

Saint Mark United Methodist Church

Advent Devotional Guide

Meditations for Saint Mark by Saint Mark



**ADVENT 2011—EPIPHANY 2012
NOVEMBER 27—JANUARY 8**



**“WHEN YOU DID AWESOME DEEDS WE DID NOT EXPECT.”
ISAIAH 64:3**

Front Cover: The Creation of Adam, Mixed Medium, Acrylic on Canvas

Byron H. Pittman



What is Advent?

We hope you find in this Advent Devotional guide an invitation to spiritual growth this Advent season. Advent, the four weeks prior to Christmas Day, is especially designated in the Christian calendar as a time to prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of the birth of Christ. For this purpose we offer you one reading to reflect upon for each day in Advent. But truly what we celebrate on Christmas day is not merely, or even *actually*, the earthly birth of Jesus of Nazareth. That birth, as miraculous as it was, was a singular historical event. But the birth of the Christ Child is also a spiritual process that happens within us over and over throughout our lives, if we are open. To be open we must set time for reflection and attention to allow the miracle to happen.

It is this spiritual exercise of welcoming the Christ Child into our hearts that we practice during Advent. Our waiting and watching and preparation are really means of nurturing the infant soul within each of us—full of promise, full of peace, full of enlightened charity toward the world. The Christ Child represents innocence and renewal. The Christ Child represents new beginnings and new grace. To welcome the Christ Child into our hearts, we must embrace the child that we ourselves once were—before life intervened to distract us, or harm us, or lure us away from our birthright, our inheritance, as true children of God. So this Advent season we invite you to prepare. Seek silence to muffle the noise that keeps you from hearing God's message of love for you. Seek peaceful moments so that you can make room in your heart for newborn hope, newborn joy, and newborn life that awaits you on Christmas. For Christmas brings not only the birth of the infant Christ. It brings rebirth for every soul—yours and mine. Let us make our hearts ready.

Beth LaRocca-Pitts
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First Sunday of Advent, November 27

Scripture: Isaiah 64: 1-9, **Hope!**

Always the best way to start out the Advent season and our annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem. It is the essence of what it means to be on a journey and what it means to meet a new born baby. Both are filled with new possibilities for things previously unseen and not yet experienced. I remember the day that my niece, Lily, was born. She was the first grandchild to be born on either side of the family, so we all had been filled with nervous excitement as the due date grew nearer and nearer. As soon as I heard the news that my sister-in-law was in labor, I dropped everything and sped toward Asheville because I didn't want to miss any of it. During my drive, I thought about who this amazing little girl being born would grow up to be and how I wanted to play an important role in her life and development. I tried to imagine all of the new memories we would make together and how our journey as a family was about to change for the better because of Lily and any yet-to-be-born babies that would come into our lives.

Today's scripture from Isaiah speaks of a longing for God's presence to be made known and the awesomeness of the unexpected things that God has done for us time and again. It also likens our relationship with God to clay in a potter's hand; always being reshaped and reformed in light of new experiences, new relationships and new information. The Advent season is about keeping hope alive as we anticipate and re-experience this amazing thing that God has done through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was born and grew up just like all of us did and through his death and resurrection, we are reminded that in all of our joys, dreams, trials, tribulations and fears, we are never alone. God is always present and always loving us through our journey.

As we kick off this year's pilgrimage to Bethlehem to meet the baby again for the first time, may we feel a joyful longing for God's presence, a nervous excitement for all of the amazing things that God will do in our lives over the coming year, and a deep sense of gratitude that God is always working on us and with us as we deal with all of the things that life sends our way. May we all feel a deep sense of hope this advent season and throughout the year in light of the amazing things God has already done in our lives and in the lives of those around us. So much more is in store!

Monday, November 28

Scripture: Psalm 145: 8-9, 17-18 “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The Lord is good to all and his tender mercies are over all his works.” “The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works. The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.”

As the mother of a precocious toddler, I find myself at times quick to anger and not as compassionate. At those times, I am reminded of this scripture. No matter what we may do that could irritate or anger Him (and I know there are times that I’m sure my behavior has been irritating!), He doesn’t get angry, frustrated or upset. He is the ever patient Father, compassionately understanding that although appearing to have lost our direction or faith in Him, we are not to be responded to with anger.

I am often struck by God’s ability to give us the freedom to make decisions and learn from them, particularly because I struggle with that with my own son. I don’t want him to have to learn the same lessons the hard way that I did—jumping off something too high can result in a broken arm. If I don’t let him do that, he’ll be safe and healthy. But, in reality, I have to let him make mistakes, learn from them and an understanding of his limits.

The same is true with God. He gives us the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, all the while watching over us, patiently guiding us, giving us compassion when we realize we have made a mistake and providing us with gentle encouragement along the way. What a miracle we have in Him!

Prayer: Dear God, please help me to be more compassionate, caring, loving and kind. Please help me be less quick to anger and less frustrated by mistakes others make. Remind me daily of Your caring presence so that I may live a life modeled in your patient ways. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29

Scripture: Matthew 21: 12-22

Fed up, I decided to take the “reindeer by the antlers” and do something about my chaotic, cluttered mess of a celebration. There were far too many gifts to wrap, parties to attend, concerts to support, and casseroles to bake! I made my way to a seminar on “Alternative Ways to Celebrate the Season.”

Since that time I have been observing the season differently. I no longer send Christmas cards. Instead, in October during my annual fall leaf tour, I send a dozen friends, family members, or associates a Thanksgiving card in which I write a personal note thanking them for all they mean to me.

I also learned that the season is not something “put” on me. I learned to write into my appointment calendar: family time, moments for meditation, and evenings at home alone. When the invitations come I politely decline by saying, “I am so sorry but I have something on my calendar that evening.” It works!

And finally, perhaps the most meaningful activity is **looking for Christ in Christmas**. As an intentional spiritual discipline, I look daily for the presence of Christ amidst the hustle and bustle.

It was an icy cold, flurry-filled Christmas Eve in Marietta. I was taking a bunch of hand-me-downs to the Salvation Army collection truck across from the Big Chicken. As I drove into the shopping center I noticed a shivering elderly worker waiting to receive my donations. I inquired, “How long have you been here?” “Have you had any relief?” “Are you hungry?” His responses sent me on a daredevil dash to the nearest burger place for a full meal deal and hot coffee. When I returned he was most grateful! I could see Christ in his bent-over body, frost covered eyelids, and boney callused hands.

Prayer: Jesus, just as you were fed up and restored the temple to its original designation; restore my hope during the holidays! Help me to experience your divine presence in quiet moments, in acts of appreciation, and in people who need my special touch. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

Scripture: Psalm 147:3

"He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds."

When my mother was sick with cancer in 1994, I went back to the Eastern Shore of Virginia to that little town of which I grew up in, to take care of her for a week. Being there for a couple of days, I began to clean up, one evening after dinner; I felt something indescribable come over me. Walking to my mother's room, I knocked on her door and walked in. I found her setting on the edge of her bed, facing the window, it being wide open in the middle of winter, in pain rocking back and forth. I slowly maneuvered past the bed side table covered with various medications over to set beside her, look at her and waited for the words to come.

I proceeded to tell her that I had been given a message to deliver, hoping she wouldn't think I was crazy. One that simply said; "Everything's going to be ok", then she started crying.

She explained "Not 5 minutes before you came up those stairs I began to pray, harder than I have ever prayed." "I told God I was scared and worried about myself and about you boys." "And then he sends you".

Mom taught me something that night something she also told me later, something I will never forget "Some of the greatest gifts come from the most unexpected places."

Prayer: Dear God, This Holiday Season, help me be a light into the path of someone that would not expect your gifts upon them. Help me to lean and trust more upon your spirit that it will guide me in ways of which I would never expect. In your name I pray, Amen.

Thursday, December 1: World AIDS Day

Scripture: Psalm 147:12-20, "You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

In my years of experience working with people living with HIV/AIDS, one of the most surprising things I hear is this: "AIDS is the best thing that ever happened to me!"

For some people, after the shock of the initial diagnosis, this life-threatening disease gives them a new perspective on life, a new appreciation of the value of every moment. Friends and family members who stood beside them were found to be true and more precious than gold. Often, too, facing HIV has brought people back to understanding the value of their relationship to God and to God's people. Every stick in their beings was aflame and they returned to God. Surprisingly, they don't blame God for their infection; instead, they have learned that God's love is available and will be with them through the valley.

These people have a zest for living and a wisdom that finds good even in the worst of things I want for my life. I just forget when I get too busy.

Remember, He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns down to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD God Almighty is his name. (Psalm 147:13) Thanks be to God!

Whether you are facing great trouble or not, take a moment with me to ask: How precious is every day? Am I more often "wasting" time, or doing and being in ways that show God's love to all? Remember, the desire of God is that we might have life and have it abundantly!

Prayer: Dear God, set within our hearts your flame anew, the fire you place within us to be in relationship with you and to be your hands and feet, your acts of kindness, your loving word to a weary and wounded world. Amen

Friday, December 2

Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14, Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. '

I have to confess that, for the most part, I haven't a clue as to the moral issues Jesus attempts to teach through his stories and parables. Now, I have always enjoyed a good story. I tune into the documentaries on PBS and follow the story line, even writing down the dates and times of subsequent series. I listen and read along as the gospel is read on Sunday mornings and then listen to the sermon to hear if I understood the underlining message. I could picture myself on Jeopardy just holding my buzzer as Jesus announces the answer to the parable and waits for me to ask the question. I know that I would never make it to the bonus round.

I believe that the important part of the message is trusting the messenger; and even though I might not understand the full meaning of the message, I know that the underlining theme is to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. And that alone is my a challenge.

Prayer: Holy Father, help me to learn to listen and allow me the strength and courage to act in response to your teachings. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

The poor old Sadducees, they were sad – you - see – as they had trouble understanding and believing in the resurrection. In Matthew 22 they try to gang up on Jesus and ask him tricky resurrection questions. As usual Jesus confounds the questioners and answers in a way that changes the dialogue. Who is my spouse in heaven, they ask. And...what about the wife of the man who is seventh in line... Foolish, thoughtless tricksters – *really* you think you'll trip up the Son of God?

In the span of years since Jesus answered the Sadducees man has invented questions and posed riddles to God. There is a long line of men and women who have sought to justify their ill behavior through one exhausting string of riddles and fables after another. Surely, I can find a loophole; surely, the sordid life I lead is excusable if only I can find the trick. In all the wondering and supposing and asking man becomes a modern day Sadducee confused both about the scripture and the power of God.

Now then we come to the Advent season, our expectant waiting for the birth of the Son of God. How are you waiting? Are you waiting with an open heart prepared to receive the good news? Are you waiting with conviction prepared to change your practice and your disposition? As you ask questions of God are you prepared for the answers? As you study the scripture are you willing to make application to your life? Be ready to move beyond being a 21st century Sadducee seeking merely to question and not to have answers and prepare to be what you ought to be as a faithful follower of Christ.

The theme of our Advent writings is from Isaiah 64:3 "When you did awesome deeds we did not expect." Are you ready for awesome deeds? Ready to let go of your redundant, "gotcha" questions and ready to accept the awesome deeds as they come to you?

Prayer: God, help our foolish hearts become wise to your ways for us. Help our wandering spirits be settled in your love. Daily, Lord give us the sense to know to follow you and not to bedevil our progress with vain questions. Open us to love, change and peace. Help us in this season of expectation to be on the look out for our hopeful help. Amen

WEEK TWO: PREPARE



"Still Waters," Oil on Canvas painting by Glenda Joiner

Second Sunday of Advent, December 4

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-11

The prophet Isaiah called for God's people to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah also shared some of the wonderful changes that would come with this long expected coming. The main change would be in our relationship with God. God pardons our sins, brings peace to our lives, and comforts us a caring shepherd.

Isaiah also suggests that a change would come in our sense of mission to the world. We are to prepare the way of the Lord so that the glory of the Lord will be revealed for everyone in the world to see. The mission that we have in our day is one of preparation not only for our lives but for the life of the world. Why? At Bethlehem, God announces that he care enough about us to enter into the very place where we are. This good news brings about a change in our lives. As the Christmas carol shares: "Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." Oh, how our lives and our world need to hear this message of peace, forgiveness, mercy, and healing again this year.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, renew our hearts so that we may be open to the change that comes as our Lord enters into our lives on this day. Support us as we prepare the way of the Lord through our daily witness and service to a world in need of good news and comforting love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, December 5

Scripture: Psalm 40 - 1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.² He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

The way the Lord moves in my life never ceases to amaze me. When will I stop needing to be reminded of the same lessons repeatedly I wonder. The most recent and painful lesson which concluded at 4:45 am today revolved around my dog Pandora, who had escaped from her collar while at a pet store parking lot. She was not heard from for 7 entire days. My very first reflex was to pray (and SEARCH!). But after 7 days had passed I must admit my patience and faith were long gone. Just as I had given up all hope of ever seeing her again I got the call I had been waiting for. She had been sighted and my help was needed to coax her back to a known face. She is home safe and sound and I am eternally grateful that the Lord has heard my cry, lifted me out of the slimy pit I had built out of my personal mud and mire. He has once again shown mercy on me and set my feet on a rock and given me a firm place to stand.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we ask thee to help us be patient with ourselves as we struggle to learn to be worthy and obedient children. You are my Teacher, my Light for the Journey and my Salvation! Amen.

Tuesday, December 6

Scripture: Psalm 33:20-21 Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. Our heart is glad in him because we trust in his holy name.

What are you waiting for? The economy to improve and your house to sell? A call back from yet another job interview? Test results? Traffic to clear up so you can get home? Waiting is associated with anxiety and other negative emotions. And in this economy, the anxiety that waiting brings seems to be pumped up on steroids. It may feel as though our life depends on resolving that limbo that we are experiencing. What if we knew that most likely, we will survive maybe even grow as a result? I remember a few years ago waiting on the results of a breast biopsy. My anxiety and stress level was high. My prayers took on a special intensity. I spent too much time on the internet. The biopsy results did not come back as I had hoped but the good news was that the cancer was minimal and easily treatable. I would be OK.

What if we could turn waiting into something positive? What if we knew something good would come from it? A joyful experience! This is what the Advent season of waiting for the Christ Child reminds us of. Though these verses in Psalm 33 were written well before the birth of Jesus and are not considered to be of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, it was somehow understood even then that waiting can bring joy and hope. Especially when we understand that the long awaited Jesus offers us peace and salvation in this anxious and troubled world.

Prayer: God, help me understand that whatever may be bringing me anxiety and stress, that trusting in you and accepting the gift of your son Jesus will bring me peace and joy. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7

Scripture: Matthew 23: 1 – 12, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

It never ceases to amaze me how the words of our Savior are timeless and always fit to present day circumstances. This small passage reminds of the popular saying, “Do not do as I do, but do as I say do”. This has been a year of change for me. I started a new job, lost a dear pet, and have been blessed with another wonderful puppy named Simon. I also committed to start giving to others “on purpose”. I wake up each morning and ask God to put someone in my path that I can help. These are often purely random acts: a smile given to a stranger or a box of Krispy Kremes and spare change to a homeless person. My spirits are lifted when I see what a large difference a small kindness can make. However, I very quickly find myself feeling rushed, overwhelmed with my own drama and still overlook the many who are in need. At times like these, I am truly a modern day Pharisee. This passage reminds me how grateful I am that there is one after whom I can pattern my life. Jesus Christ did exactly what He promised to do yesterday, today and always.

Prayer: Dear Lord: Help me to use you as the example of the perfection that I can never attain. Thank you for loving me in spite of myself. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

Scripture: Psalm 18: 16-19, "He reached down from on high, he took me; He drew me out of mighty waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. "

When I first moved here, I was working crazy, long hours at a new job. My family was hundreds of miles away waiting on two houses to close and I was filling up my loneliness and all my time with work. This went on at a dangerous, frenetic pace. By the time my sweet, precious family joined me, patterns had been established and I was struggling to take my foot off of the metaphoric accelerator. My body and spirit were breaking down. Early one weekend morning I was heading in to the office and I was beginning to feel my physical limitations. I wanted to be home playing with my young son and partner. Instead, I was sitting at a stoplight at the corner of North and Peachtree waiting on the green light. As I impatiently waited, I looked over and saw (what I previously thought tacky) the Jesus mosaic. Lump. "Come all that labor and are heavy-laden. . . I will give you rest." Tears started to form. "Me?" A tear dropped. "Oh, that's me!" Tears streamed. "STOP, my child," the open-armed tiled Jesus beckoned me. And my soul released a cry that had been building for months, if not years—at the intersection of Peachtree and North. It was like Psalm 18, God reached down and delivered me from the chaos I had created. I felt like a tired, weary child looking for someone's forgiving arms to climb into, whisper words of assurance and rock me to a peaceful slumber. God was there. In that moment, in the oddest of places, the Lord was my stay, my rock, and my refuge.

Prayer: In the hurriedness that often envelopes our lives, may we feel your touch from on high and find comfort in your refuge. Amen.

Friday, December 9

Scripture: Matthew 23:37, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

What beautiful imagery Christ uses as he laments over Jerusalem! He compares himself to a hen gathering her brood under her wings. Jesus as mother. Jesus as mother to a people not willing to be gathered, not willing to be loved. How many times have I found myself resisting the love of others, of my own mother? Why do we do that? What is it in us human beings that makes it difficult to accept love and kindness? What makes us so independent, so fiercely self-sufficient? For me, maybe it's because I have a tough time seeing myself as acceptable, as lovable. That “impostor” sits on my shoulder whispering, “You're just not good enough,” even as Jesus tries to gather me in. Dear friends, listen to Jesus and not that “impostor” sitting on your shoulder. We are all made in his image and his love enfolds us—if we let it.

Prayer: Lord, I ask that you help me to accept your love and forgiveness. Help me walk with the confidence of a child of God. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

Scripture: Psalm 90:12, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

Have you ever looked forward to an event that, when the day arrives, everything seems to go wrong from the beginning? Years ago, when I worked in New York, friends who lived in the country outside Hartford CT invited me to come for the weekend, have a special dinner Friday evening, see friends Saturday, and cut a Christmas tree in their woods. I envisioned a 6 foot fir.

No sooner had we cleared the Bronx, however, than the car conked out—noisily, perilously—in rush hour traffic. When no help came to the emergency lane, I climbed the fence into the adjacent neighborhood where a kind soul actually answered the door and called a tow truck. Then the last rental car in Mt. Vernon NY refused to start after we paused to grab a take-out sandwich. Dead battery. Another tow truck, more phone calls and hours later, we sat down to that special supper at 11.30.

But from such a frustrating (and at times scary) start came a memorable end. On Sunday afternoon, on the train back to NYC, passengers first stared at those young things carrying an awkward roll of brown kraft paper, then grinned when they realized it contained a Christmas tree—all 3 feet of a young fir, peeking out both ends. A train car of tired individuals became for a few moments a bit of community. In the 40 years since, I've had lots of trees but few as memorable or meaningful. The poet of Psalm 90 spends much time lamenting all the troubles and evils life holds before remembering that God's goodness and faithfulness can shine through and redeem all things if we but open ourselves to that promise.

Prayer: Through whatever pain and troubles we experience, O God, help us find the way that leads to peace and love and community. Amen.

WEEK THREE: WATCH



“Falling into the Season ” in the North Georgia Mountains,
photograph by Brett Reichert

3rd Sunday of Advent, December 11

Scripture: Psalm 126, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream.”

I have always loved this line from Psalm 126. It speaks to me of how blessings can seem so unreal when they first occur that we can hardly believe what has happened. It seems more logical that we are asleep and dreaming than that the fondest desires of our hearts have been granted. The Psalmist speaks here of one of the fondest desires of Israel—the hoped-for reunion between those lived in Israel and those who had been exiled. “When our loved ones came home to us, came home to Zion, we thought we were dreaming. We laughed. We cried with joy!” It is one of the most touching scenes imaginable.

It makes me wonder. Why is it that happiness often surprises us so? Is it because we so often expect calamity that the arrival of something joyous seems like it can't possibly be true? One of my favorite Israeli novels is called *The Blue Mountain*, by Meir Shalev. In it there is a character who goes every evening to the edge of her kibbutz to gaze toward Russia because she once had an uncle who escaped the Soviet Union and had set off on foot to walk to Israel. Every evening she would go out and look toward that horizon to see if he was coming. Sure enough, by the end of the book he does arrive. Would we go out to look, evening after evening? Would we believe that the miracle could happen? Today? Tonight? Even now, right now? Advent encourages us to watch with joy—to expect the miracle that God is bringing. We are not dreaming. God is preparing a miracle. Come now and watch. It is on the horizon!

Prayer: Help us, Lord God, to expect your beneficence, to trust your love, and believe in your future. In the name of the Christ who is coming. Amen.

Monday, December 12

Scripture: Matthew 24:23-24, "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

How do you determine what is real? What can I do to know the authentic?

Money is good example of knowing what is real. When I was child I was once told that examiners know that money is real is by studying the real thing? They carefully look at the real authentic currency and then when the counterfeit comes along it will be easy to detect.

The scripture is letting us know that false teachers and people will try to lead us astray but if we spend time with the "Real McCoy" We can know the authentic Christ.

Prayer: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

Scripture: Matthew 24:32-44

Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When her branch is tender and the leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is almost here. Just so, when you see all these things happen, you can know that my return is near, even at the doors. Then at last this age will come to its close. Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words remain forever. But no one knows the date and hour when the end will be – not even the angels. No, nor even God's son. Only the Father knows. The world will be at ease – banquets and parties and weddings – just as it was in Noah's time before the sudden coming of the flood; people wouldn't believe what was going to happen until the flood actually arrived and took them all away. So shall my coming be. Two men will be working together in the fields, and one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be going about their household tasks; one will be taken, the other left. So be prepared, for you don't know what day your Lord is coming. Just as a man can prevent trouble from thieves by keeping watch for them, so you can avoid trouble by always being ready for my unannounced return.

In this section of Matthew, there is a warning not to speculate on the coming of Jesus. That no man, only the Father knows the time of his coming. By the very definition of Advent, we are in great expectation of what is to come – this magnificent event in the lives of Christians where we embrace the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew tells us to make ourselves ready and not become complacent as we wait for his return.

So we ready ourselves for Christmas! Words that come to mind for the season are Joy, Excitement, Celebration, Energy, Peace, Reflection, Giving and Receiving. Receiving you say? Absolutely! Receiving the greatest gift of all which is the birth of Jesus in our hearts and his presence in our lives.

For me personally, Christmas is a time of reflection. I am extremely fortunate to have grown up in a Christian household where December 25th was absolutely the best! My oldest brother believed in Santa through his teens, so that his little sister wasn't heartbroken. Even after 50 years, I remember his love gift to me – a gift that didn't cost a dime but came from his heart; and the one that has never been forgotten. Give a love gift this Christmas – touch a heart for a lifetime!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, as we celebrate Advent and prepare ourselves for the holiest of days, may we always remember our greatest gift – the birth of a small child, given by you so that all generations would know your glory. Fill our hearts with your presence and keep us mindful of our work to do as Christians, knowing that our greatest celebration is yet to come. Challenge us each and every day to hold you close and share ourselves with others. Amen.

Wednesday, December 14

Scripture: Revelation 4:1-8 ---- After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

There have been a few times in my life when I felt distant from God. I let myself get so caught up in my stress and problems that I was sure heaven did not exist and I thought didn't care. I felt alone and thought I had no one to turn to. All I wanted was to feel needed, to feel as if I was making a difference in the world. I think many people have felt this way, especially during the holidays.

After a long journey I recently officially adopted an older child from Mexico. I never thought I'd become a dad, but having a son has changed my life. I know I'm making a difference in his life, and he is doing the same in mine. Having a child and being a single dad has taught me to appreciate the blessings in my life more than before. Being in our new roles as father and son may not always be heaven on earth, but we are learning to respect each other's differences and needs, and we are taking it one day at a time.

The older I get, the more I think about heaven. Will it really be like I learned as a child in Sunday School with pearly gates and streets made of gold? Will we really get to be reunited with all the loved ones we lost throughout our lifetimes? It's comforting to think about heaven being such a pleasant place, where we will spend eternity.

Prayer: Lord, bless us and help us feel needed. Teach us patience and love and let us have comfort in knowing you are working in our lives. Amen.

Thursday, December 15

Scripture: Psalm 62

Some say patience is a virtue. I know that patience is what I strive for on a daily basis. The theme of this Psalm is placing all hope in God. What that challenges us with is that we must trust that God is in control and therefore we must wait patiently for him to rescue us. I find myself constantly struggling with God saying: "you're in control", "no, I want to be in control", "okay, I messed up now you can be in control". I think of this as me being the driver of my faith mobile and letting God drive since I know he will get me there faster and safer than I could ever do. What is it about this struggle for control and patience?

We see in this Psalm that David expresses his feelings to God. How many of us do that and do it on a daily basis? Or, do we tell God how we feel when we are displeased with something or ask God to get us out of a jam that we find ourselves in? How often do we thank God for all the blessings that he provides and praise him?

If we trust God to be our rock and salvation, our entire lives will change forever. When I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior, my life was filled with hope and peace. I still have my daily struggles but I know that I am never alone and can always rely on God's strength. He has never disappointed me when I ask for his help.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may the Holy Spirit fill each of us with faith in you that grows stronger every day and creates a peace and comfort by knowing that you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Friday, December 16

Scripture: Psalm 130, "Out of the deep have I called unto thee oh Lord; Lord, hear my voice."

When I read my assigned scripture, I recalled past winter days of my own discontent. Winter days that seemed to last all year long; completely skipping spring, summer, and fall. Days that were filled with gray skies, and bitter winds that sought to blow me down. The tall trees were devoid of leaves and unable to cover and protect me from chilling rains.

What caused those winter days? It was a combination of difficult earthly experiences that happen to each of us. Loss of job and income, shuffling bills and trying to pay them. Car engine trouble, and trying to get a ride from neighbors without burdening them with my sadness. And medical problems both personal and family, and wondering if there was any healing or effective treatments.

I did not have a church family like St. Mark, and parents and long time friends were living in another state. During those long days, I felt so alone, as if no one could help rescue me from deep despair. Winter was rough.

At some point, I began to search for guidance from the scriptures. Reading the book of Psalms helped me to understand that even David struggled with winter days as he tried to escape from King Saul and other enemies. Yet, he was able to pray to God for help and support, and patience to watch for God's blessings. And my daily prayers changed from despair to praise for what God had already done for me, and I learned to have patience to watch and wait for His answers. One day, spring began to softly enter with the amazement of new buds of life.

Prayer: I wait for you Lord, and in your word is my hope. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

Scripture: Matthew 25:34-36, "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... I was in prison and you visited me.'"

A few years ago, I taught English as a Second Language in the Cobb County Adult Detention Center. I joyfully went every Tuesday afternoon. And then the day came when I realized, "I only see some of these men three or four times, maybe six. How much English do I think I'm teaching them?" It was really disheartening.

I co-taught with a man who was there before me for another class. One day he said to me, "You really like these guys, don't you? They always look forward to you coming and ask me, 'Is Ms Pamela coming today?'" I found myself immediately responding with, "I love these men! They are so eager to learn and try so hard." It was then that I realized that what I was doing at the jail was not so much teaching English as it was "visiting those in prison." I could offer them unconditional love and acceptance. We never talked about why they were there, only their desire to learn English.

It broke my heart when Cobb County discontinued the program. These men were strangers in a foreign land who I had a chance to welcome. This had been my opportunity to share God's love with them. And maybe in the process help them learn a little English.

Prayer: Lord, help us see the people who might be in "prisons" that are not literal bars and walls as well as the "strangers" among us who need to be welcomed. Show us how we can reach out to them and show them your love. Amen.

WEEK FOUR: REJOICE!



Premature baby rescued in Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake , By Dr. Richard

4th Sunday in Advent, December 18

Scripture: Luke 1: 26-38, 47-55

The Magnificat (Latin: [My soul] magnifies), also known as the Canticle of Mary, is the song of praise Mary utters when she visits Elizabeth just after learning that she will give birth to Jesus. It is a fitting hymn for this fourth Sunday as it rejoices the coming Messiah who will bring about God's Kingdom. The words speak of the divine reversal of our world order when the lowly shall be raised up, the poor shall be fed and unjust rulers will be brought down from power. The coming of God's kingdom, that which we wait for and anticipate during Advent, is near and the response is to rejoice.

However, I must admit that I find this passage challenging if we look back to the context. Mary has been chosen, "favored" by God to be a part of bringing about God's Kingdom, but what a strange blessing. To bear a child is certainly a "labor of love" in and of itself, but to do so in that culture out of wedlock was to accept shame and condemnation. The blessing is not one of comfort and prosperity, yet this is something she gives her consent to receive (v. 38).

It would be easy to get wrapped up in the rejoicing and song of praise for what God is about to do and fall into comfortable sentimentalism. But if we sing this song, we must also lay down our privileges to make it so. The actions of Mary challenge us to do this, to accept the cost of bringing about the kingdom of God. Like Mary, our blessings may not be good social standing or wealth, but simply that we are favored by God. Let us rejoice in what God is about to do, but recognize that it might mean getting a bit less comfortable.

Prayer: Help us to magnify you, God, as we rejoice in your coming kingdom and take part in bringing about your reign of peace and justice. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Scripture: Luke 1:19-20, "The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'"

When I read this passage, I quickly realized I didn't know this story as well as I thought I did. What I had never considered before was that after Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to deliver the good news (first that his wife Elizabeth would have a child – and, even more amazing - that this child would become the prophet John the Baptist), not only did Zechariah challenge Gabriel about the angel's message, but because he questioned it, he was struck mute until his son was born.

My first thought was that perhaps Gabriel's response was the Biblical version of the idea "if you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all." I believe the lesson in this story is two-fold, and the need for Zechariah to be willing and open to actually receive the message was as important as the message itself. Perhaps that was (and still is) part of God's message – "Don't challenge Me, don't speak, just wait, listen, have faith."

Not that these are easy instructions to follow by any means - how many times in the Bible do we read of angels delivering the most amazing news to people who almost always seem to respond with disbelief and doubt? On one hand, it's almost comical that anyone would challenge a message (from an angel!) that something great was going to happen to them, but on the other hand, it's sad that for most of us, disbelief would most likely be the automatic response. I would hope that if I ever experienced an angelic encounter, I would have the sense to be quiet and simply listen, but I suspect I would probably be even more skeptical than Zechariah was.

At Christmas we celebrate God's most precious gift, that of His son Jesus Christ, but it is so easy for us to forget we are the recipients of countless gifts, both large and small, every day. Let this Advent season be a reminder to us to not only appreciate the gifts themselves, but to be open to the act of receiving them.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for still speaking to us, even when we are not willing to listen. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Scripture: Psalm 94: 1-23, "The LORD is a God who avenges...pay back to the proud what they deserve... how long LORD will the wicked be jubilant... They crush your people; they oppress your inheritance..."

Today, we can be connected instantly with events around the world and taken to constant analysis of breaking scandals, reports, and rumors here at home, if we choose. Do these prophetic words ring true for our time? Dictators and tyrants come to mind. But, what of our own leaders? How many elected officials have fallen to their own pride and deceit in the past year? Is the LORD's timeless message here calling us to be aware - at all levels and times, and in all places and people - of the very real threat regular individuals can succumb to if provided the right access or motive.

Further in this passage, we read, "The LORD knows all human plans; he knows that they are futile." Perhaps pride is one element that causes a human life, given so freely, born so innocently, to become corrupt. Pride can also lead us to believe that our planning, if done well enough, will lead to success in whatever it is we are trying to achieve. We typically see examples of this pride during travel plans gone wrong, when we are most susceptible to unknown factors. But, we can also plan our careers, relationships, and lives for years or decades even, only to discover in the end, we were not in control of anything. The outcome was not at all what we had the pride of assuming it would be.

In that place, in that moment, the LORD is there, ready to guide us back to humility, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and to peace, freely. Near the end, we read, "But the LORD has become my fortress...the rock in whom I take refuge". Even when we are held back or cast out by pride, we are anchored in unfathomable strength and hope, if we are open to it.

Prayer: Oh heavenly Father, we are imperfect in your sight, unworthy of authority or power, yet we act as if we are authorities of power. Help us to live day by day, simply and thankfully, so that we may humbly listen to your true plan, and experience all your creation at peace outwardly and inwardly. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Scripture: Luke 1: 39-56

I am writing this the last week of October on a personal retreat in the mountains of north Georgia between Mineral Bluff and McCaysville. I went for my morning walk and noticed quickly that I was either climbing STEEP hills or going down STEEP hills. There are precious few short level areas. How true is that of our life?

In today's scripture passage Mary, in all likelihood, is on the largest uphill climb of her young life. The Annuciation has occurred but she is not yet pregnant. Undoubtedly she realizes all the horrible social implications this will have for her. Joseph has to be brought on board and in Matthew's gospel it took an angelic visit to make that happen. Then there would be the misgivings of her parents and future in-laws, extended family, friends, neighbors, and the local Rabi! Much less the pregnancy!!! A difficult uphill walk. What did Mary do immediately after the Annuciation? The scripture says "she went with haste" to see her cousin Elizabeth, barren and old but now also pregnant. Mary needed the company of a kindred spirit.

And what of our life's steep uphill walks---work, illnesses, financial struggles, broken relationships, spiritual upheavals? How much easier the journey when we don't have to face it alone. God has given us the community of faith to strengthen us; to be our kindred spirit. Sometimes uphill climbs can be easier on us than downhill walking!

Remember Mary was able to say, "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name." May it be so for each of us in this special season of the year and for all our days.

Prayer: O God, grant me strength and fellowship for my life's walk in this day. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 1: 57-66: "What then is this child going to be?"

Second fiddle ... runner-up ... close, but no cigar. We have all been there. And we all know it is no fun. Instead, we want to win! We want to be special! We want to be first!

I wonder if John ever felt this. He was not the Messiah—his cousin was! Some thought he might be, but no: he went *before* the Lord—*making* a way, but not *being* the Way. It is hard to play second fiddle, even to the Lord. At least, that is, when you think it is all about YOU!

Many of us who are parents have learned it is not about us: it is about our children. We go *before* them; we *make* a way for them. And we are happy to do so. Parents know this. Teachers know this. Lovers know this. It is called laying down your life for another: it is Love. Every generation goes before and makes a way for the next.

This going before what follows is the way things are: it is the cycle of life. John's life and mission teaches us this: he decreases while Jesus increases. But his birth teaches us even more: that which goes before, that which makes a way, that which decreases so another can increase is special in its own right. John's birth is special. John's birth is unique. John's birth is surrounded with promise. And so is ours! Each and every one of us is special in our own right. Whether we make a way, or are the Way, we are special. Like John, we each were born at the right time and at the right place. Advent is all about learning to live in this time and place.

Prayer: Lord, teach us that in making a way for another, that in laying down our life for another, we become the Way and find our Life. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Scripture: Luke 1:76-79, Zechariah's Prophecy, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

In this passage, we hear from Zechariah after the birth of his son, who is to be John the Baptist. In his disbelief over his wife's conception, he was struck mute until after the baby's birth. These are the first words we hear from him, and what he gives to us is a theologically rich and powerful statement. For this child has been born, "To give knowledge of salvation to God's people by the forgiveness of their sins."

If you talk with any parent about what it was like at the moment of their child's birth, you will hear a lot of stories, but a common theme will certainly be, "it was then that my life changed forever." Zechariah's prophecy is more than what is happening for him, it is a promise of what will happen for *all of us*. In this expectant time, we are hopeful for what the birth of Christ will bring for us. Zechariah says all we need to know about what we are to expect, "light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Let us rejoice that God's tender mercy has been shown in the face of a child, so that all of us may have the promise of salvation and light to guide our way.

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for coming to us in the form of a child, who shows us that you are a God who understands our need for light, grace and forgiveness. Amen.

Saturday, December 24: Christmas Eve

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20, “Just A Joseph”

Like any good author, Luke starts his book with an alternate plot complete with foreshadowing before he delves into the main topic -- Jesus. Today, we find ourselves in the second chapter of Luke – the quintessential telling of the trip to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, the angels, and the shepherds – that we remember from childhood Christmas pageants at church and readings at Christmas Eve services.

Each year during Advent, I re-read John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. First, because it is one of my favorite books, and second, because his telling of the small town Christmas pageant leaves me laughing out loud every single time. In a year of unusual casting, the narrator, Johnny Wheelwright, has been selected by Owen to play Joseph. Johnny is disappointed and says, “For what an uninspiring role it is; to be Joseph – that hapless follower, that stand-in, that guy along for the ride.” How many of us sometimes feel that same way as we approach the Messiah's birth – just along for the ride, just a Joseph?

Just as there are no small parts, only small actors, Joseph played an integral role in Jesus' life. He remained engaged to Mary even after she told him that she was pregnant with a child that wasn't his. He protected and raised the Christ child. He brought Jesus up in faith and taught him the Hebrew scriptures. Just as Joseph had an important role, so do each of us as we live out the birth of Christ in our daily lives.

Prayer: Creating and sustaining God, help me remember that I have an important part to play. Help me to be more than “just a Joseph” as I approach Christ's rebirth into my life this day. Amen.

Christmas Day



"Haitian Baby in Despinos," Photograph by Dr. Richard Kauffman

Sunday, December 25, Christmas Day

Scripture: John 1:1-14, "In Him was the life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Do you remember being told what Santa was going to bring you? How you looked forward to these gifts? In the first verse we find a man proclaiming something, someone coming into the world which turned out to be the most wonderful gift we were ever to receive.

During Advent, we look for this promise, this prophecy, this hope and we receive this gift of Christ, our Lord, the light of the world, the most wonderful gift in the history of time.

We find the word "light" over and over in the Bible. In many stories and songs, we refer to Christ as the light. In this season, the lights on the tree and the candles in the windows represent Christ.

Saint Mark is a beacon shining brightly in a dark and troubled world, and our church helps to spread the light of God's love to so many people in so many ways. We see how hope is given to the hopeless, and how the wonderful news of God's love and acceptance is given to those that our society has made to feel unworthy of God's love and grace. This powerful beacon is not a single candle, but is comprised of so many candles, candles held high in the darkness by you and me to light the way for others to see.

Prayer: Most Holy God, We come to you today with thanks for so many wonderful gifts, but most of all for the gift of Jesus. Help us, as your children, to let our lights shine brightly with your love for all the world to see. Amen

Monday, December 26

Scripture: Acts 7:59, "And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'"

Neither the birth of our Lord was on December 25, or the stoning of Stephen on December 26. There seemed to be great wisdom by the early church fathers in placing these two biblical events a day apart in the liturgical calendar. Today we still sing 'Good King Wenceslas went out on the Feast of Stephen' ..., as the song about him indicates---too good perhaps, because in 929 he was murdered by his envious and wicked younger brother. In 1853, John Mason Neale, an English divine, selected the martyr Wenceslas as the subject for a children's song to exemplify generosity. This message of devotion and generosity resonates throughout this carol; "In his master's steps he trod...Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing; Ye who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing."

Yes, we are called to walk in the Master's steps. God turns evil into good (Rom. 8:28). The first official persecution of the church drove the Christians out of Jerusalem, and they preached the gospel everywhere they went...During the Pride festival, I was amazed at how many opportunities God placed before me to share 'The Good News'. Our faith is in and out of season at all times. Am I ready to say; "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"? So the early fathers knew that we are always to be ready to celebrate the ' Feast of Stephen.'

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us keep the beautiful message of Your Love to all your creation. Help us all be ready to trod in the Master's steps whenever asked. Amen.

Tuesday, December 27

Scripture: John 13: 34-35 NKJV, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

It's only two days past Christmas, yet for many, the season is over. The presents have been unwrapped, the big meal has been cooked and eaten, the parties are past – now it is time to take down the decorations. I know of some that by today the house would be totally void of Christmas decorations. But not at our house.

Tonight, our house will be as festive as Christmas day, with the tree lit, the organ playing, people mingling, and wishes of a joyous season spread from person to person. Tonight we host the annual holiday gathering of the local chapter of the American Guild of Organists. Everyone will be dressed in holiday attire, not caring that Christmas day has already passed. They'll be enjoying the displays of Santas on the table, or the Nutcrackers on the den mantle, or the Angels on the living room mantle, or the tree in the music room with the garland swaged through the rafters. But will the decorations come down after this?

That's doubtful. First of all, my family usually can't make it until after the first of the new year, so some things have to remain. Even if that was not the case, we tend to un-decorate for Christmas very slowly. Oh, the wreaths and garland outside will come down fairly soon, but the inside will stay decorated for a while yet. Slowly items from each room are removed and stored for the next year, with the tree being the last to go.

What is it about Christmas that makes us want to cling to it for as long as possible? Perhaps it is all the love and warmth that is shared so freely during that time amongst family and friends that keeps us dwelling on that special holiday. But looking at our scripture today, which focuses on Jesus' impending death, reminds me that Jesus wants us to share His love for us every day, not just at Christmas. He wants us to love one another in a manner that all will know that His love for us is unending.

So as the holidays wind down for you, don't let go of that special Christmas spirit, the love you experience from each Christmas hymn and service, from each hug from a friend or family member. Carry it with you throughout the year. Let others see it in you. And if you want to keep your tree up a little longer, go ahead. You won't be alone.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Thank you for the love you shared by sending us your Son at this special holiday season. May your love shine forth from us to others, spreading this season of love throughout the year. Amen.

Wednesday, December 28

Scripture: 1 John 4: 7-21, God's Love and Ours: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

There isn't any greater confirmation or affirmation of God's love for you and me than in these words. As Phillip said in his PRIDE Sunday message, "We are all made in God's image and for that we can "BE OURSELVES!"

Prayer: May you go out and share God's love by your words and actions. It is with a loving heart that we are created in God's image. As such, we must "Be Ourselves" and love one another. Amen.

Thursday, December 29

Scripture: 2John 1-11—Love means following his commandments, and his unifying commandment is that you conduct your lives in love. This is the first thing you heard, and nothing has changed.

In this biblical passage, John, one of Jesus' closest friends is speaking to his congregation about true love. I first learned about this commandment from my mother. She demonstrated love in raising a family during a difficult period in our Nation's history: Segregation and Sanctioned Racism. We were special in her sight and taught how to act, respond, how to love and respect those that are different in race, religion and politics. Some of those lessons were not easy to accept; however, I knew of her deep and abiding love in God and in her family. Her faith was steadfast and strong.

Upon the death of my mother, I saw how far her love for family, friends and neighbors had extended. I heard countless stories of her involvement in their lives. She was gifted in demonstrating her care and concern for those she met and engaged in a social setting. They became a part of her extended family. My mother exemplified the commandment of God to love as Jesus taught.

Prayer: Help us, Lord Jesus, to be less judgmental and more willing to be open to listen, to receive and to express an act of love in our daily encounters. This is not easy for many of us to accomplish. You are the source of love and all that is good and perfect. Guide and direct our path. Amen.

Friday, December 30

Scripture: John 4 46-54, "'Go,' Jesus replied, 'your son will live.' The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him." Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live."

Believing in something you cannot see or touch is difficult. Growing up the daughter of a Methodist Preacher, I never doubted there was a God and I remember the Sunday I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I was fortunate to have parents with FAITH. I have been blessed my whole life, and I know it is due to my BELIEF.

Occasionally, I meet people who do not believe in God. I have a hard time understanding and I am sad for them. I wonder how they handle things without believing in God, most of all death. After my Grandmother died in 1981, my Mom awoke early to a Mockingbird pecking on a front window in our house. Mom tried to get it to go away so she could go back to sleep, but instead she went down to the basement laundry room in the back of the house, to iron. There was a tiny window in that room. The Mockingbird came to that window and continued to peck. 10 years later, we were at my Grandfather's bedside. My Grandmother's sister was there and told my Mom and I an awesome story, that we did not expect – about a Mockingbird that came to her house and pecked on her windows, (90 miles from our house), shortly after my Grandmother died. Well?

Believing is more fun. I like to say I still believe in Santa Claus, not the red suit and reindeer but the spirit of CHRISTmas. Believing in God and the spirit of CHRISTmas allows us to witness awesome things that we do not expect.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us not to question You or need proof, but to have Faith and to Know you are always there. Help us witness all of your awesome deeds and to help others Believe.

Saturday, December 31: Watch Night

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Today brings this year to a close. Tonight is Watch Night as we await the coming of the New Year. It's been a very hard year for many of us. Many will be thankful to leave this year behind.

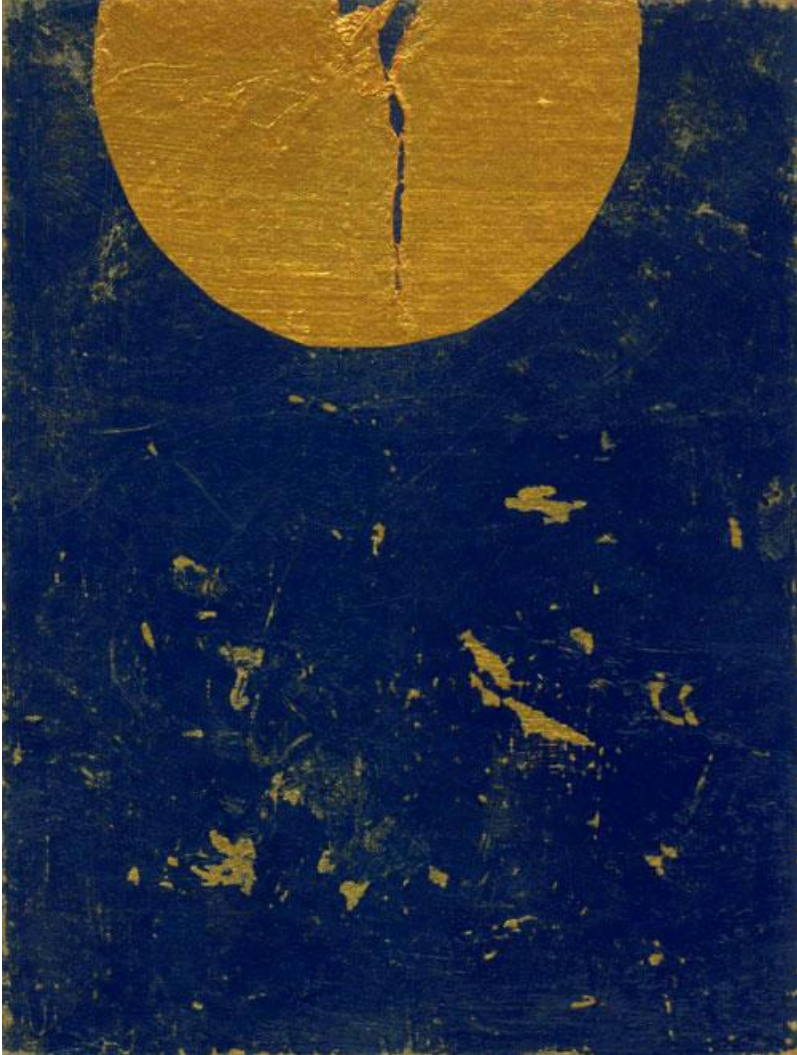
On this night in 1862, slaves in America anxiously awaited the signature of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln. A new year would bring them a new start - their long awaited freedom. John Wesley celebrated this night with a covenant renewal service. What are we waiting for on this Watch Night? Are we anticipating a new start? New freedoms? Continued blessings? What are we thankful for and what are we praying for?

One of my favorite rituals in years past was the Burning Bowl ceremony. Things we wanted to leave behind were written on small slips of paper that were placed in the burning bowl. What a sense of relief to watch the flames consume the negative things we were leaving behind! We also wrote letters to God in anticipation of the coming year - letters that were mailed to us to be read again at Advent.

There is much I want to leave behind in this old year and much that I am looking forward to. There is a sense of companionship in knowing I wait as many generations before me have - as John Wesley did, as slaves did on this night in 1862, and as we are tonight ... anticipating the arrival of this New Year. Comforted by the sureness we will be walking the path ahead of us with Jesus beside us.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for walking with us through all of the seasons of our lives. Thank you for this New Year and all the blessings that are to come. Amen.

Watch Night



The Moon is Always Whole, Jan Richardson

Sunday, January 1: New Year's Day

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

The story of the presentation of Jesus at the Temple in Luke 2 portrays a significant event in Jesus' life, and like much of Luke's Gospel, locates Jesus' life within a larger story of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike. Here, Jesus' parents, Simeon and Anna are all shown to be devout Jews faithful to Mosaic law who also recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

This passage also shows a glimpse of real uncertainty and conflict about what is to come for both Israel and Jesus. Today, as we start a new year, many of us are also anticipating a similar future. We might wish it were otherwise, but there is no empty promise or hope in this text that this can be avoided or pass us by. Where I do find hope though is that Jesus is shown first in this text as a human and that the nature of our salvation is one of incarnation and embodiment. His destiny as the Messiah is inextricably linked to his being human, and is therefore bound to us in our shared humanity.

Maybe I find hope in the incarnation because so many of our New Year's resolutions involve our bodies. Or maybe it's because we've all experienced an even deeper sense of disconnection from our own humanity as well as the humanity of others. Whatever the reason, may this passage remind us again that the incarnation allows us to share in the salvation promised by Jesus. Despite whatever uncertainty and conflict is to come, we are not alone. We are human. We are saved.

Prayer: God, who came in Jesus, the Word made flesh, we thank you that we are not alone. Be with us, sustain us and comfort us in all that the New Year will bring. Amen.

Monday, January 2

Scripture: John 6:1-14

This passage tells the familiar story of the loaves and fishes. It is Passover. The disciples survey the enormous crowd that has gathered to be fed and say: "We don't have the resources to solve this problem." But their wise leader responds, "Let's start with what we do have."

I often hear my anxious teenage son say: "The project is too big. I can't do it." My response is: "Let's break it down into bite-size pieces and work on one piece each day." In the end, the impossible project is done and my son is amazed. But what amazes me is that the memory of his success and method for achieving that success fades so quickly. He must relearn it each time a new project is assigned.

Perhaps, I should not be surprised. Adults have the same failure of memory. Once upon a time, we white folk thought people of color could not be members of our communities and churches. They could not be ordained to lead us. Such changes were too big, too potentially disastrous. Now we face the "project" of full inclusion of LGBT folk in the life of the church. Many proclaim: "It can't be done."

Yet, there are those who hear Christ whisper, "Start with what you do have. Begin to tell your stories of heartache, faith, love, and acceptance. Pass them on. Soon all will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and there will be fragments left over for the next big project.

If anything is certain, it is that God will be with us to give thanks and to prod us to begin to share our wealth (of money, talent, time, experience, love...). Whether we remember or not, God knows we have more than enough.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember that every big project can be broken down into doable pieces. Strengthen our courage and will to share the wealth that you have given us. Amen.

Tuesday, January 3

Scripture: Ephesians 4:17-32, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are all members of one another. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

As I read this passage, I remember a time in my journey when I was completely the opposite. I did not always speak the truth, I wasn't always kind to my neighbors and I certainly believed that forgiving was not my job. I am not necessarily proud of that part of my journey, but I am thankful for it. If not for that part of my journey, and the grace of God, I would never have known the importance of forgiving which included forgiving not just others but forgiving myself. I have always been as they say, my worst enemy when it came to feeling guilty because of something I did or didn't do and my punishment would be to beat myself up over and over. If I have learned anything in my journey thus far, it is God does not do guilt. That was all me!

I'm glad those days are behind me. This passage reminds us that God forgives us and gives us these rules to live by in order for us to be all that we were created to be and live the life God would have us live. As the new year begins, maybe one of your resolutions this year will be to practice daily God's rules. I know mine will.

Prayer: Lord, help us to know your love more clearly by helping us to put into practice the rules you have given us to live by and be all we can be in order to build up your kingdom. May we speak the truth to our neighbors, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as you have forgiven us. In Christ name we pray, Amen

Wednesday, January 4

Scripture: Psalm 20

When I am approached by those who visit my door with pamphlets of what they consider the "Good news", and they ask me if I know God, I always answer, "Does God know me?" Then they look at me with those blank stares of "file won't download" and I send them trotting off to the next house of sin and despair. That's how I feel some days. Does God know me? Does God get that I am giving this life the best that I have? Does God see that I feed the homeless, give to my church, suffer the ridiculous bantering of those less compassionate ?

These are the questions we ask ourselves when we feel challenged with the daily uncertainties that life throws at us. Well the "good news" came to me through Psalms 20.

Especially in line 6. "Now this I know: The lord gives victory to his anointed." Because we are all anointed when we do good works with God in our hearts. We can be the answer to those in distress. We can be the help from the sanctuary for others and ourselves.

It is of great importance that we all be a reminder for each other of this: God wants us to be happy and successful, and God does know us and of our deeds. However, we must also be reminded that we should reinforce our trust in God, and that when the charge of chariots and horses are upon us in our daily lives, we can be protected by this belief in us, and to remember it is Gods hand that moves us out of our own way, and answering those challenging questions.

Prayer: Dear God please help us be a reminder for each other that you see all of us and the good in our hearts and in our deeds. Amen.

Thursday, January 5

Scripture: Jonah 2: 2-9, "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry."

I'm heading home, tired after a day at work. I exited onto I-20 West easing my way over to the center of six lanes. About a quarter mile into my drive I saw a small tanker truck in distress forcing his way over to the right side of the highway. Suddenly the truck blew up and a massive cloud of thick white smoke billowed across the highway covering everything including my vehicle. I was driving in the center of six lanes filled with traffic moving about fifty miles an hour. I could not see beyond my windows in any direction. I was truly driving blind.

I could smell the smoke. Fear so consumed me that my legs trembled in a paralyzing weakness. I knew I could not slow down too much, because there were cars behind me. I could not speed up because there were cars in front somewhere, and also on either side. I could not even tell if I was in my lane.

I cried out desperately to God to help me. I feared an unknown impact from any direction. Though it seemed like forever I estimate the blind driving lasted about a minute before I broke through the white shroud. In the aftermath I was so weak I didn't know if I could continue to drive. Everyone had reacted the same, we were spaced apart and all in our proper lanes as we broke through. I believe without a doubt God heard my cry answering with divine intervention.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father Thank You for always hearing us whether we cry out or whisper. Amen.

Friday, January 6, Epiphany

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7

Christmas has come and gone. You'd be hard-pressed to find a Christmas tree or wreath or even so much as a scrap of ribbon. We've had our Christmas Eve services and Christmas Day celebrations. All the gifts have been given and the decorations taken down and put away. On my street every year about this time two houses stick out, my neighbors' and mine. We leave up our wreaths on our doors and our lighted trees in the window all the way until January 6th – the Epiphany. Every year someone invariably asks if we have just been too busy to take down our decorations and we explain that it's intentional that we leave our decorations and lights out for all to see through Epiphany Day. It is a reminder of the Light of Christ.

Epiphany is a celebration of who Jesus is and the miracles that attest to his divinity. The visit from the Magi symbolizes that even kings recognize the holiness and power that Jesus brought into the world. Kings prostrated themselves before Jesus the infant to acknowledge who he is - even before they could fully understand his complete divinity. We've already forgotten about the miracle that we celebrated twelve days ago but today we are reminded of the divinity of the Christ before us. The scripture says, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Christ is the Light that brings salvation to all.

It may seem silly to think that by leaving my lights up through Epiphany I can help someone see who Christ is. However, we are called as Christians to lead a life set apart to be the light that points others to the Light of Christ. Our everyday actions allow Christ's light to shine through us so others can see the saving grace in Christ.

Prayer: Most Holy Light, Guide my actions today to match my footsteps with you. Help me to make choices today that will reflect your love and grace. Open the door to relationships with others that allow me to share your love with those around me. Amen.

Saturday, January 7

Scripture: John 6:30-33, 48-51, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

When Reverend Kimberly Broerman was at Saint Mark, I would smile at the prospect of getting in her communion line because she gave out communion bread in such large pieces, I'd laughingly think of it as "breakfast".

One day I got up the courage to comment on her willingness to break off and give out such great hunks, even if it meant she went through more bread than the rest of the communion servers. She said, "This bread represents the grace of God, and I want everyone to have as much as possible."

When I assisted with communion the first time, I was a little scared - afraid I wouldn't do it right, that I might spill the communion juice on me or worse, someone else, or that I would say or do the wrong thing. It turned out to be a blessing I never expected. When you take communion, it seems to me that there's a difference - your face changes, your eyes grow softer, and there's a feeling around you. Even if for just a brief second, you're changed. Do you feel it, too?

When we come to be fed at the table, we experience a transformation. God gives us a part of God's self. As we take the elements, we are reminded that God lives in us every day.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to experience your grace every day but especially when we come to your table. Help us know that you love us and want us to be with you. Amen.

Sunday, January 8: Epiphany Sunday

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1

A traditional carol tells the story of our part in the adoration of the Magi.

Overjoyed and filled with wonderment, I rose to follow this majestic pageant.

Overjoyed and filled with wonderment, I rose to follow them where'er they went.

A brilliant ray shining night and day was leading them to a distant manger.

A brilliant ray shining night and day was leading them to where the Savior lay.

Although the calendar says it is time to move on, many of us are still basking in the glow of the Holiday. We are still at the manger. But it's time to pack away the tree, decorations and clean up the wrapping paper and yes, even store the manger and the banners. Epiphany informs us that something new is afoot.

But the story of the Magi is short-lived. They presented their gifts and moved on. The prophet Isaiah implores us, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." Light had been part of the entire story. A star appeared at the birth. Glory and light preceded the message to the shepherds. A star guided the magi.

If we put ourselves in the stories of the birth or in the prophecy of Isaiah, the question that comes up is, "So, where is the LIGHT that is the Christ leading us? Maybe it is to visit the imprisoned, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to care for the orphans and widows? That is, after all, what the adult Christ told us to do. I think so. Well, it's time. Your Light has come! Get moving! The work of the Kingdom is waiting for your feet, your hands, your voice. Arise, Shine!

Prayer: Oh guiding Light, forgive us for our shortcomings from last year's resolutions. We want to do better. "Guide my feet while I run this race."

To be Continued.....

**A Light Shines in the Darkness,
and the Darkness did Not Overcome It**

I'm not certain I can fully express my gratefulness to those who offered their writing and thoughts for this project. Together, this is a work of faithful people who have taken the Scriptures seriously and listened for the voice of God. I pray that this is a tool that you are able to use, not just this Advent, but for years to come.

Thanks to all who contributed to this devotional guide, the writers and artists. As each devotion would arrive in my inbox, it was usually accompanied with the words, "I hope this is okay." As you can tell, dear readers, it's more than okay. There is truth and a deep faith in each entry, submitted by individuals to make a beautiful project. These are small glimpses of the faith that God has given to us, and I thank you, authors, for sharing your faith with us.

The Season of Advent is a time of anticipation. It is clear through these texts that we are in deep need of a Savior. The world is now and has always been a difficult place. God has not set creation into motion and then stood at a distance. Rather, God has promised to be with us through life, death, and in life after death, all through the power of Christ Jesus.

This year, as we celebrate spirit of Emmanuel ("God with us"), let us carry that joy into the world. We are not alone, and we will never be alone. For God loves us now, always, and forever.

Thanks be to God!

Mandy



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