

Advent Daily Devotions 2020



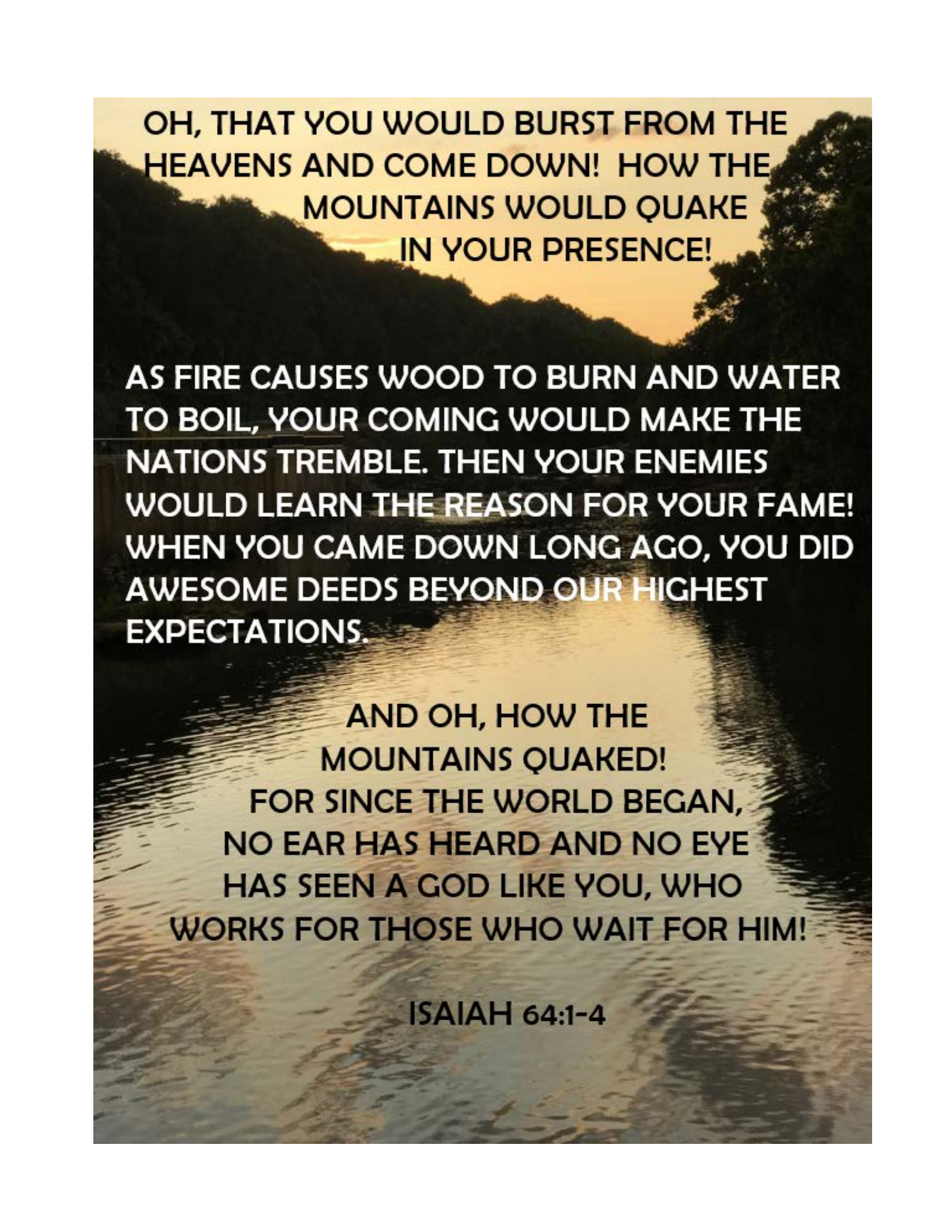
Hurry Up and Wait

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Cover Art by Ellie Bowling, Age 11 - Photographs by Liz Glycer and Tori Guest - Stamp Art by Gretchen Snyder



**OH, THAT YOU WOULD BURST FROM THE
HEAVENS AND COME DOWN! HOW THE
MOUNTAINS WOULD QUAKE
IN YOUR PRESENCE!**

**AS FIRE CAUSES WOOD TO BURN AND WATER
TO BOIL, YOUR COMING WOULD MAKE THE
NATIONS TREMBLE. THEN YOUR ENEMIES
WOULD LEARN THE REASON FOR YOUR FAME!
WHEN YOU CAME DOWN LONG AGO, YOU DID
AWESOME DEEDS BEYOND OUR HIGHEST
EXPECTATIONS.**

**AND OH, HOW THE
MOUNTAINS QUAKED!
FOR SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN,
NO EAR HAS HEARD AND NO EYE
HAS SEEN A GOD LIKE YOU, WHO
WORKS FOR THOSE WHO WAIT FOR HIM!**

ISAIAH 64:1-4

Hurry Up and Wait for HOPE

November 29, 2020

Hope in the Lord

Psalm 130

¹ *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

² *Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

³ *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?*

⁴ *But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.*

⁵ *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;*

⁶ *my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

⁷ *O Israel, hope in the LORD!*

*For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.*

⁸ *It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

We begin our Advent journey patiently waiting for hope.

I'll be honest with you. Lately, things have seemed a little hopeless to me. If we pay any sort of attention to the news or listen, with any measure of compassion, to the struggles of our family members and neighbors, and if we are still and attend to the cries within our own souls...we begin to feel the weight of this world. Sometimes, it all feels like too much, like nothing we do will ever be enough to remedy any of this suffering. What Advent is teaching me is that, thankfully, Christ has already done enough.

As I've prepared to explore Advent and journey through this season of waiting and watching with you, I've had a line from a song stuck in my head: "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices...."

Weary world, indeed!

Psalm 130 begins with a desperate cry for help. The psalmist calls out to God "out of the depths" of despair (v. 1). We do not know the exact predicament in which the psalmist found himself, but we do know that it was related to his sin: "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?" (v. 3). Implied within this statement is an understanding that our sins are so numerous and appalling that we deserve to die because of them.

But, that's not the end of the story. Verse 4 continues: "But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered." No matter how much we have sinned, we have hope because God is merciful. The Lord forgives and restores. Notice the unexpected result of our forgiveness: "that you may be revered." The Hebrew behind this translation reads literally, "that you might be feared." But this is not a fear that drives us away from God. Rather, it is an awestruck fear that drives us to our knees in humble worship. The more we truly grasp the impact of our sin, and the more we truly realize the wonder of God's forgiveness, the more we will be drawn to bow before the Lord in humble worship and live our whole lives in service to Christ.

In Psalm 130, the fact that God forgives and restores fuels the psalmist's hope: "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope" (v. 5). The psalm writer yearns for the day when God will forgive, not just his sin, but also the sin of Israel. On that day, God "will redeem Israel from all its iniquities" (v. 8). Thus, the psalmist urges Israel to "hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love" (v. 7).

The hope of Psalm 130 is an Advent kind of hope, and it is the kind our weary world needs right now. The psalmist is hoping, waiting, aching to experience God's forgiveness and redemption.

In the season of Advent, we remember how God's people once yearned for a Savior who would restore their nation. We also get in touch with our own need for forgiveness and renewal. Though our situation is quite different from that of the writer of Psalm 130, we also put our hope in the Lord and long for him. We, too, need Christ to put our lives back together. We, too, need to experience the new life he alone can give. Thus, Psalm 130 helps us prepare for a rich celebration of the birth of the Savior, who will indeed bring God's forgiveness and redemption to the world . . . including you and me.

Our holy God incarnate is the thrill of hope the world is waiting for, and Jesus Christ is the One we wait for once again. Whether you are brand new to the story of Jesus's birth, or you grew up lighting Advent wreaths and reciting Luke 2 from memory, my prayer is that the Scripture and devotional thoughts in this booklet would feel like home to you. From the first promise of the Messiah to the moment Jesus is visited by the Magi, I pray that you will sense the quiet, unmistakable thrill of hope that is yours because the Son of God became a baby.

Prayer: Oh Lord, we come to you in our weariness. Our world seems dark and broken, and we are tired of masks, and social distancing, and this pandemic. Help us, in our Advent waiting, to be reminded of the thrill of hope that Jesus Christ brings. Reawaken in us a spirit of joy for the work that Jesus Christ has already completed and the tasks Christ calls us to during this time. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- Rev. Adam C. Bowling

November 30, 2020

Hope Through God's Love

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Imagine for a moment that you are tasked to write a letter to people you have never met - a church you have never seen. This church has the challenges of every church: leadership disputes, arguments over practices, probably a quarrel about project funding. You are tasked to write to this church to help them get their act together. So, you know, no pressure.

Paul meets this challenge by, in 5:1-2, producing one of the best summaries of Christian faith ever composed. We have access to God's grace solely through the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as our Savior. In one moment, Paul answers every argument about what's critical in church:

"Should I wear a tie?" "Have faith."

"Pipe organs or guitars?" "Have faith."

"Grape juice or wine?" "Faith, Faith, and FAITH."

None of this is to say that the practices of this, or any, church are unimportant, because they help shape us into the people God wants us to be. The point is that to be a "Christian" is to have faith in Christ as your redeemer and the wellspring of God's grace. The Son of God overcame sin and death and offers the grace of this sacrificial act as a free gift. Paul talks about boasting of it, but don't confuse that with pride. It's boasting about the person who pulled you from the river - we boast about our Savior, not ourselves.

But Paul adds something alarming: boast in our sufferings. For the Romans, this was a shot straight across the bow. Exiles and executions, persecutions and purges - we are to boast of *these*? In this, Paul is calling out not only the quarreling Christians of Rome, but the quarreling Christians of northern Virginia and beyond: Is life difficult? Have we not been besieged by pandemics, politics, and problems for a year that feels more like a decade? What is there to boast about in that? In a word, hope.

Thanks to the grace and love of our Savior, we have persevered. Because we believe in a God who came down as a helpless infant and preached his way to one of the most horrible deaths imaginable, we know that there is nothing this world can throw at us that we cannot endure with God's help. We have endured sufferings, and thus gained character, and through character we have hope, and, if you read the news or social media at all, hope is exactly what our neighbors need right now.

This is the heroic life we are called to in Christ. Not a life free of difficulty, but a life where we need not despair. A life that forms us into the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the "blessing to all nations." A life of meeting the world in its anguish and despair, and, strong in our faith, saying "Peace be with you."

Prayer: Merciful and most loving God, thank you for your care in shaping us, in the practices of the church and in the sufferings of the world. As your love has been poured into our hearts, charge us to pour it out ourselves onto everyone we meet, safe in the knowledge that this cup will never run dry. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

- Richard Bennett

December 1, 2020

God of Hope

Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The word HOPE can be seen so many different ways; the HOPE in the child at bat to make the winning run; the HOPE as a 16-year old takes the DMV driving test; the HOPE in the couple waiting to find out if they will be parents or, the HOPE of a child waiting for Christmas Day to see that 'one' gift.

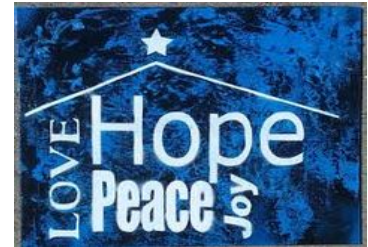
Years ago when I was a teenager, I knew a family whose adult child ran off (actually went AWOL from the Army) and I saw the parents age as they HOPED to hear word from their child or any law enforcement agencies with an update. The days turned into months and months into a year. Through it all I saw how the parents (especially the mom) knew that God would bring their child home. Then one day in the summer, a taxi pulled into the families' driveway and out steps the lost adult child. At that moment, watching the mom run to her child, I saw the JOY, LOVE and Peace, HOPE can bring.

This Christmas, as God's Children while waiting with HOPE to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, rest in knowing what wondrous gifts of Joy, Peace and Love you will receive.

Prayer: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Amen.

- Lora Nedimyer

December 2, 2020



Comfort in the Lord

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

God's plan is for our comfort. Let that sink in. God's divine plan is for our comfort. Isaiah received this message from God more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The people of Jerusalem were sinners, worshipping idols and turning from God. And they were about to be taken captive by the Babylonians. Yet, God wanted them to know their sins were forgiven and to comfort them. God has a plan/mission for all of us. We are to comfort one another. In a sermon by Pastor Ethan Cherney, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Pamona, CA, he says "We may face the consequences of sin in this life, but we will never be punished. God paid for our sins in Jesus. God gives us double for our sin. Before any of us were even born Jesus lived perfectly and died innocently and rose triumphantly for us. You cannot sin half as much as God is already willing to forgive you in Jesus. We have twice as much grace. Twice as much forgiveness. Isaiah's... God's message about his plan and mission for us is "Comfort!"

God even laid out a work plan to prepare the way of the LORD by straightening the highways, lowering the mountains, raising up the valleys, and making the rough places smooth so it would be easy for us all to witness the glory of the LORD! He has our plan/mission all laid out for us.

I don't know about you, but I am very comforted!! As we are awaiting the birth of that innocent baby Jesus, let us give thanks and share that comfort with our fellow human beings.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for always having our backs. Your love is truly incomprehensible. You are the One in control and help us to live our lives as though we believe it. Help us to comfort one another, especially in these long and trying days. Thank you for sending Jesus. In your innocent Son's Holy name, Amen.

- Marti Hall

December 3, 2020

Where Do You Find Hope?

Isaiah 40:9-11

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*
¹⁰ *See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*
¹¹ *He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Our world misunderstands the word hope. People often see hope as a desire for something to happen. When I think of the word hope, I always think of waking up on Christmas morning and hoping that Santa brought me exactly what I asked for. I can remember racing down the stairs ready to dive under the beautifully decorated tree, **hoping** that shiny new toy or that new boombox (those growing up in the 80's know what I mean with that term) was somewhere under there. I had hoped that those material items would instill new value of who I was as a person.

Stop and think. Can you imagine the excitement of something new being given value!? As humans, are we any different? When we think about Hope, what we are really wanting is new life and even new value. Hope instills purpose, value and meaning in a person.

Sometimes however, the opposite can happen and we as humans stop trying and stop looking for our purpose or our values. 2020 has been an emotional rollercoaster for most of us across the globe, and it is very easy to lose sight of what is our purpose and value. But the scriptures and our faith encourage us to find hope in every situation.

As we enter the season of Advent, where do you find Hope???

Prayer: O powerful God, your eternal Word took flesh on this earth when the Virgin Mary placed her life at the service of your plan. Please lift our hearts and minds in the watchful hope to hear the choirs of angels announce his glory and we ask that you open our hearts and minds to receive the Spirit as we prepare for his coming. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

- Amanda Peck

December 4, 2020

Hope for the World

Isaiah 11: 1-10

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

²*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

³*His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

⁴*but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

⁵*Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

⁶*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷*The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

⁸*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

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.*

¹⁰*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

Isaiah 11: 1-10 is a very timely Bible verse. We are currently living in challenging times and people need help navigating their daily lives. The year 2020 has turned the lives of people upside down and filled them with uncertainty. 2020 has greatly increased our anxiety. There has been a giant shift in our thoughts and feelings about the world and each other. These changes have created rifts in friendships, trouble at work, and arguments around family dinner tables. Activities and situations that were once familiar and routine have been greatly altered or eliminated. Stress levels are high and some people are sliding toward a breaking point.

Presently, the world is experiencing a COVID-19 Pandemic, which we are unable to fully control or cure. Some people are suffering from the challenges of social distancing and isolation.

In 2020, America is suffering from election anxiety which has pitted different groups against one another. Dialogue between some groups has become heated and hateful. Some people appear to have lost their way.

This year, we have witnessed racial injustice and racial unrest all around us. Often, we seem to be going backward instead of moving forward in the area of race relations.

Our present world is on the brink of a serious transition. The world, as we have always known it, is undoubtedly being transformed. Isaiah 11: 1-10 can help us better navigate our lives during these unstable and troubling times. Isaiah encourages us to nurture our development through prayer and studying the Bible. God has the power to

make things happen in our world and He can change our individual lives. A relationship with God gives humans direction, knowledge, and will builds strength in us. We need these gifts from our wise and helpful God in order to redeem our own present circumstances and to restore peace and harmony in the world.

Many years ago, a new, green shoot sprouted from Jesse's old and withered stump. The shoot represented the hope, direction, and strength Christ would bring to our world.

Humans who rise to power are not always the wisest leaders. Sometimes, they fail to point humanity in the right direction because they are on the wrong path themselves. The most powerful and the purest ruler in the world is Our God. We must read His Word in the Bible and follow His path; the Bible tells us how to live our lives. The more we read the Bible, the better we comprehend God's plan for us and the less we are tempted to follow misguided rulers and leaders. We must study the Word of our powerful God.

Also, we must remember to pray to God because prayer gives us hope. God has promised the world will be perfect and whole, one day, through Jesus Christ. Knowing God's promise is true helps man to remain hopeful and to endure current disappointments, frustrations, and challenges.

We need to put our trust in God, for unlike kings, queens, and politicians, God will never abandon us or betray us. We must place our faith in Him to heal our world and to bring us peace. God is in control and God is our salvation.

Prayer:

When I start to complain,

Help me to refrain;

Give me strength and direction instead.

So, right from the start,

I work from my heart;

And compassionate thoughts

Fill my head.

Help me lift others up,

Not tear people down;

Guide my spiritual path with Your Word.

Open my eyes

To how I may serve;

To ensure Your message is heard. Amen.

- Kathy McNeely

December 5, 2020

Hope Fulfilled

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

As a mom, I know the feeling when you have 20 days left to Christmas. You are trying to fit in all the traditions, all the shopping, all the decorating and everything else. We get so focused on all the details.

On this day, when you could be wrapping gifts or decorating the mantle, I want you to think about reaching out to someone. Someone who lives alone, someone who just lost a loved one or someone who may need a church home.

I had one of the most important conversations of my life six years ago, when someone asked me about the blanket drive at our church. I didn't know how much she needed to find a place within our church to belong. I didn't know how much we needed a faithful friend to love and support our family. I just knew it was the right time to reach out. Who will you reach out to today?

Prayer: Be the person who opens the door for someone today. Welcome them and share the good news of this holiday season. Show them the difference God has made in your life and have that important conversation with them. Amen.

- Ruth Washburg

Hurry Up and Wait for PEACE

December 6, 2020

Attitude of Gratitude

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

As I read this scripture, I thought of the Advent and Christmas season and how much gift-giving and receiving is so much a part of the celebration. Isn't it great when we find the perfect gift for a loved one and enjoy their pleasure in receiving it? Sometimes, it's even better when we are the one receiving the perfect gift.

We have received the perfect gift! God so loved the world that he gave his Son, Jesus, to die for our sins so that we could become the chosen, beloved children of God. We did not, cannot earn this gift. God gave us salvation through Jesus's death and resurrection purely out of love for us. All we have to do to receive this gift is to believe and declare that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. God is pleased when we accept his gift of love.

How, then, should we respond to this perfect gift? What should we give God? Of course, we give him thanks and praise, along with our monetary gifts to the church, but do we stop there? In this scripture passage, Paul suggests several ways that we can please God and show our gratitude to Jesus by sharing God's love with others. The compassion, kindness, and other attributes listed in the first sentence are some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; they are evidences of God's love within us. Using those gifts, we can then support one another by helping when others are in need, and practicing forgiveness even as we have been forgiven. We can strive to live in harmony with others as best we can by remembering that all others are loved by God.

We can remember to have an attitude of gratitude toward God and others. We can express our love, thanks and praise with music. Paul sums up his message by advising us to do everything in Jesus' name and God's love with thanksgiving.

Prayer: Lord God, Thank you for the precious gift of salvation through Jesus's death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we respond to your love for us with our love to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Sara Porter

December 7, 2020

My Peace I Give to You

John 14:25-27

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

We so often wish we could actually see and talk in person with Jesus. Although not physically present with us, our heavenly Father sent the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us. We must rely on faith and trust. In order to connect with the Holy Spirit, we need to reach out and believe that the spirit is always there for us. We just need to make contact.

In times when I feel afraid or I am troubled, I seek the Holy Spirit to bring me peace. This has been especially true during recent difficult times. Our country has been so divided and seemingly filled with hate. Until recently I had not realized the extent of the discord around me. I have always been a proud American and believed our country to be a world leader for the good. I continually pray for peace within our nation. At the same time, the COVID pandemic has certainly turned our world upside down. So many people have suffered in different ways. There have been too many deaths, illnesses, separations, lost jobs, closed businesses, and educational difficulties. I constantly pray for a peaceful end to the pandemic.

Sometimes I think it helps to find a quiet place and listen for the Holy Spirit to fill me with a calmness and peace. Spending time communicating with the Advocate of Jesus helps me focus on my blessings that supersede my troubles and fears. Likewise, looking at pictures of Baby Jesus in the nativity scene or shepherds surrounded by angels announcing His birth brings a stillness and peace. Even a quiet snow scene in the forest can remove from my mind trouble and fear. God through the Holy Spirit is always near if I just listen and seek peace.

Today, December 7, is a day that continues to live in infamy. I imagine the people living in our country during that time were filled with fear and were greatly troubled. In retrospect we now can see that God was with them and restored peace to our land. I know that God has a plan for our current situation and that the Holy Spirit will guide us through to a peaceful resolution.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Our prayers are for your peace to be with us. A peace that causes our hearts to be untroubled and unafraid knowing that you in the Holy Spirit are always with us. May we strive to communicate with you through the Holy Spirit and seek your everlasting peace. Amen.

- Charlotte Stultz

December 8, 2020

God of Peace

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Warren would have been 64 today. He went to his eternal resting place 7 years ago. A God-fearing man, not perfect, but a faithful servant of the Lord and a prominent patriarch to his family. His gentleness was known to everyone. I was blessed to know him for 50 years. He was a "sense" talker. "What are you doing?" "That was not a good idea but...." He was gentle. He was a follower of God. They had a special relationship. If I have learned anything from him, it was to walk in the footsteps of the Lord. Make your paths straight so to speak. Saying goodbye to Warren from this side of heaven was heart breaking, and something I still feel today but I still talk to him; I still see him. If you have lost someone special, you know what I mean. True I was 'assigned' this date, but I needed you to know how incredibly special this date happens to be to me. It is truly a God-wink. A God-wink is what some people would call a coincidence, an answered prayer, or simply an experience where you would say, "Wow, what are the odds of that!" It tells me God is here. HE is present. HE seeks a relationship with each of us. Enter *PRAYER*. We can build this relationship with God through our prayer life. Do not worry about anything, but in everything pray.

"The wonderful thing about praying is that you leave a world of not being able to do something and enter God's realm where everything is possible. He specializes in the impossible. Nothing is too great for His Almighty Power. Nothing is too small for His love." - Corrie Ten Boom

What is prayer?

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
that trembles in the chest.
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear;
The upward glancing of an eye

when none but God is near. - James Montgomery

⁸ Finally, beloved... what wonderful and warming words for my soul! This makes me feel incredibly special. ***If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*** The world offers us an overload of senseless things and distracting events. We battle the world's mindset by turning our focus to what is true, honorable, pure, pleasing, and worthy, thinking about these things. **⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.** Beloved, following in His footsteps is so worth the journey.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for offering me a way towards peace that surpasses understanding and guarding my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Thank you for giving me mentors that teach me to walk in the footsteps of the Lord. Thank you for the reminders that whatever comes my way, you are with me. Fix my eyes on You and help me think of those things that are worthy of Your Throne. Help me rediscover the extraordinary grace and love proclaimed in the birth of Your Son during this glorious season. Amen.

- Denise Parris

December 9, 2020

Peacemaker

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.



This scripture is one of the beatitudes (blessings) that lead into Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are the peacemakers:

"Blessedness is not about receiving things; it is about receiving God. To receive the blessing of God's presence is to rejoice in God, not because He does favors for us, but because He has shared His own sacred identity with us."

For they will be called children of God:

Following His statement, "Blessed are the peacemakers", Jesus gives us the promise saying, "for they will be called children of God". As peacemakers, we partake of the character of God; we are His children. As peacekeepers, we are called to *be like Jesus in the way we live*.

My mom was a peacemaker and knew that she was a child of God. I will never forget my mom's response (and her final prayer request) on the morning of April 12th, 2017 the day she went to the Lord. Our family was gathered around her bedside sharing memories, anxious and worried because we all knew the time had come. Her heart was failing and there was nothing else the doctors could do. My dad had spent the night at her side, holding her hand, dozing in and out, talking to her when she was awake. I remember we all circled her bed and prayed with her and minutes later the hospital chaplain arrived and said, "Mrs. Parris, is there anything thing I can pray for you?" My mom responded with two words, "World Peace". A little stunned the Chaplain replied, well - what about you? How can I pray for you?" My mom said, "Honey I am at Peace- you don't need to worry about me".

My mom was not only at peace because of the assurance of her faith – but was also a peace maker. She followed Jesus' example by offering grace and seeking ways to alleviate social injustice by serving those less fortunate. Jesus called not only his disciples but all His followers to be peacemakers. To be a peacekeeper we are must renounce evil, violence, and injustice. We are called to maintain fellowship with all people. My mom put the concern of her community and the world over herself. Today, more than anything, we need peace. Our nation and its people have faced disaster after disaster this year. We have experienced and witnessed everything from natural disasters, to the repercussions of the COVID 19 pandemic, the loss of friends and loved ones, loss of jobs, homelessness, riots, racial division, political division, and unrest.

God's Word says, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) and to "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19). "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18).

**Prayer: *Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hate, may I bring love;
Where offense, may I bring pardon;
May I bring union in place of discord. Amen.***

NOTE: Quote above by Bill McDowell, "Sermon on the Mount: The Pathway to Radical Living"

- Sam Parris

December 10, 2020

What the Future Holds

Revelation 21: 1-7

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

As we approach the Christmas season this year, many of us are filled with fear, sorrow and doubt. Usually this is the time of year for excitement and fun-filled activities. Now we have to limit our activities as well as contacts with others. We need our belief in God and heaven now more than ever before.

Imagine living during the Roman times, what faith those disciples had to have. At every turn, they faced death and persecution. As John describes his vision of heaven in Revelation 21, it brought comfort to all those Christians back then, who feared the future. It was written also for us.

John says: God will wipe away our tears; there will be no more death, sorrow or pain. That is why Christ came to earth and died on the cross for us.

As we read Revelation 21:4, we need to strengthen our faith and realize that Christmas is indeed a time of happiness, joy and renewal of faith. With that in mind, enjoy this Christmas season, thinking of what Christ has done for us and what the future holds.

Prayer: Kind heavenly Father, go with us during these difficult times of uncertainty. Help us to feel your presence and love. Guide us in all we say and do. May we live our lives as true Christians. In Christ's name we ask it. Amen.

– Marianna Gooding

December 11, 2020

He is Our Peace

Micah 5:1-5

*Now you are walled around with a wall;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel
upon the cheek.*

*² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.*

*And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;*

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

I miss singing together. I miss worshipping side by side. I long for singing with the congregation, hymns of glory and praise. I miss lifting my voice with my sister altos. I miss coordinating outfits with the other members of the praise team. I now sing in my kitchen in my pajamas with unlimited coffee available, and my husband by my side. The Lord is still praised and I must wait to see what the Lord has in store. We are in a waiting time. An in between time... waiting for Jesus.

Messiah Jesus is in every book of the Old Testament. He is written in every chapter. He is foreshadowed throughout. Just as all roads lead to Rome, all books in the old testament point to Jesus.

As I read this passage from Micah, I immediately thought of the song, my favorite praise song, "Jesus Messiah". Some of my fellow choir members know that this song is very special to me. We would sometimes talk about favorite songs, and even choosing funeral songs. This song "Jesus Messiah" would have to be at my funeral. Mark Levy also loved this song. When he ran the sound board, he would crank up the volume and we would sing with one voice. Recently, at Mark's funeral we sang that song. Sitting next to my alto sisters was such a joy. The presence of the Lord was there. It is not only a funeral song but a life song.

We may not be able to sing together for a while, but we know the words, and we know the song, and we know the promise of Jesus our Messiah.

Jesus Messiah

He became sin who knew no sin

...when she is in labor and bears a son

Name above all names

...in the majesty of His name of the Lord His God,

Blessed Redeemer, Emmanuel

..... they will live securely from His greatness

The rescue for sinners, the ransom from heaven

...and He will be our peace and march through our fortress when the Assyrians invade our lands

Prayer: All our hope is in You. All Glory to you, Lord... the Light of the World! Lord Jesus we celebrate the season of Advent. We fully realize the hope you bring to our World. Forgive us for losing sight of that Light. We give all Glory to you, Lord. Jesus Messiah.

- Cathy Albrecht

December 12, 2020

True Peace

John 16:33

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!

In these turbulent pandemic times, it would seem we are all desperately searching for a sense of peace. Yet, in all honesty, it is often hard to find. It feels as though, with the current state of our world, we are experiencing more persecution than peace. That persecution might be from all that is actually happening, or it might be our minds striving to grapple with all the uncertainties we face. I must confess to struggling to find God's peace amidst all this chaos. Yet, as I cast my mind back to earlier times in my life, I know for sure that God is always with me. When I feel His peace, it is truly palpable!

Back in 2005, our son, Mike, was newly married and had to undergo pretty serious jaw surgery. I was finding myself particularly anxious about this, as I knew he would have to have his jaw wired shut for some time, and somehow this seemed a bit overwhelming. I was truly persecuting myself with all kinds of imagined horrors. On the night before Mike's surgery, Peter and I prayed together, and without a doubt, I truly felt the peace that passes all understanding. I slept without any sense of doom and awoke ready to face whatever the day held. We went to the hospital to await Mike's return to the recovery room after his surgery. Even then, the peace stayed with me and Mike didn't undergo any of the horrors I had imagined. Instead, God had provided a means to turn persecution into ultimate peace and for that I am forever grateful.

We are not always promised certainty in the outcome of difficult situations, but what we are assured of is that whatever uncertainties we face, we are never alone because God is always our sure and constant companion.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, as we are living in days of uncertainty and peace is hard to find, help us to trust you and come to you in our brokenness, knowing that you are the true source of peace in this world. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

- Elizabeth Glyer

Hurry Up and Wait for JOY

December 13, 2020

Lasting Joy

Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

³*You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴*For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵*For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named*

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷*His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

These words of scripture always bring to mind pieces of Christmas songs that I have learned over the years, and I enjoy singing them in my head as I read the words. But doing anything in the dark can be very frightening, frustrating, or even discouraging, so it is no surprise to me that at the sight of the great light, the people rejoice. The passage tells us that they rejoice because of relief from their burdens, because of justice against their oppressors, because of victory over their enemies. All this happens because of the gift of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. This prophecy came true two thousand years ago, and it continues to apply in our lives today. In fact, with everything going on in our world today, we spend some time of our own walking in darkness when we mourn the loss of a person, a job, a relationship, good health, etc., or as we carry physical, emotional and or psychological wounds in our lives. Jesus does not want us to crumple in despair and depression. Instead He came so we could find joy in spite of it all. This joy is not just the instant jubilation feeling we have after getting the things we want or long for, but it is also what Kay Warren defines as "the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in all things". When we decide to praise God in all things, over time we can improve our state of mind and our perspective on our own circumstances. In fact, we begin to shift our focus from our seemingly overwhelming

struggles to Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, who is far greater and bigger than all the struggles in the world combined.

Prayer: Wonderful counselor, we too are walking in a darkness of some form. Please let us see your great light, that we may praise you in all things, knowing that in the end all will be well. May we hurry up and wait...for joy, the lasting joy that you alone can bring to the world. Teach us oh Lord, to share that joy with others around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- Morelle Fokwa

December 14, 2020

Great Joy is Coming!

Isaiah 35

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

*Say to those who are a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!*

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you."

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

*the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;*

*the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

*No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;*

*they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,

***and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.***

This has been a difficult year for many of us. Our lives have been disrupted, our plans have been thwarted, and many have suffered the loss of loved ones. We have been isolated, inconvenienced and frightened. We are ready for this year to be over!

The people Isaiah addressed nearly 3000 years ago also lived in stressful times. King Uzziah of Judah had died, and the Assyrians were threatening their sovereignty. They were frightened and demoralized. They needed reassurance. They needed hope.

Isaiah's words met these needs. He reassured the people that God had not forsaken them. He encouraged them with the promise that God would save them. He exhorted them to be strong: the God who created the Earth and all its inhabitants would redeem His chosen people and the Earth itself would bear witness to His glory. A time of great joy was coming!

As we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of our Savior's birth, we must remember Isaiah's words. We must remember that we are not alone. Even in these days of social isolation, we are never alone: the great God of the universe is with us always. He will never forsake us.

Let us join with one another and with the rest of creation, trembling with expectation: great joy is coming!

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for the words of your prophet, Isaiah. Let them encourage us as they encouraged your people when they were first written, so many years ago. Help us to trust in your promises and to remember: great joy is coming! Amen.

- Linda Wolstenholme

December 15, 2020

Trusting God's Promises

Isaiah 49.8-13

Thus says the Lord:

***In a time of favor I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
⁹ saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
¹¹ And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.***

¹² ***Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.***

¹³ ***Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!***

***For the Lord has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.***

These verses were written about 540 years before Christ was born, during a time when many of God's people were in captivity in Babylon. During their years of captivity, they had begun to lose hope, asking themselves if God still cared about them. They were discouraged and depressed, believing that their imprisonment in Babylon was permanent, feeling that they were a people sitting in darkness. You might know that feeling!

The prophecies contained in Isaiah, however, foretell a different outcome. The heritage of God's people will not be imprisonment but freedom, not darkness but light, not hunger and thirst but food and water that come from God's hand.

It is important to understand that these words are not addressed directly to God's people. Rather, (see verse 8) God is speaking to a person we have come to know as "The Suffering Servant". There are four "songs" about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, which you are encouraged to read: 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13 - 53.12. Some of the language will sound familiar -- you have heard some of them if you have listened to George Friderich Handel's "Messiah". In some of the most beautiful words ever put to pen (or papyrus!), the prophet foretells the work of the Suffering Servant.

It is the Servant who has been given by God as a covenant to the people, and it is the Servant who will lead God's people out of Babylon. The people will return to their homeland along a road made smooth by God's power: mountains will be laid low and turned into roads, wind and sun will not harass them, and there will be plenty of water to refresh them along the journey.

We Christians believe that Jesus is the Suffering Servant who leads God's people out of imprisonment and into the light of God's eternal presence. In this life, as we travel along that road, our way is made smooth by the power of God, who gives us food and water in the form of the fellowship of God's people, the sacraments of baptism and communion, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the end of our journey is the holy city of Jerusalem, the city of David, the place where we will live eternally with God and God's people. Such is the promise contained in these verses, a promise fulfilled in two ways: first, as God's people left Babylon and return to Palestine, and second, as God's people leave the desolation of sin and journey along the way to the place prepared for us by God from the beginning of time.

Prayer: Gracious God, who brought the Israelites out of captivity in Babylon, free us during this Advent season to leave our old ways behind, to depart from those places that cause us to feel alone or discouraged. May we hear your words of hope, trust your promises and follow the path prepared for us by your Servant, Christ our Lord, in whose name we offer this prayer. Amen.

- Larry Greenslit

December 16, 2020

The Trees of the Forest Sing for Joy

Psalm 96

- ¹ *O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.*
- ² *Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.*
- ³ *Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.*
- ⁴ *For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.*
- ⁵ *For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.*
- ⁶ *Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*
- ⁷ *Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- ⁸ *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.*
- ⁹ *Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.*
- ¹⁰ *Say among the nations, "The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity."*
- ¹¹ *Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*
- ¹² *let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy*
- ¹³ *before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.*

My family owned a Christmas tree farm in Pennsylvania in a gorgeous location which made me always feel close to God when we were hiking there or working in the fields. The beauty of God's creation was all around us. Every summer we would trim the Christmas trees to remove errant branches or odd growths to help shape the tree to make it pleasing to the eventual buyer. We would have to decide how to trim it to help its future growth. Occasionally, a tree would be so peculiarly shaped, it seemed to have no future as a Christmas tree inside of a home. I would sometimes remark, "This tree might not be worth trimming. I think it wants to go back to the forest." My husband would encourage me to trim it to give it a chance to grow in a better pattern. I usually would and, low and behold, the misshapen tree grew into a beautiful Christmas tree, sometimes in just a few months, but sometimes it took a few years. The nip and tuck, along with God's beautiful rain and sunshine made a huge difference that was amazing to watch. This reminds me of people. Some folks have errant branches (problems or addictions) of their own that can make it a challenge to be around them. At those times, being a friend and sharing God's love may be the encouragement that the person needs to hold on and to give God time to work His miracles in their lives.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for creating the world and all the living things in it. Please encourage us to share Your love with everyone. Remind us that we are not meant to judge others. In Your name we pray, Amen.

- Gail Cobb

December 17, 2020

Embracing Change

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Have you ever wondered why angels are always beginning conversations with mortals by saying something to the effect of "Fear Not" or "Do not be afraid"? To Zachariah, the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." To Mary, the angel Gabriel said "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God". To the shepherds in the fields, the angel said, "Do not be afraid; for bringing you good news of great joy". What is it about angels that strikes the hearts of people, other than the sudden appearance of a super-being? Some say that angels must be fearsome looking creatures. Others say because God sends angels when He needs something or someone. If an angel shows up on your doorstep, look out! Your town may soon be destroyed and your spouse turned to salt. Some, all, or none of this may be true but the real reason people fear angels is because they represent change. When an angel shows up, you can count on your life changing.



with
afraid"?
has been
John." To
favor with
see—I am
fear into
natural
say it's
smitten.
destroyed
I believe

In my work as a project manager, "change" is the one word that strikes fear into customers, management, and employees alike. No one likes change. People instantly fear it. Change can represent a loss of power, uncertainty about the future, unknown consequences, and it's flat-out different from how we've always done things. (Does that sound familiar?) The fear of change is why Pastor Adam always warns us to put on our Presbyterian seatbelts before he lets us know that a change is coming. Change creates so much concern in my work that we employ people called Change Managers that specialize in the discipline of presenting, instituting, and managing the consequences of change. No one in my office would ever question why Mary would be afraid.

The angel Gabriel's message that Mary had been chosen to give birth to Jesus, the son of God, represented enormous change, not just for Mary and Joseph but for the whole world. Until that time, people saw God as the creator, the lawgiver, the smiter of the wicked, the provider of manna, our help in times of trouble, and our judge, jury, and condemner. But from this day forth, God would also be one of us. Immanuel! He would enter into this world in the guise of a little baby, born of a woman, breathing air, and eating food. God would feel our pain; he would experience the loss of a loved one; he would be the object of hate; he would be tempted to sin; and he would cry out to the Father for relief from his suffering. In essence, God would know what it is like to be me.

It is in our nature to resist change. If you don't believe me, you should be in the room when I tell my employees that we are changing the insurance or 401K plans. Mary did not fully understand what the angel was telling her, how it would happen, or what the consequences would be for her or humankind. What she did understand was the assurance of the angel that she need not fear the change; that God understood the trials and struggles that she

would face and would be with her each step of the way. And most of all, she knew she could place her trust in the God who makes all things possible.

Prayer: *Father, give me the strength, courage, and trust to accept your will in my life. Help me not to fear your leadings and plans for my life. Help me to know that my life, my circumstances, my world, and my soul get better when I embrace the change you offer through the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

- Martin Andrews

December 18, 2020

Leap with Joy!

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

The year 2020 has been a whole lot of waiting, separation, isolation, hope, disappointment, fear, and occasionally joy. Events that used to involve gatherings of people – weddings, funerals, baby showers, wedding showers, birthday parties, graduations, and even church – now frequently take place virtually. Upon reading this scripture for the first time, my first thought was, "WHAT? MARY JUST WALKED INTO THEIR HOUSE UNANNOUNCED? WAS SHE EVEN WEARING A MASK?" The idea of having a visitor without planning for COVID-19 mitigation seems like such an unfamiliar concept to me now. Upon second reading of this scripture, I noticed the stark contrast between the two expectant mothers: Mary, a very young virgin, and Elizabeth, a very old woman who never expected to have a child. The third thing I noticed is that even though John the Baptist and Jesus have never officially met yet, this "meeting" forms such an impression and a bond between the two of them. I have a niece – my brother's baby – who was born in July. Due to COVID, I have only met her online and through pictures. Reading this scripture made me smile as I picture leaping for joy when I get to meet her in person for the first time. Lastly, I notice how once Mary and Elizabeth are together and are filled with the Holy Spirit, they praise God together for what they know, for what they don't know, and for what is to come. What is this Christmas going to look like for us? I'm not sure. Am I going to be able to see my family members in person, or will we have to celebrate on Zoom? I'm not sure. What I am certain about is that no matter how we celebrate Christmas with our loved ones, the presence of the Holy Spirit will be with us, connecting us all.

Prayer: *Dear God, Among many things, we patiently await the birth of your Son. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we may leap with joy in your presence. We ask these and all other blessings in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

- Becca Anderson

December 19, 2020

Song of Mary

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him*

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;*

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things,*

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,*

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) about three months and then returned to her home.*

This scripture from the gospel of Luke is often called the “Song of Mary”, or the “Magnificat”. These almost exact words have been a very significant song for over 1500 years in some churches! Mary’s words show us the incredibly surprising plans God has set in store for Jesus’s birth unto the world.

First of all, God selected Mary to bring Jesus to the world. God chose a poor, young, “insignificant” peasant girl to be Jesus’s mother, when he could have chosen a rich, “important”, queen. Because of this, Mary begins to rejoice and praise God for giving her the chance to do this extremely special and exciting job. Mary carries on for several verses, as she starts to sing jubilantly about God’s plans to bring down the rich who oppressed people and raise up the poor people who were oppressed. Mary rejoices for all that has happened to her, and shows us that we should rejoice for those gifts God has given to us in our lives.

Mary really does rejoice exuberantly when she finds out the great news. Rather than a person already viewed by other people as “important”, she was chosen to mother and nurture God’s child, Jesus Christ. She lets everyone know the great news and shares her gratitude and happiness with all. Even when people don’t believe her, she still believes and rejoices loudly. This Christmas, I would like you to ask yourself: Have you ever been unexpectedly chosen for something? If so, did you rejoice and share your gratitude, or keep it to yourself? As we are at home this Christmas, I would like you to look around and see who makes you rejoice greatly and exuberantly and thank God for them with all your heart.

Prayer: Dear gracious and loving God, while we stay at home during this season of Advent eagerly awaiting the birth of Jesus Christ, please help us to look around and see those throughout our lives for whom we are thankful. Help us rejoice over them, and thank you for them. Please help us be joyful for those people around us and live our lives through your kingdom each day. Amen.

– Parker Bowling, Age 13

Hurry Up and Wait for LOVE

December 20, 2020

The Greatest of These is Love

I Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Not many could recite Corinthians 13: 1-13 by memory, but countless could tell you the last six words...***“the greatest of these is love.”***

In Matthew 22: 37-39, Jesus answers the Pharisees question about what is the most important law by saying “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...” and adds to it by saying “...Love your neighbor as yourself.” The first Fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22 is **LOVE**. Love your enemies? Love those whose views differ from yours? Love the person who jumped ahead of you in line or cut you off on the highway? That’s not always easy!

The number of times “Love” appears in different Bible translations varies, but it’s a lot! We picked 1 John 4:11 for our license plate to serve as a constant reminder of God’s love and expectation for us! It says “Dear Friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

These verses in Corinthians Chapter 13 have been read at many, many weddings. Our daughter and son-in-law wanted both sets of parents to stand together and read these words at their wedding. The words are powerful and a challenge to us all. Although verses 4 - 8 establish a strong foundation for any marriage, they serve as a challenge to all throughout our community and globally. We show a different kind of love to others when we become more like Christ.

From our NIV Bible notes on this passage, we read “*Faith* is the foundation and content of God’s message; *Hope* is the attitude and focus; and *Love* is the action. When faith and hope are in line, you are free to love completely because you understand how God loves.”

We have been so encouraged by the multiple ways love (“the action”) is being shared in and through our community of faith, especially during these past months of COVID 19. Our church has stepped up, faced these challenges and modified our ministries. The ministries of our church are truly impacting lives... and love is at the center of these actions. Some examples include: virtual worship and virtual Bible studies; prayer groups; Spread

the Bread, Warmth and Love; expanded mission and outreach programs to include increased financial support for ACTS; compassion shown when loved ones have passed; ...the list goes on and on. If everyone did their part in extending love to others, how might this make changes in our broken world?
Christ came to us out of love.

As we continue through this Advent season and celebrate Jesus' birth, we strive to live our lives as He taught...
"the greatest of these is love."

Prayer: Lord, we thank you that the whole meaning of Christmas can be explained in one little four letter word, LOVE. Thank you for loving us so much that you sent us the greatest gift of all. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- Bruce and Betsy Gilbert

December 21, 2020

Come into the Light

John 3:16-21

For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.¹⁸ Those who believe in Him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Last year, no one had to persuade me to write an Advent devotional. Mark was gone, and I needed to channel my emotions and unrelenting need to ask everyone: "Are you ready for Jesus to come?" This year, I tried to hide under a rock and didn't want to write a devotional but got called ... I'd like to say that it was a 'soft whisper inside my head on a cold stormy night' but alas it was a phone call. Anyway, not one scripture beckoned, but my sweet daughter-in-law Autumn and I kept seeing *John 3:16*. My goodness, why was it still unclaimed? And what could possibly be said that has not been said by so many others? Nonetheless, I hoped this might be a special activity for Autumn and me.

I confess it would have been easier just to talk about *John 3:16* – but *verses 17-21* were part of the assignment. *John 3:16* is nestled into an important conversation that Jesus has with Nicodemus (who is sometimes called 'the night visitor'). And before this verse, another amazing text needs our attention. In *John 3:14-15*, Jesus tells us that "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him."

If ever there were doubts about who gets to heaven and how – Jesus erases them all in John's gospel. He, the Son of Man, must be lifted up (*Lift High the Cross!*) and those who believe He is who He says He is, receives the gift of eternal life that He offers to ALL who accept it from Him. *Come into the Light*. Jesus called Himself the *Light of the World* (*John 8:12*). Without Him – we indeed *walk in darkness*. It is scary to *come into the Light*. We come with our baggage, our sins, our doubts. Satan tells us, it's a bad idea -- we'll be sorry – no way can we ever find forgiveness for *all our sins*. But he's the father of lies (*John 8:44*). We can't listen to him. *We must come into the Light ... to the Light of World – Jesus*.

Nicodemus knew Jesus was special and said: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God (*John 3:2*)". But then Jesus started talking about being 'born again' (*John 3:3*) and Nicodemus could not wrap his head around the idea ... *What-on-earth-do-you-mean, Jesus?* Maybe Paul can help us. *2 Corinthians 5:17* tells

us: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." That's what happens to you and me when Jesus comes into our lives! Will you accept His invitation and Come into the Light?

Prayer: Father, We seek Your wisdom and guidance during these tumultuous times. Let us not be fooled by the liar and deceiver who wants to draw us into his false light. Give us Your strength to turn our eyes away from every outlet of distraction and keep us in Your word. We pray for the lost who have not yet found You and for our leaders that You will grant them Your grace, courage, and wisdom. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

– Autumn and Karen Elliott

December 22, 2020

A Sign of Hope

Isaiah 7:13 – 14

Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

When Ahaz became king of Judah, he was probably in his early twenties. Not many years later, King Ahaz was facing defeat and almost certain death when Syria joined forces with Israel to attack the southern kingdom of Judah in 731BC. In this desperate situation, Isaiah was given a sign from God that he had not abandoned Judah. Isaiah went to King Ahaz with encouraging news from God. God told Isaiah to let Ahaz know, "It will not happen. They will not stand. Ask for a sign to know that God is with you to deliver you." Despite this message, Ahaz decides to move forward with his plan to seek help in an alliance with Assyria to the north, rather than trusting in God for help and deliverance.

Sometimes I have this realization that, just like King Ahaz did, I am putting a huge amount of trust in myself. I am counting on my abilities, my charm, my intellect, and my resources to help me get through certain situations instead of trusting God. (I'm not saying I have an overabundance of any of these things, which makes it that much sadder that they're what I'm relying on.) I spend a lot of time worrying and trying to figure out how to handle certain circumstances and totally discount what God may have to say about the matter.

In chapter seven of Isaiah, King Ahaz is terrified that he and his people will be overtaken. He is desperately hoping to find a way to save his kingdom, and he is in a season of waiting to find out what will happen. If we were to be honest with ourselves, I guarantee that each of us could tell a story about something we are either currently waiting on or hoping will happen in our lives.

2020 has turned out to be wildly different from what we expected, and it would be easy to be discouraged this Advent season. We are in a season of hoping and waiting - there is an air of expectancy as people hope and wait for the coronavirus pandemic to end. The good news for us, and for all people this Advent season, is that - whether we've asked for it or not - God has given us a sign. The sign of Immanuel is a sign for us. It is a sign of hope and promise, of grace and mercy, for Jesus has come to be with us, and he brings forgiveness, life, and salvation. God is with us no matter our circumstances, and there is no greater joy than the joy to be found in being loved by God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for being present in our lives, regardless of our circumstances. Help us to seek you and follow your plans, rather than relying on our own abilities. Help us to approach the waiting periods in our lives with joyful anticipation of the fulfillment of your promises. Amen.

- Erin Bowling

December 23, 2020

No Room

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Imagine the preparations we do when expecting a newborn into the family? How we go from store to store figuring what to buy for the baby. Beloved in the Lord, it's alarming. But here is Mary who is about to have her firstborn child, "the Savior of the world", and has nothing prepared for Him. They, like everyone else in that area had been ordered to go to Bethlehem to pay their taxes. They had no choice but to go. So, she and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem.

The scripture says, while they were in Jerusalem, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Consider how blessed we are to have a doctor deliver our children. Think of the care, the hospitality anything you can name... but yet we still complain. As children of God let's stop complaining and be grateful for who we are and what we have.

Mary didn't have the opportunity to be given the care we receive today, 'NO ROOM' but she didn't complain because she understood the Joy Christ brought into the world. May the birth of Christ bring us peace, love and joy that we have never seen before. It might hard especially during this difficult time. Let's keep trusting, just like Mary who had no room for herself and the baby Jesus. Smile and remember how we feel, when there's a newborn in the family, when everything changes. May those memories accompany us throughout our lives and let's just keep being happy and trusting that Christ's birth brings joy and peace.

Prayer: Lord, may your spirit abide in us and may the birth of your son Jesus Christ bring us Joy and happiness. We ask all this through your only son, our redeemer. Amen.

- Therese Same

December 24, 2020

The Wonder of God

Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

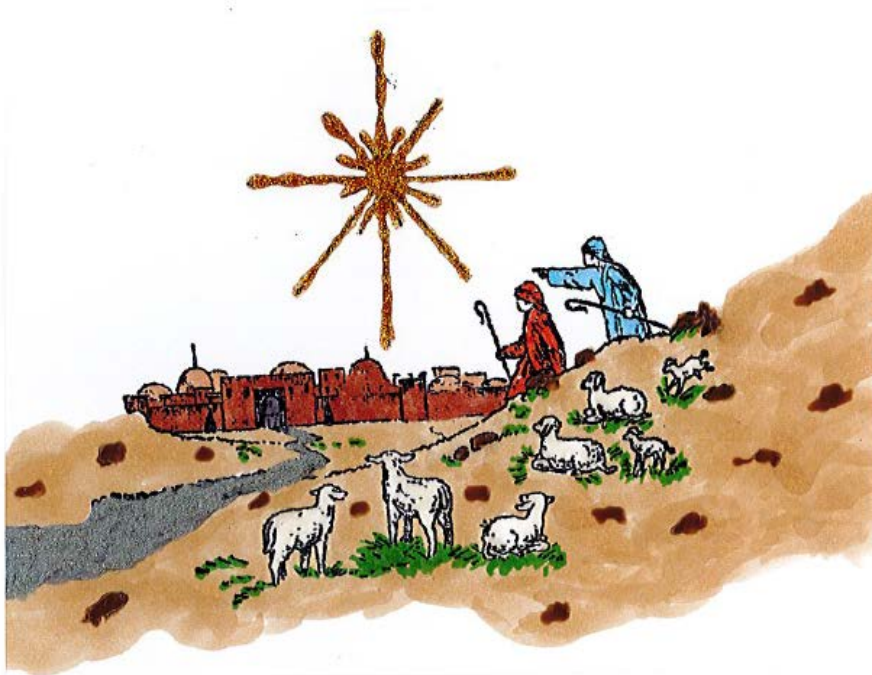
Initially the shepherds were afraid due to the sound of angelic voices and the piercing light. However, as the expressions of worship and exclamations from the angels settled into their hearts, they became alert to a divine presence and "hurried to the village." God in all His glory became the center of their world!

As a member of 4-H in Illinois, my brother and I cared for lambs that we would show at the fairgrounds each year. After our time in the show ring, the lambs would immediately be sold and our hearts became unsettled! We had difficulty understanding these moments in our lives as we had cared for the lambs from birth. Like the shepherds, Mary knew that God was weaving together what couldn't yet be understood.

May we seek to find the same wonder that the shepherds felt that quiet night in Bethlehem, as they returned to their flocks!

Prayer: God, grant us your wonder, as we praise You for Your glorious gift of Jesus. Amen.

- Gretchen Snyder



December 25, 2020

Christmas Day!



John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Where are the angels, heavenly host, shepherds, sheep, cattle, camels, wise men, the star, Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph, and the babe asleep in the hay? It is Christmas day; we want that and more. But it is not about us. This is Jesus' day and we are getting a theology lesson from the beloved disciple.

John means us to see his gospel as part of the great story arc of the Bible, which starts with Adam and Eve being cast out of Eden at the end of the creation story and ends with the reconciliation of Heaven and Earth in Revelation 21. We are clearly meant to think about Genesis, and the creation story as the gospel begins with "In the beginning", but then he made a sharp right turn and equates "the Word" (a name that John gives Jesus) with God. Jesus is not any word but the very Word of God, the thoughts of God, the mind of God, made available to us this day. Then to cement the tie to Genesis we get light and darkness and the assertion that Jesus brings us "life, and the life was the light of all people".

Jesus brings three gifts for us today, the Word, Life, and Light. What are we to do with them as we sit here on earth barred from entering the garden?

Verse 10 makes it clear why we were cast out of Eden, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." How can we fix this? In this context, "know" is not the glancing

acquaintance kind, but rather the more intimate one where there is an alignment of spirit. But even if we come to know God, what is to be done about our neighbor, who makes up the rest of the world? Through the grace of Jesus, we are given the power to become children of God. Grace grants us access to the kingdom, not by our earthly birth or our earthly works, but by divine inheritance.

Finally, we are told that God will be known to us through the Son. Thus, in just eighteen verses, John takes us from creation to full reconciliation.

So our role is clear. We are to announce that Jesus, the Light for all people, was made flesh today. His abundant grace is available to all, who will but receive him and believe in his name. The Father will be known to us through the Son.

Prayer: Lord, we give thanks for the birth of your Son. Give us the strength to do our part to proclaim the coming of your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. - Gary Smith

December 26, 2020

Wise Men Still Seek Him

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I remember as a child looking forward to all of the animated Christmas specials that would air on tv. Of course, this was before the time of video tape, DVR, and streaming, so you had to plan carefully to catch each show when it aired on network tv, or you would have to wait a whole year to see it again. While I loved **Frosty the Snowman**, **Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer**, and **Santa Claus Is Coming to Town**, it was always **A Charlie Brown Christmas** that caught my heart and would cause a lump in my throat. Part of what appealed to me was Charlie Brown's protest against the commercialism of Christmas, and this was close to 40 years ago when Christmas did not start after Halloween like it seems to today. After working in a Christmas Tree lot for 8 years with my youngest son and his Boy Scout Troop, I also have a soft spot in my heart for any tiny or misshapen trees that were often overlooked

until all the other trees were sold. I was always happy when these “Charlie Brown” trees were taken home by a family thankful to just have a tree. But what really always choked me up was Linus quoting the Gospel of Luke to the Peanut gang and for the viewers at home. He tells of the shepherds who were visited by an angel and told not to be afraid because they bring good news of great joy for all people because a Savior was born, and he is Christ the Lord. “That,” he tells Charlie Brown, “is what Christmas is all about.” As the kids say today, it gave me “all the feels.”



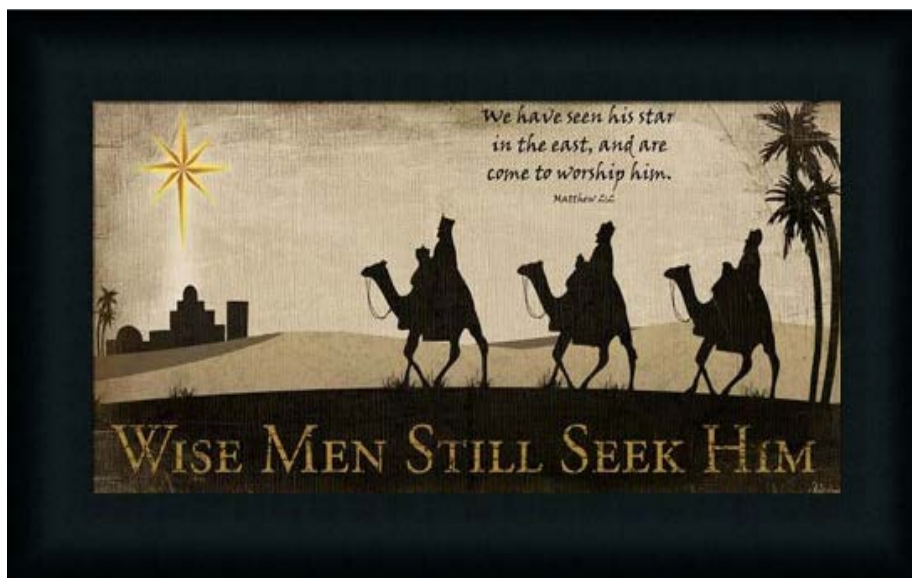
The Gospel of Matthew does not tell the story about Jesus’s birth from the point of view of the lowly shepherds, but from the point of view of the worldly wise men. Instead of joy, there is a sense of foreboding as the devious King Herod tells the wise men in verse 8, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” The wise men did follow the star in the east which led them to the Christ child. It is at that time that they are filled with joy and wonder, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Of course, they brought gifts, and I remember being taught as a teen that these gifts represented the truth about this child’s identity and what he would accomplish. *My Life Application Study Bible* reminds me, “Gold was a gift for a king; incense, a gift for a deity; myrrh, a spice for a person who was going to die.” Thankfully, the wise men were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, so they took another route home.

These men were from the east and said to be from different lands, and so they represent the world bowing before Jesus. This shows that the Messiah is meant for all people, not just the Jews. They experienced an epiphany, a sudden insight or intuitive understanding, of what God has done and will do. That is why many Christians celebrate Epiphany, or 3 Kings Day, on January 6th. How ironic that these outsiders from faraway lands recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but the religious leaders closest to Jesus did not. God chooses to reveal himself to “others” so in God’s kingdom there are no outsiders or discrimination.

I have a friend who has a plaque in her house that says “Wise Men Still Seek Him.” It is not enough for us to find the babe in the manger and leave him there. This child grows up and does amazing things. He dies for our sins, then is raised to sit beside his Father, and now lives in our hearts. Do you still see him as a babe in the manger, or do you see him as Lord of your life? What star are you called to follow? What gifts of time and talent are you willing to offer Him? How can you show God’s love to the “others” in your life?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, life is sometimes full of questions, seeking and searching. I pray that I may always seek the truth and that I might recognize it when You put it in my path. Send me out to be a bearer of your love to all whom I encounter. Amen.

- Debbie Boisvert



December 27, 2020

Grow Each Day

2 Corinthians 12:10

“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

I feel like I have been on a journey of faith from the time of my birth, continuing to the present, and reaching into the future. I was born of a Jewish mother and a Protestant father, neither which practiced their faiths. I was not raised with any religion. As children, my brother, sister, and I, celebrated Christmas with a tree and Santa Claus, and when I was adept enough on the piano, Christmas carols. There was no Spiritual meaning though I felt *something* with my music. In my teens, I wanted to know Jesus and asked for a Bible, so my mother bought me a copy of the Old Testament.

Later, as an adult on my own and married, I started going to church with my husband who is Presbyterian. We went to FUPCDC! I loved it, but still had a long way to go on my journey. The children went to Sunday School, I attended Bible studies, yet there was something missing and I could not find what it was.

Several years later, I fell in and out of deep depressions and in and out of hospitals. When I needed God the most, He did not seem to be there for me. I know now that He was there, just out of reach for me because I was incapable of reaching out to Him.

In 2012, I started keeping a prayer journal, which included Scripture passages, passages from daily devotionals, and my own thoughts on both my faith and my illness, and the impact each had on the other.

Today, I am not the same person I was forty-some years ago, as a new daughter of Christ. Yes, I still have my illness, and yes, I still work diligently on my prayers and devotions. . . but I am a stronger, more faithful person. I especially love Christmas because, like the Baby Jesus, I am still a Babe, growing each day with more days to follow.

Prayer: Dear Holy Father, keep reminding us that we are just children, growing each day in Your love and devotion. Help us to remember that, when we need You, all we have to do is call, “Abba, Father” and You will be there. Amen.

- Laura Hammel

CHRISTMAS SERVICES

Please join us as we celebrate Christmas.

- November 29: 1st Sunday of Advent - Online Live Stream at 10 AM
- December 6: 2nd Sunday of Advent - Online Live Stream at 10 AM
- December 13: 3rd Sunday of Advent - Online Live Stream at 10 AM
- December 20: 4th Sunday of Advent - Online Live Stream at 10 AM
"A Service of Lessons and Carols"
- December 24: Christmas Eve Services - Online Live Stream
 - 4:00 PM Christmas Eve Family Service
 - 7:00 PM Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Service
- December 27: 1st Sunday of Christmas - Online Live Stream at 10 AM



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*May the
God of Hope
fill you with
All
Joy and Peace
in believing,
that you may abound in Hope,
by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13

Merry Christmas!