

Prepare Ye The Way of The Lord



*A Devotional Guide
for Advent 2014
Third Church*

This year's Advent Devotional book is a compilation of devotions from past years. God has used these to touch many hearts. It is our prayer that you and your family find time to read them together as a way of drawing closer to God during this special time of year.

Worship Committee
John White, Editor

Christmas at Third Dates of Special Services

Sunday, December 7

7:00 p.m. Sanctuary Lessons and Carols
A candlelight worship encounter for the Advent season. Come sing your favorite carols as we worship the Christ of Christmas!

Sunday, December 14

Handel's "Messiah," Part 1—The Christmas Story
9:00 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. services in the Sanctuary

Wednesday, December 24

4:00 p.m. Children's Christmas Pageant
6:30 p.m. Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
8:30 p.m. Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
11:00 p.m. Christmas Eve Communion Candlelight Service

Sunday, November 30, 2014—First Sunday of Advent

The Prophecy Candle

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5

Devotional

“In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. . . . Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

We’re aware that in the Advent or Christmas season, we celebrate the “advent” or arrival or coming of God in human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What an incredible fact! God has come in history. However, what many aren’t as aware of is that part of the celebration of the Advent season is to call attention not only to Christ’s first coming, but to Christ’s second coming to judge the world. *At Advent, we also celebrate the “second advent” or second coming of Christ.*

In Isaiah 2 the word of the Lord comes to Isaiah, telling him of the worldwide rule of the Messiah in the “last days.” The phrase “last days” is almost a technical phrase that includes all the time from the first coming of Jesus Christ to His second coming. It is the church age. In Isaiah’s day, Israel was adopting the gods or idols of the Gentiles, but Isaiah says a day would come when the Gentiles would abandon their idols and worship the true God of Israel. That day has already begun with the first coming or first advent of Jesus Christ. You and I and countless others, in coming to faith, have surrendered ourselves to Jesus as Lord. Jesus Christ, the new Temple of God, has come. We are going up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of God, to Jesus Christ. The place of our worship is a living Person, Jesus the Messiah. It was prophesied, **“He will teach us his ways, so that all may walk in his paths.”** How wonderful to be taught His life-giving ways. Jesus is teaching us His ways.

Now, we must be quick to add that the day of which Isaiah speaks has *not come in fullness*. The prophecy’s complete fulfillment awaits the second advent or second coming of Christ. Then, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ will be foundational for multitudes of people and **“he will teach us his ways, so that all may walk in his paths.”** Furthermore, peace shall reign over all the earth. There will be no need for military budgets. Money spent on weapons of war will be able to be spent on instruments of peace. And, surely, the peace that will exist among nations will exist in interpersonal relationships. What a glorious day is coming!

What should be our response to this good news—this good news of grace? Isaiah says, **“Come, ... let us walk in the light of the Lord.”** To walk in the light will mean to walk in *all* of Jesus’ ways. The invitation to walk in the light of the Lord is an invitation to examine our lives in order to see where that is not happening. It is, then, a call to repentance. It is a call to invite the Lord to convict us of sin if there is a need. It is a call to confess our sins with the confidence that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Jesus is coming again and we are to be ready. His cross makes us ready and we respond to the glorious grace of the cross, saying to each other, **“Come, ... let us walk in the light of the Lord.”**

Monday, December 1, 2014

Ready?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Devotional

*“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know
on what day your Lord will come.”*

ADVENT (noun) 1: arrival that has been awaited (especially of something extremely important)
2: the season including the four Sundays preceding Christmas
3: (Christian theology) the reappearance of Jesus as judge for the Last Judgment

Advent! It's the most exciting time of the year. How we scurry to get ready to celebrate the Lord's birth. We make secret lists, we decorate our houses (and yards ... and cars ... and church ... and cookies ... and selves), we rehearse the lines of angels and innkeepers, we choose gifts for special people. And we do it all with a fixed date in mind. All the cards will be written and sent; all the carols in church will be sung; all the purchases will be made by our deadline, December 25. We know what to do, and we know when to do it.

But wait! What's that about a reappearance of Jesus? He's coming again! When? What date do we put on our calendar? Jesus himself said, "The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." We don't know if it will be this month, or next year, or even in this century. How can we get ready if we don't know the date?

Perhaps instead of *getting* ready, we can *live* ready. The prophet Micah put it simply: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." While we wait for Jesus to come again, we don't have to *do*. We can just *be*. Be what pleases him. Be close to him. Be like him. No wrapping. No baking. No running. Come, Lord Jesus! We're ready.

Prayer

O God, help us to prepare not just for a holiday that will quickly come and go, but for a Kingdom that will never end! Let us open our hearts and our arms to welcome Jesus, this time not as a little baby, but as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Come, Lord Jesus!

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

To Us a Child is Born

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

Devotional

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. . . . 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.”

In a time of great darkness, God promised to send a light Who would shine on everyone living in darkness or in the shadow of death. This message of hope was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his eternal kingdom. Isn't it amazing that God's perfect plan was to send this “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” in the form of a precious child?

This is particularly meaningful to me because of the deep and heartfelt love I have for children, particularly the very young ones. You see, God has not only entrusted my husband Bob and me with two very special children, but I am also blessed to take care of many precious preschoolers every week throughout the school year. Their sense of wonder, their expressive eyes, their outstretched arms in need, and the warmth of their unconditional love are so very special to me. I also love the way children have of truly causing you to slow down and linger in amazement as to what really is precious in life.

We too can learn so much through the eyes of a child. Perhaps during this Christmas season, consider honoring God by spending time in worship with a childlike faith. Crawl up onto your Heavenly Father's lap and spend time in quiet adoration over God's promises that were fulfilled in Isaiah 9:2-7, and other scriptures that God might lead you to. Come in anticipation and with a sense of wonder of how He will speak to you. Come with outstretched arms in need for Him. Come with open, expressive eyes as to how you will see Him, and sit and rest in the precious gift of His one and only Son that He has given us. And also come slowly and linger in amazement of the warmth of God's unconditional love for you.

We are all children of God if we have called Him by name. Think about the love and care that you give to your children or that was given to you as a child, and think about how much more our Heavenly Father loves and cares for us. The most precious child of all, who was given to us by God so many years ago, is Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. God's word in John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Prayer Thank You, Lord, for Your perfect plan of sending Your one and only Son into the world to take us out of darkness and into the light. Help us this Christmas season to truly appreciate the magnitude of Your precious gift to us. Amen.

Wednesday, December 3, 2014

Where Is the One . . . ?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12—The Visit of the Magi

Devotional

This scripture is traditionally used to establish the precedent for gift giving at Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are the basis for the tradition of three Magi (wise men). All these gifts were expensive and considered precious.

The Magi were men of obvious wealth, culture, and influence and not to be ignored. This may have paved their way for access to King Herod and religious authorities. They were also from Gentile lands and were seeking a Jewish king. They were following a light much like the Israelites followed the pillar of fire and smoke on their way to the Promised Land (Exodus 13:21-22).

Several things in this scripture are interesting. First is the question asked by the Magi upon arriving in Jerusalem: "Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews?" This caused a stir among both civil and religious authorities. Herod saw the object of the inquiry as a direct challenge to his authority. He immediately sought to eliminate the competition when the Magi did not return as directed (Matthew 2:16). After finding Jesus they presented their gifts, worshipped Him and returned home a different way.

The next "Where is the One . . . ?" search occurs when Mary and Joseph seek Jesus after the Passover in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus was in the temple, teaching and being about his heavenly Father's business. Another "Where is the One . . . ?" occurs when Jesus is nailed to the cross, is identified as "King of the Jews" (John 19:19-20) and where He makes Himself our sacrifice as the Lamb of God (John 1:29) for the forgiveness of our sins. Perhaps the most important "Where is the One . . . ?" occurrence was at the empty tomb when the angel said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, "He is not here; for He has risen, as He said" (Matthew 28:5-7).

Finally, "Where is the One . . . ?" Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19) as our mediator waiting for the time of His second coming. Jesus is still waiting for us to actively seek Him as Lord and Savior. The words of the hymn, "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near," come to mind as we see daily the signs (Matthew 24:3-14) of His return. Don't wait until it is too late to ask Jesus to come into your life, to move you from darkness into light, and to be your personal Savior (John 8:12).

Prayer Our Father in heaven, all praise and honor in heaven and on earth is yours. We see your sovereign plan which includes Gentile and Jew being involved when Jesus entered human life. Your perfect plan is seen again in your care of your Son in protecting Him from harm. When Jesus became our Savior, we came under that same divine planning and protection. Thank you. Amen.

Thursday, December 4, 2014

The Joy of the Redeemed

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

Devotional

In Isaiah Chapter 35, we see a description of nature personified and reacting with joy to the splendor and glory of the Lord God. Following this anthropomorphic description, we read a note of encouragement to the weak and fearful, for God will save. Not only will He save, He will take away physical limitations and make natural wastelands alive and beautiful. He will provide a special path upon which only those following the Lord may tread. The redeemed will thereby enter Zion, singing with everlasting joy and gladness.

Where but heaven could we find a world free of hunger, thirst, hatred, war, illness, pain, death and mourning? In Revelation we are told that we will be led to springs of living water, where we will have everlasting fellowship with our Lord and will never again hunger, thirst, or experience death, mourning, crying or pain. (Rev. 7:16-17, Rev. 21:4)

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our Savior, who provides us with the means of access to God. "How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1) The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:7) Shortly before Christ's death, He prayed to God, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." (John 17:24) Because God answered that prayer, we can anticipate with joy the day of joining Christ Jesus before our heavenly Father.

When my special Aunt Millie was ill in the months just prior to her death, this woman of faith longed to be with Jesus. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us remember why God the Father sent Him to earth as a helpless baby, born in a humble stable. Christ's incarnation allows us eternal fellowship with God. May that knowledge fill our hearts with joy!

Prayer God, our Father, thank you that the anticipation of the joy we will someday know in eternal fellowship with you fills our lives here and now with joy. Amen.

Friday, December 5, 2014

Joyful Exuberance

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:14-16

Devotional

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

There are only a few more shopping days remaining until Christmas. For me, this is actually quite good news. Although I come from a long line of champion shoppers (even my uncles candidly admit they like to shop), the family shopping “gene” somehow skipped my DNA. Shopping is right up there with “have a root canal” on my list of favorite things to do. So I usually put off doing my Christmas shopping until December 22 or 23. While I don’t recommend this method for everyone, the pressure of having only two or three shopping days transforms a dreaded task into a full-blown adventure, thereby preserving both my sanity and my joyful exuberance in the midst of the Christmas season.

You see, “joyful exuberance” is exactly how I hope people will characterize you and me these few days before Christmas. As Christians, we have something to be truly joyful and exuberant about—the wonderful, mysterious, and shocking truth that Jesus came to offer us the gift of God’s saving grace. But if you’re like me, it’s easy to take this gift for granted—to mentally assent to the truth of it all without allowing that truth to engender within me a deep sense of freedom, peace, and joy. Even during Advent, I’m tempted to either bask mindlessly in the warm glow of the lights on my Christmas tree or to shift into anxiety-producing anticipation of all the unfinished items on my “to do” list, with my heart (and therefore my attitudes and actions) remaining unchanged by the majesty of Christ’s birth.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, from which the verses above are taken, Jesus reminds us that we are people with a purpose, not just during this season but every day of our lives. We are the light of the world. Like cities built on hilltops and lamps set upon lamp stands, we are meant to shine light into the dark places of this world—so that those around us praise God as they witness how He has transformed our lives. And being light isn’t optional. Jesus says it’s our very identity.

If you paused now to take an honest look at your heart and mind, would you find that your light has been hidden under a bowl of anxiety or a bowl of unfinished tasks this Advent season? If “joyful exuberance” sounds like a foreign concept to you these days, it’s time to stop, be still, and ask the Spirit to refocus your heart and mind.

Prayer Let’s do that now, together, pausing to pray: “Holy Spirit, make my heart and mind tender again to the incomparable gift of Jesus. Transform my thoughts and actions so that I faithfully shine Your light in this world.”

In these last few days before Christmas, may every twinkling Christmas light remind you that you are called by Christ to be His light in this world.

Saturday, December 6, 2014

First at the End of the Line

Scripture Reading: Matthew 23:11-12

Devotional

“The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Recently I devoted a day to pray for those people in my life who have served me, praying the above verse for them. I thought of my own parents, Sunday school teachers, friends, restaurant workers, pastors, mission friends, CBS Servant Teams, and others who came to mind. The day came to a fast close before I had a chance to pray for all of these faithful servants! How do we learn to humbly serve in the way that Jesus is talking about here? Jesus came to serve and to give his very life for us. He is our supreme role model. In our passage today, Jesus is blasting the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites for elevating themselves and thus shutting off the kingdom of heaven to others.

This busy Advent season, as we stand in many lines and when we, followers of Christ, are being watched everywhere we go, can we look to be “first” at the end of the line? Can we look for the person who really needs someone to lovingly serve them? Can we stop our harried and hurried lives to find a moment to bring joy to someone?

Perfect freedom comes from serving Christ by serving others wherever he places us in the course of the day.

I read a story about a newspaper reporter who watched a nun mop the gangrenous wounds of a Chinese soldier. “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars,” the reporter said. “Neither would I,” she replied quietly, and went on mopping.

Prayer Jesus, thank you for coming to this earth to teach us what God is like and to die for us. Free us from a preoccupation with ourselves. Show us how to serve you in perfect freedom as you bring people into our daily lives to love and serve. May our life and freedom and joy be in you. Amen.

Sunday, December 7, 2014—Second Sunday of Advent

The Bethlehem Candle

Scripture Reading: Micah 5:2-5

Devotional

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

Isn't it amazing that the prophet Micah penned these words over 700 years before the birth of Christ? The prophecies of the Bible are among the most powerful witnesses to its authenticity! There are over 100 scriptures in the Old Testament that prophesy the birth of Jesus and the events in His life. Think about what God had to put into action to make just this prophecy of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem come true: God had to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, so he used a Roman emperor (Augustus Caesar—the first Roman emperor you learned about in history class!) to send everyone back to their ancestral home town to be counted for a census. Mary and Joseph departed from Nazareth to travel 70 miles south to Bethlehem—a long trip whether you traveled by foot or by donkey. And it just so happened that they got there right when Mary went into labor! Talk about perfect timing!

It is remarkable to realize the incredible detail God has given us in His word, the Bible—details that show us His fingerprints—that prove we can trust in the words of these ancient writings. Jesus was probably born in a grotto somewhere on the outskirts of the city of Bethlehem. Jesus born in a cave: not the picture we have in our heads on Christmas morning! Where did the idea of the nativity scene that we all associate with Jesus' birth come from? From a monk around 1200 A.D. named St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis had a passion for teaching the word of God to the people. Books were not widespread before the printing press was invented so people of St. Francis' day had limited knowledge of the stories of the Bible. St. Francis decided to create a live nativity to tell the story of Jesus' birth in a way they would remember. It worked and we still use living and carved nativity scenes to tell the Christmas story today. The prayer below was penned by St. Francis 800 years ago. Does his faith sound like your faith? As off course as Christianity has gotten sometimes in history, God has always kept a remnant of the faithful in each generation! Close your family devotion time by saying this famous prayer of St. Francis together as a family. They are powerful words. Talk about what they mean afterwards.

Prayer *Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Activity Find a nativity scene in your house. Take all the pieces out and, using the figures, try telling the story in the order it happened.

Monday, December 8, 2014

A Yearning Soul

Scripture Reading: Psalm 84:1-4

Devotional

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.”

How beautiful it is to be in the presence of the Lord God Almighty—to sense His power, majesty and love. It is a place of warmth, of comfort and of peace where our fears and anxieties disappear. In this noisy, sinful world, we yearn for those precious moments with God.

Often we have these moments with the Lord in quiet solitude when we allow Him to speak to us and renew our spirits within us. God also calls us together in His dwelling place. There we find an indescribable fullness of His Spirit as we gather to worship Him with one heart. It is in these moments that we understand that we are a holy priesthood, the Body of Christ, a called and redeemed people that God is using to fulfill His eternal purposes on earth. May we praise His name and be filled with a passion to pray without ceasing for the glory of Christ to shine forth in the darkness so that the name of Jesus Christ will be praised throughout all the earth.

We wait for Christ’s return and the joy of His eternal presence among us. And, as the people of God, our souls yearn and our hearts cry out for our living Lord!

Prayer Father God, we yearn for your presence and our hearts cry out to you. We put our hope in your unfailing love. Come, Emmanuel, come.

Tuesday, December 9, 2014

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

Scripture Reading: Zechariah 2:13; Hebrews 2:20; John 8:12, 9:5

Devotional

What will it be like when we come face to face with our Savior, our Lord, our Creator? Human words and imagination place but a ripple in the ocean of the greatness and severity of our God. Feeble minds and hearts will be silenced in the presence of Emmanuel. We can but worship in fear and trembling at the awesomeness that is the Christ, the destroyer of death. His power is so fierce that the angels of darkness vanish in His holy presence. Friend, can this Mighty One be the precious Babe in the manger? Silence yourself . . . stand trembling in awe. Then bow to worship the One who so fiercely loves you.

Prayer

Lord, reveal to us as much of you as is safe and reveal enough of yourself so we may tremble.

Wednesday, December 10, 2014

Scripture Reading: Romans 15:4-13

Devotional

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

Hope can be an elusive thing. Sometimes we experience it; sometimes we don't. We can have a sense of hope when the hero shows up in a story, or when the storm begins to clear, or when everything just looks like it's going to be all right. We can lose that sense of hope when circumstances cast a shadow over the days ahead, when we suspect that what's coming our way is a time when we will have less than we want, less than we need. Less than we had hoped for.

If faith is a certainty about the way things are in the present, then maybe hope is a certainty about the future. Maybe it's like knowing what's going to happen, how the story is going to end. Sometimes our idea of holding onto hope can be just wishful thinking, maybe even delusional thinking. After all, what can we really know about the future, especially a future we can't completely control? What can we reasonably hope in?

As Christians, maybe we jump to the right answer: our hope is in God. That's simple, isn't it? If things are going well, a simple right answer can feel good. It can even leave us feeling a bit smug. But when things are not going so well, all the right answers in the world can't touch that hidden fear inside that things are not well, that life and our future are not at all safe or going the way we'd hoped.

Like faith, hope is a gift, not something we work up through positive thinking or cheerful rhetoric. Somehow, in ways we can never comprehend, God Himself fills people like us with hope. It definitely seems to be His desire that we enjoy a life filled with joy and peace and hope, even though those things may have to keep company with adversity and suffering, even tragedy. In fact, what better time for the Holy Spirit to work real hope into our hearts than when all seems lost, when we've come to the last of all our fixes and defenses. Now that's hope.

God shows up in the midst of people who don't expect Him, people who don't even deserve Him. And He shows up not in high and lofty places, waiting for us to attain great insight, but rather in the middle of the grit and grind of our lives. He shows up as a poor, helpless newborn, carried through life as we are by one divine intervention after another. He creates out of nothing a firm hope inside us, something that connects us to very certain promises of a future controlled not by the world, or by us, but by His mercy.

We need mercy. We need it often and we need it much. Thank God it's ours. Everything about the entrance of Jesus into the world speaks of God's unimaginable mercy toward us. We can count on this mercy. It's solid and it's proven. It's what gives us an enduring hope that cements our future to His goodness.

Prayer Jesus, all my busy attempts to control my future I let go of for just right now. And, I'll be still and I'll be quiet while you graft real hope into my heart. Thank you so very much that you'd want to do that for me. Amen.

Thursday, December 11, 2014

The Lord is With You?

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Devotional

“The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’”

When I was four years old I was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. I was too young to understand what was going on within my body and to understand why I needed to take insulin injections every day. Despite my lack of understanding, I did what my parents told me to do to take care of my diabetes, and as I got older I listened to and trusted my doctors. Today, after having diabetes for many years, I am thankful for what my parents and doctors did for me even when I did not understand what they were doing or why I had to do what they said. Trusting fully in my parents and doctors was the best thing I could have done as a child.

While I can see tangible benefits from doing things I did not understand, I think that Mary was in a very different situation. She was young by today’s standards, maybe 12 or 13, and was pledged to be married. An angel of the Lord came to her and told her that she was highly favored and this favor was that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit before she was married and would give birth to the one who will rule over the House of Jacob forever. In Mary’s time, when a woman became pregnant outside of marriage she could be punished by being stoned to death. This hardly seemed like a favorable situation, and that her child would rule a kingdom that will never end seemed like an outrageous promise, to say the least!

Mary responded in a most unlikely manner with her question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” It is unlikely not because she was challenging the angel, but because she was responding from a position of faith. She wanted to know what would happen in order for these events to occur. The angel assured her that nothing is impossible with God, and Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.”

Mary’s situation hardly seemed favorable. Similarly, when God breaks into our lives it is at seemingly inconvenient times or it seems that our lives will just be too hard and there is no godly favor working for us. During those times may we remember that we are highly favored by God, which he has demonstrated by sending Jesus to live the life we should have lived and to die the death we should have died. Through this we are favored and saved because nothing is impossible with God.

Prayer Lord God, thank you for your favor that you have poured out upon us through Jesus Christ. May we respond to your favor with faith, knowing that nothing is impossible with you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Friday, December 12, 2014

The Unique Son

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:41-52

Devotional

Each year Jesus would have gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with his family. But something made this year different. Jesus was twelve, one of the most significant years in the life of a Jewish male. In Jewish custom, when a boy turned thirteen he assumed adult responsibilities, so the twelfth year of his life was full of preparation and discernment. It involved instruction on being an adult, exploration of vocational calling, religious training and, above all, intensive time with his father.

With this context in mind, Mary's response to Jesus in verse 48 makes a little more sense. "*Your father* and I have been anxiously searching for you!" *Your father...* Mary is trying to convey to her son the seriousness of what he has done, considering the significance of this special year. It's as if she is saying, "How could you treat your father like this in a year as important as this one? This is the year you should be at his side every moment, listening intently to him!"

Jesus' response is astonishing. "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my *Father's* house?" His response would have come across as enormously disrespectful, especially considering the high importance of familial relationships at that time. Yet Jesus is trying to convey that he is learning to relate to his true Father. It's as if Jesus is saying, "*I am* being with my Father. *I am* discerning my call, exploring my vocation, figuring out who I am and what I'm called to do." The writer Luke is making it very clear that Jesus is going through the normal process of discernment that happens in the twelfth year of a boy's life, but he is doing it with his *heavenly Father*, a relationship that transcends his earthly relationships. "It is necessary," Jesus says, "for me to be about my Father's business." He must align himself with his Father's purpose even if it compromises his relationship with his own parents.

Here, in this adolescent boy, we see the powerful identity of Jesus beginning to shine forth. He is discovering his calling, he is figuring out what he is supposed to do, and he is making a claim about himself and his relationship to God. As Paul writes in Romans 1, "as to his human nature he was a descendant of David, [but] through the Spirit of holiness he was declared with the power to be the Son of God." Jesus is the only natural, perfect Son of God. He has a relationship with God that is far deeper and different than anyone else in the history of the world. He calls God "Father," and even more dramatically, "Abba," a term of such intimacy that no rabbi would have dared utter in relation to God.

Yet Paul also claims in Romans 8:15-17 that Jesus has opened up to us the same intimacy of relationship with God. We see Jesus' confidence in his own unique Sonship expressed in this passage, but he spends the rest of his life not selfishly flaunting that Sonship, but calling people into the same kind of intimate relationship with the Father that he makes available through his death and resurrection. He ensures, absolutely guarantees, our adoption as the sons and daughters of God.

"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of Sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." This is one among the many astounding promises of Christmas.

Saturday, December 13, 2014

Wake Up!

Scripture Reading: Romans 13:11-14

Devotional

"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime . . . Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Wake up!" The most dreaded of words for a night owl like me. Have you ever dreamt that you were awake and busily about the business of getting ready for the day? What a shock to wake with a start, only to discover that you overslept and were now going to be late for work or school.

It's easy for us Christians to lie in bed, so to speak, and slough off the things God is calling us to do. After all, we can hit the snooze button a few more times and deal with important stuff later. The urgency of waking is lost on the groggy mind that only wants to go back to sleep. The same is true of us when we allow our spiritual lives to atrophy. We become oblivious to the peril of our situation.

Praise God that He hasn't abandoned us to our humanity and our propensity to stray from what we know is right. He lovingly intervenes with timely wake-up calls, for His desire is that we succeed in our spiritual journey.

"...The day is almost here..."

Christmas should be a wake-up call, or reminder, that the age in which we live is not static. It had a beginning and it will have an end. The birth of Jesus ushered in this season of grace and His second coming will bring an end to things as we know them. Paul is urging us to understand that time is short.

Wake up and do what?

First, we are warned to live decently and not give in to our nature that is attracted to worldly vices and attitudes. Then we are encouraged to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, putting on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) so we can stand in *his* mighty power against the temptations that come our way.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank You for intervening in our lives. This season, help us put off the things that are displeasing to You. Clothe us daily in the righteousness of Jesus Christ so we may reflect His love as a light into this dark world. Amen.

Angels from the Realms of Glory

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-2; Luke 2:10

Devotional

I love the way that the hymn "Angels from the Realms of Glory" starts with the imagery of an angel chorus, before moving on to describe the essentials of the Christmas story. The last few lines of each stanza are so powerful in their call that we are to "Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King."

The angels we sing about are a far cry from the cherubs that all too often grace so many Christmas cards. These angels are not cute, pudgy, smiling winged infants, but rather majestic heavenly creatures so awesome that their first words to the shepherds are "Fear not." They come from the realms of glory to proclaim their message of the birth of our Lord. What amazing words—*the realms of glory*. The words evoke in me the spectacular and breathtaking sights of the aurora borealis, the immense kaleidoscope of color and motion you can see in the clear, cold northern skies. They literally take your breath away when you see them for the first time—the gigantic shapes and changing colors moving across the sky. Yet the northern lights are silent, whereas the angels are not. They sing the news of the newborn King, and one can only imagine what the music must have sounded like. C.S. Lewis describes Aslan singing the world into being in his book *The Magician's Nephew*. In the book, Aslan throws back his head, shakes his mane, begins a low roar that becomes musical notes and sounds, and out of the darkness, out of the nothingness, out of cold, emerge light, color, substance, warmth and life. Just as the newborn King brings light and life to us out of the darkness of our sinful world.

The alliteration in the next three stanzas tells the Christmas story. The Shepherds, Sages, and Saints. We know the story of the shepherds, people just like us, called to witness the infant light. The sages, or wise men, called—just like us—to recognize Jesus as the desire of all the nations and people. And finally, the saints, Simeon and Anna, people like some of us who have been waiting, perhaps without knowing it, for the appearance of the Lord and the fullness and completion that He represents.

As we enter this Christmas season, let us call to mind the glory and majesty of our Lord and all that the angels tell us He represents!

Monday, December 15, 2014

God's Plans and Promises

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:57-80

Devotional

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him." Luke 1:76

The first chapter of Luke's gospel begins by outlining for us the account of Jesus' birth, telling us of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. She was promised by the angel that she would give birth to a son, whose name would be Jesus. Around this same time, an angel also visited one of the Jewish priests who was serving in the Temple. This priest was Zechariah, who had hoped for a son to be born to his wife Elizabeth. By now they were both too old to have a child. The miracle the angel announced to Zechariah was the promise of a son to be born, whose name would be John. Not only would John's birth be a miracle, but his life would also be "...filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth." (v. 15) The fact of John's birth to parents who were physically too old to have a child was a clear message to the neighbors in Judea that God was at work in this young child's life. John's growing up and his life were promised to be special, as God's purpose for John was to prepare the people for Jesus' public ministry.

It is remarkable how God enters into the everyday details of our world to accomplish His work. God does not leave anything to chance, including even the names of Jesus and John that God wanted their parents to choose. Sending Jesus as His Son to live among us was the greatest miracle, which we are now celebrating this Christmas season. But another miracle of God was John's birth. The inclusion of John's story in the text about Jesus' birth is significant as an illustration that the plan of God includes some ordinary people who were chosen to be part of God's plan for the world.

The Psalmist David has written in Psalm 139 that God has known us even before we were born. "...You knit me together in my mother's womb." Psalm 139:13 "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." Psalm 139:16 In the year 2014, God still knows his children, and has a plan for each of us that He established since before the foundation of the earth. He knows our names, and knows the purpose He has planned for each day that we live. Moreover, He knows the number of our days, and promises to lead us. Let us worship Him today, and thank Him for how He loves and guides each of us in a personal way.

Prayer

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23-24

Tuesday, December 16, 2014

Comfort, Prepare, Cry Out

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Devotional

Sometimes, we're not sure what we're supposed to be doing. If we're not pastors or missionaries or Sunday school teachers—or even if we are—we're not always sure exactly what to do each day to serve and love and honor the Lord.

Here's an idea: Comfort people. In general, people have hurts of one sort or another; we are all glad for comfort. The prophet Isaiah knew that what mostly ails us is sin. Mental anguish, emotional pain, physical hurts—all are the results of sin. When we suffer, it doesn't so much matter whether the sin was ours or someone else's or the sin of the world. News that God has taken care of the sin, has paid for the remedy, stands ready to offer us the balm—that is good news for a hurting people. It's news that God wants us to receive and then to share, tenderly, comfortingly.

Isaiah gives us another idea: Prepare the way of the Lord. The stretch between God and man is impossibly difficult, full of dark valleys and unscalable mountains, terrain marked by pitfalls and snares and unforeseen traps. How could we ever make it from where we are to where He is? The divide is too great for man to overcome, but nothing is impossible for God. Two thousand years ago He came and lived among us, and His name was Jesus. Still He lives, and still He wishes to come, to be among His people and to reveal His glory. He asks us to prepare His way—to clear the obstacles to His coming into our lives. What dark valley can we build up in our neighborhood; what mountain that blocks our vision of Him can we make low? What stretch of distance between our hearts and His can we begin to smooth and straighten, so that all mankind together can see His glory? Highway work is done one lane, one short distance at a time: "Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

Here's a radical idea: Cry out, says Isaiah. How often do we feel permission to yell as loudly as we can? Do church people do that? God wants us to shout at the top of our lungs, with all the strength that is in us. Grab the microphone and magnify the message that God is here—He has traveled the highway—and that He has come with power and mercy and love, even for us. Cry out that here is a Shepherd who comforts, who gathers and carries us close to His heart. Shout out the good news for all you're worth: Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so.

Prayer

God, help us to know what you want us to be doing today. Thank you for the comfort you give us, and help us to comfort others with the ultimate good news: that you, Jesus, have paid for our sins, that you come to us where we are, and that you love us tenderly. Open our mouths, Lord, to share such good news!

Wednesday, December 17, 2014

Holy is His Name

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:39-56

Devotional

“ . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.” Luke 1:49

Mary, a young teenager, has just learned from the angel Gabriel that she will become pregnant with a son who is to be called Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High and will rule over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end. She has also learned that her relative Elizabeth will also have a child in her old age.

As soon as Mary hears the news from Gabriel, she hurries to see Elizabeth in a town in the hill country of Judea. Can you imagine the excitement as both women greet each other? Can you picture Mary's reaction when Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, joyfully affirms Mary's news without Mary even telling her?

We see God's amazing grace given to Mary and Elizabeth, for both women will be in the public eye in some challenging ways. Both will be called to step out of their comfort zones. Elizabeth is well past childbearing years, and Mary is a virgin, engaged to be married to Joseph! Imagine what their neighbors, family members and communities will think. Surely the news will spread quickly. Yet neither woman seems to be concerned about her reputation. Instead, each one rejoices in God's great reputation—“ . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name!”

How about the situations in your life? Are you willing to forgo your reputation so that Christ's reputation may become greater?

In Luke 1:46-56, a passage known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song, Mary can only respond in praise to the Lord in spite of the public humiliation she will likely encounter back home—becoming pregnant while engaged to Joseph. Mary relies on her faith in God and trusts Him for what she knows to be true and real about His promises, His faithfulness through the generations, and His character. She trusts Him wholeheartedly. What about the challenges God has placed in your life? Is He calling you out of your comfort zone? If so, are you able to trust Him wholeheartedly and praise His name?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for Mary's example of complete faith and trust in you! Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus, who died for my sins. Help me to forgo my reputation and to trust you wholeheartedly with your plans for my life so that, like Mary, I can praise you and say, “ . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name!” Amen.

Thursday, December 18, 2014

He is the King of Glory!

Scripture Reading: Psalm 24

Devotional

"Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift them up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the king of glory." Psalm 24:7-10

As we approach Christmas, it is our tendency to concentrate on the baby Jesus, small, helpless, lying in a manger. This is our Emmanuel, God with us, entering into humanity as do we all, in a state of dependence and vulnerability. And this perspective of Jesus Christ often colors our perception of Him throughout our lives. We see Jesus only as gentle and forgiving and kind and merciful and gracious, as One who always turns the other cheek. Of course, these are His attributes. He is our Friend, our Comforter, gentle and kind. He is our Savior, the One who will hear our cries and heed our tears.

But this psalm gives us a more complete depiction of Christ. Indeed, we are told that this Jesus is the only One who can ascend the hill of the Lord (verse 3). He is the only One who can stand in His holy place (verse 3). He is the only One with clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up His soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully (verse 4). He comes to us without fear, without guilt, in complete innocence. He is also the Answer to David's thousand-year-old question: "Who is this King of glory?" He is the King of glory! He is strong and mighty! He is the warrior King, mighty in battle! He is the Lord of hosts, commanding the legions of angels! No one and no thing can stand against Him!

Seventeenth century theologian George Abbot, in *Brief notes upon the whole Book of Psalms*, rightly notes, "Why, He is the Almighty God, of power all-sufficient to preserve and defend His people and church . . . against all the strength and power of men and devils that do or shall malign or oppose themselves against them. . . ."

There are times in our lives when we need to see our Jesus as the kind and compassionate Savior, but there are also those times that we need to know Him as the Almighty, the all-powerful God, standing immovably against His enemies, while protecting and defending His people against all comers! This, too, is our Lord, Jesus Christ!

Prayer

Dear Lord, my Savior and my King: this Christmas, help me know You as my Protector and Defender and see You as the Lord of hosts. Help me know, though my enemies may multiply about me, that I need not fear; that You, O Jesus, are the God of power and might! Thank You, King of glory!

Friday, December 19, 2014

Draw Near

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:19-25

Devotional

For me, one of the greatest aspects of Christmas is the time with people I know. The gifts are fine and the food is always incredible, but the deep connecting with family and close friends sets Christmas apart from other times.

I wonder what sets it apart for God. I'm sure He loves to see our joy in the gifts and our connecting with each other. Does He ever wonder why, even in this season that is supposed to be about Him, we don't connect more with Him? Why is it that so many Christmas seasons over the years have passed leaving me with a nagging guilt that once again I forgot about Jesus?

Amidst all the Christmas pageants and carols, Yuletide parties and extravagant gifts, does God feel lonely during Christmas? The writer of Hebrews urges us to "draw near to God with a sincere heart." What could possibly make God happier than for us to give heed to this call? What if each day during this last week before Christmas we took some unrushed time just to sit with Jesus and draw near; not the obligatory quiet time or the cursory reading of Scripture, but heartfelt drawing near to God. We may feel uncomfortable trying to draw near, and yet that may make the effort all that much more precious to God. The gifts that require sacrifice are often the most meaningful.

The hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter" has one of my favorite verses of all the Christmas hymns:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him—give my heart.

We have about a week left until Christmas. Our efforts to draw near to God may be meager, but they may also be the very best Christmas gift we could give him. "Draw near to God with a sincere heart."

Prayer

Lord, meet me in my small efforts to draw near to you. In this last week before Christmas, may I celebrate you and your greatness, your mercy, your faithfulness, your kindness, and your love shown so perfectly in the birth of your Son, our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, December 20, 2014

Our Darkness, His Light

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-13

Devotional

One of my least favorite things to do is to clean the house. On many days, the light shines through the window illuminating the dust on the table, clearly showing me that cleaning is necessary. Sometimes the dust is so thick I can write my name in it. I often choose to close the blinds and block out the light in an attempt to avoid the apparent need to clean.

The light of Christ similarly shines through the window of our hearts and lights up the dust. The best part is that He does the cleaning. Our part is to leave the blinds open. We may want to block out the light in an attempt to avoid looking at the dusty places in our hearts, but it is there that we find Him. In His great love, He shows us our sin so He can in turn show us our need for Him. Leaving the blinds open, we are able to see Him and there He embraces us in the depth of His grace and love. In our darkness we are captured by Him and stand in awe of His sacrifice for us. In our darkness, we find His light. (v. 5)

He chose us as His children, and He shines light into our hearts and writes His name in our dust. He says: "I love you; you are forgiven, you are mine. Let me show you the dark places and I will cover them with my light; let me in, leave your blinds open."

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you that you don't leave us in the dark. Your light speaks of life to us. Let us allow ourselves to be exposed so that you can fully show us our dark places, teach us your way, mold us and create in us hearts more like yours. Amen.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 52:7; Luke 2:14

Devotional

*“How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of those who bring good news,
Who proclaim peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things,
Who proclaim salvation,
Who say to Zion,
'Your God reigns!'”*

Isaiah 52:7

The hymn “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” reminds me of being in the church Christmas pageant when I was seven years old. Dressed as an angel, I thought my main jobs were being well behaved and making sure my silver wings were not crooked. Looking at Scripture and the words of this song, it’s clear that the angels were responsible for much more than that! They had the joyful task of being the ones who “proclaim peace and bring glad tidings of good things” (Isaiah 52:7). Jesus arrived in a humble way and brought quiet gifts: mercy, healing, and the chance for us to be reconciled with God. The angels were there to announce the glorious news in such a way that the world would pay attention.

It can be difficult to feel anticipation and enthusiasm now—with financial pressures and familial or health concerns that may not have existed in our lives a year ago. We need to be reminded of the energy and joy with which the angels proclaimed Christ’s birth. Even through challenging times, we can still celebrate the most amazing truth, just like the angels did so long ago. “Glory to the newborn King!”

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, and for the light and life He has brought to us. Help us to have a new and joyful spirit this season as we remember the everlasting gift of salvation. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Monday, December 22, 2014

Devoted Disciples Know the Master

Scripture Reading: Mark 11:1-10

Devotional

Events in today's scripture passage take place some thirty years after the birth of Christ. In them we see Jesus instructing two of His disciples to go, to act, to answer, and to return to Him. These were not especially learned men, but they were men who had been traveling with, learning from and listening to Jesus. They had a relationship with Him, a relationship built on trust, expectation and obedience to His word. They were coming into a deeper understanding and knowledge that this Jesus was the Lord, the promised Messiah. But did they truly comprehend who Jesus was, that He was set apart for a special service to save all of humankind from their sins? (John 3:16)

Yes, they may have heard of the prophecies of Zechariah 9:9: "See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Or, Psalm 118:25: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." But did they truly comprehend that they were fulfilling prophecy as they responded to Jesus' instruction to go, to act, to speak as directed, and to return to him?

I would think they were not aware of their actions being a fulfillment of prophecy. Instead, their actions were more likely those of devoted disciples. They were asked to trust and act. They may have felt foolish as they went to look for a colt tied in a certain location, but they went. Jesus had prepared them for what to say when asked what they were doing. "The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly." (Mark 11:3) They went and did what was expected, armed with His words and resting in their relationship with Him.

In this season, do we rest in our relationship with Christ, trusting that He will speak to us, that we will hear His voice, that we will follow His directions and act without question when asked, and return to Him for more? Or are we too busy to stop, listen, act and return?

We are often eager to celebrate the Christmas season by decorating, preparing and anticipating the excitement of Christmas morning. But are we missing the true meaning of Christmas because we don't take time to develop and nurture that relationship with Christ? Unlike the disciples, we have the scriptures, God's love letter to us. Do we cherish it and read it, looking to find Christ? Or do we read it to know about Christ but not to know Him as He reveals himself to us?

Prayer Dear Loving Father, we come before you, praising you for your wisdom, your love, your compassion and your sacrifice of your son Jesus Christ for us. We know that we are not even worthy to fall at your feet as we are self-centered, full of greed and have dishonored you by our lack of attention. We ask that you would bring about a change of heart in us. Develop in us a heart that would desire to put you first, to honor you with our total being. Oh God, give us a hunger to know you and to rest in your presence. Help us in this season of celebrating to embrace you as our Lord and Savior with an eagerness to hear you and to respond to you out of love for you. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Tuesday, December 23, 2014

Impenetrable Armor

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Devotional

Several years ago, I attended every Freeman wrestling match. There is something so enticing about raw matches of strength and technique as two athletes wrestle. Two wrestlers grapple for domination, the complete overcoming of the other. Occasionally the matches become messy and illegal, but they are mostly a demonstration of a struggle against an opponent that may or may not be beatable.

However, most of the struggles that we encounter in life are not against a corporeal adversary. Verse 12 of our reading cautions that we “do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” We grapple with intangible foes such as despair, insufficient faith, excessive ambition, temptation, selfishness, and greed. These opponents are the footholds that such enemies take in our lives.

Therefore, if we desire to overcome them, we must prepare ourselves for battle. When offered foolproof armor that could save us from the enticement of the Devil, why would we even hesitate to accept it? God offers us complete protection from the evil powers, but we lack the faith to completely clothe ourselves in this infallible protection. God freely gives us truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Sword of the Spirit. He wants to protect us from the dangers and opposition we inevitably will meet in this world. We just need to accept His help and array ourselves entirely in the armor He designed specifically for us.

Prayer

God, thank you for desiring to keep me safe from the evil forces of this world. I pray that you would help me to have total faith in the power of your protection. Help me to put on Your armor so that I may be equipped to live in this world but still live as Your child. Amen.

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

Silent Night, Holy Night

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5

Devotional

“Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

It is Christmas Eve, and many of us will have just returned home from one of the Christmas Eve services at church. Depending upon you or your family’s life stage, this evening may bring a multitude of activities and emotions.

It is not by accident that most Christmas Eve services end with the singing of “Silent Night.” It is generally accepted as the most beloved carol worldwide. It had humble beginnings in Austria, high in the Alps, where an assistant priest, Joseph Mohr, wanted to write something special for the Christmas Eve Mass. The organ was under repair, so he and organist Franz Gruber prepared this carol as a duet with guitar accompaniment. They assumed it was for that one-time event, but its impact upon the congregation was deep. The organ repairman, Karl Maurachen, found a manuscript while working and began sharing it with friends and colleagues. Its popularity grew from generations on.

I love this carol because it seems to bring a sense of order and peace to a night that must have been very frantic and anxious for Mary and Joseph. They finally found a place to rest, even though it ended up being a barn. God continues to surprise us with his actions and his ways of doing things.

Prayer

Father, may we sleep in heavenly peace tonight, and every night, knowing that your love for us is secure. May all be calm and all be bright. Thanks be to God for the joy you bring to each of us now and forevermore. “Christ the Savior is born.” Hallelujah! Amen.

Thursday, December 25, 2014

Joy to the World!

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7

Devotional

“No more gloom for those in distress,” Isaiah says. Then he tells the reason for the move from gloom to joy. “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. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” The reason for joy for the Hebrew people was a future hope. However, that future hope has come and our hymn sings of that fact: “Joy to the world! The Lord *is* come.” Here is the unchanging joy of the Christmas season—the Lord is come! Here is the great truth that chases away gloom—the Lord is come! Here is the great truth a “down economy” can’t take away—the Lord is come!

How easily we can think about what we don’t have, but our scripture reminds us of what we do have in the One who has come: a Wonderful Counselor—a Mighty God—an Everlasting Father—a Prince of Peace. And our hymn reminds us of the heart of *that* peace when we sing, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found . . .” Now that should give rise to joy. His death has completely covered our sins and removed all the curse of sin. “He comes to make his blessings flow.” His death opens the door to the flow of blessing.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders” (Isaiah 9:6). The gloom is further chased away as we remember who this child is now. The hymn sings it: “He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love . . .” The government is on his shoulders. He is Lord of all—ruling over all now. That’s joy for us and that’s joy for the world!

“The Lord is come; let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room . . .” May the Lord find new room in our hearts this season as we see who he is and what he has done.

Prayer

O Lord, your coming causes joy to rise in us. Lord, in this season, give us grace to think on this great reality—you have come—and to see our lives in light of your rule and all the blessings that reign brings. Cause joy to rise in our hearts in spite of any distress we are feeling. O Lord, may you take up a wider room in our hearts today. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

