



2011 Advent Reflections
Elkton United Methodist Church
Elkton, MD

Sunday, November 27, 2011

Read Psalm 24

“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory”. Psalm 24: 7-10

Who’s That Knocking?

Albert Einstein said that “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” An anonymous author wrote, “Opportunity may knock only once but temptation leans on the doorbell!” We all know that “opportunity knocks,” don’t we? Opportunity—is it a random, fleeting occurrence? A lightning bolt of circumstance? Something that only happens to lucky people? Or something that only others recognize or have the courage to act upon? Perhaps it’s none of these. Opportunity, as an outward demonstration of the grace of God, surrounds us all every day. Perhaps it’s not *courage* that drives us to open the door when opportunity knocks, but *faith*.

Michelle, the children and I were presented with an opportunity last summer to relocate to New England as part of a career change I had been offered (an opportunity!). So many emotions flooded us simultaneously: fear, uncertainty, excitement, sadness (at leaving our Elkton friends and family), and hope for the future. It wasn’t *courage* that drove us to the decision to open this new chapter, it was *faith* that God would be with us no matter where we were, and in fact our conviction that God had a hand in presenting us with the choice to make. And of course while we still miss our Elkton “family” we are doing just fine in Rhode Island. God made a beautiful coastline on the Narragansett Bay that I suspect we will treasure for years to come. And we’re developing a new “family” here quite easily, thanks to God’s love being shared with all of us by so many good “Rhodies.”

In Psalm 24, the Psalmist commands the doors to open, that the King of glory might enter. Clearly, the passage can refer to Christ’s future ascension to the throne at the right hand of God. But as we enter Advent and prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus’ birth, it also serves to remind us that at Christmas—especially at Christmas—Jesus’ arrival among us all those years ago gave us an *eternal opportunity*. It’s an opportunity that surrounds us always, every day of our lives. Jesus knocks gently but continuously on the door of the hearts of all people everywhere. Can you hear it? Will you stop and listen for it every day this Advent season?

This Advent, may our faith allow us to hear Him knocking, to answer the door anew, and to re-open our hearts to Him and to others as He would have us do. Let it be so. Amen.

Tim Webb

East Greenwich, Rhode Island

Monday, November 28, 2011

Read Matthew 21:1-11

*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the Highest heaven! Matthew 21:9*

A Christmas Worth Remembering

Matthew 21:9 sounds as though it might be an announcement of the birth of Jesus – something we would expect to hear or read during the season of Advent. But when we read the first 11 verses of the chapter we realize the story recorded here is about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday! Isn't this a curious reading for Advent? Not really. This Gospel lesson reminds us of what was soon to happen: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This was the greatest gift ever given!

Last year during Advent, I participated in the EUMC study, "The Advent Conspiracy". The writers encourage us to worship fully, spend less, give more and love all at Christmas time. I encourage you to participate in this study or at least read the book. Two friends and I reread and discussed the study during the summer. Among the many things we learned was about the issues of gift giving. Instead of running to the mall, trying to find the perfect gifts and spending too much money we have decided to give gifts from the heart – gifts of love. Here are some of the ideas our small group have considered:

- Consider a donation to help reduce world hunger. Participate in the Angel Tree, Mitten Tree and Operation Christmas Child projects. Send a card to your loved ones and tell them these gifts were given in their honor.
- Make a gift card for someone in your life who could use several hours of babysitting.
- Arrange to help take care for a pet for someone who cannot. And take the dog for a walk.
- Deliver a holiday meal.
- Help with the homeless shelter project.
- Homemade and handmade gifts are really appreciated: bread, jam, cookies. Yum!

One Christmas during the post-depression years my mother told me Santa probably would not be bringing a doll for me that year. But to my surprise I found a beautiful doll in a satin covered bed and a full wardrobe of clothes for her! It was YEARS before I realized that the gift was an old doll of mine made to look like new in a tomato basket covered in shiny, soft cloth with clothes made from fabric scraps from curtains and dresses. That was a gift I have never forgotten – a Christmas worth remembering. Like God' gift, gifts from the heart are gifts we give and receive and love and remember.

"Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart" (Charles Wesley, 1744).

Judy Pugh

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Read Matthew 21: 12-22

And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the son of David; they were sore displeased, And said to him, "Hearest thou what these say?" And Jesus saith unto them, "Yea; have ye never read out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise?" Matthew 21: 15-16

Except for God's love, there is no greater blessing in my life other than my children. They are my world. There is something about the innocence of a child that speaks to the pureness of the way life should be. One of my most favorite things in the whole world is to pray at night with my daughter before she goes to bed. She always stops me before we start the Lord's Prayer. She leans in close to me and whispers, 'Daddy, I can do it by myself.' Then with pure intention she recites the prayer and I get to listen to her.

Sometimes when she prays, she will stumble and forget a word or lose her place. I never let her catch me, but I keep reciting the prayer in a whisper and I can feel her look up at me to find her place. She trusts that I am there to guide her. She trusts that I will be there to provide security, guidance and direction in everything she does. I am her father and she knows that I love her unconditionally and therefore she trusts in me unconditionally.

In the verses above we find that the chief priests become extremely upset when Jesus cleanses the temple. They became so disturbed by the wonderful things that Jesus did that eventually they plot to kill him. The priests did not trust in Jesus, but only in themselves. However, the passage also teaches us the children who came into the temple did trust Jesus. They recognized his love so much they were singing praises to him. 'Hosanna to the son of David'; please save the Son David. So why did the priests not trust in Jesus the way the children did? Why as we get older do we become less trusting? We tend to yield to our own understanding and then when things do not work out the way we plan we doubt or rationalize or become displeased.

The last verse of this passage is my favorite verse in the Bible. "*And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.*" It is the word 'believing' that means the most to me because it means that when I ask God for something in prayer I have to trust God with everything and that He will deliver. He may deliver on His time and on His terms, but He will always deliver. To believe is to accept something to be true and that is how Jesus taught us to pray: to know that your prayer will be answered. Remember this Advent season that Jesus came to give us the one thing that we can believe in. The one thing we can trust. It takes tremendous faith to believe that our prayers will be answered and it also takes action on our part. The next time doubt or skepticism enters your prayer life, stop it and cast it out. Tell yourself you are not going to doubt no matter how scared you are or how dire the situation. Is there nothing that God cannot handle? Trust in God the way our children trust in us – unconditionally. Because as Jesus has said, the children have perfected praise.

Father, help us trust in You with everything we are and everything we have. Let us not doubt or question, just believe that You will answer our prayers.

Eric Laramore

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

Read Psalm 50

Sacrifices and Gifts

In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God lays out very specific laws about the sacrifices the Israelites are supposed to make. Then, in many other parts of the Old Testament, God proceeds to say that he cares nothing for these sacrifices. In Psalm 50:9, He says, "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens." God says in verses 10 and 11, "for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine." I find myself asking, "If God does not need those sacrifices, why give the Israelites such detail instructions on how the sacrifices were to be made?" That question gets me nowhere. If I ask slightly different questions, it starts to make sense. If God does not need those sacrifices, who does? If He does not appreciate them, why not? It is not God who needs the sacrifices; it is the humans who need to make them. It is the giver that needs to give. The human who needs to let go of those material possessions. Why then does God so frequently not appreciate the sacrifice? Verses 17 through 20 answer that question. In my translation, He says, "you ignore my rules, you reject my teaching, you help thieves, you hang out with adulterers, you say nasty things and tell lies, and you slander those closest to you." God lists other sins in other parts of the Bible. My conclusion is that those sacrifices were intended to remind the Israelites of where all good things originated, and who they really belonged to, and who the Israelites themselves belonged to. If the people making the sacrifices understood that, and they were earnestly seeking to please God, then God would have been delighted with the sacrifices because He was delighted with the ones making them. Furthermore, if the people were earnestly seeking to please God, they would live by the teachings God gave them, and consequently not be accused of the litany of sins mentioned here or elsewhere in the Old Testament. It would be nice to stop here and pat myself on the back for figuring this out, and go on about my November 2011 AD business. If I were to do that I could be accused of "casting [His] words behind [me]" (vs. 17). I would have missed the point.

While burnt offerings and animal sacrifices are a thing of the past, nothing else in this passage is. God still wants me to give back to Him from all that He has given me. He expects me to fully realize where all my blessings have come from and to give Him thanks. He still expects me to know His laws and teachings. He expects me to live by those teachings. He expects me to have a heart that yearns for Him and yearns to please Him. I believe that in giving to those in need, I give to God and that it pleases Him. When I give to those on my "socially correct" gift list of people who already have enough, He cares nothing for that.

Lord God Almighty, Giver of all good gifts. Help me to please you by all my thoughts and actions. Help me to find ways to give gifts that please you.

Heidi Gaultney

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Read 2 Peter 3: 11-18

"Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? ... So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found at your best, in purity and peace." 2 Peter 3, selected verses (The Message)

How Then Should We Live?

It is my hope that by the time you read this the world has not come to an end. It was first predicted by a California preacher to happen on May 21, 2011. And when that time came and went, he moved the date to October 21, 2011. The fact that the day of the Lord will come is clearly stated in the Bible and no amount of anxiety on our part can alter God's plan. So then how shall we live? 2 Peter tells us to "look forward" and the Advent season is a time to examine those things that we hold so close to us and which in the eternal scheme of things have no value. What are the things in our lives that could be gone tomorrow and what are the things that have eternal value? We live in a troubled and dysfunctional world and we spend much time on triviality, but God is about to send us a gift in the person of Jesus that lets us rise above the commonplace. Just as we would put on our best attire to attend a special social function, let us be found suitably dressed to greet the One who personifies purity, peace and righteousness. God's plan for us is not destruction, but to be embodied in Him through Jesus Christ. May we be found at our best this Advent season.

God of wonder, we worry so much about what will happen to us and are so protective of what is ours. Help us to understand we have nothing beyond Your grace. Purity and peace seems so out of reach and yet it is right before our eyes. It is the Christ child. Our pledge is to know Him better and mold our lives around His teaching and example. For this wonderful gift we give You thanks. Amen.

Rev. George N. Leathrum

Friday, December 2, 2011
Read Amos 5:1-17

Amos was a shepherd called by God to be a prophet in the northern cities of Israel during a time of riches and wealth for the northern kingdom. He announced God's judgment on the people for turning away from God, for being cruel to the poor, and for living selfishly. Amos 5:14 states "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you just as you say He is".

This time of year we are all caught up in the hustle and bustle of the holiday seasons, the shopping and the cooking, the rushing around to Christmas bazaars, concerts, plays and various continuing sports activities; sometimes we just forget to slow down and watch what is going on in the world around us. The last several years have been very trying for my family as well as many others. We are trying to establish a new business in a down economy, care for an infirmed parent, get children through college, and just keep going on a day to day basis. We keep plugging along as do many others. I don't get to church every week but I try to stay involved through friends, the newsletter and the prayer chain. Having a family with strong faith also keeps me going; I'm glad they're always there for me.

Some days I get so bogged down I forget to notice God's presence in my life. I try to make God the center of my life and I have discovered the best part of not having money to do so many things and the ability to go so many places has made me slow down some and I am able to see more of the good things happening around me. I read somewhere the other day that if you want to feel rich you just have to count all the gifts you have that money can't buy. This Advent season let us all take the time to do just that. There are many, many out there and I have discovered I am truly "rich" and blessed. I hope you will discover as you spend time with friends and family this Advent season that you too will be able to see just how "rich" you really are. There are few things in life more important than friends and family and I plan to spend my holidays with both not worrying about being able to afford presents but just truly enjoying the time I can spend with them.

At a youth rally in Ocean City, one of the speakers said that faith is like a rubber band. It's pretty useless if it's not being stretched. During Advent we need to allow God to stretch our faith. Opportunities abound at work, at school, at church, and everywhere; we just need to slow down and take the time to see and act upon them. We need to learn to listen for the whisper ... if God has to use the brick to get our attention, it's going to hurt. Enjoy the season and look for God in all you do!

Dear God: Thank you for providing me the opportunities to seek good and not evil that I may live. Thank you for all that you do for me in my life. Help me to slow down and listen and seek the good in the world because I know through faith that it is out there. Lord, I would ask that you stretch my faith and continually help me to help others seek the good also. Remind me that my actions truly tell the story of my faith in God. Please help me have the patience I need to deal with difficult situations. Amen.

Cindy Fetterolf

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Read Matthew 22: 15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. Matthew 22: 15-22

Everyone's a Cynic...

This past spring, I played the part of a Pharisee in response to this Bible passage during Lent. I especially enjoyed the part due to the amount of sarcasm and cynical remarks involved. After reading through this passage another time, I have more questions. What if you removed the cynicism? What if the Pharisees simply asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" Jesus might have given a different answer. Perhaps he would have elaborated more about what it means to give God the things that are His. Instead, the Pharisees are left with what appears to be a riddle.

This cynicism still thrives today in our world. Our questions spawn less and less from curiosity and wonder, and instead they are created by doubt and even anger. Since there have been athletes who have used steroids in the past, people are more skeptical when an athlete is performing well. When a politician proposes an idea, other politicians choose to attack rather than to focus on creating a solution.

The Pharisees learned nothing by asking Jesus a question out of pure cynicism. To comprehend His message, we must first arrive with an open heart and an open mind. We have taxes, pay bills, and perform other transactions in our lives, but because of our faith in God, we know that everything in our possession belongs to Him.

Dear Lord, thank you for all the blessings in my life. Please help me to seek knowledge and wisdom through a clear lens, and help me to think, speak and act with the intent to share love rather than to cause pain. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Steve Gilmore

Sunday, December 4, 2011

Read Psalm 41

Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble. The Lord will protect him and preserve his life; he will bless him in the land and not surrender him to the desire of his foes. The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness.

Psalm 41: 1-3 (New International Version)

Miracle on Timpson Street

Some folks might question my thinking about miracles. Years ago there was a man I knew who was well known for telling hard to believe stories. One story relayed how he fixed a loose connecting rod on a model "T" Ford with an old leather belt. Miracle?

Another story was that his '38 Oldsmobile had an overdrive. Said he could activate it by pulling a knob on the dashboard, while stomping on the accelerator and the overdrive would kick in! I really think the knob he pulled was for the interior light, but it didn't work because the bulb was burned out. And to my knowledge, Oldsmobile's didn't have overdrives in the late 30's. Miracle?

The miracle on Timpson Street is more believable. Unannounced, this "miracle mechanic" dressed in overalls splattered with paint, showed up at the front door. In each arm there was a large bag of groceries. Inside the house lived a young preacher, his pregnant wife, and a two year old daughter. The preacher was going to college on the G.I. Bill, working a part time job, and pastoring a small church (with a fifty dollar salary paid at the end of each month).

The miracle? How did this unlikely looking "miracle worker" know that both cupboard and refrigerator were empty? How could he have known that the checking account was bumping zero? How could he have known that payday was still days away? Miracle!

Reminds me of the timing of Jesus' changing well water into Cabernet Sauvignon ... but no greater than the timing of two bags of groceries at the front door on Timpson Street. Miracle!

Perhaps you are wondering how all this ties in with the Scripture reading – "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak". Think about it, God regarded the weakness of humankind and responded with the miracle of Bethlehem. Curtis Burnett (the story-telling mechanic) regarded a need and responded. Miracle!

Lord, tell Curtis that he is still remembered for the miracle on Timpson Street. And while the model "T" and Oldsmobile miracle stories are questionable, they harmed no one. Made a bunch of people laugh. Perhaps You even chuckled when You heard them. Amen.

Kevin L. Anderson, Sr., U.S. Navy Chaplain (retired)

West End, North Carolina

(Krista Gilmore's father)

Monday, December 5, 2011

Read Matthew 22: 23-33

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Matthew 22:11

Has God Chosen You?

Professional athletes train every day to be the best in their particular position in their sport. This not only keeps them physically fit, but also gives them the confidence needed to be able to complete their task in the sport they play. Musicians hone their craft with countless hours of practice to continuously make themselves better, and to instill confidence in their ability. Some young adults go off to college to select a profession and learn all about the details of a particular field, so that they may confidently go off and be successful in their jobs.

But what happens when we are asked to do something we were never trained for? God asked Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, and Moses felt woefully under qualified. Why would anyone follow him? He was never trained to do something of this magnitude, and he expressed to God his insecurities surrounding his assignment. Through the example of the burning bush, God showed Moses that he definitely was the one God had chosen for the task.

So many times we read in the Bible of stories where the most unassuming individuals were selected by God to do actions of great magnitude. As we go through this Advent season, let us remember the seemingly insignificant couple of Mary and Joseph, and the most magnificent task for which God selected them to carry out.

God, we stand before You as Your humble servants. Give us the courage and strength to step forward when we feel we have been chosen by You. Help us to reach outside our comfort zone, knowing that all along You are there to guide us. While we don't always know what the end result may be with Your plan, we must always remember to trust You. Help to remind us that nothing is insignificant in serving You, and that You chose us for a reason. Amen.

Steve Foster

Tuesday December 6, 2011
Read Psalm 146

Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, my soul. I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God. Psalm 146: 1-5

How often do we put all our trust in God? Aren't we more likely to ask for the opinion of others? We go to our friends, parents, sisters and brothers, co-workers, and sometimes even those we aren't even that close to, in hopes of hearing what we want to hear, rather than what we really should be hearing. How often do we slow down, sit down, be quiet and make the effort to take the time to listen to what God has to say about what we're doing, where we're going, or answering our questions? Since He has created each of us for a specific purpose, we should be seeking out His guidance in everything from our everyday issues to our most complex problems. Often those problems can turn out to provide us and others with the greatest of blessings, beyond what we could ever imagine, but not beyond what God envisions and can bring to pass.

Both Mary and Joseph were faced with huge responsibilities for young people in any age, but in the time they lived in Mary could have been stoned to death for being pregnant before she was married. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that she would give birth to the Son of God, she asked how this could be?, and the angel told her, "For no word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:37). And Mary's response was, "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Joseph faced a very hard decision, and had decided to leave Mary, but an angel appeared to him in a dream, telling him to take Mary as his wife, that her child was conceived of the Holy Spirit. Like Mary, Joseph trusted in God's plan and purpose for his life. When was the last time you put that much trust in God, and praised Him with your words of submission, with the actions you take, with your acceptance of others and their circumstances?

Years after this event, we hear in Matthew 22, that when questioned by the Pharisees: "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" Joseph and Mary clearly lived by these commandments long before Jesus spoke these words. They loved God, did what He asked without question, and praised Him for it. They showed absolute love for each other in circumstances that many would have walked away from. The actions of Mary and Joseph show their trust and love of God. Had they not paid attention and taken the risk as many would see it, where would we be today? Can you even imagine? They certainly could not have had any idea that their actions would impact the lives of millions of people, thousands of years later. Their love has provided us with this wonderful season of anticipation as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas.

Dear God, Help us to remember to praise You in all circumstances, events, and situations that You place in our paths, knowing that everything is to fulfill the purpose that You have for our lives. As we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christ's birth, let us always share that love that You have so freely given to us through Your Son remembering that the impact of our actions may be felt through many years and generations to come. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sandra Zimmie-Lavelle

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Read Psalm 147: 1-11

How great is our Lord! His power is absolute! His understanding is beyond comprehension!

Psalm 147:5

“Oh no!” “#@#!” It spontaneously erupts from my mouth. My coffee has spilled. And of course it’s meant to be spilled at the worst possible place for cleanup and at the worst possible time. That foul word came out of my mouth without thinking. “Why?” As hard as I’ve struggled to stop cursing, the expletive still comes out during moments of stress or anger. In my time I’ve done worse things than cursing, I’m far from being an angel. As I’ve tried to center my journey to following Christ’s teachings, I had thought I could at least eliminate cursing. Understanding our actions and why they occur may belong to a psychologist to interpret, but I feel I should at least be able to control my tongue and what comes out of my mouth without having to understand technical jargon.

In my youth I called myself a Christian because I went to Sunday School and church every now and then. The Bible wasn’t part of my life because I didn’t read or understand it. I prayed a lot and tried to do what was right, but I retreated when I started a new job and tried to fit in with a new crowd. They taunted me for trying to be “too good” and not cursing or using foul language, and I obliged by becoming just as “foul mouthed” as they were.

During a stressful period later in my life, I read the Bible cover to cover. Understanding Scripture became a part of my life and, as time passed, Disciple classes helped further my understanding, and I opened my heart to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. A long period of bringing righteous order into my life followed my immersion into Christianity. There are still times that I say things that can be misinterpreted and leave people with doubtful or hurtful feelings. There are times that I don’t offer assistance to someone who needs help and I just stay silent expecting others to assist. Is it shyness or fear of ridicule? I don’t know.

I can’t always understand why I don’t do what I know to be the right thing, but I continue to try because I love Jesus and my heart is in the right place. I talk to Him all the time, and I know He answers my prayers. I now leave it up to the Lord to understand me and it reduces my stress and, in turn, I use less bad language. I guess the pieces don’t always fit neatly together like a jig saw puzzle. If you feel troubled and don’t understand yourself, remember God understands you fully. As Psalm 147:5 explains, “His understanding is beyond comprehension.”

With a simple and humble heart we pray for Your immersion into our lives so that we may overcome the ways of the secular world. Through the power of prayer let us feel Your grace so that we may release our troubles to You and let You solve our problems – “Let Go and Let God”.

Robert Mitchell

Thursday, December 8, 2011

Read Matthew 23: 13-26

“How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?”

Matthew 23:19 (NRSV)

The Trappings

Are you ready for Christmas? I am sure you, like me, hear this query often at this time of year, and begin to go through your to-do list: address cards and mail them, make cookies, purchase or make gifts, wrap gifts, make menu for Christmas dinner, prepare for Christmas party, clean the house, decorate the house and so on ... and so on ... and so on. We become overwhelmed with all the *trappings* of the Christmas season, wanting to make everything “perfect” for family and friends. We want to continue all the family traditions and even make new ones; we want everyone to get along; we want good weather for traveling; we want the gifts we give to be the best ones ever.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and their obsession with the *trappings* of their office, calling them “blind fools”. The Pharisees were prone to put more emphasis on the gift laid on the altar than on the altar that made the gift sacred. Jesus accused them of “cleaning the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence”. In other words, Jesus was not impressed by the outer *trappings* the Pharisees put so much emphasis on, but was looking for and did not find in them an inner spirit of justice, mercy and faith.

When I am focusing on all the *trappings* of the Christmas season, I am just like the Pharisees. When all my energy, time and thoughts are consumed by them I fail to focus on why we have a Christmas season at all: the celebration of the birth of Jesus, Son of God, and our Saviour.

Are you ready for Christmas? Perhaps a better to-do list in response to this query would be: pray for friends and family, find time for daily Bible study, offer to use the gifts God has given me to make someone else’s life a little better, clean my heart by confessing my sins to God and decorate my face with a smile for everyone I meet.

O Lord, our God, thank You for sending Your Son to us. May we honor You this Christmas season by making You and Him the focus of these days. Amen.

Dianne Thompson

Thought for the day: What are you doing to prepare for the Christmas season?

Friday, December 9, 2011

Read Psalm 148

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at his command they were created, and he established them forever and ever— he issued a decree that will never pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the Lord. Psalm 148

Shout to the Lord

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing power and majesty, praise to the King;
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the sound of Your name.
I sing for joy at the work of Your hands, forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand,
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.

My Jesus, My Savior, Lord, there is none like You;
All of my days I want to praise the wonders of Your mighty love.

My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength;
Let every breath, all that I am never cease to worship You.

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing power and majesty, praise to the King;
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the sound of Your name.
I sing for joy at the work of Your hands, forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand,
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.

Chris Tomlin

Saturday, December 10, 2011

Read Revelation 3:1-6

"If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Revelation 3:3

I often wonder about the day when Christ returns for his final victory. Will it be a crisp autumn afternoon with gold and red leaves falling gently to the ground or will it be a stormy night with thunder booming while rain pelts the earth? Will I be fighting traffic on the daily commute home beeping the horn as another driver cuts in front of me or will I be sitting quietly in a church pew listening to the choir? Will I be standing impatiently in the checkout line at the grocery store or will I be sitting on the deck watching the sunset?

Wouldn't it be nice if we could pick what we're doing when Christ returns? Instead of judging the man holding a homeless sign on the street corner, wouldn't it be nice if we're ladling soup at the homeless shelter? Or rocking an abandoned baby in the neonatal intensive care unit? Or holding the hand of a long-forgotten woman all alone in a nursing home struggling to take her last breaths?

Wouldn't it be nice if we could be assured that when Christ returns, it will be a time when we're being good disciples? A time when we're doing our best and being good examples of Christians. A time when, as the hymn says, it is well with our souls. Revelation 3:3 warns us to be ready and to keep watch: "I will come as a thief..." And since thieves don't knock, we must always be ready.

Dear God, help me to live a life that's pleasing to You. Amen.

Sheila Boulden

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Read John 5:30-47

Just Be Yourself

Many of us are not authentic in every way all the time. We let ourselves, one another and others down from time to time. But from everything we know Jesus was authentic; He never let anyone down. He was not ostentatious, but profoundly Himself. He was a gift from God. Very simply stated, His words about Himself in today's Bible reading would be, "I am doing the will of my heavenly Father and John the Baptist is bearing witness to me!" I wonder what we can learn from these words that might be applicable to our own calling and fulfillment especially in preparation for His birthday?

First, let's note that no one else but Jesus has ever been called to fulfill the Messiah mission. The timing and the person had to be right. Likewise, every person is born in a certain time and place and with certain gifts to fulfill a unique mission. Just as no one will ever be called to fulfill Jesus' mission, no one will ever be called to fulfill your mission in life. This is very humbling and it means that there is no one just like you. Even if you are an identical twin, you are unique and very special. Just look around and notice all of the unique persons around you and things that are being miraculously accomplished by each one.

Secondly, this also means that we do not have to be responsible for everything, only what we have been gifted, called and equipped to be and do in His name. Jesus is the living model of this way of being and doing things. He obviously needed help and personally asked Peter, James and John for their prayers and help in the Garden of Gethsemane. He also acknowledged and involved everyone, even a little boy who willingly gave his lunch of a couple of fish and three loaves of bread to help feed a multitude. Andrew helped too by telling Jesus about the little boy. This must have prompted others to give also because when the lunch was finished there were twelve baskets full of fragments left over. Each one of us simply is and does what she or he can be and do. This is exciting. It is the way ordinary people like you and I do extraordinary things in the holy name of Jesus.

We have a unique opportunity in this season of preparation to celebrate His birthday to refresh and renew who we really are and what we can really be doing. God is creating, calling and equipping each one of us for a special time and place in this world. And I might add from my own experience of advancing into the later stage of earthly human life that God continues to open new opportunities for even me to continue to exert who I am and what I do in new and different ways every day. This is astounding.

This season provides each of us with a unique opportunity to be utterly and completely doing God's holy will, and hear persons like Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, bearing witness to us. This is what the Church does best. So don't be surprised because God has someone special for you to be and something special for you to do, and something special to be said about you. And as you prepare, please remember that you are the most unique and precious present you can give to God, to yourself, to one another, to others and even to strangers. You can be a perfect God gift this Christmas. Be yourself! This is what Jesus did and we are privileged to follow Him. He is our Savior and perfect Model. Be yourself in His holy name. Amen.

Creator of heaven and earth, sea and sky, for the blessing of this season of preparation for the celebration of the birthday of Jesus the Christ we offer our thanks. By remembering Him we are being drawn closer to You, to ourselves, to one another, others and even to strangers. Through Him we are simply learning to be who You created us to be - ourselves. Through Him we are beginning to realize how precious each one of us must really be. We thank You for the gift of Himself for all people. It helps us to prepare to give ourselves in whatever way You wish in his Holy name. For You are worthy, and through Him we have come to know that we are worthy, too. You love us immeasurably and always. Help us in this season to love as You have first loved us through Him. In His Holy name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Don Hurst

Monday, December 12, 2011
Read Matthew 24: 15-31

"For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." Matthew 24: 26-27

It was a beautiful spring day. I was fifteen years old, and my mother, her best friend Ruthie and I were driving home from my audition for a summer arts program. The sun was shining on the Pennsylvania mountains as clouds danced in the sky. Warm air blew in my face from the open car window. My mother and Ruthie chatted happily in the front seat, when suddenly Ruthie said, "Well, Nicole, I hope you get accepted into the arts program." She was very surprised to hear my response. "What difference does it make? We'll all probably be dead soon anyway." Shocked by my despondent reply, Ruthie quickly turned around in the front seat and asked, "Why would you say such a thing?"

I tried to explain to Ruthie about the debilitating fear I had been experiencing for the past several months. "Some people came to my door at home, and they were witnessing about Armageddon. It frightened me." I also explained that I was afraid there was going to be a nuclear war soon, and that someone had told me the antichrist was walking among us. All of these things were swimming in my brain, and it made me feel hopeless about the future. I was a Christian, but there were people who were trying to make me believe that my faith was insufficient and that I should be afraid for my salvation.

After my admission, which made me feel foolish and crazy, Ruthie looked at me with great compassion and understanding. "Yes, God has promised us that He will send Jesus back to us, but none of us knows the date and time. Look at this beautiful day God has given to us. He does not want us to waste it worrying about things that are not in our control. He wants us to live our lives fully, and He wants us to have faith in Him. How sad would it be if you spent all the days of your life worrying? That is not why God placed you on this earth. You should rejoice in the beauty of this day and rejoice that one day Jesus will come again. But, do not be afraid because He is always with you."

I believe that God guided Ruthie to discover the fear that was weighing on my heart, and He spoke to me through her. The healing that washed over me that day enabled me to find peace through God's promise of eternal life.

Dear Heavenly Father, You have promised us "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." Help us find solace in this Your promise. Place on our hearts the desire to live according to Your will, enable us to counsel those who undermine faith and confidence in living and loving and abiding in You! Help us to live and seek out those who will encourage us to live according to Your commandments. For while nobody knows the date and time of Jesus' return, dear Lord, we do know that one day that time will come. While the sun is shining on us today, help us prepare for the moment when we look toward Heaven and find only the light of Your Son, Jesus! In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Nicole Stauffer

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Read Revelation 3:14-22

"I am rich, I have everything I want. I don't need a thing."

Revelation 3:17a

How many times have you heard that saying when you ask someone for a Christmas list or birthday list, "I have everything I want. I don't need a thing"? I know that I have said that many times to my kids and my wife when they ask me for a Christmas list or birthday list. I am certainly not rich by any monetary standards, but do I really have everything I need? This passage from Revelation was referring to being "spiritually rich", not "monetarily rich".

The scripture reading today is about the message to Laodicea, the seventh and final church. This church contained people who were ruling against the Word of God. Man was at the center, not God. The Holy Spirit was not present there. The Holy Spirit is present only with believers.

As we are in the Advent season and preparing for the birth of Jesus, it is time to reflect on the true meaning of the birth of Christ. He is revealed to the people in the likeness of the people. With the birth of Jesus, He continues the ministry of God. He is saying to the Church of Laodicea, that He wishes they were either hot or cold. If their passion was hot with love and zeal for Him, there would be no problems. However, if they were cold, they still could be revived.

So, where am I in my belief? There were times that I would go to church and just go through the motions. But was I really a true believer? I was getting conflicting messages from the leaders of my previous church. I became very frustrated and was starting to doubt my faith and beliefs. Maybe it was time to look for another church and see if my faith was as strong as it should be.

We started looking for another church. About two years ago, my wife and I came to Elkton United Methodist Church. When we came here, my wife and I were warmly greeted by the members of this church. We were a little gun shy at first, knowing what we had gone through at our previous church. We both decided to take the twelve week class on the Book of Revelation. This study seemed to put the pieces of the Bible together for me and renewed my faith and beliefs. This study showed me that I should never have doubted my faith. I am taking an active part in the church life here at Elkton and I am really enjoying the participation that I have taken on. I like to think that I am closer to being hot than cold. Where are you in your beliefs?

Those who are victorious in their love of Jesus Christ will sit on the throne with Jesus just as He sat on the throne with His Father.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the birth of Your Son who came to earth to save our sins and to help us become "spiritually rich" in His belief. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Bill Ferringer

Wednesday, December 14, 2011
Read Matthew 24: 45-51

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.” Matthew 24:45-46 (NIV)

While We Wait

Waiting for our Lord’s return is hard, there’s no doubt about it, especially when we watch the news or read the World Wide Web—all proclaiming manmade and natural disasters, and what seems a growing bent toward destruction. As the years go by, it’s hard to remain vigilant, faithful, diligent in doing good and always being about the work of the Lord, not knowing how long it will be until the fulfillment of our hopes.

Jesus knew that working diligently in the face of long delays and disappointments can be challenging, discouraging, that it’s all too easy for us to lose heart and let things slide, or worse, as our extended reading reveals.

But He knew the answer, the antidote, was the same as that which every parent instills in their child about life, the same as our reading gives: faithfully working while we wait, and doing our best to act charitably and responsibly toward others—feeding them that which they need—will not only make the time go faster, but will keep us focused and prepared.

Maybe that’s why Jesus demonstrated this preparation and going about our Father’s business while waiting in His earthly life and stories:

At the age of twelve, long before launching His teaching ministry, Jesus’ parents found Him in the temple, already about His Father’s business. In His youth, He was studying, learning, working, as He was getting ready to do whatever His Heavenly Father would ask of Him.

In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus showed that the only virgins who were able to follow the bridegroom through the dark of night to the wedding banquet were those who’d already bought oil and filled their lamps in preparation. They had been working in the strength of their young adult lives, getting ready for their bridegroom’s coming.

In the parable of the talents, He showed that the servants commended and rewarded by the suddenly returned owner were the ones who’d wisely and diligently invested the talents they’d been given. They’d been working hard in their adult career, getting ready for their master’s return.

Simeon, righteous and devout, and Anna, rejoicing and fasting day and night in the Temple—in old age, both were about their Father’s business, awaiting the coming of the Messiah and the consolation of Israel. God rewarded their lifetimes of faithfulness by allowing them to see Jesus.

What have we been given—what gifts of time, talent, resources have been placed into our charge at this time in our lives? Are we using them well, wisely, diligently? Are we giving those around us for whom we are responsible “food in due season?”

Prayer: Father, You've told us to love You with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. You've told us to care for the weak and vulnerable—widows, orphans, the poor, those in prison—all who need protection, guidance, love, and support. Help us focus and be actively engaged in purposeful preparation and ministry that honors You and helps Your people as we await Jesus' return. Accept this offering of the gifts You've given us, make them a sweet savor to You, and a help, encouragement, and real food to those in need. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Cathy Gohlke

Focus: Passionate worship and purposeful living

Thursday, December 15, 2011
Read Matthew 25: 1-13

We are all responsible for the use of our time and our talents. We should waste neither.

The Lord tells us in Matthew 25 that we know not when He will come and that we should be prepared. We are also told to use our talents wisely. The servant who did so was rewarded. The servant who squandered his talents lost those that he had.

We are individually responsible for ourselves and our families both morally and materially. Our actions or inactions should not be blamed on others.

We have lost much in recent generations in the responsibility of our own lives and those of our children. It is not the responsibility of society or the government to guarantee an abundant life if we misuse our talents and our time.

Prayer: We thank Thee Lord for the gifts Thou hast given us. Help us to use these gifts to guide others and to further Thy kingdom. Amen.

Dick Funke

Friday, December 16, 2011

Read Psalm 130

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits. And in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning – yes, more than those who watch for the morning."

Psalm 130: 5-6 (NKJV)

Waiting on God

We all go through seasons in our lives where we face trials and tribulations and, in our time of need, we turn to God for help. Sometimes in our pain and desperation, all we can do is cry out to the Lord to hear us and to help us, just as the Psalmist does in this reading. Sometimes God is quick to respond to us, and sometimes we may have to wait. And we may have to wait, and wait, and wait even more. We wait on God for answers to our prayers for ourselves and for others, for healing, for guidance, for deliverance, for encouragement, for strength to overcome life's problems. In our waiting, we may begin to get discouraged and begin to wonder if God hears us or if He even cares about our problems at all.

Even as Christians, God does not promise us lives free from trouble. But take heart. The Psalmist assures us that God is good and abundant in mercy and forgiveness. No matter what our problems are or how they come upon us, God loves each one of us totally and unconditionally, and He hears our prayers and answers them. According to Psalm 34, *"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles."* (Psalm 34:17 NKJV). God may not always answer our prayers in the way that we would prefer or in the timeframe that we would wish, but we can trust that He knows what's best for us and, although he may delay, He is never late. And, God did promise to always be with us and to never forsake us. We can rest in the fact that God is faithful and always keeps His promises. We can have faith and hope that He is doing a good work in us and will give us the grace to endure while we are waiting.

With grateful hearts we pray: Dear God, we thank you for your unconditional love, mercy, and forgiveness. We remember during this Advent season that because You love us so very much, You sent your only begotten son so that as long as we believe, we can be reconciled to You through Jesus Christ. We thank You that You hear us when we pray, that You care about all of the details of our individual lives, and that You will help us with our problems. Help us to remember your faithfulness in the past and to have hope and faith in your Word while we are waiting in the present. Amen.

Nancy Draper

Saturday, December 17, 2011

Read Psalm 80

O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech You; Look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine... O LORD God of hosts, restore us; Cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Psalm 80: 14-19

The Sky Is Falling, The Sky is Falling!

Has there ever been an age in the history of the world that the people of the time didn't read as the end being near? The writer of Psalm 80 conveys that very sentiment. In reading it, one wonders if he is facing dire economics, polarized political views, religious extremists, wars, famine, natural disasters, violence and depravity in the streets, and any of a host of other symptoms we think of as predictors of God's displeasure with mankind. It seems that it doesn't matter if the year is 2011 – or 2011 B.C! It always seems to us that the state of human affairs is hardly anything for God to smile on and say that it is good.

Many people, like the psalmist, believe that God turns His face from us when He is displeased by our actions and our inactions – and that God expresses his displeasure through catastrophe and mayhem. But at least the psalmist has a good excuse for his pessimism – he didn't have the benefit of the New Testament and Jesus' promises to us about forgiveness and abundant life.

During the season of Advent, we remember Israel awaiting a savior. In Him, God had a plan to bring a new view of life into the world. God would show us that He sees us differently than we see ourselves. He sees us as people of faith, and not of disillusion; as people of hope, and not of despair; as people of love, and not of divisiveness.

If we know anything from Jesus' teachings, it is that God is always with us. It isn't He who has turned His face from us, but it is we who have turned away from Him. Like the father of the prodigal son, He is always ready to accept us back into His arms in recognition of our repentance and our resolve to do better. Even in our darkest hour, God is here with us. Always.

People will never stop warning us that "the sky is falling." They will tell us all the things that are wrong in the world and ask how God could let these things happen. But we know that God is with us, and the problems in the world are largely of our making through our vanity and lack of vision. If the sky is falling, it is we who have pulled the cord. The Good News of the Gospel is that God is with us through it all.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of salvation and for the abundant and eternal life and hope You give us through Your Son, Jesus.

Rick Ceresini

Sunday, December 18, 2011

Read John 3: 16-21

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through Him.” John 3:17*

What Love is This?

There are few things in this world that I love more than being with, and spending time with, my family. For me, being with my family not only brings me a sense of joy and happiness, but a sense of security and acceptance as well. Other words that come to mind when discussing family are discipline, love, and laughter. There isn't much I wouldn't do for them.

Each and every one of us has something or someone that we cherish the most. When we find this object or keepsake we want to protect it, to keep it safe. When we find another person we love, we strive for similar things. We want that person to grow and to thrive, to become the best that he or she can be. Unfortunately, sometimes we have to let go of the person or object we love the most in order for all of the pieces to fall even more perfectly into place. When times like these arise, may we look back and remember that even before our stories had begun, God loved us so much that He had already given us His most precious gift: His Son.

Dear Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to save us and to bring life to this world. Please, help us to accept this love and to keep it with us for all of the days to come. Amen.

Sarah Alphin

Monday, December 19, 2011

Read Luke 1:1-25

When friends get together, before the latest news is discussed, usually pictures of the youngest grand- or even great-grandchild, are passed around. I love little children. Who doesn't? It is such a joy to see them toddle around in the hospitality room, totally unconcerned for their safety, because they know that everyone there loves and cherishes them. I smile and reassure their siblings when their protective stance and suspicious stare tell me that they are vigilant: nobody is going to carry off their little brother or sister.

This past summer I had the chance to spend a few days with my oldest granddaughter. Jessica was expecting her first baby. Her every thought, word and action revolved around this little girl. I had to smile. Had any other woman ever been pregnant? But I can understand her excitement. The young couple were at a point in their lives when they were ready to start a family, and everything was on target.

Things do not always go according to plan – our plans, anyway. When Elizabeth married Zechariah, she surely expected to raise a houseful of children with this respected, godly man. In the beginning, she probably told herself to be patient; they had plenty of time. But month after month she was disappointed – her hopes dashed yet again. She prayed fervently that God would bless her with a child. The months turned into years. She barely visited with friends or neighbors any more, afraid they might whisper among themselves, wondering what secret sin she or Zechariah were guilty of to deserve the disgrace of childlessness. When it became obvious that conception was unlikely – she was probably all of fifty years old – she stopped asking God for what she deemed impossible. She did not think that **the Lord of the universe, who had created the Laws of Nature with all their intricacies, could also suspend them at His Will.** He had greater plans for Elizabeth and Zechariah: to raise the prophet who was to prepare the way for His own Son.

It was quite an honor for Zechariah to be chosen to burn incense in the temple of Jerusalem. And there, in the holiest of holy, he was approached by the archangel Gabriel who announced to him that he would become a father. Not only was Zechariah flabbergasted – he was scared. He was old, and there was no Viagra or Cialis. Not only that, he knew that Elizabeth was past childbearing age. But God had His plan, and he was not pleased that His servant questioned His edict. He struck the priest mute until after his son was born.

Not so Elizabeth. Unlike Sarah, who laughed when she was told she would be the mother of a nation, or Mary, who told the angel that her body was not ready to bear a child because she had not been with a man, Elizabeth did not let the limitations of her body deny the gift she was offered, but simply exclaimed *"How great the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."*

We may pray for someone for months or years. When we do not see an answer, we may ask ourselves whether or not our prayers are of any value at all. Yet we are told in Romans 12:12, *"Be glad for all God is planning for you. Be patient in trouble, and always be prayerful."* We have to be content knowing that the Master of the Universe has a plan – for us and for everyone for whom we are praying, even though we may never recognize it.

Almighty God, You used an elderly couple to produce and raise a great prophet. Use us for Your plans in spite of our flaws and limitations. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Evelyn Jones

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Read Luke 1:26-38

“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.’” Luke 1:26-31 (NIV)

Unexpected Surprises

Imagine receiving the news that you were suddenly going to have a baby. Our first thoughts would probably be about how this was impossible, the unexpected inconveniences it would cause, and all the trouble we would have to go through to make it work. We get stressed when we simply get sick, we think of all the things we cannot do and worry about not being able to accomplish everything you feel has to be done. Imagine if God gave us much more life changing news, like Mary’s.

Mary, however, took this news in stride. After her initial questioning, she said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” I could not imagine immediately accepting the fact that God chose me to have a child. The fact that a plan was already made, and soon not only a baby, but the Son of God, was going to become part of everyone’s life because of me. Mary is thought of by many as the mother of Jesus, but not for the graceful attitude with which she handled the situation.

If we act more like Mary in the small situations in our lives, we could become more relaxed and our actions could come through God. When something unexpected comes up in our lives, we should think about how God planned out what was going to happen before it actually does. He knows that it will work out for us, we have to simply trust him instead of doubting. If we accept the unexpected and continue moving through God’s way, we can stop worrying about the trouble that is going to be caused and accept that good things will ultimately come.

Lord, help us to be more like Mary and accept the way things happen. Help us to know that You have a plan for us, so we don’t need to worry about the “troubles” that catch us by surprise. Help us to understand that good can come out of everything. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Sarah Buckley

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Read Titus 2:11-3:8

“God our Savior showed us how good and kind he is. He saved us because of his mercy, and not because of any good things that we have done. God washed us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gave us new birth and a fresh beginning. God sent Jesus Christ our Savior to give us his Spirit. Jesus treated us much better than we deserve. He made us acceptable to God and gave us the hope of eternal life”.

Titus 3:4-7 (Contemporary English Version)

What Do You Deserve?

“You deserve a break today. So get up and get away ... to McDonalds!” If you are of a certain age, I bet you remember this slogan. I recall watching those commercials where the McDonalds’ night crew assured us (with that catchy, yet annoying, jingle) that we deserved to know we were eating at a clean fast food restaurant. Print ads and billboards depicted dads bringing dinner home in large McDonalds’ bags because moms deserved a break from cooking a meal. Later on, ads featured kids heading to McDonalds after school or practice for a much-needed (and yes, well-deserved) snack or meal. Ah, comforts and conveniences are wonderful things, aren’t they?

It is easy to get caught up in the “McDonalds’ mentality” — thinking we deserve a reward (a break) due to our efforts, worth or status. We live in a world where we are bombarded with messages which reinforce this type of thinking. And what happens when we encounter unfairness, pain and heartache — you know, those burdens in life leading us to ask “what did I do to deserve this?”

So, what do we really deserve? After careful thought, should the question be what do we not deserve? We are approaching the time of receiving an incredible gift — our Savior Jesus — that we definitely did not deserve. God gave us His Son not because we deserved Him but because He loves us and wanted to save us. We’ve been treated “much better than we deserve” ... and through Christ’s sacrifice, we’ve been made “acceptable to God”. Although we didn’t deserve it, God’s grace has been showered over us, giving “us the hope of eternal life”.

Just imagine the commercials, jingles and billboards to proclaim the break we didn’t deserve!

Father, may we receive anew the gift of our Savior with grateful — and undeserving — hearts singing: “Be near me Lord Jesus I ask Thee to stay. Close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care. And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there”. Amen.

Krista Gilmore

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Read Luke 1: 46-56

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. Luke 1:46-50

My Spirit Rejoices in God My Savior

In second grade I was picked to be Mary in the Christmas play at school and my lines included this passage, which I memorized and recited much the way most second graders memorize and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Which is to say, I had very little notion of what the words meant except that Mary was happy to be chosen. I could identify with that as I was rejoicing at getting to be the lead and have a lot of lines in the play. Now having experienced for myself the news of a child on the way, I can identify with Mary's emotion and impulse to rejoice. Though I still wonder at Mary's ability to rejoice given at what must have been her expectation of the catastrophe that awaited the announcement of her news to her community.

Looking at the passage today, I see a pure example of what we are called to do as Christians. Rejoice that we are saved and project or magnify the grace of that event to the world. So many of the traditions of this holiday season are meant to enable rejoicing and to direct us to sharing grace with the world. If anticipation of these same traditions, instead of enabling rejoicing and spreading joy, causes us to groan under the weight of excess and expenditure, commitments and calories, then isn't it time to rethink and refocus them? If the kids are arguing over who gets to put the heirloom angel on the tree or put baby Jesus in the crèche or open today's door on the Advent calendar, then the tradition becomes meaningless like my parroting of Mary's words in the Christmas play. If after opening gifts the family disperses each into his or her own room to become immersed in virtual worlds, then we don't get to share joy and rejoicing even in our own families. If our charitable acts of the season are grudgingly performed we don't succeed as examples of both Christmas and Christian spirit.

So this Advent I pledge a test for every seasonal tradition. Does this activity bring me joy that springs from awe and gratitude at the birth of my Savior? Does this activity magnify the grace of that event to others? If not, then it is time to drop or refocus that activity.

Dear Jesus, in these coming weeks of lists and activities, help me to be intentional in my actions. From Mary's example help me to learn how to respond in awe and gratitude and action to the great things You have done for me. Holy is Your name.

Mary Ann Schmook

Friday, December 23, 2011

Read Luke 1: 67- 80

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, "Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy covenant, the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham. He has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live. You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

Luke 1: 67-80 (Common English Bible)

Zechariah and Elizabeth had grown old. Their wrestling over being childless had long ended. When the angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah the news of a son, Zechariah thought it an absurd suggestion; one that ran counter to the identities he and his wife had settled into (Zechariah's doubt echoes Sarah's doubt from Genesis 18). His cheeky attitude with the angel Gabriel brought forty weeks of silence to his lips. Zechariah's silence adds a bizarre twist to an already unusual birth narrative.

After nine months of silence, Zechariah's lips are opened when he agrees with his wife to name the baby by a non-family name, John. The text continues that John is filled with the Spirit as he utters his first words, as if his first breath after release from silence has drawn the Holy Spirit into him. In his newborn son, Zechariah has seen a glimpse of God's answer to the cry of God's people.

Zechariah glimpses salvation from political, economic and social disorder, but salvation that also confronts sin with forgiveness and the shadow of death with light. There is a reality coming that pulls the rug out from under the powerful who abuse. There is a reality coming that brings those who've sat captive in dark prisons into the light of a new day. God's centuries old promise through Abraham is coming to fruition. Zechariah's son John will prepare the way for God's breaking open of the heavens.

What would it mean to be a part of preparing the way for God's kingdom to be fully disclosed? In what darkness do you sit, awaiting the breaking open of Heaven's dawn?

God grant us imaginations to live into your in-breaking peace. Amen.

Rev. Brett Pinder

Saturday, December 24, 2011
Read Matthew 1:18-25

Most of us are probably happiest when things go as we plan, aren't we? We like having our "ducks in a row." We like things to run smoothly, predictably. And when they don't, it upsets us. When our schedule is interrupted, when someone doesn't follow through with something they said they would do, or when something unexpected comes along, it messes up our plans, and it upsets us. Sometimes it does worse - it stirs up fear within us - like when that something unexpected is illness, or sudden unemployment, or a relationship breaking up. Suddenly fear grips us, because we realize we have no control over what's happened and we feel very vulnerable.

This year a lot of things happened in our world to make us realize how vulnerable we are, and indeed, they stirred up fear within us. Bizarre weather of all kinds hit us seemingly during every season of the year - blizzards, hurricanes, flooding, why, even an earthquake! It seemed that every day we would open up the paper and read of another horrendous scandal, even some involving people we admired. And the financial roller coaster kept all of our stomachs queasy! It has been quite a year in which many carefully laid out plans were totally wrecked. It is no wonder that many people are afraid these days - one of them might be you.

So I invite you to read today's Gospel lesson from Matthew because it is the source of much good news for you. It involves two people whose carefully laid-out plans were totally wrecked: Mary, a dear young woman whose plans for a solid and secure future with a new husband were waiting to unfold, and Joseph, whose plans to care for her and make a home for them were set to begin. And suddenly, in the blink of an eye, for both of them, life changed completely. They were invited to take part in a venture with God that, even though it was a great blessing, was also scary and very risky.

Yet, they both said yes, and they both said it after hearing these words spoken to them, "Do not be afraid." Those words came from God. Those words came to say to them, "I know this is not what you planned, I know this is scary, I know this might cause you pain at times, but do not be afraid, for I am with you."

Friends, may those words ring true in your lives as well on this Christmas Eve. No matter what is going on in your life - whether your plans are running smooth as silk, or whether you feel right now like nothing is going well in your life - no matter what - do not be afraid, because God is with you. And tonight, you will receive a wonderful reminder of that - a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem - Emmanuel - God with us - ever and always.

So do not be afraid. May the peace of the new-born Christ be with you always!

Almighty God, we confess that when things happen and life doesn't work out as we have planned, we get upset and sometimes even afraid. Remind us in the events of this special night, that we have no need to fear. Open our hearts that we might receive your precious gift anew. Thank you, Lord, for your love that never leaves us alone. Thank you, Lord for sending Jesus. Amen.

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