

Advent Devotional

2020



St. John's Tuxland
(A United Methodist Congregation)

LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH

*For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6*

This is a wonderful passage from Isaiah. And as we enter this Advent/Christmas season it's a great reminder of God coming into our world in human form. We sing this verse during this season to proclaim the wonderful gift we've been given in Jesus Christ. His name – Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Take a moment and just reflect on these amazing names of our Lord Jesus. We love them all, but this last one - Prince of Peace - really stands out as something different than what so many of us experience in life. Peace is elusive. It's difficult to get a hold of because there can be so much conflict in our relationships. Yet Jesus is called the Prince of Peace for a reason.

If you read through the gospels and check out Jesus' ministry He often talked about peace. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:9, Jesus said, *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.* In John 14:27 Jesus said to his disciples - *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* And in Colossians 3:15 the Apostle Paul tells the church - *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.*

We are to represent Christ as His followers. Since He is the Prince of Peace we're called to be ambassadors of His peace in this world. How are we doing with this calling? Are our lives reflecting the peace of God?

Jesus says in John 14:27 that He's given us His peace; it's a gift that is ours. And no matter what happens we can experience the peace of God by letting it reign in our lives. When we hear this we can't help but think we have a choice. We can allow our hearts to be troubled and afraid or we can take the advice Jesus offers and live in peace. But how does this work? How can we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts? It begins with knowing Jesus and the gift He is. When we realize this gift of peace – His peace given freely to us – it changes our spirit. When our spirit gets up close and personal with God's Spirit we begin to reflect the character of God Himself. During this holy season take time to reflect on our great Prince of Peace. Take time to just spend time with God - get in His word and talk and listen to Him; and give thanks for the peace we have with God because of Jesus Christ and all that He's done for us by His life, death and resurrection. Take time to understand that the promise of God's peace every moment of every day is possible when we remember our calling in Christ as members together of one body of believers, the Church of Jesus Christ.

It is our prayer that this Advent Devotional – written by members of St. John's church family – will be a blessing to you and will help you to connect with the peace that passes all understanding.

***MAY GOD'S PEACE BE WITH YOU ALL THROUGH THIS
ADVENT/CHRISTMAS SEASON!***



PREPARING OUR HEART FOR CHRISTMAS

Christmas is coming! Loved ones to see, gifts to give, baking to share. We prepare our homes for the celebration. But, even more important than this outward preparation is the preparation of our heart. The Advent season is a beautiful reminder to prepare our hearts, as we prepare our homes, to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus!

Advent is all about hope! Is your heart filled with hope? Do you have a confident expectation of your tomorrow? What happens when the road ahead is filled with loss and stress weighs your shoulders down? When confidence in tomorrow dwindles, what can you do? How can you walk in hope when you feel hopeless inside?

The one word answer to this question is JESUS...the Jesus of Christmas.

Hope in Jesus comes from more than just a belief that He was once a baby in a manger. This hope in Jesus has been called “an anchor for the soul”. It is something deep within that secures you through the storms of life. Putting your hope in Jesus will give you:

Hope for Help. We are invited to come to Him and confidently ask for help. Hebrews 4:16 tells us to: *come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in our time of need.*

Hope to overcome. With Christ’s strength we can overcome great obstacles. I John 5:40 tells us: *and this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.*

Hope for power. Sometimes we find ourselves with a task that simply looks too big for us. We need strength to do what we need to do. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says: *My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.*

Hope for eternity. When we put our faith and hope in Jesus, it not only gives us help, strength and power where we walk today, but it also gives us hope for life after death. It is the confident expectation of the ultimate tomorrow.

PRAYER: Dear God, Thank you that you sent Jesus on that first Christmas long ago to be my Savior. Forgive me and show me how to live in the confident expectation that You can impact my life, my character and my circumstances. Amen.

Monday

November 30, 2020

HOPE

COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley, 1744

Jesus is the “hope of all the earth”. Beyond all the material “everything” Jesus is the ultimate hope because His birth brought the ultimate gift – the promise of eternal life in heaven. There is no other gift that can possibly surpass that!

In this time of preparation, let us take some time to remember what the true focus of this season is meant to be. A time of preparation for the coming of Christ. Not just His coming over two thousand years ago; but a time of preparation for the coming of Christ again. How do we do that? The answer lies in the lyrics of the hymn. We can seek release from our sins and fears. We can seek rest in Jesus. We can allow the Spirit of Christ to reign within us. Surely, we can take a few minutes at the beginning of each day and another few minutes before ending each day to spend with God. We can read a quick devotional or take a moment to recall three things for which we are thankful for from that day. These simple things will allow God to do good things in your life and give Him glory.

PRAYER: Precious Jesus, You are the hope of all the earth. Please release us from our sins and fears. Help us to find our rest with you. Live in us forever and help us to prepare for your coming with hope in our hearts. Amen

Denise Clark
Christ Servant Minister

Tuesday

December 1, 2020

A SAVIOR

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:8-14

KEY VERSE: *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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:10*

You’re riding down the street, and a guy in the car next to yours yells out the window, “Give me your hand! I can save you...” Of course, he wants to sell you insurance, but the whole scene is a little unbelievable. Was it any more believable for a bunch of shepherds out in the field, watching a flock of sheep, to see angels in the sky? And what they told these sleepy shepherds was that a baby was being born who could save them? Every time I hear this story I have to wonder if I would have thought, “Sure a baby is going to save me. Let’s just all go and see the baby.” Or would I have been more likely to say, “This has got to be a dream. I’ll wake up in the morning and everything will be fine. We’ll move the sheep on to the next pasture and hope the Romans don’t bother us.”

Right now I’m sitting in my apartment, looking out the window at a beautiful Spring scene. The dogwood tree is blooming, the grass is green and the sun is shining brightly. Everything looks beautiful and normal, but it’s not. We’re in the middle of very uncertain times. A virus has overtaken life as we know it. Everything has changed. There is nothing normal about my world today. Those shepherds faced a similar situation. The Roman government had seized their country and they had lost control. They had no idea what was going to happen next. They needed someone to come and save them.

An old song I remember from my camp meeting days begins like this:

In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!

No matter where you are or what you think you need, the coming of our Savior is what we need most today and every day. As that chorus states:

*This Rock is Jesus, Yes He's the One,
This Rock is Jesus, the only One;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

PRAYER: Holy God, help us to realize our need of someone to save us. Continue to guide our faith so that, no matter what we face today and in the future, we’re very sure that we hold fast to our Savior. Through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Sue Uzelmeier

JOY

SCRIPTURE READING: *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great JOY that will be for all people.”*

Luke 2:8-10

That great joy was the very first CHRISTmas gift – given with love, to us by God.

As a child that joy was looking through the Sears Wish Book with my sisters and the anticipation of a special gift on Christmas morning. As a young adult the joy was finding that special gift to give to a family member or friend. Then as a parent it was the joy of seeing my children when they received that special gift.

Through all of these Christmases – as a child, young adult and parent – the real meaning of Christmas was always part of our celebration. The story of Jesus’ birth, the special placing of the manger and all of the figures, Church, Christmas carols, getting together with family – these were all things that put JOY into Christmas.

PRAYER: Dear Heavenly Father, help us to always remember why we celebrate Christmas by giving gifts. Thank You for the greatest gift – Your Son, Jesus, given to all with love. Amen.

Ruth Bowyer

Thursday

December 3, 2020

KEEP THE FAITH...JUST BELIEVE

SCRIPTURE: *Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."* Mark 5:36

Many of us have been living in a new reality for the past 6 months. We have practiced physical distancing to the best of our ability. Our kids have continued their education through hours and days of screen time. Teachers are experiencing extreme burnout, trying to juggle teaching kids in school and at home, at the same time.

Parents have juggled platefuls of expectations and feel like they're not doing anything well. Those who live alone feel even more isolated.

Many worship services are still totally online and there are now deep divides among religious leaders over the "right" way to conduct worship.

Government leaders & virology experts are continuing the hard work of discerning the best way for us to take baby steps back to normal.

It is all an exercise of faith. We are people of faith. In the face of heartache, we have faith. In the wake of confusion, we have faith. In the turmoil of indecision, we have faith. In the mundane every day, we have faith. As we continue to take steps to get back to normal, it is going to be hard to have restraint and to have patience.

And what do we turn to when things are hard? Faith. Faith in Jesus. Faith that is a free gift from God. Faith that comes to us in the quiet peace during an early morning walk, and the stillness of the Spirit. Faith, no matter how small, can move mountains. It's going to be a hard process. We are in this, with God, together.

PRAYER: Dear Father in Heaven, please help us to be faithful through times of turmoil and change...rather than waiting to become faithful after the change is over.

Trish Conover

Friday

December 4, 2020

LOVE IS INDISPENSABLE

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 15:11-32

The Bible has always been a love story for me. Our creation and the birth of a Savior is to me the result of God's wanting a relationship with us...a love relationship that desires courage, compassion and connection. And when we think about these three, it comes to mind that any/every love relationship needs them as a firm, lasting foundation.

Courage is often found when forgiveness is necessary. Preparing for a study on the Prodigal Son, I found myself wondering if I would reflect the behavior of the father....would I have the courage to forgive to the depth he did? Forgiveness often means something has to die....a hurt, a misunderstanding, anger....so that forgiveness can take its place. This is the sign of courage....the love of the father for his son, and his courage to forgive restored their relationship. Are we capable of this as often as we should be?

Compassion is found in sharing with someone when fear, or suffering, or misfortune shows up and there is a strong need to end the suffering. This is where I often find my faith takes a seat. It doesn't solve my problems or take away occasional sorrow. But it does sit with me. It is there in comfort. Knowing my God is always there means I am never alone.

Connection in a relationship has been defined as "an energy between people that is felt when they feel heard and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment and when they derive sustenance and strength from their relationship." How wonderful if we could feel this in every relationship we develop! The depth of our relationship with our God is often dependent on how many times we connect and reconnect. Connections are made through worship, through Bible studies, through mission projects, through anything that confirms our relationship with God.

This Advent season may be the perfect opportunity to deepen our connections with others and with our Savior...to work on courage, compassion and connection...to remember the night when a birth changed our lives forever.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, as we experience this Advent season with feelings of wonder and gratefulness for the love given to us through the birth of your Son, watch over us as we continue to grow closer to you and to those you've placed in our lives as reminders that you are God and God alone. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

Barbara Schneider

Saturday

December 5, 2020

WAITING AROUND

SCRIPTURE: *Nonetheless, the LORD is waiting to be merciful to you, and will rise up to show you compassion. The LORD is a God of justice; happy are all who wait for him.* Isaiah 30:18 (CEB)

Waiting for COVID-19 restrictions to be lifted so I can spend more than a half an hour with my mother. . .

Waiting for a cure for coronavirus, cancer, and other devastating illnesses. . .

Waiting for peace in a world riddled with dissension and despair. . .

There are plenty of days where I feel like I'm just waiting around—waiting for things to happen that are not in my control. Some days the issues might be universally perceived-- like the need for a coronavirus vaccine; some days they're limited to my personal sphere: will the dishwasher repairman ever get here?? Either way, if I'm not careful, I can become focused on what I perceive to be lacking in my life and what's missing from the moment. I can become fixated on absence rather than abundance.

The reading today from Isaiah is one that makes me smile because it reminds me that you and I aren't the only ones who wait! God is waiting, too—waiting for me, for you, for all of us—to turn our anxious or dissatisfied selves toward God's face. God is waiting to shower us with an abundance of comfort that will soothe us in our pain! God is waiting to lavish mercy and tender care upon us in the midst of the chaos and the struggle! God is waiting, to put it simply, to help *us* in our waiting!

In this season of Advent, as we find ourselves once again waiting with anticipation and hope for the Infant King to be born anew in our hearts, may we remember that God is ready to join us in *all* of our times of waiting. There is no need for us to ever wait for anything all alone.

PRAYER: Holy God, we thank you that we always have the opportunity to wait in the calm of your presence. Help us to remember to turn to you to find peace in every circumstance. In the name of our Coming King, Amen.

Reverend Erin Maurer

Sunday

December 6, 2020



COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

SCRIPTURE: *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 .* Isaiah 9:6

Lines! They're everywhere this time of year. There is a line of traffic to get into the parking lot to do our Christmas shopping, and a line of people to make our purchases before we leave. Our kids wait in line to see Santa, and we wait longer than usual to treat ourselves to that special holiday latte. In our celebration of Christmas, we get a lot of practice in waiting.

In a strange way all of this waiting fits the Christian calendar. The Church sets aside the four weeks before Christmas as a time to prepare for the coming of our long-expected Messiah. This season called Advent is an opportunity to focus on how God came to us in history in the person of Jesus, how He comes to us in the present, and how He will come again in the future.

In December 1745, Charles Wesley published a two-verse prayer in *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* that helps us enter into the season of Advent. "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" appears in the *United Methodist Hymnal* with only minor changes from the original.

As we sing Wesley's words, we enter into an ancient prayer. For hundreds of years, our ancestors in the faith prayed for the Messiah to come. God had blessed them to be a blessing to all the nations but it was difficult to feel blessed in the pain of defeat, exile, and occupation. They longed for the Messiah to come and reestablish the kingdom.

We understand those feelings of distance from God. While we have experienced times when God feels near, there are others seasons of struggle and doubt. Many have felt this isolation – this distance from God – during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some have spent time wondering if God is still with us. So, we join this prayer today, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus."

We also know this on a much larger scale. We see the brokenness of our world and its systems. We long for justice for all people regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, status, economic condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation. We await the day when Jesus will return to usher in the new creation and heal our broken world. We join this prayer for our future also.

PRAYER: With all the saints of God from every part of the world we pray this day –
"Come, thou long-expected Jesus."
Amen.

Monday

December 7, 2020

JOY

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere

Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night, behold throughout
the heavens there shown a holy light.

The shepherds feared and trembled, when lo!

Above the earth, rang out the angel chorus
that hailed the Savior's birth.

Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,
and God sent us salvation
that blessed Christmas morn.

John W. Work Jr.

Can you imagine being so filled with joy that you would climb to the highest peak of a mountain and shout at the top of your lungs so that everyone all around you could hear you? What news could you receive that would be worth that amount of enthusiasm and promote such an effort from you? Is the news of the birth of Jesus that exciting to you? Maybe not.

Many people who were alive at the time of Jesus' birth did not find the news all that exciting. There were some that did not believe the news when they heard it. What a shame! The Messiah for whom many people had been waiting for so very long had arrived. To some people it was not a big event. Why? If you placed no significance to the possibility of eternal life without any sorrows or troubles, then the birth of Jesus was no big deal. However, if you believe that Jesus would bring you a time when you would be able to leave all of your troubles and sorrows behind and live forever in peace and joy and love, then it really is a big deal. It is absolutely something that is worth climbing to the top of a mountain and shouting about. Even more good news is that God does not ask you to do that. All He asks is that you love Him and just talk about Him to others you meet every day.

PRAYER: Blessed Jesus, Your arrival here on earth is good news beyond our ability to imagine. You love us so much that you wish to fill us with overflowing joy – to the point of telling all the world about you and the great, good news that you have for everyone who chooses to believe in you. Grant that you may fill each of us with so much joy that we easily share your good news with everyone. Amen

Denise Clark

Christ Servant Minister

Tuesday

December 8, 2020

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 1:18-25

When Mary tells Joseph about her pregnancy, he considers quietly breaking off their engagement instead of publically shaming her. However, an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him, *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

This pronouncement would seem to be beyond human logic or reasoning. Could God's Holy Spirit enter a human life and conception take place? Surely Joseph pondered the Angel's message. Being in love with Mary and being a man of integrity, Joseph decided to trust God. He married Mary. After all, the angel who appeared to Joseph confirmed what Mary had already told him. When the baby was born, Joseph, as instructed by God, named him Jesus. The name means *Jesus saves*.

Thus, the very nature of God entered one human life — that of Jesus.

I think the Christmas message moves beyond the baby Jesus' birth. I believe that we celebrate the birth of Jesus because of his entire life...his ministry on earth, his death on the cross, and his resurrection, which has changed our lives for eternity.

It's all about Emmanuel, *God with us*. Jesus with us, for us, and through us to spread the Good News.

PRAYER: Father God, thank You for Your incredible gift of grace through Jesus. Guide us to trust You in all the circumstances of our lives. Strengthen us to set aside our fears, to turn to You, and to act in faith as You use us according to Your will. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mary Anne May

Wednesday

December 9, 2020

WELCOME CHRISTMAS

SCRIPTURE: *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* Isaiah 9:6

WELCOME CHRISTMAS

from How the Grinch Stole Christmas

- Fah-who foris, dah-who doris, welcome Christmas, bring your light.
Fah-who foris, dah-who doris, welcome in the cold at night!
- Welcome Christmas, fah-who rah-moose! Welcome Christmas dah-who dah-moose!
Welcome Christmas while we stand, heart to heart and hand in hand!
 - Trim up the tree with Christmas stuff like bingle balls and who-floo fluff.
Trim up the tree with goo-hoo guns and bizer blicks at once!
 - Trim every blessed window and trim every blessed door.Hang up woo boo hoo bricks, then run out and get some more!
 - Hang pantukas on the ceiling, pile panpunas on the floor.Trim every blessed needle on the blessed Christmas tree.
Christmas comes tomorrow, trim you, trim me!
 - Trim up the tree with busel buns, and bliffer bloofs, and wunsel wuns.
Trim up your uncle and your aunt with yards of who flunt flan!
(Trim up with yards of who flunt flan!)

Theodore Geisel is the one who wrote unforgettable lyrics to the “HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS.” bursting with the tongue-twisting phrases and words. Dr. Seuss’ song lyrics were so believable that the audience requested the translation of them! People flooded the network with letters asking where they could find the a word-in-word translation of the song. There was NO translation. It was a genius of Theodore Geisel’s “Dr. Seuss” that made something believable and real and so sticky to memory.

From <https://celebratewomantoday.com/why-the-grinch-stole-christmas-facts/>

You already made the leap: we have THE Christmas Story that we celebrate every year, it needs NO translation. And it is believable and real and so sticky to memory. Watching the movie again this year is a good anecdote to our very subdued celebration. Of course, Christmas will come anyway. Regardless of the sinking economy, regardless of the pandemic, regardless of loneliness and isolation, regardless of everything we are losing and have lost. We cannot lose God’s love, His Grace, His matchless gift of His Son our Savior born this Christmas Day.

Instead of focusing on what is lost, how much better for us to dwell on what is not lost. The beauty of our world, faithfulness of friends and loved ones, beautiful music. You will be ready when it is time to jump up and sing “Joy to the World”!

Colossians 3: 15-17: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ... And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

PRAYER: Dearest Lord, You are our priceless gift, our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Amen

Betty Witschard

Thursday

December 10, 2020

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLES

SCRIPTURE: *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.*

John 3:21NRSV

I did not encounter a wreath of Advent candles until I came home on Christmas break one year while in college and found them used in a worship service at my home church. A new minister who arrived that June had introduced the practice. There was no song to go with the candle lighting. The song we now sing, “Light the Advent Candle” was not written until several years later, in 1975.

Having not grown up with an Advent Wreath, I have always found the practice interesting and did some research into its origin. The modern Advent Wreath was invented by Johann Hinrich Wichern, a German Lutheran pastor in Hamburg, Germany. Wichern ran a mission school. The children at the school were eager for Christmas to arrive and asked him almost every day when the holiday would arrive. In 1839, Wichern hoped to avoid the daily questions with a visual aid. He took an old wagon wheel and placed 20 small red candles and 4 large white candles on the wheel, then decorated it with greens. As Advent began, a red candle was lit each day, with a big white candle lighting services on Sunday. No more questions!

The Advent Wreath idea spread to other German Lutheran churches and was reduced to the four Sunday candles for simplicity. The Roman Catholics in Germany borrowed the idea in the 1920’s and it spread to Lutheran churches in the United States in the 1930’s. By 1964, an Advent Wreath appeared on a children’s television program and soon it was adopted by most other Protestant denominations. In recent years, Orthodox churches have begun to use a six candle wreath, with green, blue, gold, white, purple and red colors since their Advent runs two weeks longer.

Wreaths are circular to represent God’s infinite love, and the candles represent the Light of God coming into the world through Jesus Christ. Candle colors can vary – many use three purple and one pink candle, others (particularly in Anglican churches) have four blue candles, while British churches tend to use red candles. Some wreaths (like St. John’s) have a fifth candle which is white and called the Christ candle, lit at Christmas. St. John’s candles symbolize hope, peace, joy, and love. Some other churches have the candles symbolize the prophecy of the Messiah, the journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds, and the angels’ proclamation of peace. In the United Kingdom, the symbolism is linked to the lectionary readings which includes John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary.

PRAYER: Lord, may the Advent Wreath be particularly meaningful for us at St. John’s this year, as the Light of Your Son is so needed in our troubled world. Bless all who light its candles, whatever their colors or symbolism, as we all commemorate the arrival of our Savior. Amen.

Carol Rice

A CHILD IS BORN

SCRIPTURE READING: *For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.*
Isaiah 9:6-7

The words of the anthems we sang in the choir always held so very much meaning for me and I would meditate on them. The words of this anthem we sang, I hold dear all year long.

A CHILD IS BORN

God's chosen people longed for their Deliverer
The days were dark; oppression filled the land,
Into this scene came Holy Word who took on flesh,
And those with eyes to see, said of the Man;
A Child is born beyond all our imaginings,
A Child is born fulfilling prophecy.
And by His life the world will see the face of God
And by His death we'll be forgiven and set free.
The earth is tired; creation longs to be made new,
And likewise, we were made for more than this.
For in our hearts lie pieces of eternity
To be awakened soon with heaven's kiss
A Child is born beyond our wildest hopes and dreams
A Child is born redeeming history—
And by His life, the world has seen the face of God—
And by His death, we're forgiven and set free.
By His new life, we're forgiven and set free.
Set free!

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, open our hearts to receive Your wondrous Gift and to put our trust in Him. We thank You for Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, Lord and King. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Millie Funk

Saturday

December 12, 2020

BABY BORN IN BETHLEHEM

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 2:1-6

KEY VERSES: *He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. Luke 2:5,6*

Luke tells of Jesus' birth in just 6 verses. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to register for the census. The NIV Bible suggests that the word "manger" indicates that Jesus was born in a stable. Tradition says it was a cave used as a stable.

I had the privilege of going to visit Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity this past February. The church closed because of coronavirus on March 5 and reopened two months later. I feel lucky to have been allowed inside. It is not an easy visit. The Church of the Nativity is actually two churches, the Orthodox Basilica of the Nativity and the Roman Catholic Church of Saint Catherine. Justinian I, the Byzantine emperor, rebuilt the Nativity Church toward the end of his reign in 565 AD. Since then, the church has been expanded, added to and fought over by and between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The large crowds that come to see Jesus birthplace mean the wait to see the spot where Jesus was born and the manger can take several hours. People come from all over the world. Sometimes, they become impatient and unruly. Our Palestinian tour guide helped us stay safe. Three churches control the site — the Catholics, Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Church. In addition to people waiting in line there are times when specific prayers, celebrations, or masses take place in the church. The visit to Bethlehem was strange indeed.

This year here at St John's our celebration of Jesus' birth will be different because of COVID-19 but hopefully we will be able to contemplate and appreciate the true wonder and majesty of God's gift to us. In retrospect, I think Mary and Joseph's experience in Bethlehem probably had some unruly crowds in addition to the people who came to adore their baby boy.

Christmas is a time when love came down. Let us rejoice in it!

PRAYER: Dear Lord, We are so incredibly grateful for the gift of Your Son Jesus. Help us to fully appreciate this gift of love You have given us. Help us to share this love with others always. Amen

Arlene Williams

Sunday

December 13, 2020



WEARING JESUS' LOVE

SCRIPTURE: *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* John 13:35

As a follower of Jesus, you wear a distinguishing mark. You wear His love!

When Jesus came to this earth He brought a special kind of love. This love is unselfish, compassionate and unconditional. He loves us just as we are. He gives us His love so we can give it away in the same unselfish, compassionate and unconditional way He gives it to us. He tells us this love will be our trade mark. It will distinguish us as followers of Jesus.

Your actions reflect Jesus to the world around you. You can choose to offer love or to hold it back. When it is hard to offer love, just ask Him to increase His love in your heart so that you are able to give more away.

As you move closer to Christmas, be reminded of the distinguishing mark you carry as a follower of Jesus. Ask for His love to be evident in your words and actions as you interact with others. Listen to people with sincerity and interest.

Wear the love of Jesus as your distinguishing mark as His follower!

PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for Your generous love to me. Thank You that You see the potential in my life rather than all the shortfalls I have. Help me to offer that same gracious love to those I meet this Christmas season. May everyone know that I am a follower of Jesus by my love. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Monday

December 14, 2020

LOVE

AWAY IN A MANGER

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.
The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes;
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
and stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.
Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.

(Anonymous)

The love of a small child is priceless. The innocence and purity of their love is what makes it so wonderful. Perhaps that is why Jesus came to earth as a baby; to show us His perfect love and to evoke that kind of love in all of us. Perhaps, that is why Jesus taught that we need to be like little children to inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Even if we look at only the commercialism of Christmas, the biggest “target” of all the gift buying, baking, decorating and so forth is children (of all sizes and ages). Wouldn't it be delightful to be able to be like a little child again at Christmas? Then you would see everything differently. It would all seem like magic. And, of course, the biggest “magic” is love.

What would happen if you took a few little moments of time to look at your Christmas preparations with a little love? Would you find that you don't need to do as much? Would you find a little love to share with others and yourself? Would you be asking Jesus to be nearby throughout everything that you are doing? Would you take a moment to tell Jesus that you love Him? After all, it's all about the love.

PRAYER: Loving Jesus, We cannot begin to fathom how much love you have for us. We trust in your tender, loving care of us. We pray that we may, through the grace of your love, see Christmas through the “magic” love as a child. Amen

Denise Clark
Christ Servant Minister

Tuesday

December 15, 2020

WOULD YOU

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 1:26-38

When we read of Mary's quick response to the angel, we marvel at her faith. Even though she was perplexed at what the angel said to her, her response, after he said, *For nothing will be impossible with God* (Luke 1:37 NRSV), was immediate. She responded, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word* (Luke 1:38 NRSV).

Maybe we question what God is calling us to do because we don't know what is ahead. Do you think that Mary would have said no if she had known what was ahead for her child?

Ponder these abbreviated words of the Christmas song, *Mary Did You Know*©

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you

Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?

Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?

When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God

Mary did you know?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again

The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?

That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am?

Oh Mary did you know?

(Songwriters: Buddy Greene / Mark Lowry © Warner Chappell Music, Inc.)

Since we know Mary could not possibly have known all the song mentions, we know she could not possibly have known about the end of Jesus life—humiliated, tortured, and crucified. Women were not taught the Scriptures like boys were, so she probably would not have learned all the prophecies even if she had heard them. So, would she still have said yes? I believe she would have because she said yes without knowing what the future held.

Here are a few:

Rejected by his people—Is. 53:3
Would raise the dead, heal the blind/deaf/lame/mute—Is. 35:5-6
Would be crucified—Is. 53:12
Would be raised from the dead—Hosea 6:2
Sacrificed for our sin—Is. 53:5-12
Would be King—Zech. 9:9

Remember Jerimiah 29:11: *I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for prosper you and to harm you, and plans to give you hope* (NRSV).

So, with Mary, can we say yes, without knowing the future? This Advent season let us say, *Lord, let it be with me according to your word.* We can do that because Scripture tells us, *Do not be afraid* and step out in faith.

PRAYER: Gracious God, Help us walk by the same faith Mary had. As we delve into the Scripture, let us see that what the prophets foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures came to fruition in the New Testament in Jesus. If we question, let us search the Scriptures for the answers to our deepest questions. In Christ, we pray. Amen

Reverend Sue Czarnecki

Wednesday

December 16, 2020

WAITING

SCRIPTURE READING: *Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid.* John 14:27 (CEB)

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing to celebrate Christ's first coming to this world. Waiting is a part of our busy lives yet I don't think most of us enjoy waiting despite the wonders of the end result!

2020 has been year of waiting for Jon and me. Waiting for my hip surgery, waiting for the quarantine to end, waiting for a vaccine for Covid 19, waiting for Jon's retirement (he retired Oct. 5!!) and waiting to be able to hug my family and friends again. The list is long for each of you too, I am sure.

So many things seem out of our control. Time during the wait can lead to anxiety, loneliness, frustration and feelings of hopelessness. One thing that I have turned to is the Scriptures which remind me that God is still in control and to lean into the peace that only He can give me. Psalm 40 is one of my favorites. David reminds us where our help comes from.

*I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.
He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the Lord.*
Psalm 40:1-3 (NLT)

If we fill our hearts with praise and trust in the Lord, it will remind us that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. That assurance can help us to wait with expectant hope, faith in who He is, and bring us His peace. Peace of Christ to all this Advent Season.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the reminder that we do not wait alone. Grant us your peace, joy and the certain knowledge that Jesus has come for each and every one of us. In His name, Amen.

Roberta Nelson

Thursday

December 17, 2020

THE CHRISTMAS STAR

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 2:1- 12

The Christmas Star, also known as the Star of Bethlehem, played a major part in the story of the birth of Jesus.

In the Bible, only in the book of Matthew, do we find the story of the Star and its relationship to the Wisemen's visit to Baby Jesus. These three men were most likely astrologers, so they were well aware of the Star's significance. Although many try to relate the Star's appearance to certain astrological occurrences, I believe that the Magi (the three Wisemen) considered it to be just the Star of Bethlehem – meant to worship Jesus' birth and direct them to the Bethlehem stable.

Astrologists through the years believed the Star to be a comet because several were visible at that time. Another theory was a Supernova (one was seen as recently as 2005) from the constellation Aquila. These are suppositions and have no proof.

This will be a Christmas like no other. We will have restrictions, reminders, and ideas much different from other years. However, it will still be Christmas and the Star will be a great reminder of Jesus birth and God's love for us.

Linda Mangle

Friday

December 18, 2020

NEVER TOO OLD

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. 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. John 3:16-17

I threw in my bag an almost-empty tube of toothpaste as I packed for vacation thinking I'd finish it and toss it before I returned home. Well, at the end of the week, there was still some left, so I brought it home. I was surprised it lasted another 10 days! How quickly we toss aside things that are almost empty or old. How often does a senior citizen feel he's no longer fit to serve or do much? And oh, how very sad that feeling is!

It energizes me to visit a retirement home in the independent living area and see how much life there is still left to live! I marvel at the woman who I can hear beautifully playing the piano as I walk past her apartment. Or I see the woman recovering from a broken ankle diligently walking with her physical therapist. I hear the peals of laughter coming from a dinner table of friends sharing a joke. I meet a woman outside who tells me she goes for a morning and evening walk every-day to draw nearer to God.

God has a way of showing us throughout the Bible how much an older person can do. Just how old were Abraham and Sarah when she gave birth to Isaac? How old was Noah when he built that ark? Moses was no young lad when he led the Hebrew slaves to their freedom!

And just how old is the Christmas story? Do you find yourself thinking, "Oh, I heard that so many times before!" But just maybe you need to read it once more, maybe in a different version than the one you are so familiar with, to hear something you may have missed. Have you thought about what it would have been like to be in Mary's place? Could you have been so receptive and obedient to giving birth to God's son? Or Joseph? How would you have handled all the whispers about Mary's pregnancy? How about those shepherds tending to their sheep when all of a sudden they were surrounded by a multitude of angels delivering the message that Christ the Lord, a Savior, was born? The shepherds found baby Jesus wrapped in priestly cloths. Did they realize they were the same cloths used by the church — specifically, the shepherd priests — to keep the lambs clean and free of blemishes as the lambs were prepared for the sacrifice? Jesus is the lamb of God and the great High Priest, so was fitting because one day He would be sacrificed like a lamb for you and me.

Just how many times have you sung those old hymns in Christmases past? Knowing the Savior of the world has come should move us to let loose with praise and song. Do you close your eyes and still marvel as the shepherds must have at the sight of baby Jesus when you sing "Away in a Manger"? How can you not be lifted by the Holy Spirit as you sing "Joy to the World" or "Go Tell it on the Mountain"! All of these old hymns still carry that earth-shattering message - ***Our Savior is Born*** - heard so many years ago and still so relevant today.

PRAYER: Dear God, Thank you for the birth of your Son and our Savior Jesus, who like a sacrificial lamb, died on the cross for our sins so we never need to be separated from You. Amen.

Eileen Phillips

Saturday

December 19, 2020

INEXTINGUISHABLE

SCRIPTURE READING: *Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!— came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out. John 1:5 (MSG)*

I can't remember how old I was, but I was too young to miss the fun or the humor of it all. To me it was more like a mean joke, and shouldn't birthdays be free of anything like that? Probably around five years old or so, I delighted in the exciting moment when I was asked to take a deep breath, make a wish, and blow out the candles on my birthday cake. That special day, I inhaled until I could hold no more, scrunched up my eyes and face in deep thought of a desired fantasy, and then with all the force my little body could muster, I blew out the candles. Success!!! Yes! They all went out! Until. . .they all lit up again.

Not understanding, I got my bearings, reassumed my stance, took my breath and... it happened again...and again! What was going on and why was everyone chuckling? This was not how it was supposed to happen! As my frustration grew, someone—either my mother or my older sister—explained that the candles were special. They were made to never go out. Until they made contact with water, they'd keep re-igniting regardless of my determined efforts. I wasn't a fan.

While I still don't appreciate the attributes of trick birthday candles, there is another source of inextinguishable light for which I do give thanks. Time and time again, Jesus' light has led me safely along a path that was dim and uncertain. I fall to my knees in immense gratitude when I consider the joy and security I have in Jesus' enduring Life-Light! Because of his faithfulness, I have come to know that in any time of personal darkness—loss, rejection, betrayal, or failure--I am guided by an Eternal Light that will never be extinguished. I know that in times of collective darkness—political unrest, global illness, and unjust oppression--my Life-Light will never stop blazing out into the night! How glad I am to know that there is nothing that can snuff out the brilliant life-giving radiance of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

PRAYER: As the days grow short and our hours of light diminish this winter season, let us not be discouraged, for we know that you, O Jesus, are the Light who remains vibrant and strong. Help us to remember that no darkness we encounter—whether it be the gloom of sin and sadness or merely the shadows of winter—nothing can ever put out your loving Light. Amen.

Reverend Erin Maurer

Sunday

December 20, 2020



PEACEMAKERS

SCRIPTURE: *You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is focused on You because He trusts in You. Isaiah 26:3*

The angels proclaimed *Peace on Earth* when the Baby Jesus was born. Today we wonder as we listen to the evening news...is peace possible?

We all need two kinds of peace in our lives. We need inner peace, but we also need peace with others. God addresses both. He tells us what to do to find that peace.

Inner peace begins with a relationship with God and it continues as we focus on His strength and allow Him to fill us. At any time we can exchange our weakness for His strength in any area of life.

Re-read the verse above and personalize it...*God will keep me in perfect peace as my mind focuses of Him and trusts Him.* Remember that our inner peace depends on our trust in God.

If inner peace seems to be hard to find these days and if anxiety spills over in your life, choose to trust God. You can choose to put your hand in His and draw on His patience and wisdom as you take each step. He WILL guide you through your life if you ask Him. Choosing to trust God will take you down the road to inner peace. Choosing not to trust Him will take you down the road to stress and worry. Inner peace is there for the choosing — it's a simple choice.

Peace with others begins as we understand that God has called us to be peacemakers in our world.

Is there somewhere in your own world where you can be a peacemaker this Christmas? Don't miss the blessing God promises in your life as you respond to his call to be a peacemaker in your own circle.

WE CAN HELP BRING PEACE TO OUR WORLD ONE HEART AT A TIME!

PRAYER: Dear God, Make me an instrument of Your peace this Christmas and all through the New Year. Amen.

Monday

December 21, 2020

PEACE

LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.

With God, our creator (father), children all are we.

Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now.

With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow:

to take each moment

and live each moment in peace eternally

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Sy Miller and Jill Jackson

One of the great gifts that Jesus gave to us was the gift of peace. It was not just any ordinary type of peace. It was not the kind of peace that lasts for only a short while. “I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give.” (John14:27 NLT). What a wonderful gift! Although it does not fit neatly in a box, wrapped in paper and ribbons, under the Christmas tree; it does fit quite neatly into everyone’s heart. When you think about it, isn’t that where the dearest gifts fit best?

All the preparations that we do to get ready for Christmas keep us busy. What if we took a little bit of time to give each other a small gift of peace? - even if we give ourselves a little moment of peace. How might that change how you feel about...everything? Would it make it easier to “walk with each other in perfect harmony”? What an opportunity we have, to “take each moment and live each moment in” the peace of Christ, especially during this busy time of year.

PRAYER: Precious Lord, Thank you for your amazing gift of peace. It is a peace that is better than anything we can understand. Help us to share your peace that “is a gift the world cannot give” with ourselves, everyone we know, and everyone we meet. Amen

Denise Clark
Christ Servant Minister

Tuesday

December 22, 2020

SHEPHERDS AND THE SIGN

SCRIPTURE READING: *Today IN THE TOWN OF David sa Savior has been born; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you; you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke 2:11-12*

The way it was in Bible times, sheep were very common in the Holy Land. A sheep could boast of no accomplishment. That's why sheep needed a caretaker — a shepherd. A shepherd's job was to find water and food for his sheep. A shepherd carried a rod used to protect them from predators and robbers. Shepherds would lay down their lives for their sheep — a foretelling of Jesus. Jesus was both The Shepherd and "The Lamb of God. (Isaiah 53). Sheep were used for meat, wool and sacrifices. The life of a shepherd was a lonely one. Shepherds were thought to be society's outcasts, dirty and smelly.

After having read *The Lord is my Shepherd* by Robert J. Morgan and *The Rock, The Road and The Robber* by Kathie Lee Gifford during many months of COVID isolation, I studied the words shepherd, sheep and Lord from Scripture and numerous resources. Going into Advent, a time of devotion, I gathered up some Q's — the 5 w's — who, what, when, where, why and the how of the Christmas shepherd to ponder and wonder.

And there were shepherds, living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night. Luke 2:8 (nearby was Bethlehem)

Who were these shepherds? Was there anything unique about them?

The Christmas shepherds were Levitical shepherds from the tribe of Levi, trained and tasked with the responsibility of tending and guarding the flocks used for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. The place where the sacrificial lambs were raised was called The Tower of the Flock, Migdal Eder on the outskirts of Bethlehen. The Jewish people knew that Bethlehem was known for their sacrificial lambs. On the surrounding hillsides were caves kept pure for newborn lambs. A newborn lamb was wrapped in cloths for swaddling in order to protect it from harm or blemish and then placed in a manger. In Bible times a manger was defined as a feeding trough to hold fodder for livestock and made from clay mixed with straw, or from stones cemented with mud or a depression of limestone rock. The lamb had to be spotless and it was the shepherd's job to inspect.

Right after Jesus was born, the Bible tells us that Mary wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the Inn.

An Inn was a station for travelers. The Inn was not necessarily a building but it could be a building with rooms for travelers. Animal stalls were separate and erected outside.

Jesus was born in one of the birthing caves in a manger stall at the location Tower of the Flock for sacrificial lambs in order to fulfill prophecy because Himself would be the ultimate sacrificial Lamb. (Micah 4:8)

How did the shepherds know where to go?

They were given a sign. A sign by definition is any object, action, event etc., that conveys a meaning. The sign identifying the baby as the Messiah was that He would be wrapped in swaddling cloths to calm Him and to confine His arms, legs and chin to keep Him healthy and safe from harm. The baby was also washed in salt as part of the swaddling process. (Information in Chapter 6, Bethlehem Church of the Nativity in Rock, Road, Rabbi).

Why were the shepherds first to experience Jesus the Messiah?

Because they were humble men and the message was for everyone. From notes of Billy Graham, "Jesus came for all people, rich, poor, male, female, uneducated, educated. By announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds God was demonstrating His love for everyone of us, no matter who we are." The angel gave them a name — the Messiah — who came to forgive their sins (of the heart) not of their circumstances. He came to bring them back to God after the initial sin of Adam and Eve. The shepherds were amazed and felt awesome fear. The religious leaders of the day (people of pride) wouldn't have had the same reaction. They loved religion more than they loved a relationship with God. There was no need for the angels to give the shepherds directions to the birthplace of the Savior — who is Christ the Lord — for the sign of the manger could only mean at the Tower of the Flock where they routinely raised and swaddled the sacrificial lambs. The shepherds knew exactly where the baby was and now they knew who the baby was. These shepherds experienced the reality of the Lamb to which their ministry had been pointing to for years. The Bible says, *after seeing the baby...they spread the word concerning what had been told them.* Luke 6:17b-18.

These humble men took the Good News of Jesus and did just what God wanted them to do — they told others and their lives were never the same. I think they can be referred to as the first evangelists.

Wonder is waiting...slow down...be still! Study the Scriptures with your Q's and W's this Advent Season. What would you do if you were there on that first Christmas? What would you think?

The Son of God, a mother's love,
And lots of grace from above,
Would change a manger's straw, instead
Into a Royal King-Size Bed

(Quote from David Jeremiah's bookmark "The King-Size Bed")

Bonnie Bustard

HORSESHOES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

SCRIPTURE READING: *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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.* 1 John 4:9–12 (NIV)

Look around your home to see how many circular Christmas decorations you can find. A circle of evergreens on your front door? Maybe an Advent wreath on your dining table? A skirt wrapped around the trunk of your Christmas tree? (You mustn't have cats!) If you found quite a few circles throughout your home, that's not surprising. Circles are often seen as symbols of unity, even perfection. And yet, they are limited, closed.

This season, let's consider integrating more horseshoes into our holiday celebrations. Yes, *horseshoes*, you read that right. Although I'm sure there are many metal renderings to be found throughout Bucks County auctions and antique shops, your horseshoes don't need to be that literal. It's more about the intention of widening our circles and leaving space for the unexpected—blessings in our lives or blessings we can be to others—to break in.

To quote some wise pastor I've lived with for many years, "What does that look like in our lives?" When we gather together, we leave physical space for others to wander in and join us. As someone who has been a newcomer many times in my life, I'm much more welcomed by a horseshoe of people than a circle. Even with social distancing, we can watch the shape of our space and how it invites others in. How are you communicating God's love and welcome to others? I can't take credit for this social concept of horseshoes—I heard it first from author and activist Glennon Doyle. But I believe the benefits of leaving space extend beyond our human interactions.

In our spiritual space, we also need to leave room for God to break in—not close our circle with everything we think we know and everything we think we need. Just as with a husband coming to you with a pastoral calling that changes your family's life and just as with the birth of Jesus, God may bring break in with the unexpected that is just what we need, just when we need it.

If it helps you to remember to leave that space for God and others, by all means find a physical horseshoe to display somewhere prominent in your home. Symbols can help us focus on our intentions. When I google "evergreen horseshoe wreath," I find that "it's a thing" (as my daughter would say). So you might just see a horseshoe wreath on the parsonage's front door.

PRAYER: Dear God, At a time of year when we want to jump ahead and close the circle to get to Christmas, help us stay open to the unexpected blessings we may find within the space and season of Advent. May we remain receptive to who and what may unexpectedly enter our hearts and to where You are calling us to go. In everything we do, may we draw closer to You and draw *others* closer to You while leaving space for You to constantly amaze us. Amen.

Jennifer Leight

Thursday

December 24, 2020



I'VE GOT A SECRET

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:1-14

KEY VERSE: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*
Luke 2:14

Years ago, a popular program on television was “I’ve Got a Secret.” A panel of celebrities would try to guess the secret of a contestant. The panel members would ask questions of the contestant; and on the basis of the answers they would guess the contestant’s secret.

Well, I’ve got a secret! — a secret about Christmas. This secret is not found in the Christmas lights or brightly colored decorations. It is not in the fruitcake, cookies or candy. Nor is it in the gifts or the cards we send.

This wonderful secret is found in the love, peace and goodwill that we see during the Advent/Christmas season. Everyone seems nicer at Christmas. We remember folks we haven’t been in touch with since last December. We think of those less fortunate and we dig just a little deeper into our pockets to help them. We attend church with more enthusiasm than usual; and sing carols about “Peace on Earth” and “Joy to the World.” This year, when things have been especially tough, we appreciate this Holy Season more than ever before.

So, why do these characteristics have to be limited to a few weeks out of each year? Why can’t we celebrate the spirit of Christmas all year through?

So, that brings me to my “secret” — My Secret of Christmas!!!

I believe the true Secret of Christmas is not the things we do at Christmas time; I believe the true Secret of Christmas is the Christmas things we do all year through!

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, help us to keep Christmas in our hearts and practice it every day of the year. We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus, the “Babe who brought perfect love to a lost world. Amen.

Pastor Ruth

CHRISTMAS DAY



THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTMAS

SCRIPTURE: *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.* John 1:14

Finally! Christmas Day has arrived. In the dark and cold of night, the longing, anticipation, and faint hope of Advent gives way to a wonderful proclamation. Behold, good news of great joy for all people has come! A child is born: a Son, a Savior, the Messiah. The age-old promises were fulfilled as the Word became flesh, and the glory of God in the person of Jesus entered into the brokenness and mess of a fallen world. Distant and abstract became concrete and tangible as human hands embraced the eternal God. An amazing gift and blessing has been received – one certainly worth rejoicing over. Even the craziness and chaos of 2020 cannot diminish our joy in celebrating our newborn King!

And there we go. A sacred and beautiful moment is interrupted – AGAIN – by the disappointment of an incredibly difficult year. Yes, we know our joy cannot be diminished, yet the constant presence of a pandemic is really getting old. Can't we just make it through Christmas without dealing with that? For many of us, the answer is a weary *no*. Family or friends are not here and traditions are interrupted. While Christmas is joyful and good, we're still left with a sense of wanting.

As I was reflecting on all this, I had one of those “laugh out loud” moments. My mind went to one of the Leight family's Christmas traditions... albeit a very secular one. At some point every Christmas day we inevitably find ourselves gathered around the TV watching *A Christmas Story*. Not the one about a manger, mind you... the one about Ralphie Parker's insatiable desire to receive an “official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle!” A desire that is always met with “NO! You'll shoot your eye out.”

Over the years, I've justified our “*Christmas Story* tradition” as a guilty pleasure. After the crazy lead-up to Christmas, it was good family time together as we laughed at an infamous leg lamp, a tongue stuck to a flagpole, and a punishment involving Lifebuoy Soap. Yet a part of me always felt guilty that the plotline was all about secular greed and not about the gift of Jesus... until a moment ago.

In my chuckles, I recalled the conversation Ralphie and his dad have after opening all their gifts. When asked by his dad if he got everything he wanted, Ralphie replies “well... almost.” Dad's response: “Well, that's life. There's always next Christmas.” Then, at the moment when all hope had expired, Dad sees one last gift behind the desk. It was Ralphie's Red Ryder BB gun!

When we think about it, that *IS* the essence of Christmas. At just the right moment, when all hope seemingly expired, God breaks in, offering heartfelt joy, abiding peace, unconditional love and abundant, eternal life to anyone and everyone through the gift of Christ Jesus. We are not alone or abandoned; we are joined in the difficulties and struggles by God incarnate who overcomes all through resurrection. We re-experience the arrival of the gift of Jesus today, knowing Jesus enters our lives every day - Thanks be to God!

So, if you're experiencing a tinge of wanting this Christmas, take heart: Christ is coming! Christ has come! Christ will come again! In Christ we never lose hope, as new life is always breaking in! That's the timeless story – and gift – of Christmas.

PRAYER: Amazing God, thank you for meeting us in our hopes and fears through the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Guide us to place our full trust in you as we behold and celebrate the good news of Christ's birth, and strengthen us to go and tell this good news to all people. In Jesus' name. Amen

TRIBULATIONS

SCRIPTURE READING: *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5: 1-5*

Last year in this Devotional, we were all writing about hope. Good thing, considering what was coming. Without both personal faith and a community of faith, without hope, how could we avoid despair?

Last year, as every other year, we experienced despair and hope at the Tenebrae service. When the candle is out, we live in darkness.

Thanks to God, the light returns: John 1:5 *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

As you well know, anger and intolerance prevail around us. Demonstrations for tolerance are reduced to riots exhibiting violence directed against those who are perceived to question the motives of, or disagree with demonstrators. So we have to wonder what belief system is guiding these people? Whether 'liberal' or 'conservative' or 'the government can't tell ME what to do', the behavior is the same: destructive intolerance.

We need to look to the teachings of our Lord and teacher Jesus to find a way to react to our violent society. How do we live as He would tell us? I do ask in prayer, and I listen carefully during the Zoom studies with Pastors Brad Leight and Rev Paul Henry. But all I find for me is so small compared to what is needed: to greet people kindly, sign appropriate petitions, donate resources generously. When picking up a take-out dinner in Newtown, I watched admiringly so many people, some I know, standing holding signs "Give Peace a Chance", "Fund the USPS", "Try Tolerance, You'll Like It" and many other messages, while smiling and waving at all the traffic on State Street. That seems a good way to send a message of hope.

In the scripture above, the apostle Paul says tribulation, of which we have plenty, leads to perseverance, so we cannot give up trying to help other people and ourselves through this time of pandemic and fear. Perseverance builds our character, making us strong when we feel isolated and weak. Character strengthens hope.

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, we ask You for wisdom and strength as we endure the sickness, poverty, loneliness and fear now spreading to all the places in this your beautiful world. We thank you for the beauty of nature that surrounds us, for the brave loving souls who sacrifice so much to care for those who are suffering. Help us all gain in understanding and sympathy. We thank you for sending Your Son into this world of hope, beauty, suffering and despair to teach us love and forgiveness. Amen

Betty Witschard

Sunday

December 27, 2020

JOY

About five years ago, my friend, Mary Anne May, suggested that we get a group of singers together — and I would play the piano — and we would travel to nursing homes in the area and encourage the Memory Care patients to get involved in a sing-a-long.

We decided to use some of the old tunes that would be remembered from everyone's youth — like "School Days," "She'll be Comin' 'Round the Mountain," and "Toot, Toot, Tootsie."

We discovered that the groups really also enjoyed simple rounds like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "Frere Jacques."

This reminded me of my younger days when I was a public school music teacher and I spent my days singing with the students.

There was no difference between the joy received — either by the young children or the older nursing home folks.

I loved the way they loved to sing rounds — as one side of the room would compete with the other side.

At these times of joy, we are reminded of the joy brought to the world at the birth of our beloved Jesus.

Janice Simon

Monday

December 28, 2020

POWER OUTAGE

SCRIPTURE READING: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives away, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Psalm 46: 1-3 - English Standard Version

Unfortunately, we have all been affected by the Coronavirus and COVID-19 in one way or another this year and as a result, maybe our overall ability to deal with problems as they arise, has a shorter fuse. I was no exception to this.

Luckily, I have continued going to work at my office from Day 1 of the Coronavirus as I work at an “essential” Company. I am very thankful and blessed that I have my job but with that comes the constant mind game of “staying safe” and “wearing a mask” and “social distancing.”

During this COVID-19 time, I also have had the opportunity to have my son and family (son, wife, two children ages 1 and 4 and their dog) move in with me during the period that they sold a home, bought a new home and during the necessary improvements to their new home. So, for several months, life has been a little more hectic than normal.

After a series of events one day on August 4, 2020, (a power outage at my home which would stay out for three days, my then 10 month old granddaughter being bit by a bug and her face swelling, and my son taken to the hospital after breaking his ankle in two places), I too felt like I had a personal “power outage” of my own and I couldn’t take one more thing going wrong. I realized that I did not have control of my life at that moment.

I immediately went up to my bedroom, had a good cry and realized that to get through, I needed to give my troubles to God and let his strength guide me through this time. The minute I did that, I truly felt better, and I felt like the weight of the world was lifted from me.

We all sometimes have “power outages” especially during this Coronavirus pandemic, but the one thing I am comforted by is that God will never have a “power outage” and he is always there and will always be there for all of us, to give us the strength and to help us get through our “power outages” and help us get back to being fully charged to go on with our lives. For that I am very grateful!

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank you for always being there for us during our “power outages” and for giving us the strength so that we can go on with our daily lives. Knowing you are always there for us, helps us in our daily lives!

Cheri Rider

Tuesday

December 29, 2020

A GOD WINK

It was a beautiful fall day and my husband, Jack, was going with me to the Walnut Street Theatre where I usher. He was volunteering to usher that day, too. I had a meeting that morning, so we were cutting it close time-wise in getting to the theatre; and when you usher, the rule is...you are not to be late.

We got to the Schuylkill expressway and the traffic was heavy, so Jack told me “Turn right here”. I took a sharp right onto Hunting Park Avenue heading toward North Broad Street. With wheels screeching, I hit the curb.

I pulled over to the side of the road and got out to survey the damage. Yes, the front tire was flat! I got back into the car, locking the doors, as this was not a neighborhood that we were comfortable being stranded in. We were ready to call road service when a car pulled up across the street. The young girl called over asking if they could help us and give us a “jump”. In my irritated state of mind I thought “jump!—can’t you see the tire is flat?”

They had gotten out of their car and started walking over to us. She was a small wiry girl and he was a HUGE man with big shoulders and lots of muscles. He asked if we had a spare tire, which we did not know if we did; but thank heaven in the back was a donut tire and a tire jack. He got to work and changed the tire in no time flat. At one point, Jack whispered to me, “He’s good, he knows what he is doing”.

So we got together all the cash we had and gave it to them (hoping they would take the cash and not our car!) They both thanked us and then he asked if we would pray with them...that they had been going through some difficult times. We prayed, holding hands, in the middle of Hunting Park Avenue.

When we started driving again to the theatre (and we did arrive on time), I said to Jack “That was no accident — that was a ‘God Wink’”. I was upset with myself that I didn’t get their names or number so that we could help them out more than we had.

I prayed about it that night and God opened my eyes to see that this was His plan, and it wasn’t necessary for us to do any more. What needed to happen, did happen! We had helped them out the best we could at that time and God had used them to open our eyes.

PRAYER: God, you are always right there in our lives giving us opportunities. I feel that on this day you gave us a situation to deal with and opened our eyes not to be so quick to judge others. You are a kind and loving teacher and we need to listen to You and follow Your teachings as best we can. Amen.

Linda Barr

READY TO LISTEN

SCRIPTURE READING: *Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

Joshua 5:13-15

This passage comes just before the Israelites start their conquest of the Promised Land. They have crossed the Jordan and soon will attack Jericho. The commander of the army of the Lord meets with Joshua to tell him what the plans are.

However, notice that when Joshua falls facedown to the ground in reverence that he is not chastised and told to get up. Does this mean that the commander is God? Or perhaps, God Incarnate?

During the 40 years in the wilderness, the men of Israel had not been circumcised; but now they have been. The Israelites have celebrated the Passover after crossing the Jordan and have for the first time eaten a manna-less meal. Now when the angel (or was He just an angel?) told Joshua his identity, Joshua's first question is "What is the plan?"

Joshua is not told the plan yet. Instead, he is told to get ready – to get his mind and spirit ready by taking off his shoes, "for the place where you are standing is holy." How many times have I, have each of us, needed to pause, to wait, to be patient, and listen for God's voice in the silence. It is not always my first response, sad to say. We have to get ready to hear God's voice and feel God's touch. Figuratively, we need to take off our shoes because we have entered Holy Ground. God's voice may not come right away so we need to pray and to listen.

PRAYER: Our God, Our Father, Our Mother – In this Advent Season, guide us to the holy place to receive your instructions. Help us to wait reverently and patiently for your voice. Help us to hear and obey. Amen.

John Hodges

Thursday

December 31, 2020

NEW YEAR'S EVE
THE END AND THE BEGINNING

SCRIPTURE: *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 without cost from the spring of the water of life. Revelation 21:6 (NIV)*

My times are in your hands. Psalm 31:15a NIV

If there is any day in the year when we look at time, it's New Year's Eve. Whether your celebration of the passage from 2020 to 2021 is with family, a group of friends or a virtual group on Zoom, we will all be examining the year past and looking ahead to the year to come.

This has been a year like no other. I will leave to the news analysts and film editors the task of putting together the year in review. Quotes from Dr. Fauci and our President will highlight those moments as they pass before us on our TV screens. We will look at what we've learned about ourselves, our government and our society. What we have learned and what we have yet to learn will be part of that challenge.

Let's look at our relationship with God. How has that changed through the challenges of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement? How has our prayer life grown through these concerns? Have we relied on God more for what we think and what we do from day to day? Have we opened up more to the needs of our neighbors? Have we evaluated our actions in the light of the scripture? Have we brought our worries and fears to the foot of the Cross and truly left them there?

Will we resolve to make our relationship with God more meaningful in 2021? How will we apply the lessons our Lord has taught us during the past year to help us grow into tomorrow? Will we resolve to study the Word so that we can better inform our faith and life? For myself, I see I have much work still to do.

PRAYER: Omnipresent God, Christ our Lord, Holy Spirit: Guide our steps as we walk with you from this year into the next. Encourage us to drink from the spring of the water of life. Bring us ever closer to you and your will for our lives. All glory be to YOU. Amen.

Sue Uzelmeier



THE 3 THINGS WE CAN GIVE TO GOD THIS YEAR

As we enter into a new year, here is something to remember: When it's all said and done, we have three things we can offer God—our treasure, our talent, and our time. Each of these is given to us by God, and each of them should be given back in generous portions.

First, there is our **treasure**. Commit yourself to give faithfully and generously to the Lord in this coming year. Jesus said, *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* (Matthew 6:21). Whenever we put our money into something, we develop a vested interest in it. It makes sense to us that we would place our treasures where our hearts are. If we love reading books, or being entertained, or the latest technology, we spend our treasure on those things. And if our heart desires change, that change is where we put our treasure.

But it works the other way too: Where we put our treasures, our heart will follow. Do you want your heart to be in the things of God? Then put your treasures in the things of God! Develop a vested interest in God's kingdom.

The second thing we can give to God is our **talent**. God has gifted each believer in different ways. Everyone has something to offer for the work of the kingdom. Romans 12 says: *Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us different work to do.*

Finally, there is our **time**. Let's say that one day your phone rang and it was the president of the bank that you use. He told you that an anonymous donor who loved you very much had decided to deposit 86,400 pennies into your bank account each and every morning. At first, maybe that didn't seem like a lot. But then you figured out that it was \$864 a day. At seven days a week and 52 weeks a year, those pennies add up to almost \$315,000 each year! But the bank president added one thing: "The anonymous giver said you must spend all of the money on the day you receive it! No balance will be carried over to the next day. Each evening the bank must cancel whatever sum you failed to use! Remember, what you don't spend is lost."

That may sound like fantasy, but here's the reality: Every morning, Someone who loves you very much deposits into your "bank of time" 86,400 seconds, which represent 1,440 minutes, which of course equals 24 hours each and every day. God gives you that much to use each day. Nothing is ever carried over on credit to the next day. There is no such thing as a 27-hour day. It's called time, and you can't escape it. Time is ticking away right now. The Bible tells us to "redeem the time"—to make sacred and wise use of every opportunity.

So, as one of our resolutions this year, let's resolve to offer God our treasure, our talent, and our time. Let's live this year as if it were our last. Make every minute count! Amen

Sunday

January 2, 2021

A HEAVENLY CHRISTMAS GREETING

SCRIPTURE READING: *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; 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."* /Revelation 21:3-4

I don't have to tell anyone what kind of year we are living through.

Aside from all the restrictions we've had put upon us, we, like many of you, have lost loved ones. For my wife and I, we have lost nine all told.

Five years ago, a neighbor died and her husband had a memorial service after the Christmas holidays. The following was on the back of the memorial service program. I thought that this poem might be a comfort for all who have lost loved ones — whenever.

MY FIRST CHRISTMAS IN HEAVEN

I am having my first Christmas in Heaven
A glorious, wonderful day!
I am standing with saints of all ages,
Who found Christ, the truth and the way.

I am singing with the heavenly choir
I — who so loved to sing!
And, oh what celestial music
We bring to our Savior and King.

I am singing the glad song of redemption,
How Jesus to Bethlehem came,
And why they called His name Jesus,
That all may be saved through His name!

Oh, loved one, I wish you could be here!
No Christmas on earth can compare,
With all of the rapture in glory,
I witness in Heaven so fair!

You know how I always loved Christmas,
It seemed such a wonderful day,
With all of my loved ones around me,
We were so happy in every way.

Yes, now I can see why I loved it,
And, oh what a joy it will be,
When all of my loved ones are with me,

To share all the glories I see!

So, dear ones on earth, I send greetings,
Look up! Till dawning appears,
And, oh what a Christmas awaits us,
Beyond all our partings and tears!

Author Unknown

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus the Christ, let us remember all our loved ones who have gone home, and may we marvel at what a celebration they will have with Jesus. In Your Son's precious name, Amen.

Al Bowyer

Footnote: Unshcooled as I am, I had no idea what or where to find a Bible verse — so I want to thank Pastor Brad for his assistance.
Thank you — Pastor Brad!

Saturday

January 3, 2021

ENDURANCE

SCRIPTURE: *Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance.* James 5:11 (NRSV)

This past year has certainly given us many opportunities to show endurance. The obvious opportunity was during the pandemic lockdown. After a sudden closure of everything, including St. John's, in March, we were ordered to stay home. In a few weeks, a weekly worship service resumed but had to be watched on television, computer or phone. In person worship began in July, but it was nothing like the "old normal" Sunday. We needed to endure these major changes in our Christian life while also managing school closures, job layoffs, takeout meals and a shortage of toilet paper. We learned to endure masks and face shields. This "new normal" is still evolving.

Then, there was Tropical Storm Isaias on a Tuesday on August 4th. The high winds and rain caused many trees to fall, often into power lines. PECO, our local power company, had 307,000 outages. Five days after the storm, when St. John's met for worship, there were still over 1400 in the dark. One member of our church had to endure a three night hotel stay after the storm damaged a neighbor's home.

James, author of the text, above, was the leader of the original Christian church in Jerusalem. When followers of Christ were driven out of Jerusalem, they settled elsewhere in the Roman Empire and formed small congregations. The five chapter book by James was written to deal with the problems of misbelief and misbehavior in those congregations under his leadership. James pointed out that complaints, profanity, and self-centeredness were unacceptable. In a modern sense, he urged talking the talk and walking the walk of faith in Jesus.

The Message translation of James' book substitutes "stay the course" for the word "endurance." This usage is more relevant to a secondary definition of endurance as an adjective referring to a physical task like a long race. To complete an endurance race requires preparation and practice to build muscles and stamina. Likewise, achieving Christian endurance – particularly when faced with difficulties, change, unpleasantness or temptation -requires practice through prayer, scripture reading, and good works.

PRAYER: Lord, help us to remain faithful to you whenever we encounter an unpleasant or difficult situation in life. Help us keep our focus on You. As the Hebrews author states, "let us run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Amen.

Carol Rice

Monday

January 4, 2021

GOD'S SACRED PLAN

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 1:18-25

Henri J.M. Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest, in his book entitled *COMPASSION* shares this thought: “God is our God, the God of the living. In the divine womb of God, life is always born again.”

Out of the womb of God, a seed was placed in a young teenager named Mary. Can you imagine what went through Mary’s mind? “What will Joseph to whom I’m engaged say? How will my parents react — women of the village and relatives?” What a dilemma!

Then there is Joseph. “I was sure Mary was the right one! Now look at what she has done — with another man’s child.”

Our God has a plan to give us a hope of salvation. He sends the gift of His Son implanted in Mary.

Our Scripture lesson tells us God’s plan is revealed to these two persons, Mary and Joseph. They now know they are to be God’s chosen servants as parents of His Son and our Savior, Jesus.

As Nouwen writes: “Our God is a God who does not hide Himself or reigns over a bunch of little gods, but is active and immersed in our lives.” We only have to look around to see His action — blue sky, sun, flowers, birds, etc. Out of His love, ‘He made you, me and all humans in His image to live life with joy and peace.

As we live and have our being we who are Jesus’ disciples see life being born in the laughter of children, the achievement of a college or high school graduate, the glow of a mother gazing down at her new-born baby and the love flowing from a couple celebrating 50 years of marriage.

I believe with Nouwen that God is always birthing new life for us as God’s gifts to us to go with His greatest gift we all cherish at Christmas and each day. Thank You, God, for life and living.

PRAYER: God is all living things who is always with us, may we share joy, peace and hope to all persons we meet. May our lives born again through Jesus Christ shine within us every day. Amen.

Pastor Jim MacMain

Tuesday

January 5, 2021

EPIPHANY: RECOGNIZING CHRIST IN EVERYDAY LIFE

SCRIPTURE READING: *The star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Matthew 2:9-10*

Every year on January 6th, the church celebrates Epiphany. There is a story about a Sunday church service when children were called up for the children's message. Everyone watched with joy as the little ones hurried down the aisle to reach the steps at the front of the sanctuary. The pastor lowered herself in front of the pulpit to see from the children's perspective. In her calm voice she said to them, "Does anyone know how the wise men found the baby Jesus on that night so long.....?" And before she could finish her question, a little boy excitedly jumped up, maybe 5 years old, and yelled, "STAR!" It took a few minutes for the laughter in the congregation to die down, but they knew someone had taught this little fellow the story of the wise men and he knew the answer!

When you look at something that you may have known about for a long time, and suddenly you realize that it is very special, you've had an epiphany.

We have experienced a year unlike any other in our lifetime. We have had to monitor and adjust over and over. The excitement of Christmas and New Year's is waning. But the JOY of Christmas isn't over yet because we can choose to recognize the *mercy of God* in our everyday stuff. With open hearts and hopeful outlooks, we can have epiphany moments any day.

Try looking at life through the eyes of a child who is so excited about the Christmas story that he can't contain himself! Or see the events of the day through the eyes of a traveler who has journeyed many miles to find something very small, new and precious. Just like a child's wide-eyed faith.

*Some notes from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

Barbara Schneider

Wednesday

January 6, 2021



SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 2:1-12

KEY VERSES: *Going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Matthew 2:11-12*

Wise men, astrologers, magi – all names for those men who went searching for a king with only a star to guide them and a prophesy to direct their way. It seems a strange quest, this following a star, this search for a newborn king. Yet, follow they do. These magi, search where the star will lead. The journey will cover a thousand miles with an uncertain destination. Yet they set out in a search not only for a king, a promised messiah, but a search for meaning and purpose. They will be surprised as they discover their destination is not a royal palace, but a humble home in Bethlehem.

Arriving in Bethlehem, they lay their treasures down. Being warned in a dream – they return home in another way. There is a sense that all of us, having gone to Bethlehem and arrived at Christmas, dare not return by the route we have taken. Christmas ought to change us, ought to cause us to be like those who are wise and be different from the people we were before we met the Christ.

It ought to bring us to a place of changed lives. Christmas, encountered in all of its fullness does change us. It causes us to take stock of our lives. It asks us to look at the values we are living by and rid ourselves of those that have neither merit nor value. Christmas ought to cause us to return home a little kinder, more generous . . . less fearful and more faithful. For if it doesn't we haven't truly encountered the Christ

The star continues to lead seekers to God's truth, to kneel at Bethlehem's Child and leave as new people . . . people who have been set free from yesterday's sins, failures, fears and doubts. Set free to live and love more graciously with a generosity of spirit and with hope in their hearts.

PRAYER: : God of the Christmas Star, guide each of us as we follow the stars you set in our skies. Lead us again to the Christ, give us dreams to follow and the courage to follow them. Lift our spirits and our eyes to see more clearly your vision for us. Help us to trust you to take us where you want us to be. May our lives be a blessing. In the name of the Christ Child we pray. Amen.

