

Advent 2020



The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
www.nyapc.org

Advent 2020 The New York Avenue

Presbyterian C *Please note that all activities are online. See www.nyapc.org and church emails to connect.*

- November 29 First Sunday in Advent
Worship Service (prerecorded, available on website)
- December 5 Virtual Advent Retreat - 10 am to noon
Discipleship in the Gospels Class - 4 pm
- December 6 Second Sunday in Advent
Children's Sunday School/Pageant Rehearsal - 9am
Worship Service with Communion - 10 am
Youth Pageant Rehearsal - 11:30 am
First Sunday FaithTalk - 5 pm
- December 12 Discipleship in the Gospels Class - 4 pm
- December 13 Third Sunday in Advent
Children & Youth Pageant Rehearsal - 9 am
Worship Service with Christmas Pageant - 10 am
Coffee Fellowship - 11 am
- December 20 Fourth Sunday in Advent
Children's Sunday School - 9 am
Lessons and Carols Worship Service - 10 am
Youth Sunday School - 11:30 am
- December 24 Christmas Eve Service with Communion - 5:30 pm
Christmas Eve Fellowship - 6:30 pm
- December 27 Worship Service (pre-recorded, available on website)
- January 3 Epiphany
Worship Service - 10 am

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Sunday, November 29, 2020

Thanksgiving

COVID-19 has been going on for eight months now, the darkness comes earlier each evening, and we are now past a milestone of Thanksgiving, and entering into Advent. COVID makes this year different: While Advent may be celebrated in solitude in other years, solitude is not usually how we want to experience Thanksgiving. The readings for today offer a chance to bring close the friends, family, and church and to be thankful for them and pray for peace. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he begins with thanksgiving for his friends and prayer for them. It reminds us that one of the best ways we can demonstrate our affection for our friends is to give thanks for them and pray that they might find peace and know the grace they are freely offered.

The Psalmist prays for the collective, for the interests of God's people, and when we read the psalmist's words, we uplift the concerns of God's people nearer to our hearts than any singular interest of our own. In the words of Isaiah 64:8, "We are all the work of your hand." Mark writes of gathering God's people "from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

In Isaiah, we hear that from the darkness that covers the earth, light will shine and treasures will be brought. We hear of nations and kings, gold and incense coming from the Sheba, not to show off their riches, but to offer these great riches as offerings, proclaiming praise to God.

We are entering a time when we will be besieged with the usual seasonal advertising that seeks to make us spend lavishly, or we may experience anxieties about a rebounding disease that makes us want to hoard for ourselves more than our share. Let us think about the simple act of showing thanks, praying for all God's people "from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

Sally Davis



Learning War No More

Micah 4:1-4

Monday, November 30

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” --Micah 4:3

God bless Micah. This prophet paints a hopeful picture where God’s house is on a mountain on top of the mountains, higher than all others, and all people flock to it to learn God’s ways. Wow. Then, God arbitrates between strong nations and they turn away from learning to make war, and repurpose their tools of war into tools that feed people. Amazing.

Just before this, Micah describes a ruined and destroyed Jerusalem since its leaders abhor justice, pervert equity, and build with blood. Sounds familiar. This makes the utopia of chapter 4 even more hopeful. Zion, Jerusalem, the house of Jacob - these are not the highest and they will disappear. But God’s house will remain and be lifted up over all that is and there will be peace. It sounds like the kingdom of heaven on earth.

We are still waiting to witness Micah’s vision. In Advent, we learn to wait. The stories of God are full of waiting. The more time I study these stories, the more I am convinced that God does not call us to wait passively. We are to prepare for what is coming, like the ten bridesmaids. We are to keep awake and pay attention, like the disciples in Gethsemane. We are to build and work for the good of the community, like the Israelites in exile. The same is true as we wait for Micah’s vision. Dreaming what this could look like today makes it possible for us to prepare, keep awake, and build community.

The nonprofit RAWtools is living this. After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school in 2012, Mennonite pastor Mike Martin invited people in his community in Colorado Springs, CO to bring their guns and turn them into garden tools. He learned blacksmithing to do this work. Word started to spread and people from all over the country began donating their guns to be turned into garden tools. They are living Micah 4:3.

“Our vision is to repurpose weapons into hand tools to be used in the creation of something new, preventing the weapon’s use for violence and creating a cycle of peace... We’re encouraging people and their communities to lay down their weapons and pick up new tools for conflict resolution. Story telling offers communities the opportunity to lament in the trauma violence has caused as well as celebrate a new path forward.” (rawtools.org)

The team at RAWtools is not just repurposing things, but also teaching skills of nonviolence. They are actively living the end of verse 3 by learning a different way to live as neighbors rather than learning war. They recognize that fear is at the root of violence and dream of a world where people sit “under their own vines” and are not afraid (Micah 4:4).

We wait for Micah’s vision, but we wait by actively moving toward it. We wait and dream with hope because we see it growing around us already. God is working through us. May it be so.

Rachel Pacheco

Psalm 79
Micah 4:6-13
Revelation 18:1-10

December 1, 2020

Arise and thresh,
O daughter of Zion,
for I will make your horn iron,
and I will make your hoofs bronze”
Micah 4:13

Arise and Thresh

A few weeks ago, when I accepted these scriptures as the basis for reflection, my heart was heavy with the possibility of a violent election, disenfranchised black voters in my deep south homeland, Boogaloo Boys in the streets of DC. The predicament of the Israelites facing captivity in Babylon seemed not unlike the multiple predicaments confronting Americans.

What a difference a day--or, in this case, many days between November 3 and January 20--can make. Although we still face grave threats to our democracy and cannot relax vigilance even amidst pandemic, it is possible still and again to foresee a future in which the Lord shall “assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away . . . those who were cast off [and make of that remnant] a strong nation.” Anxiety about the state of the union recedes, albeit slightly. Now that we can breathe, perhaps we also can contemplate the work ahead to bind wounds, narrow divisions, and bend that famous universal arc once again in the direction of justice.

What will I bring to this work? Assurance that I am not alone, the excitement of building faith, the comradeship and inspiration of fellow congregants, better physical and mental health than I deserve, and—to my surprise--fresh hope from observations across *annus horribilis*. Pair fresh hope with the God’s injunction to “arise and thresh” and it becomes possible to produce energy for the work to come.

I traveled in February to my Alabama hometown, where for the second year in a row I visited the site where Michael Donald was lynched. I recalled having read news stories about that 1981 lynching and dismissing the event as an aberration and anachronism, one that evoked shame and sadness but required no action on my part. After all, I had worked for years in civil rights and learned well the difficult lesson that social change usually takes an inordinate length of time. Four decades later, as finally I acted to collect beer bottles from the base of Michael Donald’s oak, passersby and black and white residents of Herndon Avenue waved hello. Action, however small or tardy, producing reaction.

Twenty miles to the north, I visited Africatown, the former freedmen’s colony where live the descendants of slaves who crossed over on the Clotilda, the last slave ship to enter these waters. Today, residents live in rotting wood homes, without paved streets, sidewalks, or street signs, atop a toxic papermill dump. Making my way through the neighborhood, I asked directions of an old man who rocked on his collapsing porch. I thanked him, turned to leave, then turned again and admitted, “I grew up 20 miles from here and never knew that you were here. I am so deeply sorry.” We hugged and wept together and—in the day’s second miracle--he forgave me. “How would you know back then?” he asked.

The next day, driving the 54-mile march route from Selma to Montgomery, I focused on both the events of 1965 and who I was that year: A high school senior brimming with college plans and, yes, dreams of escape to any more equitable environment. At the time of the march, my parents protected us from the headlines. The school hired extra security to accompany our single African American student. I railed silently against injustice. Yet, it was not until the age of 72 that I could see my silence as complicity in unjust white privilege. Is fresh growth in one's eighth decade another miracle?

When, the month following, pandemic walled us away from one another, I began seeing fresh growth everywhere I looked: In NYAPC's homelessness ministry undaunted by virus; in worship and other virtual comings-together that persevere, even strengthen, the NYAPC community in an unfamiliar medium; in scientists, health care workers, and media truth-tellers who persist against ignorance and disinformation; in Goodwin House-Alexandria neighbors who join forces with immigrant staff to sanitize public spaces, friendships forming as we work; in family reconstituting, erasing years of difference as we cling to commonalities; in the return of restorative sleep and time this hard winter to grow spiritual capacity for the work that awaits.

Perhaps we are that remnant of which Micah speaks, soon to be rescued from exile, who during this dark winter and beyond it will restore wealth to the Lord of all the earth. At least as I see it, that work already is underway.

Ann Bradley



Psalm 79
Micah 5: 1-5a
Luke 21: 34-38

Wednesday, December 2

Breaking our Siege

“Now you are walled about with a wall,” says Micah. “Siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel.”

Here in 2020, this passage hit me with force – we pandemic people experience a somewhat similar Walled situation. If the rulers of Israel were humiliated by a strike on their cheeks, we and our rulers in 2020 have been similarly humiliated.

This year our modern American sense of entitlement and control have been upended. Israel may have been beset by nations assembled against her, but America’s virus-siege resulted from our hubris, our assumption of greatness. Despite the crack in our armor revealed this year, we try to hold onto the idea that our system, our standard of living, our unequal economy, our full schedules, should be maintained.

But the Micah verse is somewhat reassuring to me. First, this kind of hardship is not new in history, people have survived it before. And, in Verse 2, we learn there is leadership to come from Bethlehem which shall free us and stand and feed the flock. The verse references the coming of Jesus, and reminds us that: 1) this Jesus is coming from one of the “little clans of Judah”, and 2) Jesus’ origin is from of-old, ancient days, an apparent connection to King David of Bethlehem.

It’s a compelling idea that some freedom from our siege lies in the embrace of humility and perhaps our family roots. That someone or something that is insignificant or ordinary, from a “little clan,” someone like me or you, can have some power to save. In my everyday life I can lessen the power of the siege by simply living, adjusting my expectations, and feeling gratitude for my many God-given blessings and relationships. And to look at my family history, I can appreciate the perseverance of my grandparents’ and earlier generations as they faced hardship and risk, hoping I have some of that steel in myself.

(Of course I am pampered with my handy grocery store and internet connection so an ancient person would laugh at the nature of my “siege.” Also, many people are experiencing extreme hardship in job loss, education and health care that shouldn’t be minimized.)

Whatever the severity of our distress this year, consider that the strength to break the siege may come from someone as insignificant as yourself, your decisions and work bolstered by faith, loved ones, and a grateful heart.

Prayer from a recent NYA Weekly:

*Blessed are those who are quietly holding their family and friends together—
providing comfort and consistency even if it is wearing them out,
for they will inherit the earth.*

Martha Davis

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Hosea 6:1-6
1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Thursday December 3

"Come, let us return to the LORD;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal
us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us
up.
² After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
³ Let us know, let us press on to know
the LORD;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth."

⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
⁵ Therefore I have hewn them by the
prophets,
I have killed them by the words of my
mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.
⁶ For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt
offerings." Hosea 6:1-6

When I was young, I lived briefly in Boston and worshiped at Trinity Church. There, a young woman priest told us that prayer was like stepping into a circle of people, taking their hands and walking together around the perimeter of a large room. Stepping into that motion, having the circle pull and push you along when you were perhaps incapable of propelling yourself: this was the essence of the community. The motion continues, the world over, as all of creation lifts pleas and lament and thanks to the holy one, who responds. I think of this circle often when I pray.

When I first started peeking into social media, I remember feeling a bit like God, with a view into the whole world's suffering. Here, on any given day, I saw our collective joy and anguish. An earthquake in Turkey. Artsy wedding photos from high school friends. Broken cease fires. Someone I know whose child had a leukemia diagnosis. This jumble of all of us, meeting our deep desire: to be known.

As we have all been pulled into this new circle, our breath collectively held while we await a vaccine, we find ourselves drawn into this sort of solidarity again. No matter whether we mask or pretend COVID is a hoax; work for the NIH or fly Trump flags; perpetuate or fight injustice. Here we all wait, our circle. Our love is like the dew that goes away early. We are fickle, impatient, exhausted, tired of each other. Like the northern kingdom in Hosea, we have seen the damage done as we let ourselves pull away from God, as individuals, as community.

We yearn for reconciliation. But we can also see God hewing us into truthfulness and courage. The time for performative burnt offerings has gone, and in its place a call to knowledge, honesty. We will hold onto those hands, be pulled forward, propelled, into the time that is to come. Together, guided by truth, we will claim each other and our connection to the one who made us, and makes us new.
Oh God, show us truth. Make us brave. Amen.

Rebecca Davis

Friday, December 4, 2020

Psalm 85:1-3, 8-13

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Acts 11:19-20

Hope and Deliverance

The occasion of Psalm 85 was a time of national humiliation. The people are asking for God's anger to cease, for there to be a national revival, to be accompanied by a new display of God's mercy. The peoples' petition (verses 4-7) is left out of the reading. The verses included are the remembrance of God's past favors (verses 1-3), which precedes the petition, and a statement of the psalmist's certainty of impending deliverance (verses 8-13), which follows the petition.

When reflecting on this reading, I couldn't help but think of our present situation. With the pandemic, the political strife, the racial unrest, and economic hardships, it certainly feels like we're presently in a time of national humiliation. And, many of us are suffering personally. But the message of Psalm 85, which fits nicely with the season of Advent, is a message of hope and deliverance. As Christians, hope is central to our faith. It helps us through significant times of trial and suffering, as many of us are experiencing now. In messages throughout the Old Testament, such as in Psalm 85, we can see the hope that the Israelites experienced even through extremely difficult times. The Israelites yearned for a Messiah to save them from their enemies, and ultimately from the greatest enemy, their own sin.

Like the Israelites of Psalm 85, many of us today are yearning for a healing in our country, a national revival. We ask for God's mercy, yet it seems extremely slow in coming. We appreciate that much of what we are experiencing today is the result of our own personal and collective sin. Yet, we can take comfort in knowing that God does not give up on us. God gives us hope.

In Psalm 85, the psalmist was confident of an impending deliverance from suffering. Today, we can be confident, too. Advent calls us to hope for, and have faith in, deliverance from suffering because we know that Advent ends with the birth of Jesus. Advent also reminds us to be patient. In chapter 5 of James, we are reminded to be patient as we await the coming of the Lord. James also tells us to refrain from "grumbling against one another." James says, "as an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." See James 5:7-10.

There is an optimism in the prophets and the psalmists, and we can be optimistic, too. The optimism is rooted in faith in the power of God and belief in God's ultimate justice. Thankfully, Advent helps us keep that in mind, which is what we really need during times like these.

Adam Bain

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Ezekiel 36:24-28
Mark 11:27-33

Saturday, December 5

“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.” – Ezekiel 36:24 – 28

Just as Israel’s troubled history is highlighted in this passage, 2020 has not been an easy year for many of us. As we wait for a much-needed renewal, Advent seems a little more significant this year. I suspect many of us would like “a new heart” and “a new soul” these days. This is one of the joys of Advent—we know renewal is coming. But there is something else that makes Advent feel particularly special this year: the realization that Jesus will be born into a mess, the same mess we still live in today.

In Ezekiel 36, we learn that Israel is in need of some cleansing. This isn’t to say that the past will be erased. Instead, God remembers the ancestors and offers a continuation of the story. The author writes, “Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (v. 28).

During this Advent season, we are reminded that God is coming to us in a new form, through Jesus Christ, but God has been here with us since the beginning. This story—the story that started with God naming life “good,” the story that progressed with the birth of a savior, and the story that created you and me—it isn’t over. God is still our God and we are still God’s people.

-- Abby and Katie Rosenson

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Mark 1:1-8
2 Peter 3:8-15a

Sunday, December 6

Keeping Hope Alive

“Comfort, comfort.” As I read these verses from Isaiah 40, the words from one of my favorite [Advent hymns](#) dance through my head:

“Comfort, comfort now my people; tell of peace!” so says our God.

“Comfort those who sit in darkness, mourning under sorrow’s load.”

Comfort, comfort. Who couldn’t use a little comfort right now? A curl up with a favorite blanket, a hug, a bit of chocolate, some homemade chicken soup ... time by the fire, music playing, a good book, a favorite movie ... Comfort, comfort.

But what kind of comfort is this verse in Isaiah offering? It’s different from these small comforts, wonderful as they are. It’s a dramatic turn. It’s return from exile. It’s God, in the person of Cyrus of Persia, sweeping in and sending the exiles home from Babylon, so that Jerusalem can stand as a light to the nations.

*“For the glory of the Lord now on earth is shed abroad,
and all flesh shall see the token that God’s word is never broken.”*

This comfort isn’t a retreat into a warm blanket; it’s a step into hope.

As I look at these passages, I’m reminded of how often in the biblical story – and in human history! – hope seems lost. Slaves in Egypt and exiles in Babylon call out to God for release. And – eventually – release comes. In other wilderness times, yet more good news comes: “In the beginning of the good news,” writes Mark, John the Baptist appears.

But the good news never comes right away. There’s a wait. There is always a wait. The author of 2 Peter encourages his readers as they wait, longer than they expected, for Jesus to come again. He writes of keeping hope alive. What to do, when the light seems so distant? Peter’s answer: Keep on. Live righteously, be ready. Live as if the light is coming, even when you can’t see it.

Another song dances through my head: [Hope](#), by Ysaye Barnwell

If we want hope to survive in this world today ...

then every day we’ve got to pray on, pray on - work on - teach on - march on - sing on

If we want peace in the world, we’ve got to work on - teach on - march on - sing on

The song uses a lot of verbs! Hope requires action, from us. Thank goodness for the “us” – this is too much for one person! But the song gives me energy – and hope. What gives you encouragement to keep awake? To keep on?

Meg Hanna House

FROM UNCERTAINTY TO CERTAINTY

Psalm 27
26:7-15
Acts 2:34-42

December 7, 2020 Isaiah

On December 7, 1941, I was alone in our living room packing books into boxes to be taken up to our newly completed house. The radio interrupted the music I was listening to to announce the bombing of Pearl Harbor. What was anticipated to be an introduction to a settled life into a new home became a period of wonder: "What am I going to do next?" And next to my picture in my high school yearbook, after the question about future plans, is the phrase: "It depends on Uncle Sam." I knew I was going to be drafted. The certainty of going to college, getting a degree, and finding a life's work was replaced by the wonder: "Would I get out of this alive?"

The Israelites in captivity in Babylon must have felt the same way. Yet Isaiah in his writings encouraged them not to be uncertain but to trust that their Lord would save them:

Let them see thy zeal for thy people and be ashamed. Let the fire for thy adversaries consume them, O Lord, thou wilt ordain peace for us.
(26:11b)

But uncertainty remained. In Psalm 27, probably written after the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem, the Israelites expressed their worries:

Hide not thy face from me. Turn not thy servant away in anger, thou who hast been my help. Cast me not off, forsake me not, O God of my salvation. (9)

The Jews in Jerusalem converted by Peter also expressed their uncertainties. When Peter preached to them, "Let the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified", they asked, "What shall we do?" Peter told them, "Repent, and be baptized." (Acts 2:36-38) Some 3,000 were baptized and added to the church that day. The future of the church was made certain.

We all face immediate uncertainties. My wife, Helen, is on the nursing care floor of our retirement community. I am confined to our apartment because of the corona virus scare. The presidential succession is in dispute. Yet we can be certain. In the words of Psalm 27:

I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong. And let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord! (13-14)

Phil Hanna

The Lord is my *Parol*

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Psalm 27:1

Growing up in the Philippines, Christmas starts as early as September. The most iconic symbol of a Filipino Christmas are star-shaped lanterns called *parol* (from the Spanish, *farol*), that hang on the windows. The first Christmas lanterns, made in 1908, were simply made of bamboo and Japanese paper to guide rural Filipinos as they walked to church for dawn masses.

Since then, the designs have become more elaborate – some bigger than the height of two people, others with multi-level blinking lights; most are no longer made using the easily combustible Japanese paper, and there are even contests for the most elaborate ones.

As part of the Filipino diaspora, I have one, too. My *parol* is made of Capiz shells with a halo of red and green blinking electric lights. Some *parol* have “tails” symbolizing the star that guided the Wise Men as they paid homage to Jesus in the manger.

My *parol* does not have those tails, but it constantly reminds me that, as the psalmist, wrote: *“The Lord is my light.”* Whether it is Christmas or not, it has always reminded that the light is not only a distant guide, but it exists within me as a constant companion in my faith journey. It is, and will always be, my inner *parol*.

Quakers, who I work with, have a term for this: *Inner Light*. It is both a guide and a transforming presence. Throughout my faith journey, this has been proven time and time again. Several years ago, my career path diverged into two: one working with the commercial companies and the other, with nonprofits.

The money was very tempting in the commercial field, but after a period of discernment, I chose to work with environmental and social justice nonprofits. I have no regrets choosing this path because I am affirmed daily that a life of service is a life well-lived.

Psalm 27 assures me that the Light will always be with me. God gives me the courage and the strength to overcome challenges while awaiting God’s will for me. After all, God is my *parol*.

Transforming God, whose light always penetrates the darkness and whose love always overcomes hate, we ask that you sustain us as we struggle to make your light visible in an angry and frightened world. Nurture us daily as we work for your justice in unjust places and your peace in places where no peace is to be found. Give us courage and strength when we are fearful and weak. Give us hope and forgiveness when we feel hopeless and angry. And guide us every step of the way as we walk in the light. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen. (From

<https://resistharm.com/>).

Adlai Amor

Fear Not?

Psalm 27

Malachi 2:10 – 3:1

Luke 1: 5-17

Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Recent events in both my personal life and the public sphere have reminded me once again how fear is an ever-present part of life. I don't like to be afraid. It's not pleasant. I'd much rather be the strong silent type, stare down fear. Banish it from my life. Of course, this doesn't actually work as a strategy. I may have a temporary victory here and there. But at the end of the day, it's still there for me, and I dare to say for most people.

I am also reminded again that I am very much a child of the 1960's – turmoil, war, civil rights struggles, heroes lost, the military draft, etc. etc. – a fearsome time. Is history repeating itself? Sometimes it certainly seems so as we face a pandemic, political turmoil, and any number of other problems. But there are also hopeful signs – progress on a vaccine, a generally peaceful election. Perhaps things are getting better. But there is fear that this is not the case.

It seems that fear plays an important role in the Bible. According to Google, the word “fear” appears at least 360 time in English translations of the Bible. Context of course is important. We are told to fear God, or not to fear because God is with us, or to fear someone else because we have offended God and lost God's protection. The antidote to fear is faith and hope. Thus the writer of the 27th psalm can say at the beginning of the psalm, “Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom need I fear?” and at the end of the psalm, “Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong, let your heart be bold, put your hope in Yahweh.” A sandwich of hope, a nice thought.

Anne Lamott in her book Almost Everything, Notes on Hope says it in a different way (as she always does), “In times of rational and primitive fear, hope has to do push-ups out in the parking lot to stay pumped—and it does.” Later in the same book in a statement that resonates particularly with folks of a certain age she says, “In my current less-young age, I've learned that almost more than anything, stories hold us together. Stories teach us what is important about life, why we are here and how it is best to behave, and that inside us we have access to treasure, in memories and observations, in imagination.”

It is Advent. We have a story to tell. It is a hopeful story about God's intervention in the world, about the idea that fear will not win the day. Let us remember the story, tell the story, keep the faith.

Steve Dewhurst

Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy

Psalm 126
Habakkuk 2:1-5
Philippians 3:7-11.

Thursday, December 10th, 2020

Dare I say, for many of us — indeed, for most of us — the season of ordinary time has been anything but ordinary. It has been a long, long season. A season of tears. Tears of the eyes. Tears of the heart. And, too often during this season, these tears — these tears of sadness — have been met with fear, with angst, with anger, and with despair.

We have been faced with realities of a deadly virus; a virus that has left no stone unturned. We have been reminded of ever-present racial inequities and injustices; inequities and injustices that continue to pervade the communities in which we live. We have managed through a broken economy where, for too many, the loss of a job, the hardships of paying the bills, the difficulties of nutritionally feeding the family, and the anxiety over the possibility of unexpected medical bills were inconceivable only a few months ago. And, we have found ourselves in the midst of political chaos and chicanery.

The season of ordinary time has been anything but ordinary.

But, now we find ourselves in the season of Advent. A season of hope.

We know — we feel — the realities of the past and of the present. And, yet, we embrace the promises of the future. We live in faith; in the faith of the God of grace. Advent reminds us that even in the darkest of nights, the light still shines. We call out *Immanuel* ... God is with us. We pray *Maranatha* ... Our Lord has come. *Maranatha* ... Come our Lord. We long for the day when justice will roll down like waters, righteousness like a flowing stream; when swords will be turned into plowshares; when wolves will lie beside lambs; and when the widow and the orphan, the alien and the poor, will be rightfully and fully uplifted and recognized for who they (and who we) are ... God's beloved children.¹

The season of ordinary time has been anything but ordinary. It has not seemed fair. It has not seemed just.

But, now we find ourselves in the season of Advent. And as followers of Jesus Christ, as ones on the Way, we are reminded to be steadfast in faith ... to be open to transformative change ... and to trust in God and God's promises of a new day.

In Habbakuk, God tells the prophet that there still is a vision for a better future. It will surely come to the righteous, not to the arrogant, not to the proud. *During this season of Advent, may we embrace that vision of a better future. May we more fully live into our faith and find ways to more determinedly love God, others, and even ourselves.*

Paul, in his letter to the Christian community in Philippi, offers to his readers — and us — an account that through faith in Christ he has been re-born; that he has lost all that he was to be one in Christ. *During this season of Advent, may we be open to a transformative reorientation and may we respond in kind to God's endearing love.*

The psalmist calls out to God, calls out for renewal. And the psalmist calls out to those who weep; for it is they who will reap shouts of joy. *During this season of Advent, even as we continue to weep, may we find places and times to rejoice.*

Gracious God. During this season of Advent, we reflect and reorient. The realities of this time and place have been hard on too many. Yet, we hold on to hope. For we know that you are in our midst and that a new day will come. May each of us find ways to strengthen our own faith while at the same time joyfully respond to your grace. May we be open to change. May we be agents of change. May thy will be done. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

¹ For a wonderful summary of Advent and its significance in the liturgical calendar, see Bower, P.C., ed. Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, pp. 95-103.

A Different Advent

Friday, December 11, 2020

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:2-6; Philippians 3:12-16

Today's scriptures offer an opportunity to express joy, remember to hope, and recognize our calling. This year, Advent feels different to me. Does it to you? Likely each of us is in a somewhat different place, from each other and even from ourselves, and in relation to God. God in Advent meets you wherever you are.

Children and adults look forward to the personal and corporate traditions involved in Advent, including use of this devotional resource. Ordinarily, this discrete period of Advent layers atop the routines of our daily lives, and orders our lives for a time. It has a clear beginning, progression, and joyful ending, as we celebrate Christ's birth. As Christians, we are conditioned by this ritualized, watchful waiting tradition to recognize God's power, God's promises, and our calling as children of the promise. Reminded by Advent practices that God is with us and God keeps promises, we begin each new year of life in this world strengthened, renewed, and inspired to live as children of the promise, seeking to follow Christ, loving and serving others, and sharing the gospel good news.

Pandemic conditions prevent us from gathering in person to share some Advent practices this year. Yet this year's unique circumstances may make Advent even more meaningful and powerful in our lives. For some, attempting to recreate Advent traditions in our homes and remote church setting may prove especially reassuring. Advent practices have conditioned us as Christians to trust God's promises and wait hopefully, and that may be especially helpful as we find ourselves this year in a different kind of period of waiting—for relief from and an end to a pandemic that has dominated living conditions and threatened the wellbeing of all people for months. The pandemic story has no clear beginning, progression, or ending, but the Advent story does. God waits with us in the darkness and sends light. As we light Advent candles, we remember that God sends reassuring messages that we should not be afraid. God sends a star's light in the darkness. God sent a Savior to guide us. We can pray and believe that the fearful uncertainties, heart heaviness, deep weariness, and suffering of the pandemic do not eclipse Advent's promise and joy. We do this individually and together, on behalf of the world. Blest be the tie that binds!

In addition to reassurance, Advent presents challenge. Advent encourages us to remember what we profess—that God is with us. God has sent us a Savior to shepherd, lead and reassure us, and to make a life-affirming, life-changing claim on our attention and lives, so that we may help bring hope and God's increasing "light" in the world. This year, pandemic and other social and environmental tragedies have revealed to us more clearly and inarguably pain, suffering, despair, injustices, and inequities. With illumination from God, we see those who suffered, hoped, and waited for recognition and relief for far too long. We see our own blindness. We have been blessed to see glimmers of God's light and good news emerging from the darkness, in the softening of hearts; in people reaching out in creative, powerful, faithful ways, to listen, help, and be kinder to each other; and in greater willingness to consider recognize and consider systemic injustices and inequities and how they might be remedied.

As we seek to respond to God's call on our lives, the PCUSA Mission offers an additional inspiring Advent daily devotional resource, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/advent2020>. Inspired by the poem "I Will Light Candles This Christmas" by Howard Thurman, it contains daily readings, questions, and suggested practices. To them I add this one: as we experience Advent in all its universality and particularity, and in relative isolation, consider reaching out to initiate conversation with someone. Share your understanding of Advent this year. Listen. Hear. Give. Receive. Share. Dwell. Accompany. Accept. Serve. Affirm. Risk. Remain. Encourage. In faith, we journey together, not alone, for where two or more are gathered in God's name, God is in our midst.

Dear God, Let the light of the Advent candles we light or remember having lit burn brightly during this cold, dark, winter of particularly profound isolation, danger, suffering, and fear. We give thanks for and celebrate glimmers of Your light in the darkness that are evidence of the promise and advent of the new heaven and new earth You bring to, among, and through us, and to all the world. Amen.

Karen Mills

Saturday, December 12, 2020

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19;
Matthew 21:28-32

“Oh, God Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come”

I would like to put my thoughts here in context. I am writing this meditation on Monday, November 9 after “that was the week that was”, with the election over (sort of), experiencing a residue of elation and joy at the outcome (sort of) and increasing anxiety concerning what the future holds for this terribly divided and hostile country. The readings in the Common Lectionary which I drew, are, for the most part, pleas from a people praising the Lord for previous rescues from catastrophe and an anticipation of more of the same. Praise, lamentation and declarations of faith for the future intermingle in these verses, as they seem to characterize my current thoughts as well.

Psalm 126 is a short song, literally, entitled “A Harvest of Joy: A Song of Ascents”. “Ascents” may refer to the poetic form of the song or to its being sung by worshipers ascending to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. The first half echoes the joy of Zion’s deliverance from its enemies in the past. The second half, however, pleads for a restoration of this good fortune in present, less happy, circumstances. Memories of joy in the past are tempered by anxiety and supplications for aid in the present.

Habakkuk 3:13-19 was, first of all, difficult to locate in my Study Bible! Because of my childhood experiences in Baptist Sunday School and Bible School where “Sword Drills” were performed (races to see who could locate and read a Bible verse first!), I can generally find a Bible Book quickly. This one required a trip to the Table of Contents! Like the Psalm, it is a hymn probably sung in the Temple as the “Prayer of Habakkuk”, the prophet. It comes complete with a direction to the “leader with stringed instruments”. Like the Psalm, it begins with thanksgiving for God’s destroying past enemies but concludes with “I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.” (3:16) The prophet vows, however, despite anticipated hardship and misfortunes, “yet I will rejoice in the Lord: I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength;” (3:18-19).

Matthew 21:28-32, does not, unfortunately, fit into my attempt to find parallels in all three selections. It is the “Parable of the Two Sons” and, like many of Jesus’ parables, I find it difficult to decipher. A father asks his two sons to go work in the vineyard. The first did not agree to go but later “changed his mind” and went. The second son agreed to go but did not. Jesus asked his audience “Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.”(21:31). Jesus seems less than pleased with this response and without giving a reason tells the assembled crowd that “... tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” (21:31-32). My personal reaction to this disparaging reaction was similar to my reaction, as a first-born son, to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It required my hearing many sermons on the topic to grasp the true moral of the story involving a father’s love and forgiveness. Perhaps, after the thought-provoking explication of the parable of the bridesmaids and their oil lamps done by Pastors Heather and Andrew, someone will one day help me untangle this one as well. For now, I must be content to await enlightenment.

So, here I sit, after an “annus horribilis” in the midst of a deadly pandemic, a disastrous economy, an escalation of overt racism, fear and demonization affecting the entire country and an election which, while promising hope, also foreshadows much more divisiveness and lots of soul searching for us all. These passages remind us that such catastrophes have been overcome in the past. The lesson for me, comes from Habakkuk: “...I will rejoice in the Lord: I will exult in the God of my salvation, God, the Lord is my strength;” (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

God of the Ages, our hope for years to come, keep me calm and confident in the face of adversity. Help me overcome my own prejudices and contributions to divisiveness and truly rejoice in the Lord.

Spencer Gibbins

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8, 19-28
1 Thessalonians 5:6-24

Sunday, December 13, 2020

We are in the season of Advent, a time of waiting for Jesus to come. It is appropriate, then, that all three of today's scripture passages involve waiting. Today's Isaiah reading contains the passage that Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth: *"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. ..."* It goes on to describe a time that is coming when Israel will be lifted up among the nations.

The verses from John 1 are about John the Baptist and the witness he gives about Jesus: *"I baptize with water, ... but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."* The Messiah is coming.

In 1 Thessalonians, the waiting is for Jesus' return. Thessalonica was a very cosmopolitan city, a great port, and located on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road that crossed northern Greece, linking Rome to the empire's eastern provinces. Paul's stay in Thessalonica is relatively brief, probably a few months at most, and he left hurriedly after the local Jewish authorities, angry at Paul's success in converting some Jews and Gentile God-fearers, stirred up a mob, started a riot in the city, and came looking for him. Paul fled, but worried about the fledgling church and sent Timothy back to check on them. Timothy returned with a good report and some questions from the church that Paul addresses in his letter.

Paul concludes his letter with these admonitions.

"Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, [siblings], warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."

"Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

"Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."
1 Thessalonians 5:13b-24

In this Advent season, I hope you will join me in reflecting on Paul's words. They are challenging. *Be patient with everyone? Be joyful always* – an especially huge ask this year. *Give thanks in all circumstances* – oh, dear. Also, I'm not sure how one *prays continually*. If you have figured this out, please let me know. Does it have anything to do with practicing God's presence in our lives, being aware that God is present in every moment? I don't know.

I do know that I am greatly comforted by the assurance that God Godself is working in me, and in you, bringing each of us to our best expressions of what God's love looks like. We only have to be willing. God will do it.

Miriam Dewhurst

Psalm 125
1 Kings 18:1-18
Ephesians 6:10-17

December 14, 2020

“¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Ephesians 6:10-17

Whatever one’s view of the reality of the devil or evil external to the human heart, this passage from Ephesians is compelling because I think we can agree that there is much evil in our world.

I am not thinking of the novel coronavirus. The virus is a pathogen, somehow a part of the creation. Like hurricanes and earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and floods, droughts and wildfires, pathogens are part of the natural world. The impacts of these natural occurrences are too often tragic, too often made worse by human action or inaction, but the occurrences are not evil.

We might argue with Paul that our struggle is in fact against flesh and blood. After four long years of an administration that has done everything in its power to create division and sow seeds of distrust, the recently concluded election has highlighted flesh and blood struggles. People marching, people rallying, people protesting, people shouting at one another, demonizing one another, attacking one another; the struggle is intense and exhausting.

Paul is surely correct, though, about the powers of this world and spiritual forces of evil. We can name them: racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and others. We have seen these, too, not only this year, of course, but somehow highlighted this year as we witnessed the murder of George Floyd and other people of color. We are made aware every day of the inequalities in this country, the disparities in health outcomes, employment and promotion opportunities, housing, policing and incarceration.

What can we do? Paul’s metaphor of the armor of God is useful. Putting on a belt of truth, committing ourselves to truth-knowing and truth-telling, even if the truth is that we also have our blind spots and we also benefit from the systems that keep others down. Putting on the breastplate of righteousness; committing ourselves to right action; seeking to be in right relation to God, which will bring us into right relation with others, recognizing our common humanity and seeking the good of each and all. And when armored, what are we to do? We are to stand: stand against the powers, stand with the oppressed, stand, trusting that God can and will use us to bring forth God’s kin-dom.

Miriam Dewhurst

Psalms 125
2 Kings 2: 9-22
Acts 3: 17-4:4

December 15, 2020

How Do We Hold Faith?

The Psalmist says that those who trust in the Lord are like Mt. Zion—cannot be shaken but stand fast forever. So, is that a wish or a goal or something even achievable? What exactly does it take, or mean, to hold fast no matter the adversity we encounter, the disappointments and loss, the complacency we experience, or the satisfaction with life that makes standing fast seem not so necessary? And what does forever mean, anyway? Every day, every minute—no diversions or side trips allowed? This dictum does not seem to take into account the very human doubt or questioning; does not imply that one is allowed to explore or consider the pinpricks of uncertainty that might lurk in our minds. How do we achieve “cannot be shaken” in trusting God when so much in everyday life seems to shake our foundations?

Perhaps this is an unanswerable question—for the Psalmist didn’t say how! Three recently-read books take different approaches to the issue of faith, from deep to thought-provoking to “light”—Holding Faith (Rigby), The Universal Christ (Rohr), and Almost Everything (Lamott)—each trying to convey God and the road to faith. Academic theologian Rigby plows through meanings and history, how we ‘view’ God, the creeds (Insight of Nicea), the doctrine of incarnation, for example. But even in this effort to elucidate through a better understanding of theology, Rigby wrote (in so many words) that we are trying to understand the what and who of God, the Infinite, the Unknowable, by means of human intellect and reasoning. By definition, it seems to me, we are doomed to fail. Rohr the priest, on the other hand, delves into new meanings and approaches to understanding Jesus the Christ. For me, he provides many “aha!” moments of “I never knew or thought of that”—but it still does not provide a roadmap to Mt. Zion and standing fast forever. Anne Lamott, however, through her many detours of human failures and mess-ups always seems to come back to love. “We have known the abyss of love lost to death or rejection, [but] we have been redeemed and saved by love...Love has bridged the high-rises of despair. Love has been a penlight in the blackest, bleakest nights...Love and goodness and the world’s beauty and humanity are the reasons we have hope.” And no matter the greed and cruel stupidity we observe in our world, “we also see love and tender hearts carry the day.”

Given our recent political environment and experience, I cannot help but project the current situation to the reading in Kings and Elisha’s standing on the bank of the Jordan, striking the water with Elijah’s cloak, “and it was divided to right and left, and he crossed over.” Elisha later took water and salt and purified the city’s water and caused no more death. Might we dare to hope that our country’s division of “right and left” might be purified with a new leader who seeks to purify/unify the country and people? And might we work toward this goal with love and understanding? And in loving our fellows steadfastly and unshaken, do we not find God?

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust and be steadfast through love.

Marilyn J. Seiber.

Refresh Renew Rejoice

Psalm 125,
Malachi 3:8 4:6,
Mark 9:2-13,
Philippians 4:1-7.

Wed. Dec 16, 2020

Advent comes with a paradox: while we are still waiting for the Christ Child, we also celebrate the beginning of the church year, a fresh start – new possibilities to reach out for. After 2020, a healthy, fresh start is what we all need. And devoutly wish for.

From his own prison cell, Paul urges us on: “My brothers and sisters, you who I love and long for, my joy and delight, you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” Remain strong. “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say: Rejoice!... Let your love and delight be evident to all. The Lord is near!” Be alert. “Do not be anxious about anything...and the peace of God, which transcends understanding, will guard your heart and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:1-7).” Trust fully in God and you will find peace.

As the Christmas story unfolds around us in music, lights, decorations, gifts and signs of love and peace, I find spiritual meaning in these three connected words – refresh, renew, rejoice. If I can take them seriously and to heart, that’s what my spirit needs most of all. Paul’s inspired words are a gift to us all. They can reconnect us in this season of longing for the light of a new day: a new vision of justice, honesty, compassion, a dream creating great joy.

Each of the three other passages share visions of what can also be devoutly wished for. “Zion” is invoked in Psalm 125 – it is God’s holy city which will be visible when all are “upright in heart.” When all “trust in the Lord...then peace will be on Israel.”

In Malachi, when all believers fulfill their promises and tithes to God, then these righteous followers will “see how I (God) will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” (Mal. 3:10) This vision of great abundance fulfills many prophecies. Malachi ends with God’s promise that, after Elijah, comes the Day of the Lord, which for Christians is the coming of Christ on earth.

Mark tells of Jesus and his disciples after they have experienced the vision of Jesus’ Transfiguration and conversation with Elijah and Moses. Later Jesus explains to the stunned disciples that Elijah (John the Baptist) has already come. So as Malachi foretold, the Messiah is near. More exciting and mysterious, out of the luminous cloud before them comes a voice – “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:2-13) This is the good news that all believers have been waiting for. As Paul says, Rejoice!

Oh, Lord, let us be mindful and patient enough to see all the ways that You work wonders in this world. Amen.

Tom Dunlap

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING

Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26

2 Samuel 6: 1-11

Hebrews 1: 1-4

December 17, 2020

Our Scriptures today remind us that

- God seeks us out, desires a relationship with us. God speaks and makes covenants with us, promising His faithfulness and steadfast love. (Psalm 89)
- God was present in the Ark of the Covenant. David worshiped him with joyous dancing and music. (2 Samuel 6)
- God has spoken through the psalmist, the prophets, and through His own Son. (Hebrews 1)

Some, particularly in the United Church of Christ, say that God is still speaking. As I try to listen, this is what I think I hear God saying to me, through the Scriptures:

“You are my hands and feet on earth. My Son instructed you to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and those in prison. There are still so many who are hungry, cold, displaced, sick, and lonely. How are you serving others?”

“There are still so many divisions and disagreements among you. St. Paul instructed you that you are all equal, that is, that you all have a common relationship with Christ—that there should be no division into male and female, Jew and non-Jew, slave and free. How are you fostering healing?”

“I love you unconditionally, and I empower you to bring in my kingdom. The kingdom is within you.”

Do you feel God’s presence, hear God speaking—particularly in these trying times? It is difficult, and yet the quarantine has provided us with more opportunities to be alone with God in the peace and quiet. It is time to listen more to God. He is still speaking. Where is God trying to speak to you in your life?

Ella Cleveland



Trust and Obey For There Is No Other Way

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
2 Samuel 6:12-19
Hebrews 1:5-14

Friday
December 18, 2020

We study scripture during Advent in order better to discern God's purpose in sending Jesus to us – the Incarnation. Three seemingly disparate ideas are offered for our guidance in today's lectionary passages:

- God has promised unconditionally, steadfastly, to love King David and his offspring forever.
- In order to celebrate a discerned, God-directed, political transition, King David surprisingly engages in unseemly behavior (at least in the eyes of his wife) as he leads the whole people of Israel in a wild parade and hosts a party to which all are invited.
- God, the Father, has "the talk" with His Son, Jesus, and other follower angels about the roles they play as messengers to tell and demonstrate God's "salvation" story.

King David appears as one of God's messengers, telling this story:

"God's unconditional love for me and my family forever frees me to be my authentic self without fear or vanity-based shame, to dance virtually naked at the head of a wild, celebratory parade, in front of the whole people of Israel – and to invite them all to a grand party, each person receiving a loaf of bread and a date cake and a raisin cake – all because I'm discerning and following God's will, to move God's chest to a tent I have especially pitched for it."

Advent 2020 certainly has the markings of Darkness – a worldwide pandemic causing not just illness and death but staggering economic disruption, a seemingly endless political contest with radically different consequences resulting from whichever party prevails, and the Earth quite literally burning up, to the present and future detriment of millions of its inhabitants. This world certainly needs a savior! These passages remind us that we as fellow angels with Jesus and David can rely on God's unconditional, steadfast love for each of us and respond authentically to these challenges with the skill, insight, restraint, and love that each of us can contribute. We are also called to be a fellow messenger with Jesus as we too proclaim, with faith and confidence

God, your throne is forever
And your kingdom's scepter is a rod of justice.
You loved righteousness and hated lawless behavior.
(Hebrews 1:8-9 CEB)

These passages instruct and remind us that trusting in God's unconditional, steadfast love for the whole people – all of us – can give us the confidence we need to overcome our fear of scarcity, of there not being enough cakes to go around, or that there is not enough love in the world to embrace each one of us, *indeed, all of us*, forever. That is the Good News that repeatedly greets us each Christmas morning.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, thank you for sending Jesus to show all your people how to honor your sovereignty over the universe by living faithfully, yearning and working for a just and sustainable social, political and economic order. Empower us daily to claim your promise steadfastly to love and protect us forever and to resist the temptation to cling to fears that keep us from loving you and all others. Amen. - John H. Quinn, Jr.

“Elementary, My Dear Watson. Elementary.”

John 7: 45-52

December 19, 2020

“But surely our Law does not allow us to pass judgement without first giving him a hearing and discovering what he is doing?” John 7: 51

Nicodemus is one of those shadowy characters who people the Gospels, there for a few verses and then gone, never or only occasionally to return. We find him only in John’s Gospel. This Pharisee emerges out of the darkness in chapter 3 to ask Jesus a series of questions, each question revealing even greater cluelessness. To Jesus’ claim that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they be born again, Nicodemus asks, “How can someone already old be born? Is it possible to go back into the womb again and be born? How is that possible?” After this thoroughly unsatisfactory interview for all concerned, he returns in chapter 7, as the chief priests and Pharisees are asking whether any of those in authority and expertise [that is, themselves] actually believes the claims of Jesus. Nicodemus’ question [cited above] may be somewhat brave, given the circumstances, but it is hardly a statement of faith. Then Nicodemus shows up 12 chapters later, in John 19 bringing a heavy [one hundred pounds] of aloes and myrrh to bury the crucified Jesus.

What are we to make of this guy? Biblical scholars are all over the place. Some see a skeptical but curious man of power who moves ever so carefully toward genuine discipleship. Others see a thoroughly ambiguous character who never quite gets it. Even his actions after Jesus’ death – bringing along that much burial material to the tomb – indicates that he thought Jesus really, truly dead, never to rise again, as promised. To his detractors, he can never quite sacrifice his honored position among the elite to join the ragtag community of believers.

In his book on the community of believers out of which John’s Gospel emerged, Raymond E. Brown draws a comparison between John’s record of Jesus’ dialogues with people like Nicodemus and Arthur Conan Doyle’s portrayals of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. In each case, the reader is advantaged, because he/she at least knows more than Dr. Watson/the disciples although far less than the enigmatic and charismatic Holmes/Jesus. The question for me, the reader, is: Does my additional gift of insight change me or leave me where I was before I encountered Jesus? In the world of Advent, has all my waiting borne fruit? Is it “Elementary, My Dear Paul, elementary”?

Gracious God, give me ears to hear and eyes to see the miracle of life in our midst! Amen

Paul B. Dornan

Annunciation

In the early morning blue light of dawn I stretch and yawn, remembering that it is Saturday. I swing my legs over the side of the cherry-ridged twin bed and feel the pads of my feet find the yoga mat. Placed right there to remind me to pray, the mat receives my knees as arms reach forward and up. I'm thinking of the world, which has been my single thought for weeks. I'm thinking of the suffering of the world, people dying too soon and isolated, social-political divides as never before in my lifetime. I turn on some music, memory of another time, and find my body moving, in prayer now.

***Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel
and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,...***

I don't know what I expect. I know I yearn for an end to the suffering, some assurance that we are all okay. And I know that ***my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly...***

While this appears to be an ordinary day, the warmth of my body tells me otherwise. I dance as I pray through the yoga postures, as the light changes to a palatable gray. ***Mary!*** I turn and tilt my head sideways, arms still shaping the space around me. In all my 20 years, something seems brand new. When I look to see who I'm entertaining, a trace outline with a glow lights me and the room. This One's proclamation is a surprise:

***(...according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret
for long ages but is now disclosed,...)***

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

I will name him Jesus! In this moment, it is possible to glimpse the entire world, the distraction and sadness, the hope and grace of tired humanity. Could I help fulfill dreams of old? Could I bear light into this world? The Light?

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

...to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Then the angel departed from her.

Dear God,

With the heart and devotion of that young woman who is both old and new, I pray that I too will be able to bear light into this world even in the midst of suffering and division, *especially* in the midst of suffering and division. Help us all to be beacons of light following the *true Light who enlightens everyone and who is coming into the world.**

Amen.

- Kathryn Sparks Carpenter

Monday, December 21, 2020

Scripture:

- I Samuel 1:1-18
- Luke 1:46b-55
- Hebrews 9:1-14

Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, 'How long will you keep getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.' 'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.' Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him.'

I Samuel 1:12-17

Reflection:

You are now 20+ days into this advent study, and I imagine that every writer has commented on the difficulty of 2020. The world is sick on so many levels, and maybe it always has been, but in 2020, it's just been made so obvious. Hannah grieved over an 'unchangeable' situation; how many of us have grieved this year as a global pandemic has held us in its grasp? How often have we prayed out 'great anguish and grief' or at least in bitter disappointment? As we are in the midst of a long, cold, dark winter, I find solace that our Lord hears our prayers. He is with us. He calls us by name. And just as for Hannah, he sends his son into the world, the perfect evidence that he has remembered us.

Prayer:

Lord, in this season of preparation, we beg your forgiveness for our frustration when things do not go the way we want them to go. We ask for patience and courage in equal measure to face and deal with the situations in our own lives and at the same time, for the wisdom to come together as a community in your name. Use us, Lord, to heal the world on all the levels in which dis-ease has wreaked havoc, and especially in this Advent season, to let your love and light shine through us and all that we do and all that we are. Your children.

Amen

Laura Asiala



The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶ Mary responded,

“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

⁴⁷ How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

⁴⁹ For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.

⁵⁰ He shows mercy from generation to generation
to all who fear him.

⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

⁵² He has brought down princes from their thrones
and exalted the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel
and remembered to be merciful.

⁵⁵ For he made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children forever.”

The Gospel of Luke is filled with these tender, domestic moments. A pregnant teenage girl learns her elderly cousin is also pregnant – she will not be alone in this strange journey she's been given. What erupts from her in the joy of this realization? The famous song of praise and gratitude to God, one we celebrate in the music of the Magnificat. But in those words, what do we actually hear? At first, it reads like a lot of angry smashing by a muscle-tough God. But digging a bit deeper, the changes she's actually listing are revolutions - revolutionary changes in the world. Her list of the results of God's great works:

An increase in humility and a reduction in pride in the world.

A flattening of social strata.

Feeding of hungry people.

And mercy – God's outsized mercy that is bookending both sides of the list, start and finish.

How then to read this passage, so familiar and thus so hard to take note of? Notice what world is being shaped by God. A more humble world. A less inequitable world. A world in which we all have enough. These simple revolutions are the ones we know matter, the ones we are told over and over in the Bible are the priorities.



What We Do Matters

Luke 1:46b-55
Samuel 2:1-10
Mark 11:1-11

December 23, 2020
Wednesday

A cloud of anxious waiting blankets our country like night-forming fog in a valley. Students and their parents long to return to in-person classrooms. Doctors and nurses, exhausted from treating the sick and dying, see no immediate end in sight. Store-owners ask themselves how much longer they can survive on what little cash is coming in. We are tired of avoiding other people, tired of wearing claustrophobic masks, and tired of washing our chapped hands. We hear news that a vaccine or two will be available in the spring. But then we hear offices, governments, and churches telling their communities that it may not be until September 2021 that any return to “normal” will be possible. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

A calm light shines out from two of today’s passages, in Mary’s prayer and Hannah’s song. These words pierce the fog:

Mary’s Prayer from Luke

“He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Hannah’s Song from Samuel

⁶“The Lord brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up,
⁷The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
⁸He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
And has them inherit a throne of honor.”

By celebrating Advent, we remind ourselves of the coming of Christ Jesus whose birth brings hope.

“Hope is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.”

[Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark, 2016]

In other words...

Hope is feeding someone today without knowing what they will eat tomorrow.

Hope is sheltering someone tonight without knowing where they will sleep tomorrow.

Hope is doing what we can do now because it does matter –
today, tomorrow, and the day after.

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard



Christmas Eve 2020

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20

Titus 2:11-14

As a child Christmas Eve was always filled with excited anticipation of gifts received. As an adult for me the Christmas holidays are less important than the Christian season of Advent. The distinction for me being the shift from the celebration of the story of Jesus' birth into a season of obligation and consumption. No connection for me. For me the Advent season this year is a chance to gift loved ones and myself with some freedom from the unusually stressful year that is about to pass, focusing my thoughts in prayer on giving love in new ways. Often I find the stress of my life to be instructive.

This year has certainly been filled with difficulty for our nation and the world. In recent weeks the gift of a chance for us to reorient and rebuild has been given us. As Christmas arrives, I find myself once again this year in an effort to discern the gifts I've received in spite of political upheaval and continuing health madness. The joy given me by the people in my life is always front and center. In the world of pandemic, the physical presence with loved ones has not, for the most part, been possible. This extremely difficult (for me) situation has led me toward establishing more consciously the spiritual connections with loved ones, holding you all in my heart of hearts. Yes, I do mean you.

In Isaiah we read, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, *you have increased its joy*; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest". "*For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken*". "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*."

Titus writes, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

This Christmas eve I declare openly my gratitude for the gift of Christian connection and send out the infinite gift of love to my loved ones wherever you are. May you be held lovingly in the palm of God's hand. Yes. I do mean you.

In Gratitude

Nathan Moon

Isaiah 62:6-12
Luke 2:8-20
Titus 3:4-7

Friday, December 25, 2020

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those who he favors!”*

Luke 2:13

I'm willing to bet that if some of you are like me you can recite much of today's reading from Luke by memory. Years of participating in and watching Christmas pageants have made the story of the shepherds and angels as familiar a part of the season as candlelight services and an evergreen-filled sanctuary. This year, however, we've had to adapt how we celebrate together and there is a lot about Christmas that feels different and unfamiliar.

I guess I should not be surprised then that the shepherds' story feels different to me this year too. Instead of marveling at the joy the shepherds must have felt upon hearing the news of Christ's birth, I find myself pondering how truly overwhelming the night must have been for them. Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified to see an angel appear before them. Despite Gabriel's assurances, they undoubtedly were still quaking in their sandals when they heard the joyful news of Christ's arrival and the praises of countless angels echoing through the night. Then, probably spurred by a mix of wonder and disbelief, the shepherds headed into Bethlehem to see if the news was true. The baby they found there must have seemed at the same time both wonderfully holy and a puzzling contrast to the Messiah most Jews anticipated. How did the shepherds process all of this? What words did they use to share the good news when they were undoubtedly still struggling to understand the immensity of it for themselves?

Luke does not say that the angels sang the words of glory they shared that night, but I like to imagine they did. I like to think that their song of praise gave the shepherds a way to respond to the miracle of Christ's birth even before they could sort through the fear, awe, hope, and joy of that night.

Perhaps I'm taking some liberty in imagining the story this way, but it feels fitting to me this year as I experience a Christmas of so many mixed emotions. How do we express all that Christmas means to us as Christians when we miss familiar traditions? Maybe one of the small wonders of Christmas for both the shepherds and for us is that when we feel overwhelmed, God gives us the words of praise we need to respond to the miracle of Christ's birth. How we celebrate this year may be different, but the words and truth of the Christmas story remain the same.

No matter how we sing Gloria, be it in heart-bursting joy, longing, or a mixture of both, Christ's coming is for us. May we find comfort and joy in familiar words even during unfamiliar times.

Alison Nowak