

Advent 2015



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

ADVENT AT NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
2015

- Sunday, November 29 First Sunday of Advent
Congregational Sunday/Advent
Festival, 10-11am PMH
- Tuesday, December 1 Care package assembly
Dewhurst's 10am-12 noon
- Sunday, December 6 Second Sunday of Advent
(Communion)
- Saturday, December 12 Christmas pageant rehearsal
9am-12noon followed by
pizza/movie party 12-2pm
- Sunday, December 13 Third Sunday of Advent
Children/Choir Christmas
Program, **ONE service, 11am**
- Friday, December 18 "Longest Night Service" to
remember homeless who died
during 2015, 12 noon
- Sunday, December 20 Fourth Sunday of Advent
ONE service, 11 am
Special music – "A Winter's
Night"
- Wednesday, December 24 Christmas Eve Services - 5:30
and 8 pm (Communion)

November 29, 2015

First Day of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Starting about right now it seems as though our public spaces are grandly decorated — massive Christmas trees, merry Santa-sleighs, and garlands of green, red and gold fill up the view. When you come to church today, the sanctuary will also be festive with garlands and wreaths tied with red bows. Soon there will be a tree in the back of the sanctuary. Though we certainly do decorate (thanks, Diaconal ministers), they aren't flashy and certainly not at the center.

Like the rest of the year, the Communion table, the baptismal font, and the cross are the main elements in the sanctuary. The liturgical cloth on the communion table and pulpit are purple-blue along with the stoles of the ministers. This purple-blue hue is the same color as Lent. It is the color of penitence and fasting.

We begin Advent today — the season of expectation, of patience, and of longing for a new way for the world. The good news of Jesus' birth begins as far back as God's creation of the world and God's ever-present relationship with the people and creatures of the Earth. The story begins long ago with the promises to our ancestors Sarah and Abraham and to the prophets. The reading for today from the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a day of promise to come, a day as the prophet Isaiah says, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." (Isaiah 11:1).

Advent reminds us that every time comes with hope. It is a hope that will last through the seasons — from the grass turning from green to brown. It is a hope that will weather the storms of life. "Every valley shall be lifted up; every mountain shall be made low; that the uneven ground shall be made level, that the rough places a plain; Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all the people shall see it together." (Isaiah 40:4-5) It is our counter-cultural Advent message. We live into a hope that will not be silenced or defeated.

Advent celebrates a hope that endures. It is a hope that circles our entire history, as people of God, as people of the Earth. It is a hope that we lean toward each day — to look with wide eyes beyond what is expected, to hear with wide ears a message that we might not be entirely comfortable with, and to open our hearts wide to the mystery of our never changing, always present God.

Happy First Day of Advent. - Alice Rose Tewell

Four Candles

Isaiah 40: 3-5; Luke 2:7-15;
Romans 15:12-13; John 3: 16-17

Much older than the miles of LED lights that illuminate our streets, trees and houses at Christmas are the 4 candles that ring the Advent wreath. This simple tradition of lighting a candle for each Sunday in Advent is possibly 500 years old. It is full of symbols that unify, explain and deepen the meaning of this season. With all my electronic and flashing distractions, I feel I need a simple display that focuses and centers me on each Sunday.

Candle 1 signifies Hope. Paul quotes Isaiah, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a child who will be the Messiah for all – a Prince of Peace...(Romans 15: 12-13).” This vision is an inspired hope that we need today with all the wars and threats of war we face. And for this unwed mother, her hope radiates courage.

Candle 2 suggests Preparation. Isaiah shares another vision,

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a path to our God...
and the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough ways made smooth;
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all people shall see the salvation of God... (Isaiah 40: 3-5).

What a great image: to create a royal road to the heavenly kingdom – to the New Jerusalem – to the presence of God. This road is open to all believers. But we need to prepare. And if this image has a spiritual dimension, this road is a way of life, a way to pray and meditate and to wait. And in time we also will find a way to God.

Candle 3 proclaims Joy. Luke tells of the startling appearance in the night sky of the fiery angel who proclaims, “I bring you news of great joy! For unto you (all mankind) a savior is born this night (Luke 2:7-15).” This is the news at the heart of Advent – it is a dramatic intrusion, a spiritual outburst. Imagine how the shepherds felt. This news can never be reversed or grow old. It is a clarion call for celebration from now to the 2nd Coming. Joy is mixed with blinding terror, the shock of the sublime.

Candle 4 radiates Love. John puts this news in a larger context. “For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son to be our savior...so that all the world might be saved through him (John 3: 16-17).” In this dark, disappointing world there is great cause for hope, faith and love in this realm of new light, a light that spreads salvation in all directions.

These four candles are embedded in a ring of evergreens. Here are two ancient symbols of eternal life. In the center of this ring is the Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve and celebrates his eminent arrival. He is Emanuel – “God with us,” the Advent wait is over. Light has overcome the darkness once again.

Prayer: As John says, Christ has come, “so that all who believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life.” Halleluia.

Tom Dunlap

Isaiah 42:5-9
Mark 13:14-23
1 Thessalonians 4:9-18

December 1, 2015

Power, Suffering, and Redemption

In our men's group, we've recently been reading a book by theologian Douglas John Hall entitled *The Cross in Our Context*. In this book, Hall writes about the "theology of the cross" and explores some fundamental theological issues. Today's readings made me think of Hall's discussion of how we, as Christians, come to terms with an omnipotent God in the face of human suffering.

The reading from Isaiah leaves no doubt that our God is omnipotent. God "created the heavens," "spread out the earth and what comes from it," and "gives breath to the people upon it." Isaiah 42:5. Moreover, God will tell us of the "new things" before "they spring forth." Isaiah 42:9. But, yet, the reading from Mark makes clear that there will be suffering and danger. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells some of his disciples of the end times. Jesus says, "in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of creation that God created until now, no, and never will be." Mark 13:19. Additionally, "False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect." Mark 13:22.

Why would an omnipotent God allow this to occur? Indeed, why would an omnipotent God allow any suffering? Hall writes, "We yearn for a God who sets everything to the rights – indeed who prevents wrong from occurring in the first place. But in such longings we overlook the fact that to have such a God we should have to relinquish our own freedom and become automatons who could do only right." Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 86. He powerfully concludes:

If we posit a God who both wills the existence of free creatures and the preservation and redemption of the world . . . then we must take with great seriousness the biblical narrative of a God whose providence is a mysterious internal and intentional involvement in history; a God, therefore, who is obliged by his own love to exercise his power quietly, subtly, and usually, responsively in relation to the always ambiguous and frequently evil deeds of the free creatures; a God who will not impose rectitude upon the world but labor to bring existing wrong into the service of the good; a God, in short, who will suffer. Id. p. 87

The suffering God, of course, is Jesus Christ. Not separate from God, but one with God. Hall notes that Martin Luther's spirituality captured this insight in the "theology of the cross," and he quotes theologian Paul Tillich's statement that "[o]ne of Luther's most profound insights was that God made Himself small for us in Christ. In so doing, He left us our freedom and our humanity. He showed us His heart, so that our hearts could be won." Id. p. 85 quoting Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 148

This is that most precious gift we anticipate during Advent and celebrate at Christmas: a God who suffers with us, and for us, so we can be redeemed in Him. The reading from 1 Thessalonians describes the redemption: "For since we believe Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." 1 Thessalonians 3:15. So, in the words of Paul's letter to the Romans let us "rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, [and] persevere in prayer." Romans 12:12.

Adam Bain

Malachi 1: 1-5
Mark 13: 24-37
I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Wednesday, December 2, 2015

Put On the Breastplate of Love

I write this on the day after the Paris attacks of November 13, feeling a bit shaken and hearing in the U.S. media the calls for revenge against ISIS. ISIS in turn mis-uses the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed as inspiration for its violence against the Western nations, who it believes have wronged Muslims. I am left wondering what is the true Christian response to the Paris violence?

It must feel like an apocalyptic time in France, when people enjoying an evening soccer game or concert are targeted for killing. It seems a parallel to Paul's writing in I Thessalonians about the "end of time" which he may have believed was coming soon: "When they say 'there is peace and security' then suddenly destruction will come upon them ... and there will be no escape."

But however much our freedom-loving culture may feel threatened or actually is threatened, Paul reminds this early Christian community (and us) that "You are all children of light and children of the day. Since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love."

How do we carry that breastplate now, as our Nation and we as individuals consider our response to terror in Paris and perhaps terror to come in the U.S.? A breastplate means I can strive to feel secure solely based on God's love for me and the world, if I only have faith in the power of that love. With that faith, I can absorb that violence and try to transform it, as Roger Gench has preached. I can re-double my efforts to acknowledge and love the stranger and "the other" that I see every day.

I don't know how to eliminate the hatred in the ISIS fighters, but I do know how to embody some loving responses: reach out to and support some of the billions of Muslims of good faith (50% of Africa's population are Muslims); encourage immigrants and refugees who leave their home countries in desperation; and care about the homeless and displaced in our city. If America were able to project love as a central response to terror, perhaps it would chip away at that ISIS hatred. "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Prayer: God, let me overcome my fears and pre-judging, and follow Paul's dictum: "Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Martha Davis

#PrepareTheWay

Malachi 1:6-14

Mark 1:1-8

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

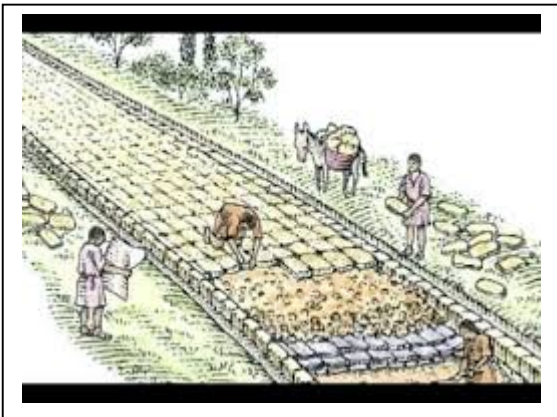
Thursday

December 3, 2015

According to recent news reports, The Wall Street Journal among them, the Washington D.C. urban area is the most congested city in the country. In an effort to fix that endless problem, roads here are built and re-built. The ancient Romans were known throughout the ancient world for being accomplished road-builders. Then as now, building roads is a time-consuming and expensive process requiring a great number of workers. When John the Baptist calls out *Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight*, he is calling his followers to collective action. He is directing them to act together to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. His message goes beyond the expectation that his followers prepare themselves individually for the way of the Lord.

John the Baptist's call to collective action was generated by *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness*. He preached his message to everyone he met and baptized people one by one. Consider the same collective call to action in our modern world. We have the ability to send messages further and contact more people using technology such as Twitter. We've seen that happen with the Arab Spring and with revolutions in Eastern Europe, for example. Most recently we saw that happen during the terrorist attacks in Paris in mid-November. Parisians began contacting each other using the Twitter hashtag #PorteOuvrte (open door) to arrange shelter nearby while the police and emergency workers responded to the attacks.

In this Advent season, the passage in Mark is a reminder that John the Baptist's message is that we should work together to prepare the way of the Lord. As Protestants, we gather together to worship God. Just as important, we gather together to do God's work and make the world a better place. That's how we answer the call for collective action: *Prepare the way of the Lord*.



Prayer:

Loving God, We ask for guidance as we – acting together – prepare for Jesus' birth, build roads, and make this world a better place. Amen.

Gwenn, Jessica, and Paul Gebhard

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

Friday, December 4, 2015

Covenants, Promises & Vows

The three readings for today seem to me to all involve the relationship of God to humanity. This relationship is often characterized or defined by some sort of promise, pledge or covenant. In Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, the prophet is chastising the priests for straying from the agreement or covenant (a promise made with conditions attached) made between the priestly tribe of Levi and the Almighty. Israel would prosper only if this covenant were kept and Malachi accuses the priests of corruption and, therefore, God would turn priestly blessings into curses and make them "despised and abased before all people." Severe consequences for violating a covenant!

John, in Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, reveals in this, a salutation of a letter sent to seven churches in Asia Minor (present day Turkey, near Ephesus) not so much a relationship between God and mankind as defined by promises, but simply by the nature of God. *Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood...*(Rev. 1: 4-5). Here, God's love is unconditional. Both God and Jesus are given names which are threefold. Jesus is described by the three essential aspects of his role, the faithful proclamation of the message of God, the victory of his resurrection and his future role as universal sovereign.

The passage from Luke tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist. Elizabeth and Zechariah had no children and both were "getting along in years". An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah while he was engaged in his priestly duties and announced that Elizabeth would bear a son who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord". Zechariah expressed doubt that such a thing could happen due to the couple's old age. The angel, Gabriel, a messenger of God, angry that Zechariah doubted, caused him to be mute until the child was born. Elizabeth did become pregnant and when the boy was born and everyone asked the name, she fulfilled her promise made to the angel that he would be called John. When people turned to Zechariah and asked him, "Why not Zechariah?", he wrote on a tablet that the name would be John. Immediately he began to talk, praising God. This couple was caught up in a unique relationship with God and fulfilled the promise made in bearing and rearing he who would become John the Baptist.

Relationships, whether between ourselves and "He who is, was and will be", or among ourselves, are defined by promises, covenants and vows. The importance of vows became very evident to me recently when, at the age of 74, I was married. I had never really thought about wedding vows as other than a part of a marriage ceremony. In consulting with Roger and Frank Dunn (Cleveland's minister at St. Stephen and the Incarnation) who was the co-officiant, I learned that the exchange of vows was the very essence or core of the marriage ceremony. This was the 'defining moment' when the relationship was defined and solemn promises made which would forever shape, nurture and support it. Working on our vows took on a whole new meaning. People have asked, "How is married life for you? Is it different?", knowing we have been together 17 years. I have flippantly replied, "No, it's just the same as the previous 17 years." But in writing this, I have realized that it is not the same.

We have made vows to each other witnessed by friends and family. We have entered into a covenant. It is a powerful experience and forever changes the relationship. Concurrently, we are being asked to enter into a covenant with The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church for the Stewardship and Capital Campaign. Promises are at the core of all relationships. My promise to myself this Advent, will be to examine and better define the covenant I have with God who already loves and blesses me. What can I promise?

Eternal God, who has promised us life in abundance, help me commit to bearing witness and loving my neighbor as myself.
Spencer Gibbins

Evolving Communities of Faith

Saturday December 5, 2015

Malachi 2: 10-17

Luke 1: 67-80

1 John 1: 1-4

The notion of community is central both to the prophecy of Malachi, which is addressed to the Jews recently returned from exile, and in the first letter of John, written to new Christians. Both communities are founded on faith in God, but while one focuses on preserving the purity of the chosen people by walling off the rest of the world, the other seeks to expand the fellowship by witnessing to the incarnation. The Benedictus hymn sung by Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, is the bridge between the two—firmly rooted in Hebrew history and prophecy but preparing the way for a savior who will radically expand the community of faith.

The book of Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament) was written in 420 BC—about 100 years after the people of Judah had returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the temple, and 25 years after Nehemiah had rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. The book emphasizes the need to bind the community of God’s chosen people together—to reestablish its identity after years of exile. Malachi condemns divorce, as it was becoming common for the men to divorce their Jewish wives in order to take up with pagans and foreigners, following other gods—all of which threatened to tear the community apart and destroy its unique identity, a fate that had befallen their kinsmen in the kingdom of Israel centuries before. Malachi laments, “Aren’t we all created by the same God? So why can’t we get along?” [2:10, *The Message*] (More than 2000 years later, these words were echoed by Rodney King in his haunting comment during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. As the community tore itself apart, his call for peace was especially powerful, given his role as the victim of the videotaped beating by police that had largely incited the riots.)

Zechariah’s poetic prophecy 400 years after Malachi, at a time when the efforts to re-establish the Jewish community had seen remarkable success, focuses on the promises of God toward the people of Judah. Yet the savior it announces will bring a message that could not be fully anticipated.

The first of John’s three letters, written about 50-60 years after Christ’s crucifixion, begins with his enthusiastic testimony about his personal witness of the life of Jesus—and of “the eternal life that was with the Father and that was revealed to us.” This testimony is offered “so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ.” This new fellowship is created, not by walling others out, but by witnessing to a truth that seeks to break down walls, and to unite all persons with their creator and redeemer in the community of faith, regardless of their individual background.

God, as we witness with compassion a modern world filled with people in exile, help us to understand and respect the need for exile communities to preserve their distinct identities, and help us to remember your imperative for us as Christians to remain open to accepting all. Forgive us for our inability to “get along”—as a world, as a country, and as a church—and draw us all toward you, which will necessarily bring us closer to one another.

Betsy Merritt & Jim Bird

The Coming Messenger, Praise, Proclamation and Prayer

Malachi 3:1-4
Psalm 150
Luke 3:1-6
Philippians 1:3-11

Sunday, December 6, 2015

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

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

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

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

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

Robert Doan

ADVENT 2015
MONDAY, DECEMBER 7
Malachi 3:6-12
John 3:22-36
1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Each time I write one of these Meditations I strive to use the opportunity to address myself honestly, to speak to my own thoughts directly so as to perhaps more clearly discern which thoughts and beliefs are really mine and what motivation(s) led to my adoption of them.

Advent refers generally to arrival and beginning. At Advent on the Christian calendar we refer to the birth of Jesus, of course. But for me not only that birth but also a rebirth/re-examination of the Christ in my own perception. What do I really mean when I say I'm a Christian? Is my life better because of the "advent" of Christ-like thinking and acting? Is anyone's life made better because of my embracing of the Christ as my ambition and guide?

As I ponder all this, it always seems to me that I have not done all that I could do to live the Christ and to give my all in so living. It's not always clear to me where I've come up short. I try hard to effectively manage rapid and difficult changes in my life and to stand with others facing intimidating changes of their own.

In the book of Malachi we read, "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished." "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts." Naturally we say, "But how shall we return?"

It's impossible for me to consider this Advent season without also considering the challenges of the capital campaign that our community faces. The story of the poor widow who gives everything she has with faith that God will provide springs to my thought. I live in poverty but in relative safety and comfort. I lack financial resources but am blessed with life and things that I feel I need. John the Baptist tells us that, "No one can receive anything except what is given from heaven." I generally have more food and clothing than my needs require. So I give that excess freely to our church to be used to meet the unmet needs of others. I give of my self-hood in the ways that I am needed and to those who feel unloved and unnecessary. But I discount this giving because it doesn't seem to meet the community's need as expressed as *financial* need.

God know that I try very hard to give without reservation of what heaven has given me. I take God up on God's invitation to "put me to the test," and "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." I commit to continuing to give what I have to give wisely and without fear. Even money, {shiver} Not as much as I fantasize about being able to give. But to trust that "my joy will be fulfilled."

Continuing requests for money can be distressing for those who have little financial resources. But, as we read in 1st Corinthians, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." I promise to stand with our community in love. And in trust. And in faith.

God give to each and all of us "all sufficiency of all things" this Advent.

Nathan Moon

Tuesday, December 8:

Malachi 3:13-18; Matthew 3:1-6; and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

The third chapter of Malachi tells the story of a people who had turned away from God, claiming, "It is vain to serve God" for "what do we profit by keeping his command"? These people believed that the goodness or righteousness of God was connected to their own profit, their own glory, rather than to that of God alone. Malachi, on the other hand, connects human righteousness with service to God, rather than profit from Him.

The beginning of the third chapter of Matthew tells of John the Baptist, prophesying the coming of the Messiah, and baptizing the people of Judea and hearing their sins. The passage states that John proclaimed that the coming Messiah was he of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Matthew also depicts John as a very humble man: wearing camel's hair and a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey.

I found 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 the hardest to read of all of the passages. It warns of the punishing Jesus who will come and destroy the lawless one, and God's condemnation for those who have believed falsehoods, and "took pleasure in unrighteousness." It speaks of "the mystery of lawlessness" – an undefined entity, but an illustration that is overall very different from the humble and servant images of worshipping God in the previous passages. 2 Thessalonians is about law and discipline, and also about violence.

While the three passages are very different, I think they are united by the idea that the path to God can only be found in God himself, and that the benefits of serving and worshipping God are for the glory of God, not human glory. Where people's motivation is in their own benefit – either in personal profit in Malachi, or the pleasure of unrighteousness in 2 Thessalonians – we are lead away from God. But where we are humble, and where our eyes are set in preparing the way of the Lord, rather than toward our own success, is where serving God really lies. Matthew shows this in his illustration of John – the man who foretold the coming of Jesus did so from a place of incredible humility and simplicity – the way of the Lord could only be prepared by someone humble and only through service to others – for John the Baptist, the service of baptism and confession.

As a young person trying to make her way into adulthood – and the personal and professional challenges and aspirations that come with that – my own performance and achievement have been a recent major focus, and a source of both pleasure and anxiety. Reading these passages of scripture reminded me of the mis-orientation of this fixation, and the humility and the desire to be of service that should orient my path. They are a welcome nudge and reminder during this time of transition, and growing up.

Prayer: *God, give me the courage to be humble, to let go of my own ambition and anxiety, and to let that humble service to you guide my path towards Advent, and always.*

Kyra Ellis-Moore

Malachi 4:1-6
Matthew 3:7-12
2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

December 9, 2015

Wrath and Evil

It's still early in December, but our heads are turning toward Christmas plans: carols and cookies, tree decorating and Silent Night, gift giving and celebration. And once again, we're wrenched away from these snow globe worlds by these lectionary scriptures. As visions of peace and joy dance in our heads, these scriptures confront us with evil - and God's wrath.

We have evildoers as stubble, ashes under the soles of the feet of those who are saved in Malachi. We have the Pharisees as vipers in Matthew, with warnings of chaff burned in unquenchable fire. Thessalonians sounds softer at first, but the author urges prayer for rescue from wicked and evil people and guarding against the evil one.

Wrath. Evil. They sound like such old-fashioned words, and I'm tempted to chalk this all up to historical context. I'd rather not spend my time thinking about evil ... and certainly not about days of judgment! And in my relatively safe world, I usually don't have to. But what better words than evil and wrath are there when we confront stories of refugees stranded without homes, see the body of a little boy washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean, hear stories of people left to die in prison.

Maybe the writers of these scriptures have a better handle on the world than I do.

And maybe they have a better handle on the power of God than I do as well. Because none of these passages leave us here. They take a good hard look at the bad in the world, the way someone who's used to working the streets in a tough part of town might. But none of them stay there.

Amid all the apocalyptic language of winnowing forks and threshing floors, there are resources, there are things we can do. Remember the gift of the law of Moses, says Malachi. Stand firm and hold fast to our traditions, says Thessalonians. Bear fruit worthy of repentance, says Jesus in Matthew.

And we are not alone. "I will send Elijah," says God in Malachi. "The Lord is faithful," says Thessalonians. There is hope for healing. What does this healing look like? "You shall go out leaping like calves," says Malachi. And communities broken by evil are knit together once again - parents and children reconciled.

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father,
who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,
comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.*

2 Thessalonians 16-17

Meg Hanna House

Christmas in Light

Psalm 89

December 10, 2015

Every December I'm reminded how Christmas is a festival of light, of hope, defying the dark and the cold. There is the star over Bethlehem: in the darkness the shepherds see a great light; through the night there are indoor stars shining in living rooms on top of trees with strings of lights. Reflecting back on my string of Christmas memories, bright lights and high expectations are what I remember. Familiar places transformed. Winter darkness broken by bright summer colors. Displays prepared to give us a new way of seeing. Distilled into one impression, it reveals the power of love in a frigid world, or what seems frozen but can be transformed.

Two lines of Psalm 89 set me off on this reflection – “The Lord said, The world is built through kindness (89:2).” This is the power of God’s loving kindness, “hesed.” This line shimmers for me. It lights up all kinds of worlds: the world God first created, the gift of life, the latest building, bridge or peaceful community – all of it is built on love and through love. This is a lens to see what is all around us. To take in what will endure, in God’s time, forever.

The other line is, “Blessed are the people who have learned to praise Thee, / Who walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy presence! (89:15)” This line also shimmers for me. What can I plan to do in this festive time of year to walk in the light of the Lord’s presence? This is a hint to let go of tight schedules and praise the Lord, to let loose and wait, to find the light. This verse shimmers as I repeat it and mediate on it. It is a window into the mystery – “only the splendor of light hideth Thee (Hymn: ‘Immortal, invisible, God only wise’).” I need a fresh view to see the world of light that God created, loves and finds good.

Praise ye the Lord who is coming, halleluiah.

Tom Dunlap

December 11, 2015

John 1:19-28

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:23)

Jesus' Sherpa

Sherpas are an ethnic group in eastern Nepal living in one of the harshest terrains in the world – the Himalayas. They are known for their fortitude, for their strength, and for being among the first to reach the summit of Mt. Everest.

But here in Washington, DC – especially in the White House – sherpas are those government officials who are put in charge of critical international treaty negotiations or conferences. In my career, my colleagues and I often have to deal with sherpas. I must admit though that while I have met many Nepali sherpas, I still have to meet a US sherpa.

Jesus had one such sherpa, John the Baptist. He was Jesus' advance party, wandering the countryside surviving on locusts and honey. John baptized Jesus, thus fulfilling the prophecy in the book of Isaiah.

As a Jewish itinerant preacher, he lived a tough life. As a reward for his work, John ended up losing his head after Herod's daughter asked for it on a silver plate.

I often wonder what motivated John to be Jesus' advance party. Was it a calling? Did John choose to prophesy? Was he forced to be Jesus' sherpa? Why did he become Jesus' baptizer?

I doubt I will be able to find answers to these questions. However, several characteristics do stand out as John exercised his prophetic role: Sherpas must be fearless. Sherpas must be centered on their faith. Sherpas work hard, often working long hours. Sherpas must have a sense of humility. Sherpas must tell the truth, no matter the cost.

So during Advent, let us remember John the Baptist, Jesus' sherpa. Let us remember friends and family who witness without fear, who witness with great humility, and who witness in truth. Let us also remember those who seek to do us harm, those who listen but do not understand, and those who see the signs, but do not believe.

Lord make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy. Amen. (St. Francis of Assisi)

Adlai Amor

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

Saturday, December 12, 2015

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” (Matthew 23:25) ... “You are like white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Matthew 23:27-28)

Are we church folk so different from the Pharisees, I wonder? Speaking for myself, I can see some uncomfortable similarities. I’m a Presbyterian elder. I attend church regularly. I go to meetings. I even chair meetings. I pledge to stewardship campaigns and, this year, to the capital campaign. I write for the Advent booklet. Church, and The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in particular, is a central part of my life. Is this cleaning the outside of the cup?

“Insides full of greed” ... I have to own up to greed. I have many possessions, but that doesn’t mean I don’t buy or wish I could buy some other beautiful thing. And books!

“... and self-indulgence.” The dictionary defines self-indulgence as excessive or unrestrained gratification of one’s own appetites, desires, or whims. I have to own up to self-indulgence, too.

“... full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” Well, I hope not wickedness, but surely I have to admit to hypocrisy. I have the best of intentions, but I don’t even live up to what I expect of myself, let alone what God expects. I can talk the talk. Walking is something else.

I think that Jesus’ problem with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law was that they were more concerned about religion than about people; more concerned about conforming to the law than seeing the suffering around them. Were they aware that the system that benefitted them was oppressive to so many others? Of course, the law called for caring for the widow and the orphan, but did the Pharisees and teachers put money in the offering plate and figure they’d done their bit? Are we sometimes guilty of these things, too?

Bryan Stevenson, the pre-eminent civil rights attorney who spoke at New York Avenue in November, outlined four major tasks necessary for transforming the system we live in so that there is justice and mercy for all. The first was to get close to poverty. The second was to change the narrative of race in this country. The third was to have hope. The fourth was to commit to doing uncomfortable things. These tasks sound so much like what Jesus was doing. Can we encourage one another to join in the effort?

Prayer: Holy God, we have to acknowledge that we have fallen short. There is too much Pharisee in us. Thank you for raising up people like Bryan Stevenson to help us see where the system is broken and how we can help. Thank you for sending Jesus to show us your heart. Thank you for your Spirit that is continually at work cleaning the insides of our cups. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about what it means to *belong*, and today's passages resonated with me for this reason, as I believe they speak not just to what God promises us, but also to what our responsibilities are to one another. We have been inundated recently with heartbreaking images of refugees from Syria, Iraq, and other countries fleeing homelands destroyed by war and terrorism. We see people risking their lives to be anywhere else, not knowing where they'll end up, and arriving in countries where they're accepted with, at best, reluctant acquiescence, or, at worst, disdain and suspicion. In our own country, we debate how to reform our dysfunctional immigration system, arguing about whether certain immigrants should be allowed to stay and call America their home or should be removed to their native countries without regard for the community and familial ties they possess or the length of time they've been here. We also are witnessing a renewed civil rights movement asserting that *black lives matter* and demanding action to rectify the unequal treatment of people of color in our criminal justice system, schools, and other public spheres. And on a personal level, I see my 18-month old twin daughters growing into individuals with distinct opinions and manners of expression, and I wonder what messages they will receive from society about whether they matter and belong. They are too young now to comprehend the myriad ways we humans sort and assess one another, but I know from the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) comments made in otherwise polite conversation that some people already have formed assumptions about who they are based on their brown skin and the fact that they were adopted. I wonder how the weight of these assumptions will impact them as they get older. As their mother, I want so many things for them, not the least of which is for them to know that they too belong.

In Zephaniah, God declares that He will deal with the oppressors and that he will gather up the exiled and marginalized and bring them home. These words tell us that God embraces each of us even when the world does not. The hopeful tone of these verses marks a striking departure from the earlier chapters of Zephaniah which warned of God's wrath against those who would turn away from Him and worship other gods. But Zephaniah's overarching message is that, while we live in a world plagued by idolatry, violence, and destruction, God can save us from ourselves, if only we keep our focus on Him. In the passage from Psalm 19, the psalmist depicts the glory of God as a tent over the heavens large enough to shelter all and proclaims that God's commandments bring restoration, wisdom, and joy. In Luke, John the Baptist admonishes those gathered that one's lineage is not important; what matters is what one does for others. John's message is that we can fulfill God's will in the most ordinary of ways when we treat one another with fairness and generosity. Finally, Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that *the Lord is near*, that we should treat one another with *gentleness* and that, through prayer and meditation, we can renew our trust in God in the midst of our own doubts and anxieties.

God tells us that He belongs to us and that we belong to Him. We thus have an obligation to open our hearts to one another, to gather up the marginalized, and to welcome even those we may not understand. Our world is a complex and confounding place, but our relationships don't have to be. As Paul tells us, we just need to keep doing the things we have *learned and received and heard*, and God will be with us. My prayer this Advent Season is that we remember that, even in the fog of violence, chaos, and social anxiety, our God, Immanuel, is with us, lifting us up, warming us in his embrace, and helping us to see the way forward.

E Pluribus Unum

Amos 3:12 – 4:5
Matthew 23: 29-39
Romans 12:1-8

Monday
December 14, 2015

Out of many, one.

The familiar motto of the United States describes the creation of a single nation out of many states. But can we seriously claim to be a single community today? Or are we inappropriately divided irreconcilably into categories of our own creation: Red or Blue States, citizens or aliens, conservatives or liberals, prolife or prochoice, white or nonwhite, educated or uneducated, capitalist or socialist, rich or poor? What do today's Scripture passages say about this state of affairs? What is the Advent message of hope and redemption in these passages?

The messages of the prophet Amos are plain and simple:

- The accumulation of wealth by extorting or neglecting the weak and vulnerable of the community destroys the community.
- Hypocritical piety is excoriated.

The Gospel messages from Matthew (quoting Jesus) are plain and simple:

- Privilege and wealth are worthless if the holders thereof "kill the prophets" or flout the prophets' mandates to pursue justice, peace and faith.
- "Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name."

Paul's messages are plain and simple:

- Community members are addressed as brothers and sisters and are implicitly instructed to acknowledge that all of us are the beneficiary of God's mercies.
- Our faith enables us to heed this instruction: "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is – what is good and pleasing and mature."
- We are called to be one community, and each of us is urged to use our respective gifts for the benefit of the community. Each of us is to "be the best showing honor to each other."

Is it not plain that the divisiveness that so characterizes our common life is perilously close to the behavior condemned by Amos? Is our unwitting conformity to the patterns of this modern world having the effect of "killing the prophets"? Is not our current divisiveness the result of ignoring the mandate to pursue justice and peace for the benefit of all members of the community? Are we claiming the blessings of the one who comes in the Lord's name? Can we honor our brothers and sisters and collaborate with each other to discern God's will for what is good and pleasing and mature? Yes, must be our Advent response. Unless we love one another enough to function as a community, we fail to assume the communal and social roles intended by God, a failure which leads us to the acquisitive and mutually destructive lives denounced by the Lord. That is the plain and simple message in these Scripture passages!

Prayer: *Gracious and loving God, thank you for the steadfast love that has sustained your entire creation and blessed me with life and all that has made life possible. Help me to so live each day that my thoughts and actions honor all of my brothers and sisters as we all seek to discern your will for what is good, pleasing and mature. Help us all to practice living as one community. Amen.*

-- John H. Quinn, Jr. and Matt Sarraf

“YET YOU DID NOT RETURN TO ME

Amos 4:6-13
Matthew 12:30-37
Romans 2: 3-11
Psalms 53 and 58

Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015

What a series of sad readings!

The writers of these passages in the Bible describe a people continually turning away from God and God inflicting punishments in attempts to get them to return.

In Amos, God recites that he starved them (v.6), withheld water (v.7), sent blight (v.9) and pestilence (v.10), overthrew them (v.11), and each time repeats the refrain “Yet you did not return to me” and warns them “Prepare to meet your God.”

In Matthew, Jesus is quoted as describing the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Spirit, calls his listeners a brood of vipers, and promises: “On the day of judgment you will have to give an account of every careless word you utter” and “by your words you will be condemned”.

In Romans, Paul threatens “But by your hand and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath For he will repay according to each one’s deeds.”

Even the Psalms in today’s reading give no comfort. In Psalm 53, “God looks down from heaven on humankind....They have all fallen away....There is no one who does good, no, not one....For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly....for God has rejected them.” In Psalm 58, “The wicked go astray from the womb....They have venom like the venom of the serpent....O God, break the teeth in their mouths, tear out the fangs of the young lions...”

What a series of hopeless readings! But I do not believe that they represent the true nature of God. I believe in the God described as follows: like the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find the stray (Luke 15:8-10); like the woman combing though the entire house in search of one lost coin (Luke 15:20); like the father incessantly scanning the horizon for the return of the prodigal son.

Phil Hanna

Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.

Mark 9:24

Amos 5:1-17
Matthew 12: 39-45
Hebrews 9: 11-22

December 16, 2015

Threats, Justice, Living

Oh, to be an Israelite and suffer the wrath of God! The threat alone—"I raise a dirge over you, O Israel"—should bring shivers and a resolve to straighten one's life and behavior. But, sadly, the words in Amos only show that man's behavior has changed little through the ages. The Amos passages bring to stark reality the stories and reflections of Bryan Stevenson, author of Just Mercy and NYAPC Scholar-in-Residence guest speaker in early November. God's accusations in Amos are too familiar:

"You that turn justice upside down and bring righteousness to the ground,
you that hate a man who brings the wrongdoer to court and loathe him who
speaks the whole truth...
For I know how many of your crimes are and how countless your sins,
you who persecute the guiltless, hold men to ransom and thrust the destitute out of
court."

Amos sums up so much of what Stevenson writes and speaks, the intentional mis-justice imposed. (Yes, I know the correct term is injustice, but that, by definition, is "the fact, practice, or quality of being unjust." I mean "mis"-justice as the intentional act of choosing to be unjust!) Just as God rages against the Israelites for their ungodly acts, how does Stevenson "keep it together" when he encounters time and again the unjust acts by law enforcement and the courts against innocent people; the harsh and uncompassionate sentences against the mentally ill; the inhumane conditions and criminal acts against prisoners; the incomprehensible prison sentences against children. And yet, and yet....

Amos says, "Hate evil and love good; enthrone justice in the courts. Seek good and not evil, that you may live." So perhaps God does intervene: People are turned around and their conscience wins out for good—and a key witness recants his story as a lie against an innocent man. A racist prison guard sees himself in the history of a mentally ill prisoner and brings him a chocolate milkshake. Acts of love, acts of kindness, acts of compassion are what happens when we turn to God "that we may live."

We can only imagine how much good in the world might emerge if we "turn over our lives to God" and remember the observation in Hebrews: "His blood will cleanse our conscience from the deadness of our former ways and fit us for the service of the living God." We should not give up on the world. We should not give up on the hope that our fellow beings can be turned toward God. We should not give up that WE can turn toward God and give ourselves to live in Christ's path. All things are new in Christ! Let it be so.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to turn to you, to live for you and in you, to be your people in all that we do. Amen.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Thursday, December 17, 2015

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Psalm 89: 1-4, 9-26; Luke 1:26-38; and Romans 16:25-27

Samuel 7:8-9

“Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.”

Psalm 89:3-4

“You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’”

I am struck by these verses of a God who makes and keeps promises—through history, through time—through Christ.

In Samuel, it’s clear that what God wants of David is his faithful following, to live a God-centered life, not to build a monument to the Lord. He promises David that he will make for him a “great name” and the Psalms further clarify that this will come to fruition in his descendants, most profoundly in the form of Jesus, the son of Joseph, born in the city of David, in direct lineage.

In this season of advent, as we prepare once again for the coming of God’s beloved son, we remember the promises that he has made to all of us, as individuals. He has provided “the way, the truth, and the light”—the path to him is direct and unencumbered, and we can trust that our God always fulfills his promise.

Dear Lord,

Today, help us to remember that our trust in you is always justified. You make promises and you keep promises, especially in the one whose coming we celebrate this holiday season. Please also help us to remember that to whom much is given, much is required, and that we may be the people whom you send to fulfill your promises. Once upon a time, a young Middle Eastern couple sought refuge at the impending birth of their son. Keep us mindful now of people in similar circumstances, in need of promises fulfilled. Amen.

Laura Asiala

Luke 1:5-25
Titus 1: 11-15

December 18, 2015

YEAH, RIGHT

It's easy, sometimes, to forget that this holy season features *two* "miracle babies" and *two* angelic heralds, and *two* "fear not"s.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were "both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years."

In a time when the primary societal role of women was to bear children, preferably sons, Elizabeth was barren, a failure. But as Zechariah was performing his priestly duties in the temple, "an angel of the Lord" appeared to him, and said "Do not be afraid, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord... and he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God."

To which, I suspect, *I* would have responded, "Yeah, right," with the voice of Bill Cosby's Noah ringing in my ear, and gotten back to fixing dinner! Or, on hearing such a voice, I might shake uncontrollably and then look for a good shrink. But not Zechariah and Elizabeth. They listened, and they trusted and believed, and they welcomed their son, John.

Paul, instructing the church in Crete in the letter to Titus, focused on a different kind of talk, and talkers, the elders of the church. "Empty talkers and deceivers ...they must be silenced, for teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach...They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed." "Yeah, right"?

Ouch! Belief can be tough, and acting those beliefs, even tougher. A sarcastic "yeah, right" comes easily. Trusting the word of the Lord, yielding to it, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared", that is sincerely, yeah, *right*.

Prayer: God, help us to discern and trust Your will, and strengthen us to follow it in deed. Amen

Mary Krug

SAINTS ALL AROUND US

Amos 7: 1-9
Luke 1: 26-38
Revelation 7: 9-17

Saturday, December 19, 2015



Friends have told me that they've heard people on their death beds say, "Who are all these people in the room with us?" Often they see the faces of loved ones who have passed on. Sometimes the figures are in white robes. I believe that this multitude is both greeting and comforting the departing person, and welcoming that person in to the next phase of life. The person is not afraid to die, thanks to the presence of this group.

Our reading today from Revelation speaks of a multitude from every nation gathered at the throne of God, wearing white robes. This vision of heaven is both a glorious one and one of promise—"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (NRSV, v. 17, also in Revelation 21: 4) The message is: do not fear death.

We also should not fear God working in us in other ways. In Luke's account, the angel Gabriel greets the Virgin Mary and then says to her, "Don't be afraid." (NRSV, v. 30) The presence of angels may produce different emotions in us, but the result is the same: the angels bring us comfort and good news.

Whether we see multitudes or believe in angels, we know that there are saints all around us. Some may be visitors from heaven, and others may manifest God's kingdom on earth. As we celebrate Jesus' incarnation, let us realize the presence of God in others and the saints or angels among us.

Prayer: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." (NRSV, Hebrews 12:1)

Ella Cleveland

“Leaping for Joy”

Luke 1: 39-55

December 20, 2015

“Now is happened that as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb....” Luke 1: 41a

One of the great joys of waiting for a baby is when you, as a father, are given the privilege of touching your wife’s tummy as the baby kicks. What was in some ways theoretical becomes in an instant entirely real. That bump on your wife’s front is alive! The possible has become animate. Mary visits her pregnant cousin in the hill country and has Good News to share. As she confides her wondrous secret, that she, too, is pregnant – and with the Messiah, no less -- the child in Elizabeth’s womb, the John the Baptist to-be, kicks. But he doesn’t just kick; he leaps; he springs; he jumps. Baryshnikov could do no better, for, even in the womb, John the Baptist senses God in our midst. Even before Mary can voice her “Magnificat”, John is dancing his.

Note that Luke recaptures the animation that marks the birth of Jesus when, later, in Acts, the church is born. The movement of the Holy Spirit in the hill country is repeated in Jerusalem with a bedlam of sounds and songs. The new life in Christ animates everything, the living, the to-be; even the stones must speak out. The following poem by the Irish poet, Pdraig Daly, captures that aliveness in a fetus’ kick:

“Magnificat for Catherine”

Your mother’s body,/ Softly glowing as alabaster,/ You danced in her eyes.
Before ever you saw light/ Or learned to scream/ So lustily,
When you were totally unwashed,/ I watched you/ Move beneath her body,
Swimming in primeval fluid,/ Sole inhabitant/ Of your close and shadowy universe;
And when I reached out my hand/ to touch you,/ You kicked at me suddenly
Till like those mountain women/ In our book,/ I heard my words becoming song.

Paul B. Dornan

PATIENCE AND IMPATIENCE

Amos 7:10-17; Matthew 1:1-17; Hebrews 10:11-18

Monday December 21

Today's gospel passage reviews the long lineage of Jesus—from Abraham through 40 male descendants—with 39 “begats” in between them. This passage with its many unfamiliar names is the kind that one may regret getting when taking a turn as a liturgist! I usually skim quickly over these passages when reading the Bible to get on with the story and look for the point, but this was the passage of the three today that most spoke to me, and illustrates an important point.

Matthew 1:17 sums up the lineage in this way: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.” Forty-two generations attempted (more or less) to live faithful lives in expectant uncertainty before the birth of Jesus. God's promises and prophesies had given people no definite timetable. I imagine it was difficult for people in each generation to trust God, not knowing whether, how, or when God's promises would be fulfilled.

During Advent, we remember this as we observe a much shorter period of watchful waiting for Jesus' birth. Jesus' birth initiated a new era in God's relationship with humanity, but again ushered in a period with no clear time horizon for final fulfillment of God's promises. Many generations have been living in expectant, impatient, sometimes frustrated waiting since then.

Amos tells us that God has set a plumbline in our midst, and God's plumbline clearly reveals that all is not right in the world and inspires us to action, generation after generation. But despite our own best efforts, in so many situations we may wonder or want to cry out, “How long, God, how long?” We can learn lessons about both patience and impatience from the examples of many generations of people who have sought to obey and follow God before and since Jesus' birth.

For example, in this year when we have been recognizing the 50th anniversary of various U.S. civil rights movement events and the passage of the Voting Rights Act, we have been reminded that it is right and good for people of faith to be impatient with situations that do not reflect God's will and plan for humanity, and to take action. As Martin Luther King, Jr. so famously wrote in his letter from the Birmingham jail to eight Alabama clergymen who recognized racial injustices existed and hoped for change, but who thought the civil rights movement actions were “unwise and untimely,” “I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘wait’ . . . I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. . . .” “If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.” Despite some gains since then, nearly every day reveals an incompleteness of justice with respect to civil rights that can be frustrating and discouraging. Bryan Stevenson reminded us in his McClendon Scholar lecture that in all that we seek to do to follow God and seek justice, though we face daunting circumstances, we should cultivate hope. Romans 8:25 teaches: “If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Dear God, Continue to cultivate in us a faithful impatience with all that fails to conform to Your will. Strengthen our resolve and commitment to seeking to do Your will in all things. Please forgive our impatience with You, and help us to trust You. Bless us continuously with hopeful visions and the courage to share them. Amen.

Karen Mills

December 22, 2015

Amos 1:1-14; Matthew 1:18-25; Titus 2:1-10

These three scriptures, seemingly discordant at first reading, are all variations on a theme – what the life of following God is about.

What not to do: In the first passage, the Israelites have lost their way. They're gambling, selling people, pretending to be righteous and upstanding, but their actions belie their true nature. God is not pleased, and much of it comes down to a lack of human kindness and grace. Instead of helping the needy, they sell them out.

What to do: in the third passage, Christians are encouraged to move towards lots of good behavior. It could be easy to miss the point: these are not works for the sake of works, but encouragement to live as examples of God. Believers preach best by how they live, through actions of grace and love. Words can ring hollow when actions do not align with what we say we believe.

A case study: in the passage from Matthew, Joseph is faced with a test of faithfulness. His fiancée is pregnant, and he knows the baby isn't his. He plans to divorce Mary, but then in a dream, becomes convinced that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He marries her, and raises this unexpected son, Jesus.

This last, the Gospel retelling of the cuckolded husband, is one of the more stunning acts of faith in the Bible. Imagine it – a fiancé, who knows that he knows that he knows he is not the father of his fiancée's baby, and becomes convinced, as she is, that the baby is the son of the God. Imagine for a moment being in his shoes. Would you have had that faith? Could you have? Imagine the doubt. And not only yours... the gossip! Joseph's faith in God and in his fiancée speaks powerfully about his love for both of them. He does not disavow the needy, as the Israelites are condemned for doing so in Amos. Mary would have been quite needy and outcast, had he divorced her pregnant. He follows his heart, his love, his God, in a dramatic way.

It's unlikely many, if any, of us will be asked to do such a dramatic thing. But where are we inconstant to our God, to our faith and how it calls us to love and serve? Where is God encouraging us to step out and preach through actions, not words? What would it look like to love with dramatic faith, in spite of fears we may hold? Where are the needy and poor – in body and spirit – who need our care?

Prayer: Lord, help us sow your love and peace. Help us to see your calling in the lost and lonely. Help us preach your good news through the way we love and care for others. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your prompts to step out in faith, and show you to others through our care for a love-hungry world.

Kate Hays Olson

Centerpieces ...

Amos 9: 1-10
John 1: 9-18
Titus 2:11-3:7

Wednesday, December 23rd, 2015

With a mere two days away, Christmas will be here before you know it. The season leading up to December 25th has already been with us for weeks as is evident by Hallmark Channel's endless run of traditional holiday movies, by those winter wonderland songs broadcast 24/7 by this or that FM radio station, and by the last minute sales offered to those of us who are frantically trying to finish gift purchases for loved ones and friends. Yes, Christmas will be here before you know it.

Indeed, by now, for many of us, I presume, stockings hang waiting to be filled; fragrant wreaths adorn front doors; multi-colored lights dangle from porch stoops; and, if weather cooperates, snowpersons pop up on many a lawn. For the most enterprising of us, tasty cookies have been baked by the dozen and glasses of eggnog or warm cider are ready to be quaffed.

But the centerpiece in our house or apartment this season is, of course, the Christmas tree. Decorated with ornaments, garland, and a star, accompanied by gifts placed below, and featured prominently in rooms for all to see, the Christmas tree is indeed a centerpiece ... a focal point ... just like the Thanksgiving Day turkey set on our dining room tables less than a month ago and the dazzling New Year's Day ball ready to fall at the stroke of midnight at One Times Square in just over week.

Centerpieces, while a focus of attention in and of themselves, are also crucial to better making sense of something greater in significance and meaning. The Christmas tree, itself a piece of beauty when decorated, also reminds us of family and friends, of the importance of giving and receiving, and of powerful memories from childhood to the present. Around it, we gather, we tell stories, we sing carols, we share. We are present in the midst of presents.

But, for Christians, the more crucial centerpiece this season is Jesus, the one we call the Christ. As we remember and celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace and as we await the ushering in of God's promised beloved community, we are reminded in today's reading from the Gospel of John that, for us Christians, it is Jesus who makes God fully known. Jesus, the centerpiece of our faith, through his words and deeds, helps us better understand and know God, the god of hope, of love, of joy, and of peace; the god, who does not abandon us when we stray; the Immanuel, the One who is ever with us.

Jesus, through his words and deeds, in making God known, also reminds us of how we are to live and act as authentic human beings; recognizing that, as children of God, we too can be instruments of loving kindness. We too can help turn swords into ploughshares, bring together wolves and lambs, care for the environment, and lift up the stranger, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten. We too can set examples. We too can be centerpieces.

Loving and compassionate God, full of mercy, full of grace. In this season of hope, love, joy, and peace, may we continually look to Jesus, the centerpiece of our faith; the one to whom we direct ourselves to more fully know you. And may we ourselves become centerpieces, examples to others on how to live a more authentic, uplifting, and justice-oriented life. Amen.

Mark A. Zaineddin

Isaiah 9:2-7

The Genius of Incarnation

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

There is a little children's book with the thick cardboard pages that can't be easily torn by a toddler – Who Is Coming to Our House? The Mouse is the first to announce that someone is coming to our house. Then on each subsequent page another farm animal announces that they are getting ready – "We must clean," says Lamb. "Dust the beam," says Ram; "Sweep the earth," says Chick. "Stack the hay," says Goose, "and quick!" Then the next-to-last page shows a pregnant Mary with Joseph coming toward the stable; and on the last page the central focus is the baby Jesus cuddled in Mary's arms – precious, adorable, irresistible – a gift of love! The caption says, "Welcome, welcome to our house!"

As you snuggle the toddler with whom you are reading this book aloud, in my case this would be my granddaughter Naomi, think what an incredible event – the incarnation – the God of the universe touching our lives, our hearts in the vulnerability of a baby! Irresistible love!

One of the most spiritual moments (some call them "thin places" where it feels that heaven and earth touch) of my ministry was in a Christmas Eve candlelight service. We had read the scriptures, the Christmas anthem had been sung, the special prayers had been offered, I had given the Christmas message and we were singing the closing carol, "Silent Night," with the lighting of the tapers each congregant had been given as they entered worship. The movement of light from the Advent wreath to pastor's candle to ushers' candles to each person at the end of the pew and from there across the sanctuary is a glorious sight!

It is a gift, as a pastor, to look out across the congregation of faces glowing in the candlelight of Christ's love. By the third verse the sanctuary was all aglow and my eyes fixed on a young mother (a visitor) holding a three-month-old in her arms at the end of a pew about half way down the center aisle. I was truly drawn to her by the Spirit! I handed my lit candle to the Associate Pastor and walked down the center aisle where the young mother was standing -- and held out my hands. The mother placed the baby in my arms; and I walked back to the chancel steps just as the carol ended. I was covered with goose flesh as I turned and lifted the baby high above my head for all the congregation to see, and I gave the benediction: This is what this night is all about *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth"* – can anyone resist such love? Take the light of this love from here to your homes, your community, to the world that desperately needs this love!"

Let us welcome the Light of Christ's love into Our House this night.

Rev. Beth Braxton

December 25, 2015 ★ Christmas Day

Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 8, Luke 2:8-20, Titus 3:4-7

Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation..."

Luke 2:19: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Christmas is here! Baby Jesus is born, the angels are singing alleluia, the shepherds are marveling in amazement. The birth of this child—in humble surroundings, after an arduous journey—heralds the start of a new era, not just for Mary and Joseph but for the entire world.

This Advent season, Matt and I are expecting the birth of our first child, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it's providing me a new perspective on the Christmas story. Upon reading and re-reading these Scripture passages, I found myself particularly drawn to Mary's role in this story. As Mary "treasured these words and pondered them in her heart," what was she feeling? Joy, trepidation, relief, elation, fear even? To bring a new life into the world is a transformative experience for any family, but Mary and Joseph knew that this child had been brought into the world for a purpose greater than anything they, or we, could comprehend. The faith and courage required of Mary, likely just a teenager, is undeniable. And here she is, in the haze of having just given birth (in a stable!), and she finds herself surrounded by awestruck shepherds, telling of angels visiting them in the fields to share the good news of Jesus' birth.

Our world needs the good news and the hope promised by Jesus' birth more than ever, in the midst of horrific terrorist attacks across the globe, a heartbreaking refugee crisis, racial unrest in our schools and communities, gun violence, staggering inequality, devastating natural disasters, and so much else. When Mary pondered these words in her heart, was she also thinking about the implications of bringing a child into a broken world, knowing that he would grow up to save the world from its sins but that first, he would be exposed to the baseness and cruelty of humankind? That his promise for the world was needed precisely because of all this sin and destruction? She must have been awestruck herself by God's promise to provide mercy, not because of our "works of righteousness" (far from it) but simply out of love: the love of a parent, a feeling she too must have been experiencing at that moment.

As Psalm 8 asks, pointedly, "...What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" This Christmas Day, we're reminded once again that while we are mortals who sin against God and one another every day, God cares for us so much that he sent his only child into a broken world, to live and die as one of us and to save us from our sins. Good news indeed!

Prayer: God, let this Christmas Day be a reminder of your promise for our broken and hurting world. Help us to model the kind of love and faithfulness that not only you, but also Mary, demonstrated in bringing the Messiah into the world as a promise of everlasting—and undeserved—mercy. Amen.

Kristin Ford