Advent 2019
The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
www.nyapc.org
Sunday, December 1 .................. First Sunday of Advent (Communion)

Saturday, December 7 ............... Solitude Retreat, NYAPC
8:30am-12:30pm

Sunday, December 8 .................. Second Sunday of Advent
Special music – Daniel Pinkham’s Christmas Cantata, US Army Band

Saturday, December 14 ............... Pageant rehearsal, Grades 3-12
9:00am-12:00 noon, Sanctuary
Advent Themed Train Day, 9:30-11:30
RR Gift Wrapping 9:00am

Sunday, December 15 .................. Third Sunday of Advent
Christmas pageant
**ONE service, 10am**
RR Gift Giving 8:15am

Friday, December 20 ................. Longest Night Service and Lunch
(Memorial service for those who died while experiencing homeless) 11:00am

Saturday, December 21 ............... Family Zoo Lights at the Zoo, meet at Elephant House at 5:00pm
RSVP Pastor Alice

Sunday, December 22 ................. Fourth Sunday of Advent
**ONE service, 10am**
Congregational Meeting, 11:15am

Tuesday, December 24 ............... Christmas Eve Services - 5:30 and 8 pm (Communion)

Sunday, December 29 ................. First Sunday after Christmas
**ONE service, 10am**
Simplicity and Spirituality in this Season of Waiting

“...also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”
Matthew 24:44

I recently spent a November weekend at Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat center outside of Philadelphia. My organization, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (fcnl.org), sent me to learn more about the Quaker decision-making and clerking process. (It’s different from the parliamentary process we have at PCUSA).

It was a welcome assignment — after several weeks of travels, board meetings, dealing with deadlines, and planning for the coming year. I needed to quiet my mind as I began this season of waiting — Advent, which starts today.

In the silence of Quaker worship, I came away with two values — values that I realized are critical in being ready for Christ’s coming — whether on December 25 or any time of the year. Simplicity and spirituality.

I realized that I needed to keep my life, and the way I live it, as simple as possible. Simplicity washes away the tensions and stresses that often occupy me this time of the year — shopping, holiday meals to plan and cook, traveling during winter, and parties to attend. To help me, my family, and friends to simplify our lives, I told them I will not be giving them Christmas gifts, neither will I be expecting any. Instead, I encouraged them to donate to their favorite charities or church.

By reducing my need for stuff, I am able to better feed my spirit and to recognize that of God in everyone. Spirituality, especially this Advent, comes with my being focused on the Christ in Christmas — not the mass commercialization of Christ’s birth. It is a more intentional form of worship not only during Sundays, but also every day of the year.

My family and friends are disappointed, of course, that they will not be receiving Christmas gifts, but they understand my need for simplicity and spirituality. Besides, we already have too much stuff — stuff that we won’t be able to take to our next life.

Already, I am finding that these two values are helping me better prepare for the commemoration of Christ’s birth — and for Christ’s return whenever that will be. As the book of Matthew warns us in our text today, we must always be ready for Christ — not only on December 25 — because Christ can come at any time.

We pray for a faith that sees the despair and need of the hour, but also sees beyond it, the presence of our God working on the world and its peoples. During this season, we give God thanks for all that we were, all that we are, and for all that we will be. Amen.

- Adlai Amor
Judgment, Timing, Living

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

Monday, December 2, 2019

Isaiah condemns the nation of Judah, in about 600-700 B.C., because the people in the land are preoccupied with luxury and wealth, and they worship their own works, rather than the work of God. It certainly sounds familiar, as an accurate description of our modern American culture. Isaiah is so disgusted with all this that he urges God not to forgive the people! Isaiah warns the people to hide in shame, and prophesies that, on the ultimate Day of the Lord, the wealthy and the haughty will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted. It’s an interesting passage for Advent. We don’t usually focus on judgment in this season; it’s uncomfortable for us, as it was for Isaiah’s listeners. But without appreciating judgment, we take salvation, and the birth of the Savior, too much for granted.

The passage in Acts describes the ascension of Jesus into Heaven, following the anxious questions of the Disciples about the timing of his return. Jesus chided them, “it is not for you to know” when I will return, but in the meantime, you will have the power to serve as witnesses to me throughout the world. Christ came the first time in God’s chosen way and time. Many expected a different Messiah and missed Him. Jesus warns the disciples not to make the same mistake. If you think you know the when and how, you’re probably wrong. Christ’s return may not come in our lifetime, but we will see Him when our life ends—and the how and when of that can be as unexpected as the first Christmas was. The important question is, how do I live now?

The Matthew passage is the “Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins,” involving ten women who were serving as bridesmaids in a nighttime wedding procession from the home of the bride to the home of the groom. They were supposed to go wait for the bridegroom to show up before the procession began. Half of them (the “wise” ones), brought extra oil for their lamps. When the bridegroom was late, the lamps of the foolish ones were starting to run low. They asked the wise women who had extra oil to share, but the wise women said, “Go buy your own!” By the time the unprepared women got back from buying more oil, the wedding feast had already begun, the door was locked, and the groom denied even knowing them!

This harsh outcome suggests that, in waiting for Christ’s return, we need to be prepared, or we might miss our opportunity to be a part of God’s kingdom. He might come later (or sooner) than we think. Nonetheless, it certainly seems dissonant with Christ’s other messages about grace and sharing our bounty with others who have less. In this case, if you screw up once, you’re locked out forever.

Yet the Gospels and life experiences also tell a different, more redemptive story. Many times, when God allows one door to close, another opens. When our own efforts feel thwarted, it may be that God is steering us to be in the right place at the right time – but it’s not the place we expected to be. If we focus only on the door that’s closed, we may miss the more important one that God has opened.

Help us, God, to be prepared for your ultimate kingdom by focusing our time here on Earth to serving as witnesses to your love.

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt
What Will the Coming of the Lord Do?

Isaiah 2:12-22
Matthew 25:14-30
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

Here it is Advent, and we are supposed to be preparing to celebrate the glorious coming of the Prince of Peace to save the world. And what do today’s passages ask us to do?

Isaiah 2:19 says we should enter holes in the ground before the terror of the Lord. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that the one who has the least will have even that taken away. And in Thessalonians 5, sudden destruction will come upon those who say, “There is peace and security.”

When I got this assignment, I felt like Schroeder in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown”. Unwilling to write on the assignment of “Peter Rabbit”, he said it reminded him of “Robin Hood”, and proceeded to write on that. Certainly I could find a good passage about Advent and write on that.

But I suppose that those who selected the passages for the daily devotions must have had a reason. And we must try to discover what those passages can mean for us.

As a Presbyterian, maybe I should go back to Calvin and his theology of predestination. It doesn’t matter what we do, our fate was decided at the beginning of time.

But, fortunately or unfortunately, I was raised a Methodist, and I do believe that we should do our best to help others. I therefore turn to those verses in Thessalonians that support that view:

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idle,
Encourage the faint hearted, help the weak.
Be patient with them all.
See that none of you repays evil for evil,
But always seek to do good to one another and to all.

And I use as the prayer of the day an old favorite Methodist hymn:

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy
From His lighthouse evermore.
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning,
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

Philip P. Bliss

Phil Hanna
The selections from Isaiah and Matthew contain a common theme, separating the good from the bad:

Isaiah 3, v. 10: Say ye to the righteous that it shall be well with him, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.

Matthew 25, v. 32: And he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth the sheep from the goats.

These verses have always puzzled me because most of us are neither goats nor sheep—maybe “shoats” or “geep”- - neither Mother Teresa nor Jeffrey Daumer. However, we shouldn’t be too complaisant, too self-satisfied as we sip our morning coffee and read the newspaper. What is the scope of our spiritual life? Do we take time for quiet contemplation, for strengthening our prayer life? Do we open our eyes to our neighbors near and far and see how we can, if only in a small way, improve their lives? There are so many people who feel alone and lack support. We are ever thankful for our many blessings. We should, though, take time to be a blessing to others.

Amen

Helen Williams
God’s Radical Message to Change Our Way of Thinking

As we await the celebration of the birth of Jesus, these passages help us to pause and remember Jesus’ remarkable birth, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus’s story is not what one would expect of the savior of the world. Born among animals in a manger. Living the simple life of a carpenter, yet preaching to the people, healing the sick, and uplifting the poor. Then, suffering the death of a criminal, rising from that death, and appearing to his followers. As we say nowadays, it’s so unbelievable that even Hollywood couldn’t dream it up.

However, the New Testament passages from today’s readings show that Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection revealed to us a radical new way of thinking and living. The passage from John highlights Jesus’ seeming contradictions:

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And in Acts, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter, seen as the founder of the Christian church, has a vision that upsets his preconceived beliefs. Praying, hungry, and waiting for something to eat, Peter falls into a trance. He sees heaven opening and a large sheet being lowered to the ground by its corners. In the sheet were “all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air.” Then a voice says to Peter, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter resists saying, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” A second, and third time, Peter objects. But each time a voice says to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

We can view this passage as God’s instruction to Peter that the old ways of thinking have changed with Jesus. Even the Jewish food laws no longer need be reflexively observed. There were instances in Jesus’ own life where Jesus eschewed strict adherence to the Jewish law, for example when he healed a sick man on the Sabbath. Mark 3:1-6. The early Christian church was struggling with questions regarding adherence to Jewish law in considering, for example, whether uncircumcised Gentiles could become members of the church.

Some see Peter’s vision as about much more than food. In *Exposition on Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Scholar Simon J. Kistamaker writes that God is showing Peter that, through Jesus, “God has removed the barriers he once erected to separate his people from the surrounding nations.” As Paul later emphasized, the church of Jesus transcends ethnicity (neither Jew or Gentile), gender (neither male or female), and social boundaries (neither slave nor free). Galatians 3:28. This was very radical in its day, and the church is still struggling to transcend boundaries of human identity.

It’s not easy to accept a radical change of thinking. Peter objected three times to eating what he considered profane or unclean. As we anticipate the birth of Jesus during Advent, we can think about how Jesus and his teaching often radically challenges our preconceived ways of thinking and consider what a great gift that is!

Adam Bain
Refugees, Wanderers, Homeless

Isaiah 5:1-7; John 1:19-28; Revelation 5:1-10; Psalm 71

Friday, December 6, 2019

Adam and Eve expelled from Eden; Cain banished after killing his brother; Noah adrift during the Flood; Abraham and Sarah as they wander west then south from their home in Haran; Jacob fleeing his angry brother, Esau; Joseph sold and carried off to Egypt as a slave; Ruth and Naomi starving in a strange land; Jacob with his 11 sons fleeing to Egypt to avoid a famine; John the Baptist in the wilderness; Mary and Joseph when Jesus is born; Jesus as he lives and preaches the Word; Paul on his three voyages; the Hebrew Diaspora...

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Once again John the Baptist is crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way to the LORD!” (John 1:23) How do we do that?... as we move thru Advent with all the feasts and festivities? “Make straight the way...” Are we road builders? “The way to the LORD” Do we know exactly where the Lord is? Or is this a call to find a spiritual way? Are we being challenged to go on a faith journey through a wilderness?

For us a wilderness is usually in a National Park and not where we go to hear prophets or to be baptized. But what about wilderness as a place of confusion, lostness, obstacles in our way? We do live in a time of confusion, distractions, rushing around with a seeming lack of direction. In this confusion, finding a prophet – a source of spiritual direction – is a great gift. But this prophet John offers no road map, no guarantees. He baptizes, cleanses all and proclaims that the great one, the Christ, is coming. God will be with us. Emmanuel.

As for faith journeys, later in John’s gospel, Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Put your trust in God; trust also in me... You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas balks and says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus proclaims, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14: 1-6) He continues, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do (follow) what I have been doing.” (John 14: 12) This “have faith” is one of John’s recurring themes – if we believe, then we will see. (Not the other way around.) If we follow Jesus’ teachings and way of living, then we will see “the way to the LORD.” This is the spiritual way that Jesus taught and points us towards.

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Psalm 71:1-3

In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge...
Rescue me and deliver me in your loving kindness...
Be my rock of refuge...

If the Lord is our rock and refuge in the midst of pain and confusion, does that make us all refugees seeking help and compassion? If we want mercy, we should show mercy to those in need of food, shelter, hospitality.

Prayer: So let’s rejoice in the Lord’s love for all and be grateful how close the Lord is always, especially when we feel lost or like strangers in a strange land.

Tom Dunlap
WHAT’S IN A NAME?

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

Saturday, December 7, 2019

"He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).” John 1: 42 (NRSV)

The giving of names has been a significant part of the biblical narrative since the beginning. After creating the wild animals and birds, God "brought the man to see what he would call each one; and whatever the man called it, that became the creature's name." (Genesis 2:19).

When Abram came to the realization of monotheism, his name had to be changed: “Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made you.” (Genesis 17:5).

Jacob’s name came from the root word meaning “heel,” since he grabbed on to his twin brother Esau’s heel during birth. Later on, after his wrestling match with God, an angel informed him: “Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:29).

When Jesus calls Simon Cephas in Aramaic, Peter in Greek, He is naming Peter the “rock” upon which His Church is built. He is entrusting him with the authority of steward in His Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Names represent our identity not simply because they are a convenient way to allow us to be distinguished one from another, but because they define us. The names we are given at birth aren’t accidental. They are to some extent prophetic. They capture our essence. They are the keys to our soul.

Elie Wiesel has written, "In Jewish history, a name has its own history and its own memory. It connects beings with their origins. To retrace its path is then to embark on an adventure in which the destiny of a single word becomes one with that of a community; it is to undertake a passionate and enriching quest for all those who may live in your name."

Jesus has been given many names or honorifics. In our gospel story, John the Baptist calls Him the Lamb of God and the Son of God. Later, two of John’s disciples call him Rabbi, which means Teacher, and Messiah, which means Anointed.

During this Advent season, I challenge you to ponder the names that we use for Jesus. And then consider the meaning of your own name, and how it defines you.

Prayer: Heavenly Creator, we thank you for all that you have made and we have named. Help us to revere your son Jesus and crown Him with many crowns.

Ella Cleveland
Symbols of Hope...for All

Sunday, December 8, 2019
Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72, Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Painted in oil on canvas in about 1834, Edward Hicks’ Peaceable Kingdom greets visitors to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, on the main level of the museum’s West Building, just a few blocks from The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is one of some 62 versions of this theme worked by the Quaker minister and artist from Pennsylvania. The painting depicts a portion of today’s verse from Isaiah where animals, predators and prey, and people of different races and cultures (in the background, William Penn executing a treaty with native Americans) co-exist in harmony. Together, scripture and artwork offer us symbols of hope that God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven where justice and righteousness reign, is not only possible on earth but is here for all who make God and Christ central in their lives. From Isaiah 11:9: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

These lessons for this Second Sunday in Advent make what is seemingly fragile—the shoot from the stump of Jesse, the little child who leads the animals, the Judean wilderness of John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, particularly as the baby whose birth we await—powerful symbols of hope because they depend not on their own strength, wisdom, and understanding, but on God. From Psalm 72:18: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.”

In the scripture from Matthew, John the Baptist calls us to prepare for the approach of the kingdom of heaven by repenting—not only by confessing our sins, but by exploring ways in which we might experience a turning around, a change of heart that will bring us closer to the people God would have us be, people whose first loyalty is to God and Christ. John’s proclamation suggests that preparing for the Lord is not once and done, but continuous and impossible but for the grace of God. From Matthew 3:8: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

The kingdom of heaven is open to all, asserts Paul in the passage from Romans. No one is excluded, no one is “other”. In the words of poet John Oxenham’s 1908 hymn: “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north; but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.” As followers of Christ, we are called to focus on points of agreement rather than disagreement, regardless of race, culture, country, sexual orientation...or political party. We are called to end, not foster, division. From Romans 15:5: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

A Prayer and Benediction: Dear God, as we anticipate the birth of your son and our savior, help us to remain hopeful, to see the symbols of hope around us—however small they may be, and to share your gift of hope with all. From Romans 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

~Edith Holmes Snyder
Rejoicing Greatly at the Bridegrooms Voice!

Monday, December 9, 2019

Isaiah 5:13-17, 24-25
John 3:22-36

During this season, in many church sanctuaries and Christian homes, we will find an Advent wreath adorned with four candles and often a large Christ candle in the center. Each week, a candle is lit, accompanied often by scripture, prayers, or devotions. The lighting of the Advent candles offers us an opportunity to step back from the hubbub of this hectic season; from the rampant commercialism and last minute shopping; from the endless holiday films and ever-playing winter wonderland music; and from the competitiveness and stress that is at times witnessed among our family, friends, and colleagues.

The Advent wreath and candles that accompany it also presents us with a time and space to remember and rejoice, to reflect and re-orient. While in some congregations and families, each candle may represent a tradition of hope, peace, joy, and love, or of a particular scriptural theme, we must not lose sight of the totality of the wreath and what it symbolizes.

As Advent progresses, the light from the candles becomes increasingly brighter … reminding us of Jesus, the light of the world and all that he is and represents. We recall Jesus is the light of the world that overcomes darkness; the bearer of hope in the midst of distress; the prince of peace in a world with too many conflicts; the joy for many when despair seems the norm; and the embodiment of love — of God’s love for all creation and our call to love one another and ourselves.

In this morning’s Gospel reading, John the Baptist reminds us of such. He is clear that the focus should always be on Jesus, our Lord; on Jesus, Emmanuel — God with us.

I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. — John 3:28-30

John the Baptist also reminds us that we should be rejoicing greatly when we hear the voice or see the actions of Jesus in our midst … in the caring words of a neighbor, in the helping hands of a co-worker, and in the unexpected offerings of a stranger. We should work diligently together, anticipating and being part of the reign of God — a time and place when wolves will lie beside lambs, when swords will be turned into plough shares, when justice will roll down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, and when the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Have I taken the time out of my busy life to rejoice greatly in the voice of Jesus?
Where in my life — in my thoughts, words, and deeds — have I heeded the call to do God’s will?

But, even in following the way of Jesus, we often fall short. Indeed, John the Baptist cautions us not to get ahead of ourselves. When we work to actualize the beloved kingdom, we should never be doing such out of self-centeredness or ego. When we light the Advent candles, we should never be the focus of the moment.

Have I let my hubris get in the way of the reign of God?
Are there places where I need to step back to let the light of Jesus shine?

Gracious and loving God, as we make our way through Advent and as we light the Advent candles each week, may we take the time to remember and to rejoice, to reflect and to re-orient. May we stridently and faithfully pursue these words found in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s “A Brief Statement of Faith”:

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and earth, praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” Amen — Mark A. Zaineddin
Prophets proclaim most seminal events in the Bible, most notably Jesus’ birth and the coming Kingdom of Heaven. The three passages for today – from the prophets Isaiah, John the Disciple, and John of Patmos – describe visions of God’s divine will and purpose. These men of God prophesy about the gift of the water of life, the tree of life, the Holy City, a state of being in which guilt has departed and sin is blotted out, and – most importantly – they speak about God’s love.

Do we hear the voice of God to us?

Some people close their ears and do not hear. In George Bernard Shaw’s play, St. Joan, Joan of Arc declares that Saints speak to her: I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God. The French King, Charles VII, complains: Oh, your voices, your voices. Why don’t the voices come to me? I am king, not you. Joan replies: They do come to you, but you do not hear them.

Do we accept God’s message to us?

Some people hear, but do not accept God’s message. They try to change the words of prophecy to suit their beliefs, or believe that quoting the scriptures alone will bring them “eternal life.” John of Patmos in his Book of Revelation says that none of these people will share in God’s love and they will be denied a future in the Holy City because they hear the prophets but do not accept their words as coming from God. They are not open to God’s message from the prophets.

Advent is a time to be alive to God’s prophets today, in the world around us, and to be open to hear God’s message to us through them.

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard
In her little book, *Encounter with Chinese Writers*, Annie Dillard describes her interactions with a group of Chinese writers directly after the Cultural Revolution. In her encounter with one particular writer, she observes the intensity with which he is assessing her, his American counterpart. Dillard notes that his capacity to judge the trustworthiness of anyone he meets is a matter of life or death. Too many peers have lost everything, even their families and their lives, if they fail to assess successfully and immediately the people with whom they come into contact. In Dillard’s words, “He was sizing up my spirit, my heart and strength, my capacity for commitment. This is what counts in a Maoist – in a friend or an enemy – why shouldn’t he be in the habit of looking for it?”

In our passage for today, John the Baptist is challenging Jesus in much the same way. John is in prison at least in part because he has been closely identified with Jesus. Thus, who Jesus is is no little matter. It’s a life or death proposition. So plaintively John poses his question to Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come or are we to look for someone else?” In other words, “Have I bet my whole life on the right horse?”

In some ways, Jesus’ answer is oblique. He doesn’t say, at least directly, “I do all these wonderful things. Therefore, I am the one.” Rather, he widens the whole frame [in my words], “Look all around you. See and experience the healing of body and mind, the resurrection of hope, the good news suffusing those who most need it. The Kingdom of God is at hand, and I am here to help usher it in.”

In a lecture on Christian preaching, Karl Barth tries to capture the mystery of every Sunday morning, as Christians around the world pour or trickle into sanctuaries. In Barth’s words, the people assembled on Sunday morning desperately want to know, “Is it true? And so they reach, not knowing what they do, toward the possibility of praying, of reading the Bible, of speaking, hearing and seeing of God.... And they want to find out and thoroughly understand the answer to this one question, Is it true?”

Can I trust you? Are you the one? Is it true? Isn’t it just one question – and isn’t it that one question we yearn to answer in the positive? And isn’t it the one question we desperately hope our children and grandchildren will live their lives asking and answering? And isn’t it the one question that those of us who spend outsized time and energy in this community of faith on New York Avenue trust that we are asking and answering in our lives together? And isn’t it the one Advent question?

Paul B. Dornan
...the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back. But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.” — Hebrews 10:37-39

Can you imagine what it must have been like to imagine and hope and believe that a Savior was coming, generations before he ever actually showed up? To have faith that one day, some day, the child who would be named Immanuel would arrive and change everything? Today’s readings give us a glimmer of the prophecies and promises, the centuries of the faithful waiting and longing for a Savior. In these texts, we see the harbinger of hope, realized in the birth of the Christ Child centuries later, in a humble manger.

To me, it poses a question of faith. Does faith mean waiting patiently, expectantly, hopefully? Does it mean setting aside distractions and staying alert? Does it mean saying ‘no’ to those possibilities that are temporary or superficial or out of alignment with God’s will? Perhaps yes to all of these. But personally, I love the formulation we’re offered in the book of Hebrews:

“We are not among those who shrink back and so are lost…”

It’s one of my favorite things about The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. We don’t shrink back. We lean in, refusing to back down or be silenced or give up or walk away. We are fueled by a deep conviction that as Rev. Roger Gench used to remind us, “God is bringing life out of the death-tending ways of the world.” That life-affirming, unshakable truth isn’t a passive reality: we all have a part to play.

Our church refuses to shrink back when those in Washington, D.C. without a place to call home need a comforting place to rest their feet, to take a shower, to have a conversation, to get a meal.

Our church refuses to shrink back when immigrant children are being torn from their parents or forced to leave the place where they grew up and call home.

Our church refuses to shrink back when God’s glorious creation is threatened by climate change and escalating climate catastrophes.

The list goes on and on. For me, at this Advent season, I’m so grateful for God’s promise to God’s people, the signs God set out before us and the messengers sent ahead. I’m grateful for the conviction and commitment that John the Baptist demonstrated and the models we see in scripture for faithful, prophetic witness. And I’m grateful for Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, as we listen with the ears we have been given and refuse to shrink back.

Prayer: God, help us to listen intently and trust in your promise for our lives. Give us the ears to listen and the hands to do your will, steadfast in our refusal to shrink back from what you have called us to do and be in the world. Amen.

Kristin Ford
“Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober…

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4, 10-11

I’ve been a planner my whole life. Growing up, I was always in charge of planning most of the activities and schedules for our family trips because I got so much joy out of the process (and at the same time appreciated knowing exactly what to expect).

Don’t get me wrong, I like little surprises as much as most people (who doesn’t love running into old friends on the street or getting surprises in the mail?), but adjusting gracefully to sudden, big changes has never been my forte.

As I grow older, I like to think I’m becoming better at taking unexpected events in stride. Perhaps it’s forced because there are so many more surprises in my life than there were years ago, or perhaps it’s just personal evolution. Whatever the reason, I do my best these days to live according to two rules:

1) Always have a plan.
2) Always be ready to toss that plan out the window.

The good news about planning is that there are many levels. We can plan our days or weeks, but we can also plan how we’re going to live our lives. Today’s passage from 1 Thessalonians acknowledges that we can’t plan or know the timing of Christ’s return, but because Christ died for us, we don’t need to plan. The only “plan” we need is to encourage one another, support one another, and build each other up. We can toss the rest right out the window.

Abby Rosenson
The scripture readings for today provoked an unusual reaction in me. I usually give short shrift to the Old Testament readings which often seem depressing, angry or confusing, and concentrate upon the more “positive” or uplifting content often found in the New Testament selections. Today, however, the ever downward spiral of conversation and dialogue found in our newspapers, TV news and even sporting events is leading me to identify with those in Isaiah who “…will turn their faces upward, or they will look at the earth, but will see only distress and darkness.” (Isaiah 8:21). From the hellish scenes of fires in California to the blatant racism and demeaning chants of political gatherings to the actions of government which take more and more from the disenfranchised and contribute to environmental destruction, I look for hope or the light at the end of the tunnel and find little for optimism. What do I do with my own rage and despair? I remember Roger Gench mentioning that Jews can and do express anger toward God. Is that the way for me to go? Isaiah, however, says “I will wait for the Lord, who his hiding his face from the house of Jacob and I will hope in him.” (Isaiah 8:17)

I recently shared an article with friends entitled “The God of Love had a really bad week”. Diana Butler Bass was lamenting a political rally chanting “Send her back” in response to the President’s suggestion that a U. S. Representative of color should return to her country of origin. She asked, “Where did these people go to Sunday School?” What happened to “Jesus loves the little children, ALL the children of the world”? It seems that Christians now worship different Gods, one Angry and one of Love. Where is love, peace and reconciliation? Even Christians are deeply divided. Where do we turn?

The New Testament readings do offer a whisper of hope (one of my mother’s favorite hymns was “Whispering Hope”). Matthew describes the admonition of Jesus to Peter, James and John to not reveal their witnessing of his transfiguration until after He has been raised from the dead. Paul’s letter to the Romans, however, offers the alternative to despair and damnation. “Love your neighbor as yourself” fulfills the law and the way of following Jesus. “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light…” (Romans 13:11). Armor can be very heavy to put on, in my mind, and trying to love your neighbor as yourself is a very difficult thing to do, but a goal to which we must constantly strive.

I realize that my “meditation” is rather muddled and confused, but that’s the state of my mind and my “spiritual landscape” at this time. Perhaps this is just catharsis, but maybe it’s also a step toward reaching up for that hope that following Jesus’ teachings and striving to love all God’s creation is our ultimate goal. Again, I am reminded of an illustration in one of Roger’s sermons in which EVERY person living in this world is preceded by an angel enjoining all to “Make way for a creature created in the image of God”.

_God of the Universe, help me see the image of God in all my fellow creatures. Bring us together in love and help us respect one another. Help us gird ourselves with the armor of light._
_Amen._

Spencer Gibbins
Today’s readings from Isaiah and the Psalms immediately brought to mind the theme of the 2020 Ecumenical Advocacy Days: **IMAGINE! God’s Earth and People Restored.** The theme is one of hope, but Isaiah and the Psalms verses tell us why. They put us, mere humans, in our place in God’s world. God’s world is one of flowering deserts, so “let it rejoice and shout for joy.” We as God’s children should be rejoicing, shouting for joy, and praising God from the mountains, from the valleys, from our daily lives of work and schedules. We should have faith that, despite the fear and anxiety of what is happening to our planet, what we are doing to scorch our earth, we must have faith in God, that His goodness will reign. His miracles of new life and rejuvenation of land and returning wildlife after fires in California, volcanic eruptions in Hawaii and Mt. St. Helen’s in Washington state, or devastating floods and hurricanes, should give us encouragement to not give up, to know that God will not abandon us.

Further, the Psalms declare that **we will be happy** if we praise the Lord and put trust in God all our life long rather than putting faith in any man who is mortal rather than the God of eternity. How little and fleeting is man; how great is God in His glory. To me, these passages remind us that we too easily take our eye off the ball or move the goalposts of life. We focus too much on the daily short-term challenges, the concerns of our jobs and the next accomplishment, and the worries of children and finances and whatever else weighs on our minds. We must somehow take a deep breath, turn our attention to God, and be in a praiseful and prayerful mindset as we go through our days.

Isaiah, Psalms, and Matthew make clear God’s power and dominion—all refer to the blind recovering sight, the lepers made clean, the deaf hearing, the hungry fed, the lame walking. “The Lord loves the righteous, watches over the stranger, gives heart to the orphan and widow.” We must have heart, too.

So let’s not be disheartened or discouraged by what confronts us, the challenges of life, the daily disappointments. The Psalms say, “Be strong and fear not.” Let’s praise God with all our heart and soul and being. Let’s have hope that we can improve our relationships, humanity, and our world that seems to be losing the fight against self-destruction. Imagine what we can do if we renew our faith in God, praise Him daily, make a joyful noise with our fellow human travelers, protect and preserve God’s good earth. **IMAGINE!!!**

**Prayer:** God of the earth, our God, remind us to praise you, to have faith that all will be well in your time, that we can imagine restoration of your earth and people.

**Marilyn Seiber**
I am old-fashioned and I like to begin each day with the daily newspaper. I like to read the A section and the sports section. Lately I have been reading the sports section first. The A section is often just painful. So much “darkness” – violence, mayhem, a seemingly endless parade of bad behavior. It is very discouraging. Sometimes I can’t bring myself to read the details so I just scan the headlines.

So today I finish my tour through the paper and I pick up my Bible to find the scripture verses that I have committed myself to reflect on for the Advent devotional booklet. And there it is – the quite familiar and wonderful words from the prophet Isaiah. There will be a great light in the darkness. The ancient Israelites surely lived in a world that must have seemed to be filled with darkness and despair. Israel was trying to survive in the midst of wars and rivalries between rival superpowers and things did not go well. And yet, here is Isaiah talking about a great light in the darkness, a child who will bring a peace that will have no end. Wow. Is this real? Can it be possible?

It is certainly hard to believe in the midst of our world and all of its problems. And yet when I turn to today’s New Testament readings it does seem that belief is at the heart of the matter. Can we sustain our belief in the light in the circumstances we see all around us? It is reassuring when the author of Hebrews tells us that we have inherited “an unshakeable kingdom.” It is reassuring when Jesus tells us that even tax collectors and prostitutes, though they hesitate at first, who ultimately believe will make their way into the kingdom. We have God’s grace which gives us the strength to believe in even the most difficult times. I very much like the translation of Hebrews 12:28 in my Jerusalem Bible which says “Let us hold onto that grace and use it to worship God...” It is Advent. Jesus is coming. There will be light in the world.

Steve Dewhurst
He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” – Matthew 18:2-5

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. – 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3

It’s not difficult for me to pick a few different verses from the Bible and plot each one on a spectrum with the cosmically mysterious on one end and the mechanically specific on the other. This is how I have gotten used to thinking about the Bible in the broader sense. So, on the admittedly infrequent occasions lately where I open the Bible, my thoughts go to the old fascinating standards of my youth which tend towards the far end of one side or another. Really though, I think many verses weave a knot through the center of that spectrum. Those verses make good readings in times like these.

Even when not prompted by reading biblical verses, I often find myself wanting to spend more of my limited time thinking of the Cosmos. As an idea it strikes a nice balance: partially visible from where I stand at night, some more of it able to fit within my imagination, roughly shaped by scientific understanding – but still far beyond full comprehension and thus a source of hope. Most of the important stuff is tied up in the middle of that impressionistic spectrum. In reading this part of Isaiah, I am reminded that God made specific judgments against Israel and continued to pay attention to His People’s behavior. Maybe my mind wanders towards the cosmic side of things as a form of escapism, into a Biblical mystery so vast that it can overwhelm the narrow sense of scrutiny that many aspects of the Bible impart on me.

Further towards the practical: In my layperson’s reading of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, we are at the point in the history of the Church where reminders, clarifications, encouragement and other communications to hold together a growing organization are necessary. But still the clarifications and dissuasions provide some fascinating, and momentous, details – will we recognize this Anarchist when he appears? I wonder what it must have felt like for the believers in this local Church.

Finally, I can refocus on the very, very big picture as I read the selection in Matthew. In Matthew I’ve heard about the simple approach of humility and about not jockeying for position. But I also like to think about how fresh and unending the world must seem to a child. I think that has to be a part of my daily reorientation to the world. I think this verse in Matthew can be a reminder that I’m expected to approach the people of the world with the naivete of a kid – an almost impossible thing, or at least an enormous daily struggle. I need the active reminders and time on the communal calendar to put the thought into it that it takes and deserves. It is wonderful that Advent presents that opportunity.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. – 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Zack Parsons
INTRODUCTION: If, as most of us probably do, you are reading this meditation on the run, please continue for now. But, when you can, set aside time to return to these Scripture passages, read them carefully and then see if you agree that they succinctly tell the entire Biblical story, from humanity’s failure to the Incarnation, to an action plan reflecting practical means of redemption.***

Chapter One: “Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees, and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans! … To whom will you flee for help; where will you stash your wealth?” (Isaiah 10:1-3 CEB)

It is easy to denounce the politicians who adopt laws and policies that benefit the already well-off at the expense of vulnerable people who depend on a “safety net” and have legitimate claims to justice. But we must fact the fact that fundamental governance rests with voters and even those who do not vote. The People effectively elect politicians and delegate to them responsibility for adopting laws and policies which we either collectively endorse or approve or effectively organize to replace. Therefore, we must accept responsibility for their actions and recognize that we are among “those” to whom Isaiah refers.

Chapter Two: The Gospel passage establishes the standard of behavior and governance God expects us to meet. John relates the story of Jesus engaging in a high-stake argument with adversaries who threaten to stone him for insulting God by claiming to be God-like. Jesus acknowledges that his good works of healing and teaching and enacting justice result from his identity as God’s son. But he then reminds his adversaries that they too are God’s children, yea even gods themselves, and therefore are empowered to participate with God in the good works of healing, teaching and enacting justice. (See Psalm 82:6: “I hereby declare, ‘You are gods, children of the Most High – all of you!” We too are called to be God-like, engaging in the good works of healing, teaching and enacting justice for the vulnerable among us.

Chapter Three: By virtue of our creation and existence as a child of God, yea even a god with the power and charge to perform good works for each other, we celebrate Jesus’ coming among us “with the certainty that our faith gives us … and [with] the confession of our hope without wavering because the one who made the promises is reliable.” (Hebrews 10:22-23 CEB) “Let’s also think about how to motivate each other to show love and to do good works. Don’t stop meeting together with other believers which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other....” (Hebrews 10: 24-25 CEB)

In short, faithful living as one of God’s beloved children, in community with all other beloved children of God, and engaging in and supporting “good works,” is the responsibility of each and all of us. Our calling is to respect, challenge and encourage each other with our votes, our actions, our contributions to those who care for the acutely vulnerable among us, and with our fervent prayers.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, thank you for sending Jesus to show all your people how to perform good works for each other and to honor your sovereignty over the universe by living faithfully, working for a just social order. Empower us daily to claim your promises to love and protect us and to resist the temptation to cling to fears that keep us from loving you and others. Amen. John H. Quinn, Jr.
Stories of Hope

The Hebrew prophets do their work in a hot kiln of disaster. The words in today’s Isaiah passage paint violent images – anger, fury, wrath, spoil and plunder. The situation is grave, yet the images keep coming. It’s a picture of total devastation – and the prophet doesn’t look away.

Isaiah tells how Assyria will destroy Jerusalem, but this could be any number of disasters in Israel’s history, or in our world today. Empires squash small countries like bugs. People in power take advantage of those who are not. But Isaiah doesn’t leave us there. Instead, he takes a step back – and attributes it all to God. The Assyrian king thinks he’s acting on his own, but he is God’s pawn, to be punished like all the rest once this phase of God’s work is done.

Attributing destruction and death to God is problematic for me, to say the least. But in a world like Isaiah’s, where violence is common, where tiny Israel and Judah are caught between mighty empires, attributing this situation to God is also a way of telling a new story.

And isn’t a new story what we all need?

Paul tells a new story in Romans. He pulls Abraham out of Genesis, taking one scene from a long, messy narrative, using it to support his argument about the importance of faith, of trust in God. (If you read Abraham’s story from beginning to end, you’ll discover Abraham wasn’t always a paragon of upright living – giving Sarah to Pharaoh to save himself, to name just one episode!)

And then there’s the Samaritan woman at the well. What story was she telling about her life before she met Jesus? There are clues in this passage from John. Who would come to the well alone, during the hottest part of the day, except someone who’s been ostracized from her community? And just a few verses beyond today’s reading, we learn she’s had five husbands.

But today’s lectionary stops in the middle of her meeting with Jesus – strange, but this also provides a pause. We encounter the woman at the turning point of her understanding. At the end of today’s reading, she’s still seeing Jesus’ offer of living water in narrow terms, as a relief from her daily chores. But she’ll soon learn her story can be much bigger than that.

Memoirists and biographers look at a life, and as they write the life’s story, they find patterns, threads that they follow to give that life a theme. Living in the moment, we can’t see that pattern; the threads blend in with all the others. But when we align ourselves with God’s story, we are given a new way of seeing. Even disaster contains some hope, says Isaiah. Even Abraham’s sometimes messy life was defined by his faith, says Paul.

And even a Samaritan woman with a checkered past will receive living water, says Jesus.

How do we tell our stories today, both the big ones and the personal ones? How can we look at them with God’s eyes, not looking away from the bad stuff? How can we find the hope that gives us living water, hope that quenches our thirst and nourishes us to act in faith, so we can tell our stories of hope to others?

Meg Hanna House
Isaiah 10:20-27; John 4:16-30; Romans 4:9-15

These passages from John and Romans share a message of Christian inclusiveness and salvation through faith that challenges us to examine how we worship and live in community at New York Avenue. In John, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus rejects the behavior that his contemporaries would’ve expected – either avoiding her because she was a Samaritan or refusing to engage in substantive conversation because she was a woman. He responds to the theological dichotomy she presents between Jews and Samaritans by embracing a vision that includes all. 21Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”

He shares with her a message of salvation through faith. 23But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in the spirit and truth.

This encounter is the first time in John that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah. In the text immediately following the encounter we learn that the disciples were shocked that Jesus would even speak with the Samaritan woman. Jesus’ choice of an indisputable member of the underclass, a concrete example of “the least of these,” as the target of this revelation demonstrates the radical inclusiveness that he embodied, and with which he challenges us all.

The message of inclusive faith is also present in Paul’s letter to the Romans. He addresses other false requirements of salvation that have acted as barriers to salvation. His message is that it is faith, not exclusive characteristics we carry that bring us salvation. 11[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, 12and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Paul continues by stressing that the path to salvation is not through works, nor through blind adherence to a dogmatic code, but through faith. 13For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15For the law bring wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

In these passages and throughout the New Testament, we encounter the message of radical inclusiveness and the reminder that salvation comes through faith. We must challenge ourselves to live this message by asking uncomfortable questions. Is our community as inclusive as it could be or do we construct barriers to entry based on class, age, and education? Do we treat our ideological opposite as a brother, or do we encourage his absence from our Sunday morning? Do we act as if being active “Church people” by pledging and serving on boards is our path to salvation?

New York Avenue is important to me because within its community we meet these challenges together. Most days I fail to meet the challenges I’ve described above. By grace, each day I’m greeted with the example and encouragement of a congregation of brothers and sisters facing the same struggle.

For a moment of inspiration and a reminder of our daily gifts of grace and faith, I encourage listening to “Jesus Gave Me Water,” Sam Cooke & the Soul Stirrers’ celebration of the encounter in John.

Jesus gave her water
Jesus gave her water
I want to let his praises swell
Jesus gave her water
He gave that woman water
He gave her living, loving, lasting water
And he was not in the well

Mike Smith
Advent 2019, Saturday December 21

Isaiah 11:1-9
Matthew 1:1-17
Romans 4:16-25

When I was a child my parents used to get for my siblings and me an Advent Calendar with little windows that would be opened in turn by each of the three of us during the Christmas season to reveal some little picture related to the season. Some were little icons of a lamb lying with a wolf or a calf lying with a lion and ultimately a little glowing child with a halo. The ritual was eagerly anticipated by us but of course the meaning not fully understood. Especially as Advent was not an element in our denomination's worship.

This year has once again been one of difficult continuing health challenges. Unexplained Chronic Hypoxia has dogged me all year. My medical team has all but given up on the explanation of it. I'm monitored. Uh-huh. I've tried as I habitually do to divine the future near and far and to learn to cope. In terms of my health it can be hard to see what the advent of each new day will bring. As I try to also habituate myself to the divining of the spiritual path forward, Advent (and Lent) have always provided a framework for my prayerful study.

I've always loved the story of the peaceable kingdom. As I try to stay on a path of spiritual and physical healing in the darkly distracting days in which we live, I find God's promise of seemingly impossible peace in the world deeply reassuring. As we pass through the season, I try to open a little window in my soul and get a glimpse of the improbable certainty of God's peaceable promise to us...to me.

There seems little reason to be seen in the physical world around me for any such reassurance. In Romans we read, “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” As well, “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

As I'm frequently asked what I believe the reason is for my continued survival and repeated recoveries I always say,” To God be the Glory. I've got no story.” I cling to the conviction that the seeming societal and physical destruction I see and feel around and within “will not hurt or destroy on all [God's] holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

In Peace and Love,

Nathan Moon
Sunday, December 22, 2019

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

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” Isaiah 7:10

“(A)n angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 1:20-21

Reflection:
The signs of the season. I am struck in these passages for the scripture for today of the signs from God. The sign from God to Joseph—that of the Angel appearing to him in a dream—is one with which we are most familiar. Joseph's faith! To receive the sign sent as a sign and not as a nightmare—this I have always, always admired about Joseph.

The passage from Isaiah here foretells the birth of Jesus, but there in the lead up to that promise, God tells Ahaz that he can ask for a sign, 'whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.' I find that enormously comforting and freeing. Ask me for a sign, says God. Ask me anything. What can you imagine? What can you not imagine? We cannot over-ask our Lord.

What do you really want for Christmas this year? Ask!

Prayer:
Father God, in this season of preparation, help us to search our hearts. Guide us as we reflect upon your words. Help us to hear your call and see your signs—which are all around us. Amen

Laura Asiala
“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. ‘This is he of whom I said, “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”’ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” - John 1:14-18, NIV

This is the essence of the Good News, isn’t it? “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.” The Greek word for “lived for a while among us” is “skenoo” and it means “to camp out; to pitch a tent.” This idea of pitching a tent among us, of camping out, should remind us of the Exodus and the tent of the Tabernacle that traveled with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. It would have been a powerful image for those who knew the story of ancient Israel.

The Tabernacle was made to contain the Ark of the Covenant, an elaborate box that held the clay tablets upon which the Law, the 10 Commandments, was written. The Tabernacle was a tangible sign of God’s presence with God’s people. When Moses consulted with God, he went into the Tabernacle. It accompanied the people into the promised land. Long years later, after David had united the tribes into one kingdom and things had more or less settled down, David’s son Solomon built the temple and the Tabernacle moved indoors. It became the Holy of Holies, the place where only the High Priest could go and then only on the Day of Atonement. If you have ever been to a Catholic Mass, you will have seen that the Host, the bread (wafers), is kept in a small box behind the altar. The priest is the one who handles the Host, serving those who come forward, and then returning it to this small tabernacle.

As children of the Reformation, we have lost the Tabernacle, but it doesn’t matter because Jesus came and pitched a tent among his people. Rather than being hidden behind a curtain in the Tabernacle, God came in flesh and blood. Rachel Held Evans puts it like this: “what each of us longs for the most is to be both fully known and fully loved. Miraculously, God feels the same way about us. God, too, wants to be fully known and fully loved. God wants this so much that he has promised to knock down every obstacle in the way, enduring even his own death, to be with us, to consummate this love.” (Searching for Sunday) This is the God that Jesus revealed in his life and in his death; a God who pitches a tent and invites everyone in.

Prayer: Holy God, as we ready ourselves to welcome you anew, help us to take down the curtains in our hearts that separate us from you. Thank you for pitching your tent among us. Thank you for loving us so very much. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst
REMEMBER!!!

"Remember where you are, so you remember where you are!"

I am sure many of us are still reliving the Nat's thrilling World Series win in Game 7. That victory definitely strengthened my heart as I was recovering from major heart surgery. What may be more interesting is how Charlie Slowes’ now famous call when the Nats won it all, “Remember where you are, so you remember where you are!” has resonated with me. I am sure he meant to say, “Remember where you are, so you remember where you were.” Yet I was truly moved by what was actually said and I think that can provide us some guidance for this Christmas Eve. I only would like to replace the word “SO” with “BUT.”

Remember where you are--Surrounded with family, friends and loved ones.... But REMEMBER where you are--KNOWING that there are those who are alone this Christmas Eve, and hurting....

Remember where you are--Witnessing the joy of gleeful children, full of the holiday spirit.... But REMEMBER where you are--KNOWING that a child is suffering or dead in Syria....

Remember where you are--Celebrating the birth of the Christ Child.... But REMEMBER where you are--KNOWING that Uighers are experiencing genocide in China....

Remember where you are--Relishing an infant, born in a manger to loving parents… But REMEMBER where you are--KNOWING that our own government is willing to place such children in cages.

Pictures and memories thoroughout the years will allow us to REMEMBER where we are, BUT are we willing to REMEMBER where we are?

Matthew Weitz
...the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified...

By now, the presents have been wrapped and most likely unwrapped. The smell of cinnamon buns or bacon or some other family favorite has wafted out of the kitchen. Friends and family are reaching out. The magic of the world slowing down just a bit pervades our souls and we begin to breathe a little easier knowing that the Light of the World has finally arrived.

For most of us Christmas is a calming, caring day—one full of connection and celebration.

But when the Light of the World arrived to that group of ordinary shepherds minding their own business, they weren’t exactly feeling calm and connected. Instead, they were probably ready to run for the hills. Hunkered down for the night, their eyelids growing heavy, and all of a sudden, the glory of the Lord is shining all around them and an angelic messenger starts speaking absurdity. Before the encounter is over, an entire choir of angels serenades the shepherds, announcing good news, the Messiah—a newborn child to be found lying in a manger.

I find a great deal of comfort knowing that the shepherds were terrified. That the good news fell upon them and elicited fear and trembling long before it felt anything like good news. Sometimes that’s the case with God’s good news. Long before it brings comfort and connection, it can feel like we’re out in the middle of a field, hearing absurdity, unable to comprehend the angels singing right in front of us.

In this season of transition at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, I wonder, if you, too, can identify with the trembling shepherds? Perhaps some of you are ready to join the choir of heavenly angels singing the good news of a different way, but I suspect that many of us are right there with the shepherds scratching our heads and thinking, what the heck is going on around here? God’s good news comes, but it almost always means rearranging the furniture a bit. I’m relieved to know that being terrified is a perfectly acceptable response.

*God of the shepherds and angels,*
*God of those who tremble in fear resisting uncertainty,*
*and God of those who start singing along immediately,*
*speak to us this Christmas...*  
*that we may begin to name the things we are so scared of,*  
*while at the same time leaning on your promise*  
*that Good News is headed our way. Amen.*

Rev. Heather Shortlidge