

# ADVENT DEVOTIONALS

NOVEMBER 27, 2011 - JANUARY 1, 2012

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## Preparing for the Coming of Christ

St. Mary's of Bethlehem was the name of a London hospital for the mentally disturbed. Over the years its name was shortened to "Bedlam," from which we get our word. In our day the Bedlam Hospital has become a museum for the British military. We have traveled from Bethlehem to Bedlam; from peace to war; from love to terror; from singing to shouting.

Our society has moved from Bethlehem to Bedlam and the Advent season provides the opportunity for us to find our way back. We need to ask, in the midst of our darkness is there someone who can turn on the lights? In the midst of our horror can we find joy? In the midst of disharmony is there a song?

This Advent devotional guide has been prepared by several members of River Road Church representing a broad cross-section of our membership. Importantly it is wonderfully illustrated by our children. We hope it will help us find our way back to Bethlehem.

Our prayer is that during this Advent season Christ may be born anew in each of our lives.

Tom Graves

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Sunday, November 27, 2011

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Advent, from the Latin *Adventus*, meaning the coming or arrival of a significant event, has been observed by Christians since the 6th century. Originally it was a period similar to Lent, but the emphasis was more on preparation than on penitence. Advent is a season of reflection and meditation, a time to remember the first coming of Christ to us, and to anticipate his second coming.

Today's Scripture selection points to Christ's first coming and the themes of justice, righteousness, dominion, and judgment are there, as they are anticipated in Christ's second coming. The longing for the Messiah, the "king," as expressed in this Psalm, is analogous to the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Indeed, the Lord's Prayer parallels this Psalm, and it, too, anticipates the day when God will usher in his kingdom with the second coming of Christ.

The purpose of Advent is to get our attention: Christ has come to us and is calling us now to follow him, because Christ is coming again.

Doug Anderson

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Monday, November 28, 2011

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Tyconius is a name you may not be familiar with. He was a Christian layman who lived in North Africa in the late 4th and early 5th centuries when that area was a province of Rome. In his day, the vast majority of Christians were converts from a multiplicity of religions and they had little, if any, prior knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. While these Scriptures (our Old Testament) were the basis for Christian worship, few Christians could see a connection between these Scriptures and the Gospels. Tyconius resolved this problem by creating a system of rules for biblical interpretation that, among other things, viewed these Scriptures as prophesying the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed one.

Today's Scripture selection is an expression of longing for the hoped for Messiah, the one who would save his people. Advent captures this hope for salvation, and unites it with our knowledge that God has sent his anointed one. As John wrote, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." And as Paul wrote, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself."

Our hope now is for the second coming of Christ who will fulfill all that has been foretold in Scripture.

Doug Anderson

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Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Psalm 96

Advent is a distinctly Christian observance. It is a time for devout meditation and self-examination. It competes with the more recently evolving customs associated with Christmas that abound at this time of year. Indeed, our Christian Christmas is over-laid with ancient Celtic winter solstice rites, northern European festivals of lights, modern day capitalism and consumerism, and a smattering of harvest feasts.

Advent is an opportunity to get your bearings, to reinvigorate your spiritual health and restore your Christian values. Today's Scripture selection is a song of joy celebrating the experience of centering that can be found in worship, and Advent is all about centering. As the Psalmist wrote (Ps. 46:10), "Be still and know that I am God."

Reflect that Christ calls us to new life and to a new way of living. The Christ whose birth we celebrate claims us for his own. Advent is a reminder that we must respond; we must claim Christ.

Doug Anderson

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Wednesday, November 30, 2011

Psalm 98.

Joy bursts forth from man and nature because the Lord is coming to judge the earth and its people. Yes, in this Advent message from the Old Testament, the Lord is coming not as the Messiah, but as a judge. These verses celebrate God's victory, a victory already won, praise his steadfast love, and look forward - with joy - to his coming judgment. This is a Christmas story, but a somber one.

Viewed from a New Testament perspective this reading reminds us why Advent is a penitential season. We know that the victory we look forward to from the standpoint of the nativity will be won, not with a "holy arm" of power, but through death and suffering. We cannot forget, even as we rejoice, that the wondrous act of love we celebrate at Christmas culminates in a sacrifice that calls us to repent. We remember when we think of judgment that we cannot accept the gifts of God's mercy and forgiveness unless we first understand ourselves as sinners. If we can look to God's judgment with anything other than terror it is because of the love beyond comprehension that is revealed to us at Christmas. Rejoice!

Sheila Marsh

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Thursday, December 1, 2011

Psalm 122

One of my earliest childhood memories is hearing my Sunday School teacher reciting the first verse of Psalm 122 as we assembled for class: "I was glad when they said unto me

‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’” Her smile, her demeanor, and her welcoming spirit evoked the joy and pleasure this verse was meant to convey. To this very day when I hear this verse read or sung I am taken back to the church of my childhood.

At first, reading this verse seems very simple and childlike, yet it is a strong statement of invitation and anticipation. It is one of the Ascent Psalms that describes the children of Israel going up to Jerusalem to enter the temple. It implies journey and pilgrimage. Going into the house of the Lord is regarded not as a duty, but as a thing of joy. It implies hope and expectation.

The Advent season in our church affords us multiple opportunities to enter gladly the house of the Lord. We come to hear the birth narrative retold, to enjoy the singing of carols, to see the candles and wreaths as we once again celebrate the Savior’s birth. This is a concept that needs to be taught and demonstrated by example to our children so that their memories of worship will become firm experiences of joy.

Emily Tuck

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Friday, December 2, 2011

Psalm 146:5-10

This past February I had the opportunity to travel to Jacmel, Haiti with a group of medical professionals. We were picked up at the airport in a Volkswagen van with “Merci Jesus” displayed across the top of the windshield. This became a running joke in our group and we always knew to look for the “Merci Jesus” bus at the end of our busy day to take us back to our clean, air-conditioned hotel.

As we travelled through the streets of Haiti, I remember looking at the breathtaking views of the clear, blue ocean and mountainous peaks; however, what stuck with me the most was the stark contrast of the beautiful scenery with the destruction and despair still present a year after the country was hit by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake. It amazed me that people were still living in tents, bathing and doing laundry in the river, and many did not know when they would eat again. What amazed me even more was the strength of their faith in God.

The small town where we were staying held Catholic mass every morning at 6:00. After a few days of sleeping in, I decided to venture to mass to see what it was like. Although I wasn’t able to understand what was being said, I was able to understand the love that the Haitians have for God and each other. They truly believed what Psalm 146 states: “Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob and whose hope is in the Lord their God (v1). ...He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry (v7).”

I went into this trip thinking that I would be providing a service for their children, however, I came home with a renewed sense of faith, and a reminder to thank Jesus (“Merci Jesus”) for what I have, for he has truly provided for me.

Melanie Gray

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Isaiah 2:1-5

Christmas is one of my favorite holidays. I definitely get a charge out of shopping, decorating, gift wrapping, baking, attending church and school events, and giving and receiving gifts. The excitement of the season keeps building as Christmas Day draws near. Of course every year, just as I'm in the throes of the preparations, the pressure and stress of getting it all done starts creeping in. Christmas Day starts to look like a giant mountain whose peak I'm never going to reach!

As a parent, I believe it's important for my children to grow up realizing that the magic created by Christmas is what walking in God's light is all about. I keep looking to God trusting that he will give me the strength to get it all done and to make the message of the magic come through. After all, we are celebrating the birth of Christ! And, as they say, anything worth doing right is never easy.

God sent Christ into our world so that each of us could live and love and be loved by his grace and goodness. Despite the inevitable hardships and stresses that we face, Christmas is a moment in time to rejoice that God's glory can still be displayed in our lives. On Christmas Eve, sitting in church with family and friends, with the whirlwind all in the past, it's finally a peaceful time – a time to join hands with our fellow man, to reflect on and take joy in our many blessings and to realize that Jesus is the light of the world. Following him means that light will always shine in our hearts.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, please help us to see your light and to follow your path so that we will not be in darkness and help us to spread your light onto the path for others. Amen.

Amy Hubbard

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Sunday, December 4, 2011

Isaiah 7:10-16

*“Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’)” (Is 7:14 NIV).*

We all need signs from time to time. Well, at least I do. Sometimes I miss signs. Sometimes I see signs and ignore them. Sometimes I need “the sign” right up in my face and so obvious I can't miss it. I suspect we are not much different.

For the last eight weeks I have trained for a half marathon. As a novice I should have followed a novice program. My training started well and I progressed quickly. I became over confident and jumped to an intermediate program. I began to build small injury upon injury. Each time I ignored the signs and kept training. You can guess this story doesn't end well – a doctor's visit and no half marathon – my final sign. Thank goodness I wasn't entrusted with the fate of Judah as King Ahaz was. He needed a sign as well. God gave him one, but he ignored it. The situation ended badly for Judah.

The text today is very familiar. Matthew quotes Isaiah when the angel of the Lord speaks to Joseph (Mt 1:23). It is a foreshadow for the coming of Jesus. We recall the text today as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth. We all need signs. Listen to God's main message to King Ahaz: "Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm" (Is 7:9b NIV).

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the signs, which keep me on a right path. As I prepare for Christ's coming, grant me discernment to see your signs and firm faith to stand in your glory. Amen.

Andy McAllister

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Monday, December 5, 2011

Isaiah 9:2-7

It is impossible for me to read these words from Isaiah without bringing to mind the majestic refrain from the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah. The prophetic words resound with unspeakable joy, "And his name shall be called:"

    "Wonderful, Counselor,"

        "The Mighty God,"

            "The Everlasting Father,"

                "The Prince of Peace."

The prophet Isaiah was addressing the gloom that northern Israel was experiencing in their struggle with the Assyrians, and announced the dawn of hope in the royal birth of the Messiah. His poem of hope proclaims the dawn of a coming light for the people who have walked in great darkness.

As "Wonderful Counselor" the one whose birth would be celebrated will be filled with wonder and awe and his counseling or administrative gifts will assist us in our planning, direction, grief and needs with guidance too wonderful to comprehend.

As the "Mighty God," he will always have power over his enemies to uphold us, and will be the invincible champion of the oppressed and needy.

"The Everlasting Father" –Father forever—will always provide us with unfailing love, care and protection, and welcome us home from our wandering or despondency.

As the "Prince of Peace," he will restore our inner brokenness, our fragmented relationships with others and teach us how to live in harmony with all persons and bring an end to the ways of war.

Reflect again in this Advent season on the wonder, mystery, joy, assurance, and hope we celebrate in the birth of Jesus, the Promised One.

Bill Tuck

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Isaiah 11:1-10

In today's passage Isaiah prophecies the birth of a special child. The "shoot that shall come out from the stump of Jesse" is Jesus. Jesus is the one the spirit of God rests upon.

Isaiah concludes the passage with a lovely portrayal of the "Kingdom of Peace" for which we still long, and which this child came to lead. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the calf and the lion shall graze together. They will not hurt or destroy; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Edward Hicks painted his famed "Peaceable Kingdom" at least 100 times. Each rendition was slightly different, but always, the animals lived together in peace.

Isaiah's vision has yet to be fully realized. Our world is still filled with injustice and strife. Wolves still eat lambs. Humankind continues at war. When will there be peace? The Peaceable Kingdom will come in its fullness when Christ comes again.

The Peaceable Kingdom is God's dream for creation. God, in his goodness, has allowed us to share this dream. Longing for it, looking for it, and working for it, is good. This is part of what we do at Advent. We look back. We look around us. We look forward. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Frank Schwall

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Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Isaiah 35: 1-10

The Christmas season is one of the most joyful times that we experience through the year. There is the joy of taking extra time to get together with friends and family. The joy of finding gifts for your loved ones that you know will make them smile. The joy of listening to Christmas hymns and carols. The joy of watching your favorite Christmas movies and maybe hearing George Bailey shout "Merry Christmas, you ole Building and Loan" for the seventieth time! The joy of watching children and the young at heart getting swept up in the excitement of the season.

The joy of the Christmas season gives us a glimpse of what true joy is. The Christmas season is a sign of hope for us all, that there is a greater joy waiting for us. A joy which is greater than any we have ever experienced or can even fully comprehend.

Isaiah paints an image of this joy by describing a world where impossibilities become possible. We get to see a glimpse of this in our holiday filled with warmth, color, and glitz in the midst of a cold, bleak, and dreary time of year. Isaiah uses an image of everyone and everything shouting and leaping in the glory of the Lord, like the laughter heard when long absent friends and family are reunited, or the joyful sound of people gathered to sing



Christmas carols. So take hope in these glimpses of true joy that come to us during the Christmas season and remember that the highest high points in your life are nowhere near the heights to which Jesus can take you!

Tyler Hays

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Thursday, December 8, 2011

Isaiah 52:7-10

Peace. How often we hear that beautiful word, especially this time of year. When the Israelites heard this message they were experiencing nothing close to “peace.” In fact, they were experiencing one of the darkest moments in the history of Israel. They had been removed from their homes and were being held in captivity by the Babylonians. Amid this state of turmoil a messenger brings good news of peace and salvation. God is there to comfort them.

The Israelites were given a message that after everything they had been through, and after all they had done to disappoint God, God’s love remained constant. Such is our relationship with God. Our actions have consequences and our lives bring ups and downs. We wonder why bad things happen and people suffer. And then, we too receive the message that has been constant through the ages, the message that was delivered to the Israelites during their captivity and re-delivered in a humble manger. It is the message that abides in each of us through the love of God.

This message of peace is not a promise of an end to war or an end to suffering. This message of peace is one that comes from the comfort in knowing that despite the hardships that come with life and despite our imperfections, we are loved. This peace enables us to keep living, and is the foundation that enables us to become the messenger. May you find peace this Christmas season and always.

Eleanor Nurney

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Friday, December 9, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-11

*A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?”*

We’ve all been thrust into circumstances where we’re told to say something to somebody but we’re not prepared for it. Maybe when you were young, after your uncle died your mother told you to go say something to your cousin. “What do I say?” you asked. Or you go for a job interview and they start with, “Tell us about yourself.” You think: “Well, what do you want to know?”

Right after the order to speak is a moment of exquisite uncertainty, because there is really an infinity of words that might be said into that empty space. We freeze because we’re unsure where to start, how to order our thoughts. It can be agonizing.

But recall, too, the relief that comes with guidance. “Just tell her how much you’ll miss her father.” “Tell us a little about your work history.” Now you know where to begin.

God wants us to cry out. But—here’s that moment of dread—what can I say? God comes through with guidance: Prepare the way. Go up to the mountain, and declare that God is here. God is strong and God cares for us.

God tells us the message to deliver.

Prayer: Gentle God, help us to bring comfort by spreading the good news of your arrival among us. Amen.

Eric Johnson

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Saturday, December 10, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9

“Peace” is a trendy term at Christmas. And often it remains just that – a cute phrase to write on our holiday cards – “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men.” But do we actively work at bringing that peace on earth? Are we peacemakers in our own families? Do we work to heal family strife or do we let our prejudices bring discord? Do we refer to folks in other countries with contempt or do we speak of them as our brothers and sisters?

Peace on earth starts with us, with our attitudes toward others. Our words convey the attitude of our hearts, and create either a culture of peace or a culture of hate within our homes. Sometimes it is difficult to tell which attitude is being promoted as our words speak of peace, but our actions promote discord. I like the questions Willie Nelson asks in his song “What Ever Happened to Peace on Earth?”:

So I guess it’s just  
Do unto others before they do it to you.  
Let’s just kill em’ all and let God sort em’ out.  
Is this what God wants us to do?

If we stop loving our neighbor as ourselves and forget to treat everyone with the same respect and love we would desire for ourselves, there can be no peace on earth. The way of peace requires a shift in how we view everything.

So this holiday season, let us make the term “Peace on Earth” mean something. Let us be active peacemakers.

Matt Straw

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Sunday, December 11, 2011

Zephaniah 3:14-20

*“...He will take great delight in you*

*He will quiet you with his love  
He will rejoice over you with singing...”*  
Zephaniah 3:17

DELIGHT...What a terrific word that we do not use very often.

- give great pleasure
- to be highly pleased
- rejoice
- joy
- pleasure
- enjoyment
- happiness
- pleased feeling

This time of year, if I take a minute to think about things that delight me, they would be: a decorated Christmas tree, my husband, my children, our choir singing Christmas carols, being with close friends, laughing, hugs, the children on Christmas morning, seeing God in the small daily ways, holding hands. It is all about people and relationships for me. People need to rank higher than other things on my To-Do List. I remember the way Mary “stopped just to be with Jesus,” and to listen and not to continue to “stir” like Martha. I already pray daily for “Mary Moments” with my children, but I am now praying during Advent to have those moments with the people I love. God doesn’t seem to be too busy, ever, so why am I? If the way things delight us is a glimmer of what God must be feeling towards us, we shouldn’t let anything affect the way we think or act except with full confidence that God, the Almighty, the King of Kings, is rejoicing over us and taking great pleasure with us. He said so in the Bible in Zephaniah. I want to delight in God and in others.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to be amazed by you. Help me to trust you, be still and commit to you. Help me to delight in you and in others as you have said that you delight in me. Amen.

Ashley Evans

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Monday, December 12, 2011

Zechariah 9:9-12

Both Matthew 21 and John 12 quote the first verse of our reading for today. They say it was fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in the middle of a popular demonstration. Three of the Gospels also tell us that Jesus planned this scene with care. As he, and a crowd approached the city, he sent disciples ahead to fetch the donkey.

What was Jesus doing? And what does it mean for us?

The Zechariah passage is our clue. The first four verses must have been in Jesus’ mind when he planned this action. Just as the prophets of old had sometimes done, Jesus would act out the message that God had given him—act it out for all to see. A victorious king is coming. But he comes in gentleness and humility. He comes to rule his people, to put an

end to deadly conflict, to bring peace, and to set prisoners free.

The part we have to play in all of this is clear in outline. But we have to come up with the specifics. Our Lord wants to rule in us, for we are his people. In and through our plans, our actions, and our words, Jesus wants to bring peace, to put an end to strife, and to deliver those who are caught in the prisons of our day: poverty, poor education, lack of health care, or addiction.

So let's hurry and fetch the donkey! Come Lord Jesus. Reign in us, we pray.

Rob James

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Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Matthew 1:1-16

I've never known a Baptist ladies' Sunday School class or circle named after a woman in Jesus' lineage other than Ruth. The New Testament's Mary and Martha get their due but never the Old Testament's Tamar, Rahab or Bathsheba. What's up?

- **Tamar** (see Genesis 38) was a "black widow" whose first two husbands, sons of Judah, died. She then disguised herself as a prostitute to trick Judah into having relations with her.
- **Rahab** (see Joshua 6), a lifelong prostitute and innkeeper, was Ruth's mother-in-law. She lied to her own people to save those pesky Israelite spies.
- **Bathsheba** (see 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2) is the Bible's most renown roof-top bather. Her first child, born out of wedlock with King David, died. Her second became King Solomon.

The magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the manger. What did these three ladies bring?

According to the theologians at the Hallmark Channel (see Verizon 240), "Christmas is the season for miracles." Perhaps these checkered lives in the genealogy of the Christ child can bore into our hearts and minds the possibility that less than perfect folk, when coupled with the amazing and liberating Immanuel, can be a part of building the kingdom of God on earth.

If God can do great things with the likes of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, imagine what he can do this Advent with nice folk like you and me...today.

Scott Leake

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Mark 1:1-8

In the midst of Advent, do you sometimes feel scattered among so many different emotions we experience? There's the feeling of gratitude for God's gift to us through his son's poetic birthday. We may also feel his spirit hug us during worship or special Christmas music. Then, there may be sadness mixed with joy, as we re-experience touching the lives of homeless friends with care and gifting of holiday meals.

Might we also experience an Advent centering at those times? As I pondered that question among today's text, a new meaning peeked out at me. Eugene Peterson describes it in verse 7 from *The Message*, "...The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life."

As I reflect on John the Baptist – thunder in the desert, camel hair habit tied at his waist – I visualize this stagehand model for us. For here we are to be preparing for the Advent scene; striving to soften the hearts and minds of others, as well as our own, to love and honor the real star of this drama, Jesus. Yes, we too are mere stagehands during this dramatic revisit of God's birthday star.

Imagine you are readying the stage for a grand annual production. The star is on his way. Is the stage ready? Are you ready?

Prayer: Lord, ground us in your love and help us see in this season, through your son Jesus, what we need to see, to be ready to carry forth your plan for us. Amen.

Page Highfill

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Thursday, December 15, 2011

Mark 13:24-37

I was never bitten by the running bug. In college, in an effort to make it to class on time, I learned to walk speedily and efficiently, my short legs taking two steps for others' one. Still, I never quite "got" the charm of running. Ten years ago my husband starting training to run a marathon. Then he ran several marathons. And then ultras--in the mountains, on trails, over streams, 50K, 50 miles. You get the picture. Then our daughter announced that she was training for her first marathon. Not to be outdone, our son joined the bandwagon.

I decided to run. Well, not exactly. I employed a program that began with me running 30 seconds and then walking 30 seconds. Each day I ran longer intervals and walked shorter ones. In order for all of this to be tolerable, I downloaded an iPhone app that instructed me when to run and when to walk, all the while blaring my favorite tunes so I wouldn't notice the pain.

I began running! I committed to 8K training. It was there that the coach impressed upon me the importance of being aware of one's surroundings. Pay attention! Keep awake! No headphones, no ear pods, no music. "Just you and nature," he said. "You'll notice things

you've never noticed before," he promised. I became more focused. I heard my body inhaling and exhaling. I heard the footsteps of other runners. I heard fragments of conversations around me, sometimes in different languages. I heard dogs barking and birds singing and squirrels scurrying. I was awakened.

Are you truly awake? Advent is your invitation to wake up to the new and unexpected things that God is doing in your life every day, every moment. Wake up!

Audrey Thomson

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Friday, December 16

Luke 1: 5-20

All births are miraculous, but some are more miraculous than others, and I'm referring not just to Jesus' birth. The Bible tells of several: Sarah was barren all her life, but God told her at age ninety that she would have a son--Isaac. The mothers of both Samson and Samuel were old and childless until God "opened their wombs." Today's Scripture begins the story of the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who also was barren and old.

What is most significant about some of these miraculous births is how persons reacted to God's promise of a son and how God responded to them in turn. Sarah, for example, laughed in disbelief when God told her that she would bear a son. God was merely puzzled: "Why did Sarah laugh . . .? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" However, when Zechariah reacted with disbelief to Gabriel's announcement of John's birth, God was apparently angered, for Gabriel silenced Zechariah—at least temporarily.

Jesus, of course, often chastised his disciples because of their lack of faith, but he was more disappointed than angered. Why, then, did God get so upset with Zechariah? Because he was a priest? Because he had actually been praying for a child? Or because God wanted to teach Mary and Joseph how to respond to another of His unbelievable promises?

Whatever the answer, I am left wondering how God feels when I sometimes doubt his promises, and hoping, that if it's anger, it won't be permanent.

Ellis M. West

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Saturday, December 17, 2011

Luke 1: 46-55

*Mary said, "My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Savior, for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me happy, because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me. His name is holy; from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honor him. He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans. He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has kept the promise he made to*

*our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel. He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham and to all his descendants forever!"*

The verses above from Luke's Gospel are often called "The Magnificat." These verses are quite uplifting to anyone who has felt the pain of illness, the pathos of depression, the sting of injustice, and the oppression of the poor. Mary, who was probably a teen girl with no standing and little self-esteem, was chosen by God to bear the son of God. She praises God in this song of praise. The Good News translation emphasizes that God has remembered a "lowly servant." Mercy is shown by God through the generations.

Until the Salk vaccine in 1955, any child crippled by polio knew the pain of that illness, the pathos of depression, and did not understand the injustice or the victimization of the innocent. This same unfairness of a handicapped child still happens today. Thus, these words during Advent can still speak to and lift the lowly.

Henry Holland

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Sunday, December 18, 2011

Luke 1:67-79

In this passage, the father, Zechariah, is prophesying the intention of his newborn son, John, that he will prepare the way for the ministry of Christ. God sent him as a messenger because God's people needed to become refocused, to be in the proper frame of mind and heart in order to be open to the good news and the new covenant brought by Jesus.

During my study to understand the ministry of John, I came to realize that our Advent season mimics his ministry. Mankind needed to be refocused, repentant, and ready to receive Christ then, and we need to do the same thing this pre-Christmas season.

We reread the prophets and the Gospels remembering their mystery and awesomeness. We examine ourselves, asking for forgiveness for times of faithlessness. Also, it is during this month of December that we remember our childlike faith and excitement. Jesus explained to his disciples that "whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17). What a great season to let loose your inner child!

One of my favorite ways to prepare during Advent is to walk the labyrinth that has been set up in our Fellowship Hall each year at this time. . It is a wonderful way for me to get away from the hubbub of decorating, , cooking, and shopping, and enter a world of meditation and restful fellowship with God. It helps me to remember, focus, and be ready.

Prayer: Heavenly father, please hold my heart. My relationship with you is my most important endeavor. Help me to know and do what you want me to know and do. Please let me feel your presence and love you with the faith of a little child. Amen.

Ann Hays

Monday, December 19, 2011

John 1:1-5, 10-18

God sent his son Jesus to be the light of our world-- to love us unconditionally – never ceasing. His loving arms are open and ready to embrace us with his love. What a wonderful gift that God has given us. How do we share the gift of Christ with others? We know God loves us, but how do we show our love for others? In our busy lives we become so preoccupied and self-absorbed that we forget to share our love. Henry Van Dyke's book, *The Spirit of Christmas* states it well:

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and to look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness- are you willing to do these things for a day? ...Then you can keep Christmas. ...Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death – and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the eternal love? Then you can keep Christmas.

May we share the gift of love to others not only at Christmas but all through the year.

Cathy Whitty

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Tuesday, December 20, 2011

John 1:6-8; 19-28

Well, here he is again, old John the Baptist. We get him every year at this time, the forerunner come to prepare the way, the voice crying in the wilderness, the man sent from God. This year we meet him in the narrative of John the Evangelist who doesn't give us his wardrobe, diet, or even fiery calls to repentance. Instead we have John the witness, beset by a deputation from the Jews of Jerusalem. They don't seem very friendly. The evangelist doesn't explain. What they demand to know is just who he thinks he is, and where he gets off going around baptizing people for pity sake. John lets them know right away that he knows he is no Elijah, no prophet. He is just a voice crying in the wilderness. He is certainly not "the one," he doesn't see himself as even worthy to tie the shoe laces of that one. But, if they want to know, and even if they don't, that One who is the life and light of every human being in the universe, not to speak of the universe itself, is abroad among them and they haven't even recognized him!

Isn't that the way of it? Later Jesus will ask Phillip, "Have I been so long with you and you didn't know me?" If the text does nothing but tease us into really taking a hard look around us for the word made flesh here and now, in this the only time we have and the



only lives we will ever have, then maybe it will have served its Advent mission once again. If you catch a glimpse, you are obliged, like John, to become a witness, in the proper way, of course.

Jim Slatton

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Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Luke 3:7-18

I was looking up today's Scripture passage online and one of the ads running on the webpage caught my eye. "Share your faith with free tools and apps," it proclaimed alongside a picture of a smart phone and computer screen. Want to proclaim the good news to the people like John did? Apparently there's an app for that.

So I clicked the ad and I could then download the "Steps to Peace with God" app described as "the Gospel message in four simple steps." You might recognize the classic sin chasm/cross bridge illustration on screens two and three. It is a perfectly fine message (though I'm skeptical anybody searching for life's meaning is thinking the iTunes Store has the answers). But the message doesn't go far enough.

In today's Scripture John also has four steps to peace with God. First, he tells the crowd: don't think your spiritual heritage or pedigree is enough to get you by. You need to bear fruit. Second, the crowd wants to know more so John responds: those of you who have more than enough need to share with those with less than enough. Third, the tax collectors are instructed: treat people fairly and honestly. Finally the soldiers get advice: never use your power to take advantage of others for your own gain.

For John, preparation means taking action, the right action. Proclaiming the good news of the one who comes is more than sharing words. And certainly more than a snazzy app on your iPhone.

Sheryl Johnson

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Thursday, December 22, 2011

Romans 13:11-14

Everyone pays attention to time. We take classes to learn to manage time, wear watches to measure time, purchase devices that promise to save time. We are time-driven and clock-conscious.

According to Paul, author of Romans, there is a Christian view of time. The Christian view of time is not about minutes; it is about moments and meaning.

The ancient Greeks had two words for "time"—chronos and kairos. Chronos is clock time, time measured or quantified. Kairos is qualitative time; time as significance or opportunity

The Bible is filled with kairos time. Luke, for example, does not record what the clock read when Zacchaeus invited Jesus into his home, but does describe the significance of the hours he spent in Jesus' company. We live inside time, but ordinary events have meaning beyond themselves, meaning that transcends the hour of the day or night they occur.

We need the reminder Paul gave to the Roman Christians—to be alert to the meaning of what is happening all around us. “Salvation,” he writes, “is nearer to us now than when we became believers.”

A Christian view of time also reminds us that the present is more important than the past or future. The present is the only time we have to practice our faith, to begin living as one who is redeemed.

Look for the meaning in your moments. Live as a redeemed person. Then when Christ is present, you will not miss his coming.

Mike Clingenpeel

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Friday, December 23, 2011

Romans 15:4-13

My favorite part of today's Scripture reading is verse 5 and 6, “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.”

The Christmas season is a time for all of us to remember what brings us together, and not what divides us. It is very easy to get caught up in the day-to-day functions of running a church and to lose sight of why we became a church in the first place. It is important to take time to remember why the church and our church family mean so much to each of us. We forget that Jesus Christ came to show us the way to love one another and to worship God the Father together.

The Christmas season is also a season of hope – we relive the hope of those in the first century awaiting the birth of Christ and we continue in the hope of the Holy Spirit who guides us until Christ comes again. Thankfully, we have the Scriptures to remind us and by their “steadfastness and encouragement” we too have hope.

Spend some time today contemplating the hope you have in Christ, our Lord and Savior, and in our church as you remember that we all come together to celebrate and glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sara Heisler

Saturday, December 24, 2011

Romans 16:25-27

There are folks who have made a living because so many of us love a good mystery. In every mystery there is a secret somewhere and we anxiously await its discovery at the end. Through the message of the prophets God hinted that there was a mystery that would someday be revealed. For hundreds of years faithful followers of God looked forward to the day that the Messiah would come. They hoped it would happen in their lifetime, and they anxiously awaited the revealing of this mystery.

The challenge for us is to capture the wonder of this revelation. After all, for us it is not a mystery – as the revelation took place before we are born. But if we put ourselves in the place of those living under the tyranny of the law, maybe we can get a glimpse of the wonder they experienced having finally discovered the long-kept secret, and understanding the mystery of salvation.

Does life sometimes seem a mystery to you? Do you have challenges and problems that need solving that seem to have no answer? At this time of Advent, let us stop and ponder this mystery that was promised by the prophets and fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah who was promised so long ago. This Messiah not only was the revelation of a secret and the conclusion of a mystery in ages past, but he can be the same solution to each of the struggles we face today.

Prayer: Lord, reveal the secret of your salvation to me in a new way this Advent season. Amen.

Martha Lou Green

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Sunday, December 25, 2011

Philippians 2: 5-11

We are usually shocked to discover that someone could ascend to fame from such humble beginnings as, for example, the poor, self-educated lawyer who became the 16th President of the United States. We are just as shocked when someone who has succeeded professionally decides to give it up for a path of lowly service far from home. The story of Albert Schweitzer comes to mind.

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul gives an important clue to understanding the incarnation and genuine humility. He says that being found in human form, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death. It is difficult to imagine Jesus ever being sick, having ordinary human problems or any doubts, but the incarnation process means that he was fully human, and that he did not immediately know his father's whole plan for his life.

He had to learn obedience everyday just like we do! As He discovered his father's perfect plan, he passed it on to his followers. He said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). So, the question is: how much have we humbled ourselves in our quest to know God intimately, and to be obedient

to his call? Genuine humility is not something we can strive for, but something we receive as we begin to lose our little self-advancing plans for the sake of the enormous world-redeeming plans of God.

Let us celebrate the incarnation today!

Rob and Bettina Sandford

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Monday, December 26, 2011

Micah 5:2-5

It is the day after Christmas and the observance of Advent has come to an end. It is easy in the hectic pace of the Christmas season to forget its meaning. In fact, the way our modern-American culture celebrates Christmas, with its emphasis on material gifts, can mask what the season is really all about.

Matthew 2:1 tells the story of the magi who came seeking salvation in the city of Jerusalem. It was the military capital of Herod, a city of wealth and power, as well as the key religious center. If you're looking for God's redeemer of Israel, where else would you look? But scribes, who were reading today's passage from Micah, redirected the magi to the small town of Bethlehem where they found not a king, but a baby; not a palace, but a stable; not a royal court, but peasant family who were soon to become refugees on the run.

If the Christ event means anything it is a celebration that God's love can be found in any human situation, even in our loneliness, anguish, pain, grief, and fear. Our values are turned upside down and we find salvation not in the most popular, most successful or grand most powerful, but in the weakest thing imaginable: a crying baby in a feed trough.

Matthew 2:12 closes the story by saying that the magi "departed to their own country by another way," that is, they did not return to Jerusalem. That should be true of us as well. If we truly encounter the Christ child during this Advent season, we cannot continue to walk in the same old way.

Prayer: Christ, be born in us anew, that we may walk in a new way of life. Amen.

Tom Graves

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Tuesday, December 27, 2011

Romans 1:1-7

Paul Harvey was an iconic radio personality. Broadcasting to a national audience from 1951 until his death in 2009, his Wall Street Journal obituary stated that his broadcasts brought in more than 10% of all of ABC radio's advertising revenue.

One of Harvey's signature creations was the "Rest of the Story" series. He designed his stories so that you wanted to know their ending, then he told you "the rest of the story."

With a flair for delivery and a command of words, he earned his place in radio history.

Our Scripture today is from another iconic man named Paul. This Paul also earned his place in history and had a command of words. In seven short verses he sums up the story of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection; the promise of grace and redemption; and the call for Christians to live an obedient life.

Each year, we are faced with the challenge of going through Advent. It is a challenge, because unlike the shepherds of old, we DO know the "rest of the story." We see the wonder of Christ's birth, but then transition immediately from Advent to the daily work of living our lives as one of "the called of Jesus Christ."

As we return to the reality of post-holiday life, we need to remember that while we don't have a radio show, we do tell a story each day in the way we live. Most people know the story of Christmas. Our hope should be that they will look at our lives, and want to know the rest of [God's] story.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to live our lives each day so that others can learn your story through us. Amen.

Susan Rucker

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Wednesday, December 28, 2011

### Psalm 148

One of my favorite Christmas carols is "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." I have always assumed that the carol was right, and the angels really did sing that night of Jesus' birth.

Not everyone agrees. In fact, on several Internet sites talking about this carol, there are comments posted noting that the Bible does not say that angels sing. An example comment follows:

According to the 16 bibles I looked through, the angels DID NOT "sing." Look it up in Mark 2:13. "...a multitude of angels SAYING..." What about "choirs of angels?" That's not in the Bible either.

In his book, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, Billy Graham takes on this very topic. He writes:

Some Bible students insist that angels do not sing. This seems inconceivable. Angels possess the ultimate capacity to offer praise, and their music from time immemorial has been the primary vehicle of praise to our all-glorious God.

Our text today reminds us that we should praise the Lord at all times – and it is not just the people here on earth that should offer praise. According to the Psalm, the angels and hosts, the sun and the moon, the heavens and the stars, and all of the earth are called on to praise God.

Singing is a natural way for us to offer praise. Christmas would be a much different season without music. We all need to think about how we are going to offer praise to God throughout the year, but I am glad that in this season we can raise our voices in song as a part of our worship. The songs of the season add meaning and joy to our celebrations. I like to think that the angels are singing along with us.

Susan Rucker

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Thursday, December 29, 2011

Luke 3:23-38

Today's passage is Luke's version of the genealogy of Jesus. Genealogies were important in Jewish culture. Exodus 6 sets the pattern by providing a genealogy of Moses. A biblical priest had to prove an unbroken family line all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother. The purpose of Luke's genealogy is to root the life of Jesus in the story of the people of Israel.

Matthew 1:1-17 also provides a genealogy of Jesus and it varies significantly from Luke's. First century genealogies tended to be very stylized and symbolic, so the differences should not distress us. There is one significant variation, however, that cannot be overlooked: Matthew ends Jesus' list of ancestors with Abraham, while Luke traces it all the way back to Adam.

What Luke is teaching us is that Jesus is certainly a true child of Israel and in continuity with his Jewish heritage, but Jesus is importantly related to all humankind, and Luke interprets this as part of God's original and never abandoned purpose.

That theme of the universal family of Jesus is crucial throughout Luke's Gospel as in the nativity story about the foreign magi who come to bring their gifts and worship the Christ child. That same emphasis is even more central to the second volume of Luke's work, the book of Acts, which comes to a close with the words: "Let it be known to you then that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles . . . with all boldness and without hindrance."

This Advent season tells us the good news of Christ who comes to each one of us. That gift of Christ also brings with it a responsibility to share Christ's love "with all boldness and without hindrance."

Tom Graves

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Friday, December 30, 2011

Malachi 3:1-4

Advent celebrates the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, the one we know as Jesus. God fulfilled his promise, as foretold in Scripture, but the manner in which he did this was unexpected. The fulfillment did not fulfill the expectations of the religious community that was longing for God's Promised One. The vast majority of Jesus' religious community

did not like, or accept, him as their Messiah. Truth be told, it is likely that we too find it difficult to like and accept Jesus on his terms.

Spend a few minutes reading Matthew 5:1-48 as you celebrate this Christmas season. How do Jesus' standards and expectations square with your values and lifestyle? If and when you feel the discontent, the restlessness, the urge to change, it's likely a sign you really do need to change. God's judgment falls heavy on those who, in fear or stubbornness, don't address their growth issues; God's grace overwhelms those who do.

The words of Malachi remind us that we end this Advent season in anticipation of the second coming of Christ. The Day of the Lord is coming just as surely as a child was born unto us.

Doug Anderson

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Saturday, December 31, 2011

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, God's word comes to John in the wilderness, far from the centers of Roman order and Jewish temple rites. John is alone in the waterless wild, a landscape evocative of human vulnerability. For the Jewish people the wilderness evokes other associations as well: the Exodus from Egypt, the Covenant with God at Sinai, and their desert journey to the land of promise. The wilderness is a place of danger and deliverance.

Luke frames John's encounter with the word of God in language conveying divine inspiration. God inspires John and John acts. He journeys to the Jordan, proclaiming his God-inspired vision of a new reality, one that will require relinquishing the old order and its ways. John exhorts his hearers to receive the gifts of repentance and forgiveness offered by God in order to prepare the people for the in-breaking way of the Lord.

John is the voice in the wilderness prefigured in the words of Isaiah written more than six hundred years earlier. Isaiah's images are cataclysmic: mountains are brought down; valleys are raised up. The way of the Lord is made through the wilderness over ground that had once been impassable.

The apostle Thomas asks: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus answers, "I am the way." The way of the Lord is the way of Jesus, the one who reveals God's love – God's self-giving, self-sacrificing life for, in, and through humanity.

The way of the risen Christ breaks into the order and disorder of our own time, reaching into all the concrete realities of day-to-day existence. It is the way we travel only by God's grace . . . the way that transforms our living in time and through eternity.

Carolyn Briggs

Sunday, January 1, 2012

II Peter 3: 8-15.

Our Scripture for today comes from II Peter, a letter written to warn second century Christians against accepting the leadership of some in the early church who professed to be Christians but were not following the teachings of Jesus. The writer especially challenges the claim of these false Christian leaders that Christ will not return to earth again as he promised. Instead the passage advises true Christians to wait for Christ's return doing their best to be "faultless in God's sight and to be at peace with him."

Advent has drawn to a close. I hope that again this year you experienced the return of Christ in your life through the celebration of his birth. Perhaps, for you Christmas passed without your feeling all of its wonder and fulfillment. Distractions like project deadlines, tough economic conditions, having to care for others, illness, and loss sometimes keep our lives so occupied that time does not permit room for the contemplation of God's gifts.

If this describes in part your Christmas, our Scripture for today may be a reminder of God's patience and how he tracks time in a different way. No matter what the calendar may say, there is still time, if you will find it, to experience God's grace and feel the peace which can be realized by the coming again into your life of his Son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Prayer: Our Father, help us to remember that you are always near and ready to share your love and grace through the presence of your Son, Jesus Christ, who comes to visit us again and again. Amen.

Dan Stevens