



*Lo!*  
*Newborn*  
*Jesus*

Advent 2014  
The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Washington, DC  
[www.nyapc.org](http://www.nyapc.org)

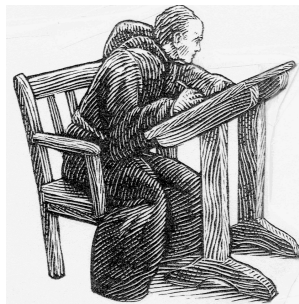
ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
2014

- Sunday, November 30 ..... First Sunday of Advent  
Congregational Sunday/Advent  
Festival, 10-11am PMH  
Pageant rehearsal 10 am
- Sunday, December 7 ..... Second Sunday of Advent  
(Communion)  
Pageant rehearsal 10-11 am
- Tuesday, December 9 ..... Joint Boards Meeting, 7 pm
- Wednesday, December 10 ..... McClendon Scholar-in-Residence:  
Dr. Harold Dean Trulear on  
mass-incarceration, RR 6:30pm
- Saturday, December 13 ..... Christmas pageant rehearsal  
9:45-11 am
- Sunday, December 14 ..... Third Sunday of Advent  
Children/Choir Christmas  
Program, **One service 10 am**  
Cookies and Gift-wrapping,  
PMH, 11 am  
Sam McFerran's Ordination  
Service, Sanctuary, 2 pm
- December 19 ..... "Longest Night Service" to  
remember homeless who died  
during 2014, 12 noon
- Sunday, December 21 ..... Fourth Sunday of Advent  
**One service, 10 am**  
Special music - Bach
- Wednesday, December 24 ..... Christmas Eve Services - 5:30  
and 8 pm (Communion)

## Advent 2014 Contributors

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## NO MORE WAITING



Isaiah 64:1-9  
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19  
Mark 13:24-37  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Sunday, November 30

*Prayer: Be patient with us, Almighty God, we are still children in your eyes. Help us recall Jesus' journey through our lives. We will not watch and wait; we will witness and act. As we celebrate Advent, we will share the love and forgiveness and grace that come with Jesus' presence. In your name we pray, Amen.*

Our late-rush-hour drive to Meadowkirk for the All Church Retreat on Friday evening, counter to our expectations, was stress-free. As we turned into winding Lime Kiln Road at twenty to eight, we could see the stars above the shadowy trees alongside the road. The moon, in a waning crescent phase, was dark and we felt like we were in the only car on the road. Conditions like this are some of our favorite times to talk. We used that warm cocoon quiet time to ponder aloud the Lectionary passages for November 30.

Briefly summarized, Isaiah 64 and Psalm 80 are written by people pleading to God to come down with earth-shattering noise and light (we could say “shock and awe”) to save them from their enemies, and forgive them for their faults and errors. These people are waiting to be saved. Mark 13:24 describes the fanfare heralding the Second Coming of Jesus sometime in the distant future, and follows that with two nuggets of advice about watching and waiting. 1 Corinthians 1 consists of a greeting and some praise for doing such a good job of fulfilling Jesus' commandments while waiting for the aforementioned Second Coming.

At first glance, these passages seem timeworn. Yes, Advent season is about preparing, watching, and waiting. Paul and I debated the issue of whether this is biblical “gotcha”: “If you are not prepared, and watching, and waiting, then you won't be saved.” Then we turned it around.

Do we need Advent? Do we need a threat/enticement of Jesus' Second Coming to live our lives each day to “be prepared”? If we accept Jesus' First Coming, then we have everything that we need to know to live our lives. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians: “*For in Him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.*” God does not need (again) to “*rip open the heavens and descend, and make the mountains shudder.*” God is with us, in us, all around us already. Jesus can come again, but His return is not going to change His message. We just need to get on with His message from his first visit: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: *‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard



Monday December 1

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

## A "Call" in the sinful world

*"The Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land;  
There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land... My people  
are destroyed for lack of knowledge." (Hosea 4)*

*"He has given us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may  
escape from the corruption of the world and may become participants of the divine  
nature." (2 Peter)*

The passages from Hosea and 2 Peter provide opposite perspectives on the scorecard for humankind and how we might be faring in our lives on God's earth. Hosea lived in a challenging time of war and anarchy for Jerusalem. Many of his passages are railing against the disloyalty and ignorance of God's people. To read him feels like a barrage of condemnation that makes one wonder about any possibility for redemption.

On the other hand, in this portion of 2 Peter the author exults that God has given us so much, and we must make good use of these gifts... in fact: "Be eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never stumble." Wow, as an "elected" of God who is trying to live out my call, I can move mountains!

In a way it's good to read these two extremes. Our lives and our time contain both sides of this dialectic – there is so much war, sin, and death in our world and our nation. There is indeed destruction when the leaders, priests and people forget God. Yet, so many of us are given the gifts, resources and opportunity to make a positive difference. The gifts are numerous and are named in 2 Peter: goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, mutual affection, and love. In particular the gift I would call out for special recognition is *endurance*. Whether in working with projects, which must go through lengthy city approvals, or accepting the physical limitations that come with getting older, I find that the ability to persevere is paramount.

The usefulness of the Hosea warnings is that we acknowledge the world's state of sinfulness at the same time we work our hardest on our "call and election" to carry out God's will. We try to work out our "call" within the systems of human corruption, pain, and anxiety that Hosea would recognize. We can only try our best.

Prayer: God, give me the strength and endurance to continually consider my "call" and to devote my energies to it, within a world beset by tragic sinfulness, hurt and indifference . Amen.

Martha Davis

## EVENING STAR — MORNING STAR

Hosea 4:11-16  
Luke 21:29-36  
2 Peter 1:12-21

Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2014

Most biblical scholars believe that Second Peter was not written until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, well after the death of the Apostle Peter. But it was common, and not considered deceitful, for Christian writers of that time to take the name of earlier Christians in order to spread their messages.

The writer of the letter was using the authority of Peter to counter a laxness of belief and behavior that he had witnessed or heard about among the churches, probably in Asia Minor. The writer was presenting Peter in old age, nearing death, wanting to tell his friends to remember his teachings.

Sunset and evening star, And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no mourning of the bar When I put out to sea,  
But such a tide as moving seems asleep, Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep, Turns again home.

*Joseph Barnby*

Peter was telling the churches that the stories of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not myths, but the truth. Similarly, all the predictions in the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus. He asks his readers “to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

O Morning Star, how fair and bright Thou beamest forth in truth and light!  
O Sovereign meek and lowly! Thou Root of Jesse, David’s Son,  
My Lord and Master, Thou hast won My heart to serve Thee solely!  
Thou art holy, Fair and glorious, all victorious,  
Rich in blessing, Rule and might o’er all possessing.

Thou heavenly Brightness! Light divine! O deep within my heart now shine,  
And make Thee there an altar! Fill me with joy and strength to be  
Thy member ever joined to Thee In love that cannot falter;  
Toward Thee longing Doth possess me; turn and bless me;  
Here in sadness Eye and heart long for Thy gladness!

*Philippe Nicolai*

Phil Hanna

## Repent! Repent! Repent!

**Hosea 5: 1-14   Matthew 3: 1-10   2 Peter 3: 1-10   Wednesday, December 3**

These three texts call God's people and their leaders to repent. Hosea called upon Israel, Judah, the priests, the king, to repent from idolatry and turn to the God of the covenant. In the words of Hosea, God sounds angry. Reading on in Hosea, we learn that God's anger and vengeance are tempered. Our other scriptural texts for today also give another view of God's posture toward us, and God's expectations. John the Baptist traveled to the wildest places preaching repentance to the masses and to the Pharisees and Sadducees, who seemed to feel entitled to God's blessing by birthright. In the words of John the Baptist, God sounds disappointed in and frustrated with their conduct, but continues to offer embrace. Peter wrote to scattered exiles who had been waiting to witness the fulfillment of God's promises, and perhaps doubted them. Meanwhile, God was waiting too, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. In the words of Peter, God is patient and longsuffering.

It is both hard to ignore, and hard to live with God's wrath. What God's wrath means, and whether and how it has been or is to be assuaged, became part of a theological debate during development of our current PCUSA hymnal, Glory to God. According to Mary Louise Bringle, in "Debating Hymns," published in Christian Century, May 01, 2013, the committee developing the hymnal considered hymns recently published in other hymnals, and found much to commend, and recommended a song popular in many churches, Getty and Townend's "In Christ Alone," based on a text found in another denomination's recently published hymnal. In that version, the second stanza contained the lines "Till on that cross as Jesus died / the love of God was magnified," but, the committee discovered that this version was not the original copyrighted version of the text, and had not been approved for publication. The original version said instead, "as Jesus died / the wrath of God was satisfied." The committee debated whether to include the hymn in its original version, or not at all. According to Brindle, "The theological question raised by the text in the original version was whether "God's honor was violated by human sin and that God's justice could only be satisfied by the atoning death of a sinless victim" and whether "the cross is primarily about God's need to assuage God's anger." While the committee voted not to include the hymn, the decision did not deny God's wrath, and it is in other hymns.

Our texts for today show that before, during and after Jesus' life and death on the cross, God calls us to repentance, and sometimes God is angry with us. What then, does God's anger or wrath mean for us? In the transcript of a conversation about the "Theology of Joy" between theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf on June 27, 2014 in Tübingen, Germany, published by Yale Divinity School and available on YouTube, Volf asked Moltmann about the wrath of God. Moltmann replied, "I interpret the wrath of God as God's wounded love. If you feel the wrath of another person, you feel also the interest of another person in you. Only if that person turns away, and turns his back to you, then you feel indifference. And this is the most terrible thing we can experience of God, that he has turned his countenance away from us." Moltmann continued by referring to scripture describing God's wrath as only for a moment, and God's grace as everlasting. Examples are at: Isaiah 12:1, Isaiah 54:8, Psalm 30:5.

Karen Mills

**Dear God, Thank you for Your steadfast love and everlasting grace. I/We hear You call us again and again to repent. We have much to repent, individually, as leaders, and collectively. May this Advent season of joy be a new season of commitment by me/us. Guide me/us ever to right relationship with You and strengthen my/our resolve to repent—to turn around--thought by thought, and deed by deed. Amen.**

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

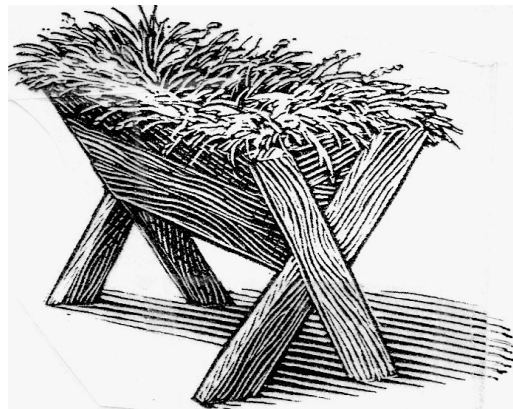
Thursday, December 4, 2014

Teach Sunday School for preschoolers, and you learn real quick to be wary of the Old Testament. Most of the stories you remember gloss over or omit the part where some large group of people dies in a generally horrific fashion. Ancient Israel was a brutal place in most respects (see, for example, today's passage from Hosea). People had a lot to be repentant about.

This is the backdrop for today's passage from Matthew. John's emphasis is on repentance, on the cleansing that was necessary before Jesus' arrival. If you did not repent, you would be the chaff after the threshing, discarded and burned. I am struck, then, by the difference between John's baptisms and the baptism of my own daughter a few weeks ago. Charlotte's baptism was a joyous, hopeful occasion. The church promised to teach and care for Charlotte, as it did for her brother a few years earlier (a promise that David puts to the test most Sundays by running around like he owns the place). The focus of the baptism was not self-preservation through repentance, but on a joyous welcome into the Kingdom of God.

This is what we wait for this Advent season - the one who will change life from a cycle of terrifying sin and desperate repentance to an existence of joyous community with each other and with God. He will give us the great gifts of hope, and love, and knowledge of God. And He will be here in three weeks!

Brian Dewhurst





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

Friday, December 5

In re-reading the letter to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 at this time of year, it is difficult not to read into it a polemic about the commercialization of Christmas: we too have abandoned the love we used to have; we have forgotten the works we used to do. This recontextualization of the passage might even be bolstered in reading that God commended the church at Ephesus for rejecting the Nicolaitians, a sect known for – according to 2<sup>nd</sup> century writer Irenaeus – their 'lives of unrestrained indulgence.'

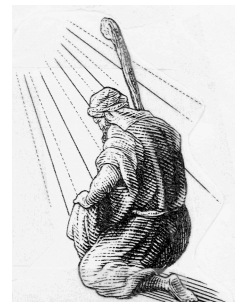
Indulgence: this is the underlying thread in all three of the readings, even though it is not the primary focus in any of them. In Hosea, the foolhardy indulgence of the Israelites and Samaritans is implicated in the political instability of the era. A quick succession of kings in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC (just before the exile) rose and fell, most taking the throne through some combination of assassination and intrigue only to be deposed in the same manner. Hosea uses the metaphor of a baker who has fallen asleep from drunkenness, with the oven still burning, only to awake and find everything scorched (one could probably add Christmas baking stories of a similar, but rather more light-hearted nature).

Even in the Matthew passage, Jesus can't help but note that prophets – much less John the Baptist – are not the people who dress in fine robes like those in the king's palace. Several commentators have suggested Jesus is making a very pointed reference here to the Jewish scribes who, allured by the growing power of King Herod, decided to enter the king's service, and in so doing exchanged their humble scribes' garments for fine robes.

The seduction of wealth and the subsequent corruption of its pursuers is a recurring theme throughout Scripture and indeed throughout human history. But as in these three passages, it often sits in the background, and is so subtle that it is easy – perhaps even comforting-- to overlook.

Prayer: Holy God, help us to resist the siren calls that surround us in this indulgent season; let us not forsake the humble beauty of the Incarnation for the allures of Imperial glory. In Jesus name, Amen.

David Kroeker-Maus



Saturday, December 6

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

Every so often I'll hear a line in a sermon that just completely resonates with me, and sticks with me for years after. Several years ago, the pastor at my home church had one such line, referring to wars and acts of violence done in God's name with the so-called purpose of defending God.

"God doesn't need **you** to defend him," he said. And he went on to explain that there is nothing, really, that we, as humans, could do to defend God anyway.

As I was reading the verses from Acts, I thought about his sermon again.

Verse 25 says, "*He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people.*"

That thought in and of itself is pretty amazing. God gives *everything* to *everyone*. I'm not even sure I can fully grasp the magnitude of that, though I can spend an awful lot of time trying.

But Paul goes further in his explanation of God. No, he doesn't need anything from us, but God has created all things "*so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, and he gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are.*"

And that is a reminder that I am constantly in need of, especially during Advent.

It is so easy to get caught up in the secular parts of the holiday season. It's easy to focus on gifts and decorations and music and traditions. And that's not inherently a bad thing, by any means. But it is essential that we remember, however cliché the phrase has become, the reason for the season. It is essential that we continue to look for, reach out, and find God in the midst of these other traditions.

He is there among the gifts, because he gave the greatest gift of all. He is the inspiration for the music that we sing. He is there at the heart of the traditions that we've created with our loved ones. After all, as Paul reminds us: God isn't far from any of us. In fact, I suspect that he is as close as we let him (or closer than we realize), but never as far as we may try to push him away.

It's true, God does not need us. He doesn't need anything from us, but instead he gave us everything we truly need in the form of His Son. In this season of giving and reflection, the very least we can do is reach out for him - and hopefully find what we're looking for.

Elizabeth Sciupac

# Glory in Isaiah

Isaiah 40; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13;  
Mark 1:1-8; and 2 Peter 3:8-15a.

Sunday  
December 7, 2014

“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people!” (Isaiah 40:1) The prophet is addressing the Jewish community, which has returned to Israel after 40+ years of exile and slavery in Babylon. Many dangers have been overcome, but many more lie ahead, Isaiah warns. How do these newly freed people find a pathway to God? They must “prepare,” especially spiritual paths. If they can wait and watch for direction, for teaching, then “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (Isa. 40: 5). So it is promised. Yet there is another kind of glory ahead of them: the “flowers,” the prizes, new wealth, the distractions in the world of freedom that they are rushing into. The prophet warns them away from all these green and attractive promises. “All their glory is like the flowers of the field ...(that) will wither” (Isa. 40-8). But “the Word (the teaching) of our God will stand forever” (40- 8). These are the two glories – that of God and that of the ever-changing, fading world. The prophet wants the people to follow the teachings that lead to God. It is a Word that is available to everyone who will listen.

**Have you not heard?**

**Has it not been told to you**

**from the beginning? (Isa. 40:21 and 40:28)**

These questions are repeated. It is like an illuminated sign in Isaiah. Pay attention.

So much of Isaiah 40 is about illumination – about seeing the right way. The chapter is full of unanswerable questions that expose our limited vision, our limited comprehension. Yet the folly is that we attempt to comprehend all the mind of God. We can't. We need to be humble and wait for guidance. We can see the effects of God's infinite love and be grateful for these gifts, but a full understanding is beyond us.

This mysterious illumination is far beyond us, but we can witness it like the stars. We need to slow down, drop everything, forget distractions and focus on the marvelous light. This is the great light in our dark world. We can see it but can't define it, capture it nor iPhoto it. This is the present Glory of God. We can bask in it – if we let go of all else – lose ourselves in this illumination. In this leap of faith, we must trust the Lord. Maybe that's how it feels to “soar on the wings of eagles (40:31)” and to be renewed in the light of the Sun. This soaring is how Isaiah's vision ends. It is what we need in this dark time of year.

**Prayer:** Halleluiah, the Lord is coming, and His glory will be in His Word and light. They are His gifts to us.

Tom Dunlap

## We're Number 1!

*Matthew 20: 20-28*

*Monday, December 8*

Election season is finally over as I write this, and who's sorry to see it end? All those who didn't win, whose dreams of coming in first did not come to pass, I suppose. I remember well my own first campaign. There were five seats available, so the candidates did not need to finish on top, but we all hoped we would. No one chants, "We're number two!" even in a multi-seat contest. And so it was with "the mother of the sons of Zebedee", who apparently was not important enough to Matthew to warrant a name, although my Commentary identifies her as Salome, the sister of the Virgin Mary.

She must have thought, as Jesus' aunt, that her status justified the request she made. She knelt before him, and "He said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'" Jesus' response was in the nature of "Be careful what you wish for", even as He told them, to the jealous chagrin of the other ten, that "you will drink my cup."

Jesus contrasted the way of the Gentile, lording it over those of lesser status, with what was required of His followers: "Whoever would be first among you must be your servant, even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." I have often been puzzled by the word "many", rather than "all". My Commentary suggests that it is in contrast to the *one* who died, but "a happy [choice] in view of the clear teaching elsewhere that not all would avail themselves of the proffered salvation."  
*Wycliffe Bible commentary*

"Not to be served, but to serve." It's a very different form of status than being Number 1. A good servant, not that I have one, but as I understand it, is one who goes about her work diligently, faithfully and invisibly. And, as we are admonished each Sunday, let's all that she or he does, be done in love.

*Lord, help us to be servant people, seeking not to be Number 1 but to do what we can to improve the lives of others. Open our eyes to see the need, and our hearts to fill it. In Thy holy name, Amen*

Mary Krug

**December 9, 2014**

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

When my husband, Wilson, and I began thinking about places to retire, we came up with a lengthy, complicated and ever-changing list of criteria for ranking locations. One item on the “would like to have” list was that it be near mountains, double credit if it had a mountain view. There is something majestic and inspiring about gazing upon a mountain peak that pulls one out of preoccupation with the mundane details of life. Mountaintop images abound in the Bible. Roger has mentioned that mountains are a “thin space” for him, a place where the separation between this world and the other world, between man and God, becomes thin. Just hours before his death, Martin Luther King spoke of reaching “the mountaintop” and seeing the Promised Land.

The Transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17) took place on a “high mountain” where Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus talking to Elijah and Moses. There they heard the voice of God, certainly the very essence of a thin space. Today’s scripture from Matthew occurs just after the Transfiguration as Jesus walked down from the mountain with the three men. The disciples have just seen a miracle but are admonished not to speak of it until after Jesus’ death. I don’t know about you, but I might be dumbstruck in such a situation. Not these three! They asked questions and talked to Jesus about what they had seen and what it meant. They asked about prophecies in the scriptures, and Jesus taught them the meaning of what they had seen.

In Acts, the followers at Ephesus, baptized in the name of John - a baptism of repentance - had never heard of the Holy Spirit. When, at Paul’s hand, they received baptism in the Holy Spirit, they spoke in tongues and prophesied. This experience led the new disciples to view their faith and their lives in a very different light.

How do these stories inform and instruct our preparation in Advent? How do we make time and space for finding our own thin space, for learning from the words of Jesus, for being open to the Holy Spirit? As we observe the season, perhaps going to church more often or reading these devotionals, we can invite the Holy Spirit to help us see things in a different light; to help us feel the anticipation of the coming of the Christ Child amidst all the shopping, wrapping, and traveling; to help us find that Advent mountain top, our Advent thin space, the place where we can approach God and he can approach us, where we can feel the Holy Spirit preparing us for the coming of our Savior.

*Father, as we move through Advent, grant us a mountaintop moment as you move us toward that space where we can sense your presence and love, discern your will, and seek to become what you would have us be and do. Amen.*

Kris Golden



## **“I Am Who I Am”**

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

Wednesday  
December 10, 2014

Today’s scripture passages give us the opportunity to ponder God’s fundamental nature as we continue our Advent journey. Prophet Micah tells us “what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.” (6:8 CEB) But who is this God with whom we are to walk humbly? Moses asked that question and was told, “I Am Who I Am.” (Exodus 3:14 CEB) These passages leave us with multiple questions; they are hardly self explanatory.

Our perception of God’s nature matters. Is God “all powerful” and in control of every detail of human and nonhuman existence? Is God angry and vengeful? Is God judgmental? Is the evil, unjust, neglectful conduct that characterizes so much human history the action of God – or enacted with God’s acquiescence or approval? Are we to worship, to walk humbly with a Being who has those fundamental characteristics?

No, the prophet Hosea tells us. God is like the perfect caring parent, nurturing each of us and the rest of God’s creation too with creative, instructive, unconditional, corrective and sustaining love. Can we even imagine such love? Yes, Hosea calls us to do so!

No, the Gospel writer tells us. God is our heavenly Father. All of God’s creation is to constitute a family in which status distinctions are to be avoided, and the “greatest among you will be your servant.” (Matthew 23: 11 CEB)

No, Paul reminds us in the Acts passage. God’s long salvation history is recited in detail. God’s “great power” is exercised through the leaders whom God calls and who discern and act in accord with God’s will. This great power is shown to be that of the perfect caring parent, our heavenly Father, nurturing each of us and the rest of God’s creation too with creative, instructive and corrective yet unconditional and sustaining love.

Can we imagine such love creating, nurturing and sustaining each of us – and the rest of God’s creation too? We are invited to do so, for it is the God whose fundamental nature is to love, nurture and sustain God’s creation, and each part of it, even each of us, that we are to worship and with whom we are to walk humbly.

*Prayer: Gracious and loving God, enable me to live each hour of each day with awareness of your steadfast love for me and for all of your creation. Help me to stay alert to this reality as I seek to be your faithful disciple in all that I do and say and believe. This prayer is offered in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.*

- John H. Quinn, Jr.

Thursday, December 11, 2014

## REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

Hosea 11: 8-12

Matthew 23: 13-22

Philippians 4: 4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always;  
again I will say, Rejoice.”  
--Philippians 4: 4 (NRSV)

Peter Kreeft, in his book, Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing, offers some excellent questions—and some answers--for us to ponder:

### **What brings us joy?**

Perhaps it is music that we hear, art that we view, or a baby that we hold. This joy is something outside of ourselves. When our senses are fixed on something else, not ourselves, our tears can overflow like a fountain.

### **What do we want, ultimately?**

*We want heaven.* We don't want to continue on the treadmill of our earthly lives. Yet we fear that heaven might get boring. What does one *do* at the eschatological banquet, day after day?

*We want infinite joy*, which is found in heaven. Heaven is timeless, not linear; it transcends time. Heaven is rejoicing and playing that do not end. Heaven is not the end, but the beginning of true life in the spirit.

When we enter into the joy of the Lord, we realize that our true joy is in Him. St. Augustine: “Our heart is restless until it rests in you.” During this Advent season, let us rejoice *in the Lord*, and marvel at His creation and His many blessings to us.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for continuing to bless us and bring us joy in this earthly life. We look forward to the time when we will see you face-to-face, and experience infinite joy in heaven.

Ella Cleveland

Hosea 12:2-9;  
Matthew 23:23-28;  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-7

Friday, December 12, 2014

### **God's present in Jesus - God is present in Jesus**

The Advent season is filled with anticipation.

We prepare for the Holidays with shopping for gifts, for guests arrival, and in putting up lights and decorations.

We prepare to celebrate God's coming, and Jesus' birth into the world.

This is the most remarkable present to discover at the Holidays, but how often do we truly prepare in the way that God asks?

In the scriptures for today's devotional, I found myself reflecting on these questions of preparation for the culmination of the Advent season – Christ's birth.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 Paul writes that, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come..."

As Christians our "*seasons*" take on a different meaning. We have the *season* of Advent, the *season* of Lent. Our *seasons* are good reminders that we should always be awaiting the coming of God into our lives.

In Hosea 12:6, we are told, "... return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God."

And in Matthew 23 we are reminded to not only clean the exteriors of our lives, but the interiors of our souls. It is not the decorating of our homes that matter during the season, or the outward appearance of giving lavish gifts. Giving of the finest of gifts is not the same to God as what we have neglected, "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting" the giving of our tithes and offerings.

Furthermore in preparation we are asked to make a conscious effort to pay attention to the interior of our lives, that they not be "full of greed and self-indulgence.... First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean."

In both Hosea and in Matthew, justice is a theme. In the hustle and bustle of the holidays we need this reminder. Let us in preparation for Christ's coming keep watch so that we can recognize the injustices that surround us, let us shine a light into places of darkness. We "are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."

The lights that we put on the Christmas tree, or the candles that we put in our windows, let them be a reflection of the light that is within our newly cleansed souls. In preparation for the present that is coming at Christmas – God being present in Jesus – let us seek to be clean inside and out, and awaken to the injustices that surround us, and give of ourselves this season.

-SVG



Hosea 13:4-9  
Matthew 23:29-39  
1 Thessalonians 5:8-15

December 13, 2014

## ANGER MANAGEMENT

It's sometimes hard for me to come to terms with the angry God I often find in the Bible. When I read through the first readings for this day, I cringed a little. In Hosea 13, the prophet writes of the Israelites who had turned away from God after being led out of Egypt and fed. The Israelites had become proud and had forgotten God. This caused God to respond with severe vengeance, as an animal. The passage states that like "a bear robbed of her cubs," God will "tear open the covering of their heart," and "devour them like a lion." *Hosea 13:8*. That's harsh!

Perhaps the second reading would be a little better. After all, it was from the New Testament. There the focus is more on God's love, and less on God's anger, right? Unfortunately, no such luck. In the second reading, from Matthew 23, Jesus is reading the riot act to the hypocrite scribes and Pharisees with a series of "woes unto you," ending with this crescendo: "You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" *Matthew 23:33*. Wow!

It seems that God and Jesus are often described as expressing imperfect human qualities, like anger, not necessarily because they actually have those qualities, but because we imperfect humans think they do. By projecting our own emotions onto God and Jesus we may get a deeper understanding or we may become confused. I think the anger of God and Jesus in the Bible is a way of saying "This is important!" There's nothing that quite focuses attention like anger. It's important that we be faithful servants to God who has delivered us, not proud and forgetful like the Israelites were. It's important to be inclusive and faithful, not exclusive and hypocritical like the Pharisees. Anger in these passages makes those points forcefully.

But what's the reaction to the anger in the Bible? It seems to me that the answer is the gift of Jesus Christ and the Crucifixion. We are not destined to be objects of God's anger, but rather to be embraced in God's love, the most perfect quality imaginable. As Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, "But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him." *1 Thessalonians 5:8-10*.

As we await the birth of Jesus during Advent, we can appreciate that there will be anger, unhappiness, and suffering in our world. But we can withstand the anger, unhappiness, and suffering armed with "the breastplate of faith and love" and the "helmet of salvation." We can do this, because we know that Christ is on the way. God's gift to us has died for us to save us from the anger, suffering, and unhappiness we find here.

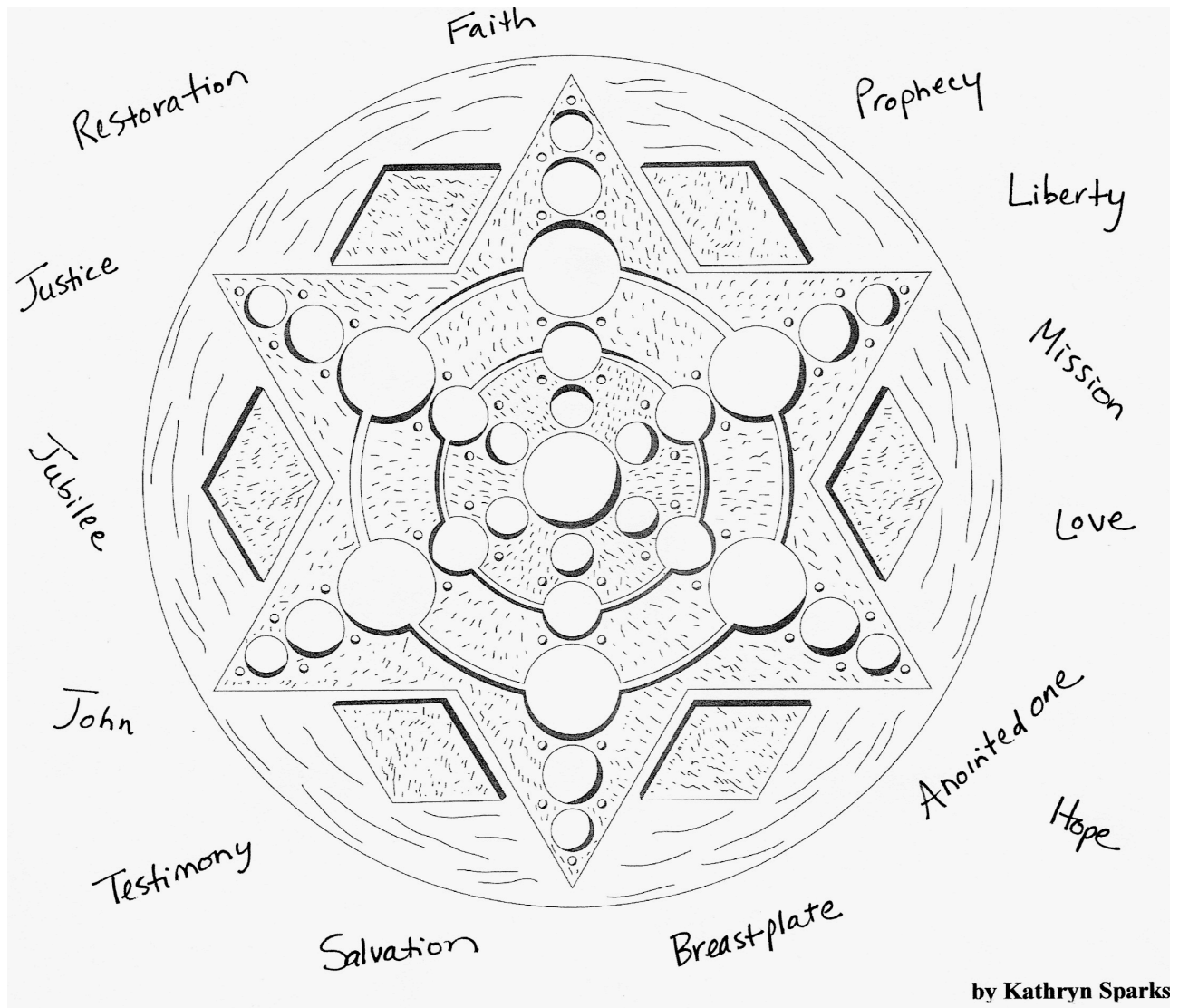
*Adam Bain*

**Sunday, December 14, 2014**

*Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 Psalm 126 John 1: 6-8, 19-28 1 Thessalonians 5: 6-24*

“Art offers a chance to lead us into prayer not just through our words or our minds, but our hands!” (*Exploring Spiritual Practices*, the small NYAPC Solitude Retreat booklet) I chose the mandala below after reflecting and praying with today’s lessons. In preparation for prayer with these lessons, you are invited to gather some colored pencils together or decide to simply focus on the shapes in the design.

“Mandalas are common in Buddhism. They have been shared with all of us as a way to focus in on prayer through color and concentration of breath. Read the scripture. Take in 3 breaths (invoking the presence of the Trinity) and then, without thinking too hard, select a color. Begin on the outside of the design. Then, watching your breathing notice also what thoughts come up for you. When your attention starts to wander, this may be an invitation to select another color. As you move from the outside towards the inside of the design, follow your breath and focus in on the Trinity...what has come up for you?” (Solitude Retreat booklet) ***This mandala comes from the kit Mandalas in Nature, by Sonia Waleyla***



Hosea 14:1-9  
Matthew 24:1-14  
Jude 1-16

Monday, December 15, 2014

On October 27, the Washington Post put faces on the devastation in Monrovia, Liberia:

The two girls [12 and 13] had nursed their mother as she died, cleaning up her vomit and curling up against her feverish body on the family's only mattress. They braided her hair until a truck came for the corpse. . . . This is the world of Princess and Georgina: They share an outdoor toilet, without running water, with 25 other people. In their slum, 15 members of an extended family often sleep in one home. . . . [T]heir shack . . . had been locked by the body-collection team after their mother's body was removed . . . . The team had also burned the family's mattress. So the girls had spent the previous night with their grandmother . . . . She, too, had Ebola.<sup>1</sup>

During Advent some draw parallels between biblical text and world events as signs of the second coming. Two thousand years ago, from the Mount of Olives, Christ described the end times in ominous terms:

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. . . . Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all . . . . Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. . . . The love of many will grow cold. *Matt. 24:7, 9-10, 12*

But these comparisons distort the gospel. If we expect Christ's return to be a moment of escape, we separate Christ from our life today. Christ is in Monrovia with Princess and Georgina, in Sierra Leone, in hovels and shanties around the globe, among the poor, weak, and forgotten.

In you the orphan finds mercy. *Hos. 14:3*

If we separate ourselves from the suffering of others, we separate ourselves from Christ. God joined us as a vulnerable child, saved us by climbing astride a cross of suffering and death, and continues to suffer in solidarity with the afflicted. Christ never left, instead we lost sight of him. We can choose a life apart from God's love, as "waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted." (*Jude 12*) Or we can choose to embrace God's love for us and flourish:

His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. They shall again live beneath his shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon. *Hos. 14:6-7*

Because our vision of Christ is often obscured by day-to-day life, it may feel difficult to choose life in Christ, "but anyone who endures to the end will be saved." (*Matt. 24:13*)

Advent anticipates a day when we recognize Christ's continuing presence and affirm our desire to live in God, crumbling the temple stones of inequity, extinguishing hate, and rekindling love.

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations. *Matt. 24:14*

Mike Smith

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<sup>1</sup><http://wapo.st/1xQ19ha>

Tuesday, December 16

Malachi 3:1-5  
Matthew 24:15-31  
Jude 17-25

### **Who Can Endure the Day of His Coming?**

We've domesticated the word "awesome" these days. "Awesome," we say, in response to good news. Or when we bite into a delicious Christmas cookie. The slang has replaced the first meaning listed in my dictionary: "inspiring an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear; causing or inducing awe."

The God portrayed in these Advent passages is awesome in the classic sense of the word. In a passage I can't read without hearing Handel's Messiah, Malachi promises, "The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, indeed he is coming." But then this promise begins to sound like a threat: "But who can endure the day of his coming?" And in Matthew, Jesus' description of the coming of the Son of Man paints a horrifying scene. "Woe to those who are pregnant. ... Pray that your flight may not be in winter. ... All the tribes of the earth will mourn."

Malachi goes on to promise judgment on sorcerers, adulterers, against those who oppress workers, widows, orphans, aliens. I'm tempted to look over my shoulder, assuming Malachi's talking about someone else, but I'm not so sure he is. And Matthew's Jesus warns Judeans to run to the hills. Ominous. God isn't only awesome. ... God is dangerous!

The scenes in these passages are a far cry from the Silent Night scene I hold in my head, a warning that not only have I domesticated the word "awesome," I am in danger of domesticating God. How on earth can I even stand up in church, with these apocalyptic visions swirling around me? When I sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," do I really mean what I am singing? Really, who can endure the day of his coming?

These apocalyptic images are only one aspect of God, of course, one aspect of the God who arrives at Christmas in the most surprising way of all, in the form of a baby. But as I get ready for Christmas with holiday lights, gift shopping and favorite carols, perhaps I should be grateful that the lectionary confronts me with images far removed from the sugar-plums dancing in my head.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Really, no one can, at least not alone. And as Jude reminds us, we are not alone. I need Jude's advice to the community: "But you, beloved, build yourself up on your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering." And I need Jude's benediction:

*"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."*  
Meg Hanna House

## Wednesday, December 17

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

*“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” – James 5: 7-8*

Advent is all about expectation, anticipation, preparation: We prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ, the savior sent by God out of love for us, God’s children. And today’s scripture verses hone in on what it means to expect God and prepare for God’s coming. In Malachi, we are told to “return to God.” The passage in James reminds us to be patient and strengthen our hearts, just as a farmer must wait for the crop to grow, “being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.” In Matthew, we are instructed, “from the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.”

But while themes of anticipation and patience echo throughout, the conclusion of the passage from Matthew goes even further. Matthew calls on us to not just practice patience, but to actively prepare for what is—for me at least—a complicated notion of the second coming of Christ: “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

The Rapture is a hard concept with which to grapple, and not something we often talk about as Presbyterians. I certainly tripped over this every time I read the passage. The common cultural understanding of the Rapture seems antithetical to my understanding of God’s radical love for all God’s children. The concept of God taking away the righteous and leaving behind everyone else is deeply unsettling to me. So as I was turning over these words, I was heartened to stumble across Chris Glaser’s blog, where he writes this simple line about the rapture:

“Truth is, we are more likely to abandon God than the other way around.”

While we turn aside, stumble, or lose sight of God, God is always there, always seeking to work through us and be with us. The call for patience in the Scriptures isn’t just about waiting for God, but learning to recognize God—proactively attuning our senses to God at work in the world and striving not to abandon God.

No one can know what God has planned for the world, for God’s children, or for Christ’s return. But what we can know is this: We may fail at patience or strength of heart. We may “rob” God and put God to the test, as Malachi reminds us. We will certainly turn away from God, even as we try desperately not to. But the transformative love of God, represented in this season as a baby in a manger, will grant us the grace we cannot earn. We will not perish, but will receive an overflowing blessing from God, who never turns away from or abandons us.

Prayer: Loving God, as we prepare for and anticipate the birth of the baby Jesus this Advent season, we celebrate the abundant love you have for us. Thank you for blessing us and extending your radical grace, even in the face of our impatience and our shortcomings. Strengthen our hearts and help us to see you at work in the world, this advent season and always. Amen.

Kristin Ford

## The (Watchful) Faithful Servant

Dec. 18, 2014

Matthew 24:45-51

*“Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.” Matthew 24:45-46*

This is one of the three parables that Jesus taught while he and his disciples were in the Mount of Olives. Jesus had just foretold the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. His disciples asked what signs will precede His coming and how they will know the end of the age. Jesus answered the question by ending it with three parables. They could collectively be called the Watching Parables. They all emphasize the need to be watchful and to be always ready for Christ’s coming because the Lord could come any time.

Our reading today is the first of three such parables. The story teaches us that watching means being mutually concerned in sharing the Good News with others. The second story, that of the ten virgins, teaches us that being watchful means not being dependent on ourselves but on others and other resources. The third parable, the story of the talents, means that being watchful is a deliberate investment in life.

Our meditation today focuses on the first parable, especially in the context of this Advent season and in the commemoration of the birth of Christ.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that a faithful servant ensures that everyone is fed at the proper time. Literally feeding them with food, but just as important, feeding ourselves and others the Good News. A watchful, faithful servant ministers to others by teaching and sharing the Good News of Christ.

The parable also describes a servant who, instead of keeping watch over God’s people, exploits them and abuses them. Since this servant does not know when the Master will return – and I doubt that he cares – the servant instead mistreats others. The servant forgets that God is always watching us even if we do not know it. A watchful, faithful servant is a good steward knowing that God continues to watch over him even if God is not physically there.

In effect, the faithful, watchful servant is a servant leader which Jesus typifies in Mark 10:42-45. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. As servant leaders we lead through our service, and do not exist to be served. So as we look forward in celebration of Christ’s coming, let us be the watchful, faithful servant leaders God charges us to be.

*As we await your coming Jesus, help us to always be mindful that only you know when that time will be. In the meantime, strengthen us and guide us as your faithful servant leaders. Guide our hearts as we feed the hungry and minister to all those whom you call the “least of these”. Keep us steadfast in mission and in prayer. Help us to be always alert for your presence in our lives. Amen.*

Adlai Amor

**“The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow.....”**

The advice that “everything will look better in the morning” or “sleep on it” and you will have fresh perspectives, come to mind in reading today’s passages, especially Malachi, that invoke the brightness of the sun in terms of faith in God. For all the worries, trouble, and challenges we confront in our daily lives—not to mention the world’s turmoil—we have God’s promise: “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings.” A new day always comes with hope and opportunities to start afresh, to make new beginnings, make amends, develop a different course, solve problems, give solace and support to others. As Malachi writes, “A day comes, glowing like a furnace.” The promise is also made that the “arrogant and evildoers, the wicked” shall be chaff burned to ashes (admittedly, not a pretty image).

When speaking of the wicked and evil, it is hard not to bring the Islamic State to mind with the horrendous consequences of being “the wrong Muslim,” a Christian or other minority religion. It is difficult to comprehend the death and unending suffering of Iraqis and Syrians pushed from their homes, witnessing massacres and loss of loved ones, suffering cold, hunger, sickness. And yet it is amazing that the sun of God shines through in the faith and spirit of Christians in these countries.

Matthew’s advice is clear in the story of the bridegroom and the girls’ oil lamps to “Keep awake then; for you never know the day or the hour” when Christ will come or the opportunity is there to shine God’s light. The Synod and churches in Syria and Lebanon are ready; the churches in Iraq are ready. The Presbyterian Synod and churches in Syria and Lebanon are for the third year seeking to supply winter heating, clothing, and food for homeless Syrians and using the network of churches there to furnish these provisions. The two Presbyterian churches in Kirkuk and Baghdad are housing refugees in the church and its grounds in Kirkuk and supporting refugees within a ten-mile radius of the Baghdad church. The dedication, commitment, and courage of these churches in Iraq and Syria truly are the bright-shining, indeed blazing, sun of God bringing healing to those in desperate need.

As Paul wrote in Corinthians, “I resolved that...I would think of nothing but Jesus Christ...[with] conviction carried by spiritual power.” Surely this spiritual conviction is working in these places. In Basrah, Iraq, Dr. Zuhair Fathallah told us about the demonstration of Christ’s love working through the pre-school children to their parents and families; the love of Christ being demonstrated to taxi drivers on the Church FM radio station. In ways unknown, God’s sun—and son!—are shown through faith and love. How can we display such conviction and faith? How can we take action and live our lives so that the light of Christ, God’s blazing sun, shines through us?

Prayer: Dear God, show us your blazing sun with each new day, and renew in us your spirit and conviction so that your light might shine through us in all we do.

Marilyn J. Seiber

## ***The Gift of Worship***

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

December 20, 2014

*“You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain which is your heritage, the place which you, Yahweh, have made your dwelling, the sanctuary, Yahweh, prepared by your own hands. Yahweh will be king for ever and ever.” Exodus 15: 17-18.*

*“... to us, though, God has given revelation through the Spirit, for the Spirit explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God... Now, the Spirit we have received is not the spirit of the world but God’s own Spirit, so that we might understand the lavish gifts God has given us.” I Corinthians 2: 10, 12.*

Most of us have read or heard the Parable of the Talents [Matthew 25: 14-30] many, many times, and by now most of us have been able to tame it. It’s about testing and stretching our gifts, small as they may be. Period. End of lesson. But what if we interpreted it in light of our other two lectionary passages in which the power and mystery of God are set before a people, a worshipping community? It is up to that community, then, to explore the depths of everything, even the depths of God through worship, reflection, action. If we as a worshipping community bury those lavish gifts, what are the consequences? I can even picture the abundance of God’s gifts bubbling to the surface as we try to bury them deeper in the ground in worship complacency – same old words, same empty sentiments, same old domestication of the wildness and unpredictability of God’s love in trite words and practices.

I love to worship at New York Avenue when the sermon offers new insight into the depth of God, when the words and tune of the hymns embrace and enrich each other to the glory of God, when each element of the service adds depth and light to Yahweh’s dwelling, when the congregation is prepared and expectant in worship. New York Avenue shares with what seems like the entire American Church a serious decline in worship attendance. I, as others, mourn that fact, but I am enough of a traditionalist to question new practices just for the sake of newness or popularity. We are called to be faithful – and, yet, to test the Spirit’s moving. So my questions to the pastors, to the Worship and Music Committee, to ourselves are: Does our worship in its totality and its constituent parts allow this worshipping community, both as individuals and as a people, to explore the depths of everything, even the depths of God? And are we of the congregation prepared in worship to be struck by the wildness and unpredictability of God’s grace? Let our prayer be, in the words of Charles Wesley, that we may be *“Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.” Amen*

*Paul B. Dornan*



Sunday, December 21, 2014

Bible Passages:

- 2 Samuel 7: 1-11
- Psalm 89: 1-4
- Luke 1: 26-38
- Romans 16:25-27

What is the difference between a labyrinth and a maze?

During the course of the year, in different spiritual seasons, The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church periodically hosts Solitude Retreats on Saturday mornings--in the heart of the nation's capital--at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> & New York Avenue, two blocks from the White House. These are two of Washington DC's busiest streets. It is never quiet.

Still, we are encouraged by our pastor, Roger Gench, to pull ourselves away from the din of the days, to reflect on biblical passages, spiritual readings, monastic chants, scriptural art, and re-center ourselves in Christ. During these mornings, a large canvas sheet, with an intricately drawn labyrinth is laid out in the enormous "Peter Marshall Hall" on the fifth floor, directly over the sanctuary. Participants are invited to prayerfully and silently enter the labyrinth and meditate as they follow the winding path to the center and back out again.

Here's the thing: you can't get lost in a labyrinth. You just need to stay on the path. It will lead you in. It will lead you out. You don't need to worry. You don't need to interrupt your meditation to look up and try to figure out where you are. You need only trust the path in front of you, and lose yourself in the contemplative and spiritual moments which refresh body, mind, and soul.

The passages outlined for today's reflections call to mind this powerful metaphor. God's covenant with David was clear and profound, as clear and profound as his promise to Israel: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish your kingdom."

The promise is reinforced in the Psalm: "I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations."

Mary knew this. It's probably pretty fair to say that she wasn't exactly expecting Gabriel and his message, foretelling the birth of Jesus, but once she got that message, I think that she entered into this labyrinth, based on her understanding and her faith. In doing so, she becomes a model for us all: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

You can lose yourself in a labyrinth, but you can never get lost. Your faith will always bring you back.

Lord: Give us the faith as Mary had as we prepare for the birth of your son. Help us to remember that you are ever faithful in our lives; we cannot get lost. This journey of faith is a labyrinth, not a maze. Amen.

Laura Asiala

## *The Least of These ...*

1 Chronicles 16: 8-18    Matthew 25: 31-46    Ephesians 3: 7-13    December 22nd, 2014

Every year, it seems, the holiday season comes a bit earlier. By the holiday season, I mean, not the Christian liturgical period of Advent, but rather the days ... no weeks ... preceding December 25<sup>th</sup> when consumers are barraged with the latest “must have” products, when holiday music blasts from radios and in elevators 24/7, and when twinkling multicolored lights appear on lampposts, on bushes, and even on buildings of skylines. With now but a few days left before Christmas, many of us, I suspect, are stressed, hurried, and even tired. We love Christmas and all that accompanies it; we just don’t need the commercialization for months on end.

How important is it then, that we take a step back and remind ourselves that we are also deep into the season of Advent, that period in the Christian calendar of celebration and of awaiting. In Advent, we rejoice in the birth of Jesus – *Emmanuel*, God with us – and we anticipate a time when lions will live besides lambs, when swords will be turned into ploughshares, and when the beloved community will be fully realized. Like 1 Chronicles suggests, let’s take the time to shout Hosanna, to venerate God. *Sing to God, sing praises to God. Tell all of God’s wonderful works. Glory in God’s holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.*

But Advent, like Lent, also offers us the chance for both personal and communal reflection. Let’s ask ourselves, “Where have we been? Where are we going? Have we been moving towards, or away from, God and neighbor? Have we been working for, or been an obstruction to, a new day and God’s beloved community?”

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus presents us with a parable about the judgment of nations. In it, the righteous are those who care for the marginalized and the oppressed. In feeding the hungry, in welcoming the stranger, in clothing the naked, in assisting the sick and the imprisoned, the righteous are tending to Jesus, God *Emmanuel*, God in our midst. *Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did to me.*

Striking in this passage is the righteous assist the marginalized and oppressed not to curry favor with the king of kings but solely because it’s the right thing to do.

Countless examples can be noted of those who have selflessly given to assisting the unfortunate. Many, I am sure, you personally know. But in this year of a black mark on professional sports, let me note but one more such individual. Former NFL Center Jason Brown gave up a promising career a few years ago to go into farming ... farming for the poor. With no experience and few contacts, he purchased a 1,000 acre farm and this year planted sweet potatoes, potatoes, and cucumbers, of which all were given away, all to the needy and hungry. How much? According to a November 7, 2014, article in the Raleigh, NC’s *The News & Observer*, nearly 50,000 lbs of sweet potatoes, 10,000 lbs of potatoes, and 10,000 lbs of cucumbers. All given to *the least of these*.

God loves everyone, without exception. But, perhaps, God does indeed have a preferential option for the least of these, for the marginalized and the oppressed. Look into the eyes of men and women in the Radcliffe Room and there you will find God. Engage in conversations with individuals at the McClendon Center and there you will find God. Pass the peace with strangers beside you in church and there you will find God. Seek out a child in Bethlehem, like that child born two millennia ago on edge of empire, and there you will find God.

*Loving and compassionate God. May we pursue acts of peace and justice not just during this season of Advent, but each and every day. May we do this selflessly and without favor. May we, in assisting the least of these, see glimpses of You and of the beloved community here and yet to come. Amen.*

- Mark A. Zaineddin

*When they were few in number, a handful, and strangers there, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another, He let no one oppress them. 1 Chronicles 16:19*

*I cannot do anything on my own . . . I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.*  
John 5:30

*How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? John 5:43-44*

As Christians, we strive to seek the will of God as exemplified by Jesus. But how successful are we in accomplishing this? How often do we instead seek to fulfill our *own* will, hoping that God will approve and answer our prayers the way we want? I like setting goals for myself, and I care about what my family, friends, and coworkers think of me. I enjoy the sense of accomplishment I feel when I have completed a challenge successfully. I like being told that I have done a good job. But I do wonder sometimes whether I am prioritizing my own expectations ahead of God's, pursuing my own agenda while calling it His.

This past year and a half, Kim and I endured over thirteen months of waiting to be selected as adoptive parents. Adoption is a kind of faith journey all its own. Everything about the process tested us. During the initial home study, we literally faced judgment at every turn – our home, finances, health, and mental fitness were all up for evaluation. But while this part of the process could be bewilderingly tedious, Kim and I understood that this was part of the deal. What challenged us most was what followed: the waiting period, the wondering whether and when we would be *chosen* to be parents. This required unyielding patience, open-mindedness, and trust – trust in ourselves and our own worth, in our case workers, and in the process itself. There were many days when I felt lost and alone, as if I was wandering through unknown territory. Being in a place of such vulnerability and having no control over the outcome, I know I spent more time worrying about what others thought of me than about what God wanted for my life. So, I prayed. A lot. Often, I did not know what to pray for. And as the months went by, I sometimes questioned whether this was how God meant for us to be devoting our time, resources, and energy. Were we fulfilling God's will or just marking time? *How long did He expect us to wait?*

Kim and I were selected by our agency to become the parents of Ava and Ellie in July 2014 – whether this was God's will, I don't know. As I write this, we have been parents for almost five months, and I have neither the words nor the space on this page to describe adequately the joy and treasure that our daughters have brought into our lives. We are not so far removed from the waiting period that we can't remember what it was like, but now our focus has shifted. We have begun a whole new journey, one that brings much excitement but that also comes with its own sets of doubts and fears. I know we cannot control certain outcomes. But I think God's will for all of us is for us to remember that we are not alone on our respective journeys.

During this season of Advent, may we all quiet those voices of judgment, whatever their source, by focusing on God's love for us as exemplified through Jesus, our Christ and savior.

Rachel Browning

## The Coming King, The Shepherds and The Angels

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

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

Isaiah proclaims the Righteous Reign of the Coming King, the great light that will be seen by those who have walked in darkness. The rod of the oppressor will be broken, and the boots and bloody garments of the tramping warriors will be burned as fuel for the fire. A child will be born on whose shoulders authority will rest and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There will be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom, which will be upheld with justice and righteousness.

Luke continues Isaiah's reference to the light that is coming as he reports on the people within the realm of Emperor Augustus following Augustus' directive to return to their towns to be registered in the first census. Joseph goes from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the city of David in Judea called Bethlehem, for he is descended from the house and family of David, and with Joseph goes Mary, to whom he is engaged and who is expecting a child. When the child is born, he is wrapped in cloth and placed in a manger, for there is no room in the inn. The child is given the name Jesus and his arrival is proclaimed to shepherds in the neighboring fields keeping watch over their flocks at night by an angel surrounded by the glory of the Lord who proclaims to the terrified shepherds that it is a glorious time, there having been born that day in Bethlehem the Messiah proclaimed by Isaiah. The angel is then surrounded by heavenly hosts, praising God and proclaiming the good news. When the cloud of angels has returned to heaven, the shepherds go to Bethlehem to see what has been proclaimed and, after seeing Mary, Joseph and the child in the manger, spread the word to the world. But, as noted in the brief recital from Paul's letter to Titus, we are still waiting for the full manifestation of the hope and glory in those words.

*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

## “Extravagant Incarnation”

Luke 2:8-20

December 25, 2014

Christmas is finally here! Since Thanksgiving or maybe going back to Halloween, we have experienced a range of emotions: joy, sadness, chaotic fury and expectation. It is a season that is known for its extravagance. There are parties to attend, cookies to make, and the just-right presents to buy. During this fall-to-Advent-to-Christmas season, we are often accused of materialism, and some of the critique is probably quite fitting. But when we take a look at the Nativity story, we notice that the Incarnation has nothing to do with separating the spiritual from the material.

Our nativity story, beginning with the angel appearing to Mary and ending with everyone in the stable crowded around Jesus Christ, is rich with detail. From an unwed mother, to a scared Joseph, to the straw in the stable, to the bright star, the story is alive with color, fragrance, and emotion.

God came to be with us as a real person. Jesus is God. God is Jesus. When Jesus was a baby, he cried, ate, slept, and grew. As a child, he laughed, he loved, and he learned. In his lifetime, he felt sad and happy, frustrated and proud, angry and satisfied. He prayed, taught, healed, and cried. He lived within our very human world, full of politics, full of people seeking shelter, and full of people seeking for something more.

Fast forward to today — God is still with us – in the face of every person, in the faces of those gathered around the dinner table, and in the faces of those who are looking for a place to go. God continues to be incarnate amongst us. That is the incredible news of Christmas. God became a real person who lived among us, and God continues to give us that startling, always present love everyday!

This Christmas day, giving is not only what we do; it's who we are, for this present of eternal-never-changing love that is the most valuable of all. It is God's extravagant gift of incarnation for us. Let us pray:

*Holy One, like Mary and Joseph when Jesus was born, we look with wonder at your Son. Like the angles on the first Christmas night, we sing, “Glory to you, O God in the highest heaven!” Like the shepherds who ran to the stable, we are amazed at all your good and mighty works. Like the magi when they first saw Jesus, we bring ourselves and our gifts and bow before you. Thank you for Christmas. Thank you for your incarnate Son. In Jesus Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.*

Merry Christmas!

Alice Rose Tewell

