visions and revelations.

I did not think about this until one of my daughters, Michele made her personal analysis to this issue. She told me mum all I can tell you is you have a very serious job on hand. Everybody else in the family got a revelation of the problem that was on the way and you had but a vision of the solution to the problem which is the Word of God. That is when it dawned on me that I was already interceding for the family not knowing that a problem was on the way. Are we talking about the grace of GOD? the love of GOD, the mercy of GOD? It is all of these put into a little beautiful package. What else can one ask from GOD? The rewards are bountiful but we need to do our part. That's probably why in the Bible, every promise that the LORD makes to us is preceded by **IF**. Matthew 4:9 – Exodus 23:22 – Jeremiah 15:19 – Zechariah 3:7 Don't expect anything from the LORD if you're not prepared to sacrifice somehow for HIM. You can sacrifice your time, sleep, money...for the advancement of HIS Kingdom and you'll never regret it.

Talking about Matthew 25:1-13, the foolish took their lamps without any oil but the wise took their lamps and oil. The wise were prepared to be received by the Lord. The foolish could not be received because they were not prepared, did not have any oil, came back late and the door was shut on them. We need to wait on the LORD and not the other way around. We should not wait until the last day and pretend we need just few minutes to get ready before the LORD comes. You don't feed the chicken only the day you're taking it to the market to be sold.

The foolish might also say 2000 years ago, Jesus died on the cross of Calvary in order to redeem us from the curse of the law therefore we don't need to do any effort. All we need to do is wait for that day and we'll get to heaven. The oil that is mentioned here symbolizes the Spirit of God by which the light of testimony could be maintained in the hour of darkness. Zechariah 4:6 "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts". In order for the oil to continue burning, some work needs to be done. John 16:13-14; you need to eat spiritual food. It is unacceptable to have one leg in and one leg out Matthew 16:25 Matthew 25:8...Give us of your oil...This is absolutely impossible because every impartation of the Spirit's power to an individual is **marked "Nontransferable."** You cannot be doing night vigil and instead of the Holy Spirit coming upon you, it goes to someone else. No prayer, no power – some prayer, some power – more prayer, more power. Nothing multiply by nothing = Nothing. The oil mentioned in Matthew 25:8 represents prayers and fasting in our family.

In fact, all three scriptures are dealing a whole lot with prayers. Conclusion: prayers should be part and parcel of us. It is imperative that we abide by the Lord's principles – who spent most of His time praying. Mark 1:35

I thank GOD for our grandparents, parents, my siblings and our children for the burden of prayers HE has given us. It is said you can only give what you receive. Thank goodness for the favor of seed sowing.

When you don't pray, it's as if you build a house without a fence, giving the opportunity to the devil to come in any time and do whatever he wants. James 4:7

God does not have any grandchildren – it is always said child of GOD. Salvation is not transferable and everyone needs to work for theirs. Salvation is not an heritage that is passed on from generation to generation like a recipe. Everybody must seek their salvation. It's like you sitting on a bench by the swimming pool watching people swimming and doing water aerobics and you're losing weight or somebody is doing his/her daily exercise and you're expecting to lose weight at their place. The last but not the least, children will never inherit faith from their parents – everyone is responsible for the growth of their faith.

CONCLUSION : to summarize it all, it is very good to pray, fast and command in the name of Jesus-Christ. John 14:14; Mark 16:17 ; Acts 16:18 (there is power in the name of Jesus). What seems simple but it is not easy to carry out. It needs a lot of faith, patience a personal relationship with GOD.

Glory Eyong



Isaiah 2:12-12

Tuesday, December 3, 2013

Matthew 25:14-30

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

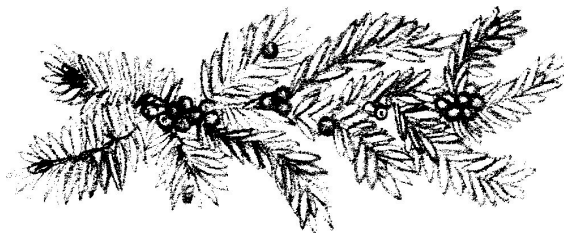
“Got Talent(s)?”

The parable in Matthew about the master leaving his servants with different amounts of talents—5, 3, & 1, respectively, and what they did with them, made me think of how we use our own talent(s). I’m using the word talent in two ways, both as money and our individual abilities.

As we respond to our calling as Christians to use our talent(s) for the Lord’s work, I wonder if we are afraid of taking risks with our talent(s). Afraid if we give too much money, we won’t have enough for ourselves. Or, afraid that our skills won’t match up to what needs to be done. Are we trying to bury our talent(s)? Maybe we want to be safe. All these thoughts have gone through my mind as I think of my gifts to the church. But the Isaiah passage reminds us that if we live humbly and do not get into building up man-made idols or our own image, God will take care of that kind of competition. And in Thessalonians, Paul gives us the model to live our lives: “But, since we belong to the light, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.....Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your unending love and faith in us. Give us the courage to use our talents bravely and to give a grateful response to your Son’s giving His life for us. Amen

Jenean McKay



HERE COMES THE JUDGE

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

Wednesday, December 4, 2013

Advent Scriptures that deal with the Second Coming are often harsh and threaten devastation and the separation of sheep and goats for judgment. In order to be sorted in to the “sheep” fold, we are instructed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, invite in the stranger, look after the sick, and visit prisoners. Jesus says that if we do these things to the least fortunate, we are doing it to Him. (Matt 25: 40)

Is being a Christian difficult or easy?

These instructions seem easy on the surface. However, there’s a difference between what Jesus says we *may* do and what we actually *end up* doing. Many people get stuck trying to discover their skills and talents and what direction they should take. Sometimes they never figure out what they have to offer.

Being a Christian is not difficult if you start with the neighbor that you are serving, rather than thinking about yourself and your talents. Choose someone less fortunate than you are—I’m guessing that this will not be difficult. You don’t have to choose the poorest, or hungriest—how about spending time with and listening to a lonely neighbor?

How do we measure success?

I find these quotes from Mother Theresa inspiring:

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

“It is not how much we give but how much love we put into giving.”

“At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by ‘I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in.’ If you can’t feed a hundred people, feed just one.”

“God doesn’t require us to succeed, he only requires that you try.”

Prayer: Loving God, please help us to lead holy and godly lives, as we look forward to a new heaven and earth. (2 Peter 3: 11b and 13)

Ella Cleveland

THE COMING OF THE MESSIANIC AGE

**Lectionary Passages: Isaiah 4: 2-6
John 1: 6-13
Acts 10: 9-16**

Thursday, December 5, 2013

The passage contained in Isaiah 4: 2-6 describes the future *Messianic Age* of the Messiah and is normally translated and paraphrased from the *Septuagint*¹ and appears in almost every biblical precursor of the Nativity (and this lectionary is no exception!). If you read the book of Isaiah, you will find this example unusual as it appears abruptly following dire warnings from the prophet concerning the future of Israel. In contrast to the warnings, it is unmistakably a message of peace and forgiveness.

The second lectionary, written by an unknown author, seeks to make a distinction between John the Baptizer and the coming Messiah. The author apparently thought that the enormous crowds and wide popularity of John the Baptizer would lead his followers to believe he was the coming Messiah.

John the Baptizer was the son of Zachary. He lived as a hermit in the desert of Judea until he was thirty when he began to preach on the banks of the Jordan against the evils of the times. He called his audiences to penance and baptism "for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand". He attracted large crowds, and when Christ came to him, John recognized Him as the Messiah and baptized Him, saying, "It is I who need baptism from you". When Christ left to preach in Galilee, John continued preaching in the Jordan valley. Fearful of his great popularity with the people, Herod had him arrested and imprisoned. John was beheaded at the request of Salome, daughter of Herodias, who asked for his head at the instigation of her mother. John inspired many of his followers to follow Christ when he designated Him "the Lamb of God," among them Andrew and John, who came to know Christ through John's preaching. As such, John is presented in the New Testament as the last of the Old Testament prophets and the precursor of the Messiah.

The third and final lectionary concerns a story in Acts 10, in which Saint Peter had a vision of a canopy full of animals being lowered from heaven. A voice from heaven told Peter to kill and eat, but since the sheet contained unclean animals, Peter declined. The command was repeated two more times, along with the voice saying, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (verse 15) and then the sheet was taken back to heaven (Acts 10:16). At this point in the narrative, messengers sent from Cornelius the Centurion arrive and urge Peter to go with them. He does so, and mentions the vision as he speaks to Cornelius, saying "God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean".

Prayer:

Merciful God, who sent Your messengers, the prophets,
To preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation:
Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins,
That we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer;
Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever!

Amen
Bruce Whitener

¹ from the Latin word **septuaginta** (meaning *seventy and often abbreviated LXX*), is a translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek..

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

December 6, 2013

Wild Grapes

A good vintner pays attention to her vineyard. She's out there daily, observing the plants. Should she remove leaves to get the fruit more light? What should grow between the vines? The details matter, from the beginning of the season to the end.

Now imagine you put all this work into the vineyard, and when you harvest, you have wild grapes – small, hard and sour. That's what Isaiah says has happened with Israel. God "expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry." Is our world today much different? God has lavished every care, but we have strayed and become like wild grapes – small, hard and sour.

How can we yield sweet fruit?

I've been thinking a lot about dispositions these days – about how I approach people, tasks, events, even scripture. Am I open or closed? Do I pay attention to others or focus on myself? Most often I'm not aware of my disposition – I move through life riding on habits, good ones ... and bad.

The Levites and priests seem determined in their dispositions as they approach John the Baptist. They want answers. But John's answers must have frustrated them. They ask who John is; he tells them who he is not. They ask again, and John quotes Isaiah: "I am a voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord." They want to know: Are you qualified to be doing this? John again answers indirectly: There's someone else, he says, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

As readers, we know what John is saying, and while I hope I would have cocked my head and tried to understand, I fear I would have been more like the priests and the Levites, seeking answers to fit into my own set of rules for the way I want the world to work.

I would have needed a shift in vision, in my disposition, to begin to understand. And with all its perfect sevens and metaphors, today's Revelation passage certainly tells about a shift of vision. It begins with a question similar to the one the priests and Levites ask of John the Baptist: Who is worthy? And no one can be found until the passage shifts our vision to the Lamb. To Jesus.

So how can we be worthy? How can we yield sweet fruit? Imagine we are in the vineyard. Imagine we are a branch growing and stretching our tendrils under God's care. God's gifts of sun and rain, of covenant and of Jesus help us to unfurl, to open ourselves, to shift our vision to see others in a new light, to be ready to see what John the Baptist was ready to see - the "one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me."

- Meg Hanna House

Social Injustice, the Lamb of God and Justification

Isaiah 5:8-12, 18-23
John 1:29-42
Romans 3:21-31

Saturday, December 7, 2013

The opening passages from Isaiah address social injustices that must be corrected, beginning with one's accumulation of property until there is room for no one else, and denounce those who are inflamed by drink and debauchery early and late and who do not pay attention to the works of the Lord. Also denounced are those who urge that the work of God be speeded up so that they may see it soon but show no inclination to distinguish good and evil, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and who deprive the innocent of their rights.

The passage from the Gospel of John covers the second and third day of the ministry of Jesus after his baptism by John the Baptist. Jesus is now introduced by John to the crowds as the "Lamb of God". As suggested by William Barclay, John may have been thinking of the Passover Lamb as flocks of lambs were being driven past them en route to Jerusalem to be sacrificed for the Passover Feast. He may have been alluding to the daily morning and evening sacrifices of a lamb by the Temple priest for the sins of the people when he hails Jesus as the only sacrifice that can save men and women from sin. He may have been linking Jesus to Isaiah's picture of one who was brought like a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). Or he may have been drawing on the struggles of the Maccabees, familiar to Jews of the time, in which the lamb served as the symbol of a great conqueror, when he introduces Jesus as the conquering champion of God.

Finally, in the passage from Romans, Paul is introducing the concept of justification by faith through grace as the only way to be in a right relationship with God. The Jews cannot get there by following all of the precepts of the Jewish laws, because no Jew can do that, and the Gentiles do not even have those laws. Yet in his divine forbearance, God has passed over the sins previously committed to prove that he is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Prayer: Creator God, keep us mindful of the history and perseverance of those who preceded us in earlier faith communities before and after the time that Jesus spent on earth. We thank Thee for prophets, apostles and martyrs - and for those close to our lives in the past who have loved us, trusted us, had hopes and dreams for us, and continued to love us even when we could not fulfill those dreams.

Robert Doan

Banner and Branch

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

Sunday, December 8

What a long tradition we follow. We read the Jewish Holy Scriptures which are many 1000's of years old. We share the same psalms and 3 books of Isaiah that Jesus and Paul read, studied, memorized and quoted. We have the privilege of seeing how they understood key sections of this Older Testament. Today we have Isaiah 11 under discussion; Paul quotes from it in Romans 15:12 :

The Root of Jesse will spring up,
One will rise to rule over the nation;
The Gentiles will hope in him. (Isaiah 11:10)

This quote points to the heart of Paul's ministry; once converted (baptized) by a fearful Barnabas, Paul dedicates his life to carrying the good news to the Gentiles and thus to us. It was his great mission and echoes God's command to Abram to leave his city, his people, all of his possessions and go to a promised land where:

I will make you into a great nation
And I will bless you
And all peoples on earth
Will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:2-3)

This blessing and inspiration given to one man were meant to be shared with everyone. The breadth of this promise is staggering. The blessing is meant to enrich "all peoples on earth." It is not to be hoarded, buried or restricted to one tribe, class or country. Abram was meant to be blessing to us all. So what does this mission of blessing everyone require?

A shoot (blessing) will come up from the stump of Jesse (Jesus is foretold),
From his roots a Branch will bear fruit for all.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him –
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and of power
The Spirit of knowledge and of awe of the LORD –
And he will delight in wonder of the LORD...(Isaiah 11:1-3)

"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a Banner for all the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious." (Isaiah 11:10)

In the midst of these blessings, the Banner is the rallying point for all who believe in and love Christ. The Branch is the living Word that Christ offers us. "I am the vine; you are now the branches...and you will bear much fruit (love)... My command is this : Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15: 1-12) Be a blessing to one another. And God's first blessing given to Abram, Isaiah's vision of a glorious Banner, and the gift of Christ's birth will be a great blessing shared by us all, with peace on earth and compassion to all men and women.

Prayer: Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, Who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be His glorious name forever, May His glory fill the whole earth!

Amen and Amen! (Psalm 72: 18-19)

Tom Dunlap

FOLLOWING JOHN THE BAPTIST



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

December 9
Monday

John the Baptist's approach to ministry as laid out in John 3:22-36 sets an important challenge for each of us during this Advent Season: the challenge of understanding our mission as Christian rather than congregational.

In the passage, John and his disciples are in the midst of a round of communal baptisms. One of John's disciples sees Jesus on the other side of the river, and is dismayed to see that Jesus is also performing baptisms. Worse, many of John's potential converts are abandoning him to flock to Jesus. John's disciple is agitated and alarmed on John's behalf, as he believes that Jesus is poaching John's potential parishioners, though Jesus himself was recent baptized by John.

In a modern context, Jesus's ministry is "stealing" members and donations from John's. A modern Session would probably react in the same way as John's disciple: with dismay.

John the Baptist, however, has a different view of the matter. The Bible tells us that John replied "*He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.* [John 3:29-30 NRSV] John measures the success of his ministry not by the number of his own followers, but by the number following Jesus whom he baptized. This presents us with a subtle challenge. Our congregation, like many others, measures the health and success of our ministry implicitly by membership totals and pledges and donations. But that is **not** John's measure of success. For John, it is more important that he helped in a wider mission, not that his own personal mission be a particular success.

How do we meet John's standard of selfless, humble evangelism?

As the church community of NYAPC, we evangelize six days a week to all the users of the church building each week: to all of the kids and tutors in Community Club, to the homeless in the Radcliffe Room Ministry, to the several church and community groups that use our building and facilities. Our outreach to, and support of, ministries outside the city—whether in other parts of the United States, Cuba, or countries in Africa—is a ministry that does not directly generate new members or tithes for NYAPC. In this Advent Season, we must remember that our interactions with the world around us give others a reason to consider Jesus and his message and what it could mean for them. Like John the Baptist, our individual actions are most important as they benefit those we help and the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Paul, Gwenn, and Jessica Gebhard

Prayer: *We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. In water, your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah. Through water, we are cleaned and reborn. Please, Almighty God, be with us as we go out into the world, in joyful obedience to your Son, to perform the service that you have set before us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*



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

Galatians 6: 2, 9-10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kristin Ford

come to me to have life you refuse
do **not** understand: look
eternal life you **think** scriptures have
eyes not look ears listen and their minds
from the one who alone is God comes
the **glory**

go and **say**
his **form** you have never seen heard
voice

holy **holy** holy
how will you **believe** what I say you do
not believe Moses
I know that his **testimony** to me is true

I warn who hears the **words** of this book
in his **light** for while
in my Father's **name** I come you do not
accept
in the midst that land vast **emptiness**
in this **book** are described

listen **not** comprehend
lofty and **high** a throne
messengers the truth John **testified**
morning bright **star** I am
my behalf another **testifies**

my behalf **Father** has testified
my behalf **testify** Father sent
not accept from human beings **glory** I
do

not turn and **not** be healed
of David the **root** and descendant

of him who **sent** me I seek the will
on my own **do** nothing
seraphs above the Lord
share in the tree of life and the holy **city**
shining lamp and **burning**

smoke **filled** house
so you may be **saved** I say these things
stop ears **shut** eyes dull mind
surely soon am **coming**
take **words** away God will

temple robe hem **filled** the
testimony is not true if about myself
the King my **eyes** have seen
touched my **mouth** with live coal
terebinth an oak **stump** still standing

two face **two** feet two flew
unclean lips a **people** live among
unclean lips I am a **man** of: Woe
utterly **desolate** the land is
voices **shook** on thresholds the pivots

when you accept **glory** and how can
you believe
who will go for and whom shall I **send**
works given me to complete works I
am **doing**
you do **not** have the love of God in
you I know

a pair of tongs from the **altar** brought
a live coal
add **words** God will add plagues
angel with this testimony Jesus **sent**
you

away far the Lord **sends**
because you do not believe him his
word is not abiding

before the **Father** accuse you think
believe me if you believed Moses
blot out sin: guilt depart
burned again even tenth part remain
but I have a **testimony** greater
than John's

bride '**come**' Spirit say '**come**' who
hears the thirsty one **come**
who wishes as a gift **take** water
Come Lord Jesus amen
with all be **grace** of the Lord Jesus

Isaiah 6:1-13

John 5:30-47

Revelation 22:16-20

Bob Braxton
Tuesday, December 10

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

Thursday, December 12, 2013

Perseverance in Faith

Today's readings made me think about perseverance in the present and hope for the future. God tells us that there is a brighter future for us and that it is important to persevere in our faith.

My experience as a Christian has included times when I felt confident in my faith and very close to God. During those times I often engaged in contemplative prayer and looked for opportunities to serve others, rather than thinking of myself first. At other times, however, I have felt myself drifting away from God. I got caught up in my own pride and material concerns. I failed to set aside sufficient time to pray and meditate on God's plan for me.

The verses of Hebrews call to mind the importance of persevering in faith. "But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassions for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourself possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised." **Hebrews 10:32-36.**

I think part of my growth as a Christian (I hope) is being conscious of times when I felt distant from God and, then, making efforts to move closer to God. This includes trying to focus on God's plan for me and trying to take steps to implement the plan. Contemplation, prayer and worship all help in moving closer to God. Ironically, I sometimes felt closest to God when going through hard times, experiencing grief and pain. The Hebrews passage reveals a community that was confident in its faith during times of persecution and abuse. Maybe it is easier to persevere in faith during times of pain and ordeal because those are the times when we feel that we need God the most. Unfortunately, when things are going well, and we feel good about life, God sometimes recedes to the background. I know that has been true for me.

The challenge is to persevere in faith, in both bad times and good times. It requires hard work, commitment, patience and endurance. Perseverance is about refusing to give up, trying again and again. Fortunately, it is blessing to have a community of faith at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to help in the effort. Worshiping together, praying together, working together and confessing together help in the quest to persevere in faith and strengthen the commitment to the faith community. The idea of joint perseverance is captured beautifully in the folk song that became an anthem of the Civil Rights movement, "Eyes on the Prize." "Well the only chains we can stand are the chains of hand in hand. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on."

So what is "the prize" for our community? Certainly it is growing the community and together sharing the ideal of the final verse of Hebrews Chapter 10: "But we are not among those who shrink back, and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." **Hebrews 10:39.**

Prayer: Dear God have mercy on me. Show me your plan for me. Help me move closer to you and persevere in faith. Amen

Adam Bain

Each year during advent season, I reflect on the previous year and contemplate where I've been and what the next year might bring. This year, I must confess, I feel overwhelmed as I try to put into perspective the challenges I faced personally over the past six months, as well as the countless crises occurring every day in both our country and abroad. This time last year, Kim and I had just begun the adoption process. As I write this, we are still in the midst of a crazy, emotional roller coaster of waiting and seeing, wondering when the moment will finally arrive that will change the rest of our lives. In addition, the whole process was brought to a screeching halt this summer when I suffered an unexpected grand mal seizure while on a run and later found out that I had brain tumor which, while (thankfully) benign, nevertheless required immediate surgery. Six weeks of recovery and five months of no driving later, I was back to "normal" life, but I definitely felt like I had been tested and had emerged a reformed soul.

But really, in spite of all that, I recognize that I'm one of the lucky ones. Others in our world – victims of such calamities as the Boston Marathon bombing, the ongoing violence in Syria, the civil unrest in Egypt, the recent typhoon in the Philippines, and other natural disasters – have experienced far more trauma and uncertainty than I can even imagine. I watch events unfold in the news and try to conceptualize how I would respond in the face of such terror. Observing the state of our world, it can be hard to envision Immanuel – God with us – when so many obstacles obscure our view. Isaiah's prophesy of the birth of a child yet to be conceived and his call for us to "be set apart for Him" reminds us that God is with us always. Yet Isaiah's vision of Immanuel as not just a "sanctuary" but also a "stumbling stone" is also a warning that, in the face of challenges and threats, there will be those who turn away and reject God. This notion is echoed in the text from Matthew, which recounts how both John the Baptist and Jesus were disregarded for being different, their messages rejected, and that, like children, we often are unsatisfied with the messages we receive, disappointed with what the world has to offer us. We reject God precisely at those times we feel most vulnerable, naively thinking we alone can control the chaos around us.

This year it's been hard for me not to be that person who, when facing the unknown, chooses doubt and cynicism and embraces unbelief as somehow more secure than the alternative. But I have to believe that it was Immanuel in the three individuals (still unknown to me) who found me unconscious on the trail after I had collapsed, called 911, and waited by my side for help to arrive. He was there in the nurses, physicians' assistants, and surgeons who took control of my care. And He was with me in the numerous individuals from my family, work, and, of course, this church community who prayed with and for me. I know God was with me not because the surgery was successful, but because, through the love and support I received, I was reminded that I was not alone. Through God's grace, I was lifted up out of the darkness and into the light.

My prayer for everyone this advent season and throughout the coming year is that you feel God's presence in those periods of pain and suffering, in the feelings of uncertainty about the future, and in those moments of rejection and loneliness.

Rachel Browning

Indifferent Christians?

Matthew 11:16-24

December 14, 2013

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” Matthew 11:16-17

Unfair though it may seem, the millennial generation came to mind when I started reading these verses. A 2012 study of 9 million people born between 1982 and 2000, concludes that millennials are “more civically and politically disengaged, more focused on materialistic values and less concerned about helping the larger community than Gen X (1962-1981) and Baby Boomers (1946-1961).” In other words, they are stereotyped as selfish and indifferent.

You could apply these same attributes to the people Jesus speaks about in the Gospel of Matthew. Expressing pastoral frustration, he rebuked the communities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because the residents of those cities did not repent after witnessing the miracles of Jesus.

More than 35 miracles performed by Jesus happened in this region of the Sea of Galilee. Twelve miracles were reported in Capernaum alone, the town where Jesus had relocated. He added that even the people of Sodom would have repented had they witnessed all of Jesus’ miracles. They were like children who were never satisfied, no matter what Jesus did. They were blasé about the miracles they had regularly witnessed.

During this Christmas season it is worth asking ourselves: have we, like the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, become millennial Christians?

Fortunately, I have met hundreds of millennials who are not typical of their generation. The response of many millennials to help in the relief and reconstruction efforts in the typhoon-ravaged islands in Central Philippines is a case in point. Young people raised funds and packed relief goods to help people in a country that they have not been to. Many have joined missions to help rebuild homes and provide medical support as the reconstruction continues.

Millennials have made – and can continue to make – a difference in our world. In my work at Bread for the World they have pushed us to do our work better, to use tools familiar to them, to work harder to end hunger – and be as driven as they are by their desire to love God and to live their faith in this troubled world. Instead of being deaf to the problems of this world, to Jesus’ teachings, they have repented and chosen to respond to God’s call.

Dear God, help us to always love you with all our hearts, with all our soul, and with all our minds. And help us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen

Adlai Amor

CROCUS

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Psalms 146

Matthew 11:2-11

James 5: 7-10

Sunday, December 15

What a beautiful gift is today's Scripture! Winter sets in upon us; darkness comes early; trees stand bare against the gray winter sky. But Isaiah shows us a springtime of the soul, when "the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

Throughout winter I watch for my first crocus to appear. It is a very mixed blessing that they arrive earlier and earlier, as our climate warms from our assaults on our environment, but still they bring me joy, and hope for the spring that will follow, with its gifts of renewal. "Your God will come...He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped....And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, ...they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

I can think of no other Biblical passage that holds more beauty and more hope, all packed into that tiny patch of purple poking its delicate petals through the slush. According to the Wycliffe Bible Commentary, "The blossoming of desert vegetation symbolizes the inward change that takes place in the redeemed soul. Instead of arid fruitlessness and spiritual death comes the fair bloom of newly blossoming faith and the more matured grandeur of the Cedars of Lebanon."

Each fall I bring in as many blooming plants as my den can accommodate, to carry me through the winter. Begonias by the pot-full fill the window with their pink and white. But as lovely as they are, they are merely a gap-filler until I spot that patch of blue or purple that emerges by the sidewalk. I have not planted any for years. They return of their own accord, in their own time, the reminder of the beauty and joy that will follow at Easter.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the promise held in the tiny beauty of the crocus that heralds the abundant joy that follows at Easter. As we await the holy Birth, keep us mindful of the promise that can be held in a homely bulb, and the even greater wonder of the salvation that arrives in the form of a wee human baby. Amen

Mary Krug

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-7
Matthew 21:23-32

Monday, December 16

What is Your Intention?

I grew up hearing my mother say “The road to hell is paved with good intentions; that was her way of telling me you better follow through with what you say you are going to do. (I found out that this proverb has been around for a long time; it is an old, old saying traced back to St. Bernard, who said “Hell is full of good intentions or desires.”

This little parable of the two sons suggests follow through with intentions—what you say you are going to do! It is a narrative depiction of Jesus’ earlier statement in the Sermon on the Mount, “Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

Sandwiched between a pericope on Jesus authority and the parable of the wicked tenants, the context applies this parable of judgment to Jewish religious leaders, but Matthew probably intended a wider application. Certainly it can apply to us today. How easily “church work” degenerates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God’s love and grace is doing in the world. As Professor Douglas R.A. Hare says in his commentary on *Matthew*, “We say that we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path!”

Advent is a season of anticipation; we are called to live expectant for the birth of Christ, the Light in our darkness – “the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!” (Isaiah 9:6) -- the incarnation of God to make all things new!

Is it our intention to yawn and go about the holiday festivities as usual OR will it be our intention to live out the light, the love and the peace that God gave us in Jesus? Is it our intention to go about our church duties with a ho-hum attitude OR will we open to the energy of the Spirit and let the enthusiasm of anticipated new life fill us and our work?

The Christmas carol says, “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.” It is my intention to spend some silent time to listen for God’s gift for me. It is my intention to sit and bask in the power of Isaiah’s poetry set to music in Handel’s “The Messiah.” It is my intention to wait for the coming of God.

The Coming of God

Our God is the One who comes to us
In a burning bush,
in an angel's song,
in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found locked in the church, not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be with no constraints, no predictability...

Our God will be born where God will be born,

but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us. When God is ready

God will come

even to a godforsaken place

like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch . .

for you know not when God comes

Watch, that you might be found

whenever

wherever

God comes

(From [Kneeling in Bethlehem](#), poems by Ann Weems)

Lord, we pray to you, the Holy One who comes to us. Come to us with new beginnings. Come to us in Jesus Christ and make us ready to let him live in us. Amen.

Rev. Beth Braxton

Tuesday, December 17, 2013

Isaiah 9:8-17

Matthew 18: 1-6

2 Thessalonians 2: 1-3, 13-17

Trusting God

Who do you trust? This has become an unspoken question in our society. In a world filled with people with hidden motives, suspect agendas, thoughts, plans, and ambitions, who do you trust? The world's way of thinking suggests that we trust no one, but ourselves, not even God. This way of thinking is contrary to God's will for our lives. So why don't we trust God? In the passages for our consideration, three reasons are lifted – pride and arrogance, position and power, fear and anxiety.

In the book of Isaiah, God sends a message of punishment to the children of Israel in Samaria, because of their disobedience. They heard the message, but their pride and arrogance caused them to ignore God. God sent another message, but the children of Israel paid no attention to God. Arrogance crept into the heart of the Israelites, and they believed that they no longer needed God, nor did they reverence him. They could do things by themselves. Even though God made the Israelites a nation and gave them the land they occupied, they put their trust in themselves rather than in him.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples were concerned about who would receive the highest place of authority in God's kingdom. The disciples were more interested in their position in the earthly kingdom. Instead of looking for service opportunities, they were focused on their status, their position. Jesus reminded them of their self-centered nature, and let them know that they had to put away their own selfish motives, thoughts, desires for status, and simply trust in Jesus.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul speaks to the church at Thessalonica about the end times and Christ's return. He did not want them to be anxious about Christ's appearing or tricked by false teachers who attempted to predict the day and hour, but prepared. He reminds them that they were chosen by God, from the beginning. He tells them that salvation begins and ends with Jesus Christ, and no other. Paul knew that they would face challenges that would test their faithfulness and trust in God. He encourages them to hold to what they have been taught, to stand firm, and to trust God.

Matthew's gospel and 2 Thessalonians reminds us of our need to trust God, as a little child, with no agendas, no hidden motives, simple trust. Sometimes it's hard for us adults to trust as a child. We are reminded that God chose us from the beginning. He knows our dreams, our desires, and our anxieties. We will stumble and we will have challenging seasons, but we are assured that when we put our trust in God, he will guide, protect and provide for us.

Father God- Forgive us not trusting in you. Deliver us from the arrogance, pride, the need for status and position, the fear and the anxiety, that comes when we think we know better than you, what is best for us. We acknowledge that we need you in our daily lives. Teach us to come to you as a child, trusting in your love and providential care for us. We trust you, God, In Jesus name, Amen.

Tarra Taylor

December 18, 2013

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

God's Amazing Grace

The verses found in this study differentiate between the principles and outcomes of love for neighbor and those born of self-serving intentions. In these scriptures, God reminds us that love for Him is intrinsically tied to love of our neighbors, whereas the path of selfish gain can lead to societal injustice.

The verses found in Isaiah and John provide a stern warning about the consequences of living self-serving lifestyles. The crimes against the poor in Isaiah remind us that the perpetrators of these offenses are committed by people who engage in vain pursuits of power, admiration, and/or wealth at the expense of the most vulnerable. When the fires of God's purification finally tear down unjust systems of abuse and power, the oppressed are liberated, and the oppressor is faced with the opportunity to transform.

In the book of John, Christ also warns us of the danger of becoming obsessed with religious and societal rules (as we understand them) to the point that love for the neighbor becomes secondary or non-important. This obsession can lead us to minimize love through 'justified' condemnation, and rejection of others; even those who do wonderful deeds for the well-being of 'the least of these.'

On the other hand, I can't accept the notion of a hateful God that destroys the 'wicked' out of pleasure. I have experienced and sensed enormous love from Him; I can, however, accept the notion that we can reap what we sow and that God is always willing to show us Mercy just as She has called us to do likewise to those who have harmed and/or hated us.

The scriptures remind us that God will never leave us alone. This knowing becomes a calming influence in the midst of personal and/or societal strife. This faith helps us cope throughout our lives because we have an inner anchor that keeps us grounded. It also allows us to take risks, make a stand for justice, and experience what Martin Luther King, Jr. mentioned when he said:

"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Finally, these verses remind me that this transformation can only be made through the blood of Jesus Christ. "The new and living way" mentioned by Paul in the book of Hebrews is a reality full of love for our neighbor, creation, and God. God's transforming Grace opens our eyes to the beauty of simplicity; to gratitude for what we have, and liberation from vain wants. With a sincere heart that has become full of faith, we can hold to this blessed hope without wavering. The Kingdom of God is of a greater realm, and this irrational love 'provokes' us to encourage and support each other as brothers and sisters in a reality where class, race, and nationality mean nothing in Her Light.

Prayer: Dear God, have Mercy on us, for we do not know the depth of our own sin.
Have Grace upon us, for we are your children longing for redemption.
Give us your Holy Spirit, so that we know that we are never truly alone.
Give us your Son, Jesus Christ, so that we may gain a loving heart through you.
Have Mercy on us oh God, have Mercy on us.
And teach us to walk in your ways. Amen

Steve Yu

Thursday, December 19, 2013

Try as I might to allow words to arise in me, none seem to come as I meditate on Isaiah 10:5-19, John 4: 1-15 and Romans 4:1-8. What comes, instead, is a patchwork of simple images.

I see an assault of Assyria against the Israelites, by God's sanction.

I see Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well as she asks him for "that living water."

These pictures take place against the backdrop of an open hand, signifying that righteousness cannot be attained through work but is freely received by faith.

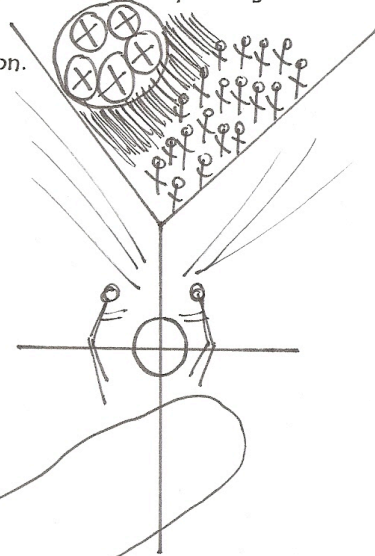
Sometimes words cannot express my longings – or God's longings for me. Each Advent my fingers strum the pages of the familiar story and I find I'm on the edge of something in my life, a yearly inner birth to mirror the birth of Christ for the world again.

Pictures (in color, movement, clay, music, silence, the flicker of a candle) often help us to "see" differently. And God, I want to see with new eyes.

I want to be that Samaritan woman next to Jesus....and let Your Living Water....

...all over the desert corners of my being.

What images do we carry? What are the pictures that point us to our beloved Christ Child, the birth of God? Let's visit and revisit them and see anew!



Kathryn Sparks

Cherchez L'Eau

John 4: 13-14

December 20, 2013

"Whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again; but no one who drinks the water that I shall give will ever be thirsty again: the water that I shall give will become a spring of water within, welling up for eternal life."

Perhaps the motto of French mysteries is "Cherchez la femme!" (Follow the woman!) If a French detective is at a loss in solving a crime, it's not a bad idea to go back to all the evidence and "cherchez la femme", since not infrequently that is what the perpetrator had in mind in the first place. Similarly, following the water in the Bible might not be a bad way to proceed. Water runs through the whole story, from the river flowing from Eden to the river of life in John's vision of the end-days – by way of the Nile, the Red Sea, the rock springs in the desert, the Jordan, the Sea of Galilee and all of those meetings at wells -- including the lesson for today.

I find the Samaritan woman at the well to be one of the Bible's most engaging characters. Over the millennia she has maintained her intelligence and her sense of humor. I particularly like it when, after Jesus promises living water, she replies, "Sir, give me some of that water, so that I may never be thirsty or come here again to draw water." In other words, anything to stop having to lug this water day after day!"

But, what does Jesus mean by "living water"? That's the \$64,000 question. I suspect that Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet and Nobel Prize winner, did not intend his poem "Wind and Water and Stone" to be an affirmation of Trinitarian faith, and yet it captures the animating power of "living water".

(1)The water hollowed the stone,
the wind dispersed the water,
the stone stopped the wind.
Water and wind and stone.

(2)The wind sculpted the stone,
the stone is a cup of water,
The water runs off and is wind.
Stone and wind and water.

(3)The wind sings in its turnings,
the water murmurs as it goes,
the motionless stone is quiet.
Wind and water and stone.

(4)One is the other and is neither:
among the empty names
they pass and disappear,
water and stone and wind.

Prayer: Holy God, pour Your Living Water on us this Advent Season, cleansing, molding, animating Your people. In Jesus name, Amen

Paul B. Dornan

Hope is a gift from God intended for all peoples.

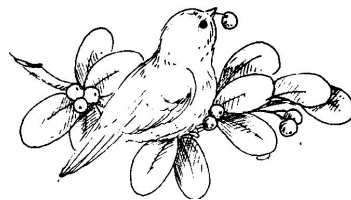
Most peoples throughout time have been awash in despair. Abraham faced despair. He was an alien in a strange land. With no children to perpetuate his identity and culture, he despaired about putting down roots and building a new identity in a new community. God offered hope and Abraham believed God's promise. His descendants, those who live in hope and not despair, are now numerous among the nations.

Jesus faced despair. He was maligned and captured and led to execution. His followers deserted him. Yet, because he believed God's promise, God lifted him and his followers out of despair and left them filled with hope for a world of peace.

As Paul insists in this passage from Romans, God's gift of hope through Abraham and Jesus is a pure gift. We don't have to "do" anything to receive it. We don't have to come from a particular religious tradition and follow particular religious rules, such as those of Islam, Christianity, Presbyterianism, Judaism or Buddhism. Whatever culture, nation, or religious tradition we come from, we can simply believe we are accepted as who we are, and that God's free gift of hope is meant for all of us.

During this Advent Season, let us hope for God's peace between all peoples and all religions.

Kay and Dave Herrell



Anticipatory Surprises

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 24
Matthew 1:18-25
Romans 5:1-7

Sunday, December 22nd, 2013

With the countdown to Christmas in its final hours, I think that it is fair to say that the holiday season is one of both anticipation and surprise. Many of us, I suspect, long for the Christmas of classic 1940s and 1950s cinema ... complete with a winter wonderland, with carolers at our front doorsteps, with stockings hung by the chimney, and with abundant presents oh so elegantly wrapped under a freshly cut, beautifully adorned six-foot spruce.

For one day, yes for one day, we want to forget the stress in our chaotic lives, the poverty in our hometowns, the political squabbling in our nation's capital, and the despair and destruction in our world. And, yet we know the reality; the reality that these continue to exist even during the season of Advent ... even on the day when Christians celebrate the birth of their Lord, Jesus the Christ.

In the liturgical calendar, Advent is that season of anticipation; that season of longing; that season of awaiting. But perhaps it is also a season of surprise. Convention suggests that the one who is to usher in a new kingdom – a day of new beginnings – should be mighty and powerful; a king of kings, or as Psalm 24 suggests, the king of glory, the Lord mighty in battle, the Lord of hosts.

And yet what a surprise when we are reminded in the Gospel of Matthew that it is a young child born on the outskirts of an empire to an unwed mother who is to be that prince of peace, who is to forever change the world, who is to usher in the day when swords are turned into ploughshares and lions live beside lambs. What a surprise when we recall that Jesus, this lowly boy of Nazareth, born in the village of Bethlehem, is to be named Emmanuel ... *God is with us*.

Perhaps during this season of Advent we should pay more attention to those surprises all around us ... to people like Larry Stewart, the Secret Santa of Kansas City, who for more than 25 years until his death in 2007 anonymously handed out cash at the holidays to individuals in need; to organizations like the Arctic League in Elmira, NY, which for more than a century has been seeking to ensure that no boy or girl in Chemung County goes without gifts at Christmas; and to the myriad of saints who volunteer in NYAPC's Radcliffe Room and Community Club and beyond, and the countless entities that selflessly seek to restore calm in the Philippines, hope in Haiti, peace in Palestine, and joy throughout the world one day at a time.

We may not find the romantic Christmas of ages past ... of Norman Rockwell paintings and of Irving Berlin songs. But perhaps it is not that wrong to long for such, to anticipate a time full of hope and joy and love and peace. So let us anticipate such a time, but also let us be surprised.

Loving God, during Advent, this season of anticipation, let us be surprised ... surprised not only by the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth born so long ago but by those who faithfully have taken up his call to fully love you with hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love neighbors as ourselves. And acting out of your love, let us too surprise ... surprise others – near and far, known and unknown – in simple and yet profound ways. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

December 23
COPING WITH THE RED DRAGON
Revelation 12: 1-9

In today's scripture we encounter the "Great Red Dragon with seven heads and ten horns . . .that serpent of old whose name is Satan or the Devil." Once again I pondered that Red Dragon . . .far more than selfishness, unkindness, gluttony or forgetting to pledge: true evil.

Browsing in a library one day I smiled seeing the cover of a book. There was a charming young blond boy out fishing. Closer inspection revealed his name: Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer. How can one's belief in a loving God reconcile with the Jeffrey Dahmers and Ariel Castros of the world?

A possible answer is provided later in Revelation: "The Red Dragon was worshipped by all . . .except those whose names the Lord that was slain keeps in his roll of the living, written since the world was made." That predestination-type concept would explain evil. Some people (us, of course!) are God's true people. The others . . . like Dahmer and Castro . . .are lesser beings. I simply don't buy that explanation. What other explanations are there? Environment? Perhaps, though Jeffrey Dahmer was wanted and loved as a boy. Genetics? His parents didn't have his inclinations. Mental aberration? Dahmer did change after an operation. Whatever the cause of such cruelty, the result is horrific.

How are we to cope with senseless evil? There are those whose professions require them to confront these horrors head on. A former forensic doctor I met dealt with the victims of such crimes. Years later she can only go to movies that are gentle--Disney, Pixar, romantic comedies. I salute the psychiatrists and police who have a courage that takes them into the dark corners of life.

I have concluded that it is counter productive to dwell on dark matters when I can't prevent them. I don't want to spend my hours paying attention to that Red Dragon. And then I think of the wise advice in Philipians 4:8:

"And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and gracious, whatever is excellent and admirable - fill all your thoughts with these things."

In this time of Advent we can focus on that New Birth, the child who showed us that the true way is Love.

Helen Williams

Advent 2013

Tuesday, December 24th, 2013

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 1:1-20

Titus 2:11-14

I think it's possible that the word "humbug" doesn't appear in any of the versions of the Bible that I'm now familiar with. Yet as I see commercial advertising swing into high gear before Halloween is even past and getting earlier every year I'm filled with exasperation and dread and an urge to cover my head and avoid the season altogether. But my love for the music and liturgy of Advent does overcome in part my distaste for commercial Christmas. My experience of community and closeness to friends is my handrail that prevents my complete fall from the spirit of the season. Daunting continual life challenges have made it hard for me to keep my hand on the rail though. Isaiah says in the familiar text, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." He also says that they have "multiplied the nation,...increased its joy; they rejoice before [the Christ] as with joy at the harvest". Hard for many to feel who have been living in need. Perhaps more to the point Isaiah continues, "as people exult when dividing plunder."

I myself feel gratitude for blessings of better health for myself and others of my family. Also I feel a tendency to love myself less due to incapacity to give in the way that I might wish of material gifts. For me, that's the trap. A poison potion of obligation and lack. Paradoxically both a fear of the future and the lack of one. I expressed this thought recently to a group of friends. They immediately chided me gently for not valuing the gifts I have and my willingness to share them with others whose lack is deeper and more sharply felt.

The account of the birth of Christ given by the evangelist Luke is familiar to many. His telling doesn't begin with Jesus though. It begins in the previous chapter with John the Baptist. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, come from good backgrounds and strive to be "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." But they felt keenly the lack of offspring "because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years." The Archangel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him not to be afraid. They are to be blessed with a son. "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Gabriel says, "...even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him,... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Nice gift, yes? It's the gift that we're all given in my view. Not necessarily to have children of course, but to have the privilege of a legacy of a difference made. A gift of grace. Not a material gift but a lasting one. Reformed and always reforming. Seldom easily given. And very valuable. Abundant and self-renewing. The gift that keeps on giving.

In the words of Titus, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety (selfishness) and worldly passions (greed), and in the *present age* to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope *and the manifestation* of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

With gratitude for Grace and in hopes for the manifestation of abundant good for everyone.

Merry Christmas...

Nathan Moon
Christmas Eve 2013

Isaiah 52:7-10; 62:6-7, 10-12
2013

Wednesday, 25th December

Luke 2:8-20

John 1:1-14;

Titus 3:4-7

Hebrews 1:1-12

Joy to the World

"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people[...]. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11

This year, the utmost privilege of writing the devotional for Christmas Day has been bestowed upon me. Although I was enthralled by that opportunity, by the same token, I both felt a mixture of humility and the self-inflicted strain to deliver a message that would be up to par with the significance that special day holds for me. Because the Nativity season, year after year, as far as I can remember, has consistently been the triggering event that brings back a flood of bittersweet memories.

In my native country, situated in the heart of Africa, aptly dubbed "Africa in miniature" for its assortment of landscapes that can be found throughout the continent, and its patchwork of ethnic and religious groups, Nativity is undoubtedly the most celebrated holiday, only rivaled by New Year or when the iconic soccer team, nicknamed the Indomitable Lions, is involved in an international competition; as of late, when they won their qualification for the upcoming Soccer World Cup. Needless to say that soccer, or football as it is termed in my motherland, is itself a 'religion'.

Growing up, Advent has always been the most exhilarating season of the year when, during a time-frame, the atmosphere seemed to be filled with particles of joy, magnanimity, Christmas carols, the fragrances of Christmas trees, a regain in faith in God and humanity. I still recollect this period as the catalyst for many "first and unique" moments of the year: for some, the first and unique time of the year for some to set their feet in a worship house. I also recall that it was during that time, that most of the less fortunate of us could enjoy our favourite dishes to one's fill; enjoy new sparkling clothes and shiny shoes that were recently bought exclusively for that special occasion, we could go to the movie theater (sometimes to watch the screening of the same movie about Jesus Christ for the umpteenth time). In short, it was the time of the year when we could indulge ourselves with the "hard-earned" money collected by wishing "Merry Christmas" handed to us by generous acquaintances or unknown passers-by; about the only time the least of us could afford what usually seemed out of our reach.

As I grow older, many of the childhood myths I had entertained about Christmas have been debunked one after another by the rationality linked to adulthood. And today, this day, I am celebrating my eighth Nativity far away from the familiar warm weather, dusty roads and modest surroundings of my native land. Yet, I can still experience, amid the wintry weather of my new homeland, the warmth of its melting pot and the universal magic of Christmas, thanks to the adopted Jewish Son of a carpenter, born of Immaculate Conception in the humble setting of a manger thousands years ago. Have yourself a little Merry Christmas!

Youssoupha Nyam