

Advent Reflections



As a congregation committed to daily prayer, the Advent season provides us with an opportunity not only to prepare prayerfully for Jesus' coming, but also to receive Christ daily in our lives.

This year's Advent Devotional is a gift from the congregation for the congregation. Many of you have provided reflections upon Advent and God's presence in our lives coupled with Scripture as a gift to the congregation. May your time with these writings be an opportunity to engage with one another and with Christ, through whom we receive the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Merry Christmas!



1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

The Day of the Lord, otherwise thought of as the Second Advent, is the day that God will come to judge the world. The Second Coming is something that instilled fear within me as a child. I envisioned it with fire and brimstone and quickly cast my thoughts elsewhere. But now, as an adult, I find comfort in this passage and the idea of the Second Advent. I liken myself to those who are considered to be “the children of the light,” and to one who is called to “put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” That sort of imagery doesn’t scare me; it inspires me! I like to think of myself as a warrior for God, who shares with others the joys of redemption and salvation. I now know that we are to prepare for the Second Coming just like we prepare for Christ’s birth.

Prayer: *Holy Father, thank You for this time of preparation. Provide us with the tools we need to draw closer to You. Cloak us in the armor of Your love; strengthen us with Your grace; and cast us in Your saving light, both now and forevermore. Amen.*

Brigetta P. Del Re, Elder



Monday, December 4, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

I wonder what Mary and Joseph imagined their Baby Boy's life to be like when He grew older. Did they picture Jesus in our passage for today delegating tasks to a group of disciples to set up a dinner party? I wonder what the Jews who waited for the Messiah imagined their Savior to be like. Did they imagine their Savior to come humbly riding on a donkey and, days later, to die on a cross? I wonder what it is that we expect and wait for in this season of Advent. In Advent, we are called to "wait with anticipation." I love that phrase, for it doesn't mean that we just sit around doing nothing, but it also doesn't mean that actions of our own can make the waiting go away. To wait with anticipation means we actively wait with hope and yet are opened to be surprised at God's working in our midst. May we wait with anticipation for Christ to come again into the world full of surprising hope.

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank You for Your surprising gifts. May You gift us again this year with the ability to wait with anticipation, that we may receive You into our lives with great hope. Amen.*

The Reverend John F. Magnuson



Tuesday, December 5, 2017

Matthew 21:12-22

What an action-packed reading! In a short time – apparently less than 24 hours – are three amazing exchanges with sinners, a sick man, and a withered plant. The first two incidents are well known in Bible lore and are taught in any Sunday school curriculum. Driving out the money changers from the temple, acknowledging the children as the “tellers of truth,” as well as healing the sick alone in the temple do not go over so well with the religious establishment of the day. But Jesus uses these “teaching moments” to insist that He has something better and bigger than what people were experiencing in their lives. The next morning, though, in the shadow of the previous day’s miraculous events, Jesus uses a simple withered plant to drive home His faith message. Faith is what Jesus really wants for us because He knows it is all we really need, and that is why God gives it freely as a gift. Advent prepares us to receive this gift of faith as we await Christ’s presence and return. Real faith, sincere faith, trusting faith – yes, childlike faith – will enable us to see, believe, and accomplish any and all things in order to bring glory to His kingdom.

Prayer: *Gracious God, grant us faith that we may believe without seeing, and trust without fully knowing. In this season of Advent, open our hearts and our eyes to childlike faith, placing all of our trust in You. Amen.*

James E. Olson



Wednesday, December 6, 2017

2 Peter 3:1-10

In the very first Christmas, people were waiting for the birth of the Messiah, the One to save their people. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, who came to save the world from sin by dying for all of us. Some Jews of the time were excited and happy as they waited for Jesus. Others had concern. In 2 Peter 3:1-10, we are reminded of the Day of the Lord. This is the Second Coming of Jesus, and we are told that Christ will come again, and, “The Lord will come like a thief.” He will completely transform the earth and utterly destroy all sinfulness. While at first this may seem scary and daunting, we are reminded that He will be patient with us as He does not want anyone to perish but, instead, to repent. We are told, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness.” This tells us that we also need to be patient with God and rely on our faith. We should not, as Christians, fear this day but, instead, anticipate it in patient excitement like the people from the first Advent. So as we remember and celebrate the first Advent, we must remember we are also in the second Advent, full of faith and excitement as we wait for the Lord to come again to judge and transform the world.

Prayer: *Dear heavenly Father, be with us in this time as we remember the patience Your people had for Your first coming, and as we are told to be patient in waiting for You again. Lord, comfort the scared, help the weak, and allow us to remain faithful in the face of fear. For we know You will come again to judge, but that You are a loving judge. Allow us to understand that in repentance is life everlasting. Amen.*

Luke A. Diel, Deacon



Thursday, December 7, 2017

2 Peter 3, 14-18

After a joyous Christmas season, I collapsed at home during the night. My wife drove me to the nearest hospital the next morning to their emergency department. Then I underwent a series of tests and ultimately was admitted. After a week during which I received lots of medicine, I was transferred to a nearby rehabilitation center. I do not recall much of these stays as I moved from a totally unconscious state to some awakening. I do not remember visits from my wife nor from our ministers. Eventually, I was discharged home to continue my care by professionals and my wife. I improved.

Five weeks later, I collapsed again at home and was transported via ambulance to another hospital in order to be close to our primary care physician. My condition improved slowly over the next six months.

The experience during that time reinforced my faith and patience that our God is always with us. He is waiting for me, giving me the strength to help me to move forward again and providing me the tools and confidence for living and caring. He still never forgets me.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, strengthen us through Your grace in order that we can face our trials with the confidence that You are with us every step of the way, and that, with You, all things are possible. Amen.*

Dr. Peter J. Freymark



Friday, December 8, 2017

Amos 5:1-17

This passage seems to be an unusual choice of text in connection with Advent. The Prophet harshly reprimands the nation of Israel for the offenses of trampling upon the poor, afflicting the righteous, and engaging in bribery. The tone of the passage seems to be at odds with the spirit of Advent.

During this season, we experience a sense of joyful anticipation. We look forward to Christmas, when we receive God's loving gift to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

We have a responsibility to prepare ourselves spiritually for Christ's coming. It is in this sense that we may discover a parallel with Amos's text. If Israel is to survive as a nation, Amos tells the people that they must "seek the Lord and live" (v. 6). In the same way, we must open our hearts and minds to welcome Christ's redeeming presence. Our thoughts and actions must be such as to make us worthy vessels of receiving Jesus Christ. As Isaiah 40:3 commands, we must "prepare the way of the Lord."

Prayer: *Our heavenly Father, thank You for the promise of Advent. We pray that You will help us as we strive to become worthy recipients of Jesus' presence. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.*

Dr. Margaret A. Ross Mehl, Elder



Saturday, December 9, 2017

Amos 5:18-27

The Bible gives us vivid imagery of Christ's arrivals in the world. At Christmastime, we look to the gospels and are filled with a kaleidoscope of angels and shepherds, friendly barnyard animals, crisp starry skies, and exotic visitors bearing kingly gifts. The prophet Amos describes Jesus' return to earth and warns that, for the unrepentant, His Second Coming will be like a snake bite(!), and a time of darkness.

It can be perplexing when we try to reconcile the innocence of baby Jesus and the scary judgment of apocalyptic-Second-Coming Jesus. Amos confronts our cozy conceptions of Christmas and reminds us that the Word of God is unsettling. It challenges us, turns our lives upside down, and demands righteousness.

I once heard that Jesus' Advent is like having a really cool neighbor move in next door. He's super friendly and always around for a casual chat or for when you need to borrow a tool. Then one day, He knocks on the door and tells you that He'd like to move in and stay in your spare bedroom. You are hesitant about this unusual request, but invite him into your home. He helps with the bills and housework, and, in general, is a wonderful house guest. After a few weeks, He gently tells you that you're going to need to start getting rid of some of the clutter and junk around the house. It won't be easy, but He'll help you set things right.

Prayer: *Father, as we celebrate Your Advent and ponder Your imminent return, keep us mindful of Your call to righteousness. Confront us with Your life-changing Word, and teach us to seek justice and practice repentance. Amen.*

Adam D. Loucks, Deacon



Amos 6:1-14

A world where some lie in luxury on soft couches, oblivious to the sufferings of others; where pride swells in the hearts of those convinced of their own righteousness; where justice has been so twisted and distorted that it feels more like poison than cleansing rain; where the name of the Lord is stifled, rather than joyously proclaimed . . . Is this a description of 21st-century America? Perhaps.

But first, this picture portrays the world of the prophet Amos. It is a world where God's once-faithful people have become complacent and have allowed apathy to seep into the fabric of their community. It is a disturbing image of what happens when God is pushed to the margins of our lives.

Part of our challenge in this Advent season is to look around us, and, like Amos, name the brokenness that we see. But the greater challenge is to hold fast to our hope that God is coming, even into this world of sin, to redeem and make new. May our prayer continue to be, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Prayer: *O God, Creator and Ruler of all, open our eyes to see our world as You see it, and open our hearts to discover signs of Your coming, each and every day. Keep us vigilant and faithful, Lord, until the day when all creation joins in praising You in glory. Amen.*

The Reverend Lynn M. Portz



Monday, December 11, 2017

Revelation 1:1-8

This time of year is full of the busyness of preparation: gathering decorations to bring joy and light inside during a time of darkness; buying and making gifts to celebrate the love we have for one another; preparing food for gatherings of friends and family. We bake, we shop, we gather greens and hang ornaments, and we try to prepare our homes and hearts for the joyous celebration of our Lord's birth. But what would it mean to be truly prepared for the wonder of Christmas? Can our hearts and minds fully understand the majesty and wonder of God's love for us? Can we see how this story of awe and sacrifice culminated in the birth of Jesus Christ in that manger thousands of years ago?

The Scripture calls us to reflect on God as “the Alpha and the Omega,” the One “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” God transcends time itself, an inevitable presence in our past, present, and future. This simple truth is almost too much for our minds to comprehend, and yet our hearts swell in an acknowledgment of its truth. God's presence is felt in our traditions, in the singing of old songs of praise, in the stories that have been told for generations. He was there in the beginning when the world was new. He was there with Abraham and Isaac, with David and Solomon. He was there with Mary and Joseph, with the shepherds and the Magi. And He was there when our own families were new – with our grandparents and great-grandparents. Whether they were traveling to new countries or digging deeper roots in the cities of their ancestors, He was there. He has walked alongside us all, loving us through all the Christmases that have ever been, loving us before we knew His name. And He is with us now.

Sometimes it can feel hard to connect to God's presence in our day-to-day routines. Everything is so loud, so bright and distracting. But even when it feels as though all things are fleeting, God is there. For we do not worship a story but a living God. A Savior who is, and was, and will be. So it is right and wonderful to prepare to celebrate and remember. But let us also reflect on God's presence now, how we may be an example of His love in our homes, communities, and beyond.

This is the gift of Christmas – that we may forever have a tangible example of God's love and power: something to anchor our minds and hearts as we struggle in trying to comprehend something that is far beyond our comprehension. As we ready ourselves for our favorite holiday traditions, whatever they may be, perhaps we can reflect on how these very traditions are an example of God's power and love. Just as others have tasted, seen, felt, smelled, or heard these elements of Christmas in the past, so we do now, and so perhaps will our own children and grandchildren experience them in the future. For God is with us now. He is there in the quiet and the clamor. He was there before we drew our first breath. And His story is not over.

Prayer: *Bring us Your peace, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Rachael W. Viehman



Tuesday, December 12, 2017

Matthew 22:32-46

When the Pharisees asked Jesus what the greatest commandment in the Law is, Jesus replied saying, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind.’ ... The second commandment is ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” We need to remember this commandment now more than ever, when it seems we are so focused on who is right, who is wrong, and who is more deserving of our love. Really, we just need to love one another. During times of devastation, I see God when people come from all over the world to help the people devastated by hurricanes and earthquakes; it seems our hate and differences get put on pause. My Advent prayer is that we can take the love we feel for each other during times of devastation to remind us to love each other always.

Prayer: *Loving God, focus our hearts on You this Advent season so we may fulfill Your command and love You with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and therefore love our neighbors, as well. Amen.*

Audrey L. H. Werling



Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Amos 8:1-14

Christians speak of three comings of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem, in glory at the end of time, and daily in our lives. Advent is a time of preparation for the celebration when Jesus of Bethlehem arrived. Advent preparation moments also can and should happen daily in our lives – setting aside quiet times to listen for God’s direction and guidance as we prepare to make decisions and choices.

The entire Bible speaks of God’s gift of freedom. Often however, we – as individuals, and institutions to which we belong, and even nations – can move in directions which would not be pleasing to God. God wants for us a life which is secure, prosperous, happy, and healthy – elements of His Kingdom here on earth.

As we prepare for the Bethlehem birthday of Christ into this world, let us also daily take time away from the world to listen to God’s plan for our lives.

Prayer: *Father, find for us daily time to free ourselves of our worldly toils and tasks in order to listen for Your voice and direction. Amen.*

Robert G. Mayer Jr., Elder



Thursday, December 14, 2017

Amos 9:1-10

I would not want to be a prophet. Prophets are all too frequently tasked with the responsibility of sharing God's messages with people who don't want to hear them, or who are unprepared or unwilling to listen to them. The prophet Amos has some particularly difficult news to share as he observed God's people cheating, acting without compassion, and dismissing those who were suffering. Amos described five visions of Israel's punishment for not doing God's will. Yet, even after considerable doom and gloom foreshadowing, Amos's message is one of love and hope. Amos reminds us God pays attention to God's people and to how we care for others. When we act in love, show compassion, help the suffering, and seek justice, we are helping God rebuild the broken parts of the Kingdom. As we anticipate the coming of the Christ Child, how can we as Christians help to repair the brokenness?

Prayer: *Lord, be with us as we look to Your coming and guide us in our own brokenness as we seek ways to help rebuild Your Kingdom. Keep us ever mindful of all those You have placed in our lives, and open our eyes and hearts to the blessings of those around us. Thank You for the promise of Your Son Jesus, and allow His light to shine through us. In the name of Your Son, our Savior, we pray. Amen.*

Ellen L. Allston



Friday, December 15, 2017

Haggai 1:1-15

The primary theme of the book of Haggai is the rebuilding of God's temple. Our passage today opens with the description of a people who are truly discouraged. Saddled with opposition from their neighbors, and met with construction difficulties, the people had wrongly concluded that it was not yet time to rebuild the temple. With five pairs of poetic contrasts, Haggai paints a picture of their economic and social distress. The people are admonished for spending all their attention on their own homes and interests, while God's home was set aside to lie in ruins.

We learn that Haggai's message caused the people to consider their ways and energized both the leaders and the people to carry on God's work of rebuilding His temple. Following the harsh command tone earlier, the Lord's message of, "I am with you," was a response to the people's genuine repentance and obedience. This assurance only strengthened the people and their efforts to serve the Lord.

Prayer: *Lord, as we dwell in the world today, we can become burdened with a myriad of discouragements and struggles. May You help us to be reminded to focus on You, and building Your Kingdom. In this time of expectation and anticipation, may we remain focused on the coming glory of Your Kingdom. Amen.*

Randy C. Adams II, Elder



Saturday, December 16, 2017

Haggai 2:1-9

Advent, taken from the Latin word *adventus*, means “arrival” – that four-week period of waiting and preparation for Christmas and the Nativity of Jesus. And while we wait and prepare, we can take time to pause – to think about our spiritual journey.

The shortest book in the Old Testament is written by the prophet Haggai. Haggai prophesied after Cyrus, the king of Persia, had allowed thousands of Jews to return to Jerusalem and their temple, which had been lying in ruins. The Jews began to rebuild the temple. But because of opposition from neighbors and their own discouragement and indifference, the rebuilding was abandoned, and their spiritual vitality began to fade.

Haggai received messages from the Lord and exhorted the leaders and the people to renew their efforts to rebuild the house of the Lord. The Lord said, “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” To Haggai, the temple also represented God’s dwelling place, His presence with His chosen people.

The Lord said, “*Give careful thought to your ways.* You have planted much but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored.” And the Jews *obeyed*. Haggai reinvigorated and motivated them by reminding them that their drought and crop failures were caused by *misplaced spiritual priorities* (1:9-11).

God continues to encourage them with hopeful words, “‘Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work, for I am with you . . . My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’” He promises greater glory for His house, peace, and blessings. Ultimately, their crops were blessed, and they completed the work of rebuilding the temple; the second temple was completed in four years.

How does this apply to us? Advent is a timely call for spiritual renewal. In Haggai’s message, God focuses on what is eternally important: our attention to *spiritual priorities*, and our obedience to and relationship with God.

Prayer: *Father God, during this blessed time of year, help us to recognize that incessant activity can be a distraction from the blessed miracle of Jesus’ birth. Help us to make time for quiet reflection; to give thought to our priorities of faith, hope, and love. In this spiritual journey, keep us mindful of our eternal hope and strengthen us with revival, renewal, and rededication. Amen.*

Laura B. Vondas, Deacon



John 5:30-47

"I can do nothing on My own. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I seek to do not My own will but the will of Him who sent Me." (John 5:30)

As I read and reread the opening line above, I am reminded of the Heidelberg Catechism's first question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The catechism answers for us: "That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." I am not my own, and as John includes in his gospel, "I can do nothing on my own."

Yet, the words above are Christ's words. What must it mean when Christ says, "I can do nothing on My own"? Take a moment and ponder that question.

In addition to revealing God to humanity, Christ entered this world to reveal humanity to humanity. Christ exists in the community of the Trinity, and, in fully human flesh, Christ entered the community of this world. Christ models and calls us to live in community as well, for, "I can do nothing on My own." Christ chooses to need community, and that, too, is the choice for His followers.

Prayer: *Holy Lord, as we prepare ourselves in anticipation of Your coming, may we learn to lean more heavily on one another, and may we learn to carry one another's burdens. May we invite others into our celebrations, and may we learn to rejoice more closely with those who are rejoicing. May we live as the holy community You have established, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The Reverend Todd E. Leach

Monday, December 18, 2017

John 3:19-21

Growing up in Maryland, my family always took an annual sojourn to the beach. I loved catching (terrorizing?) sand crabs, holding hands with my brother and sister and seeing if we could stand in the biggest waves, and swimming to the bottom of the shoreline and feeling the waves rush over me from above.

My favorite tradition, however, was to watch the sunrise over the beach. This is no small feat, because to say that I am not a morning person is quite the understatement.

At least one morning during the trip, my father and I would rise while the moon was in its full glory and walk out to the beach. I, ever the impatient one, would play a version of the old car game, except now the question was, “Is it time yet? Is it time yet?”

But in growing a semblance of patience, I began to appreciate the sunrise process. And soon the part that intrigued me the most was not the actual sun – it is those few moments where you’re not sure if it’s day or night, dawn or dusk. Indigo hues are filling the skies, stars seem confused if it’s still their time, and gradually blues and pinks start to whisper onto the water. Finally, with my eyes firmly glued to the horizon, the first beckoning light of the sun’s rays peek out, simultaneously tentative and committed.

We know wrong and right like we know darkness and light. However, so much of the world’s sin, including my own, seems to take place in those indigo moments.

We participate in the gossip, but then rationalize that we are just helping them. We sit down in church, though we are anything but mentally present. We see those in need, and give but a pittance, with a begrudging spirit. We say, “This is wrong, someone should do something,” and forget we are someone.

We must acknowledge before we change. We must allow God’s light to illuminate the darkest corners of our souls and allow His still, small voice to nudge us toward acts that glorify Him. We must simultaneously be light to others and grow toward God’s light, much as a sunflower tracks the sun.

Life is a journey, not a destination – and so, too, are the sunrises.

Prayer: *Loving God, as we anticipate Your coming, may Your light shine into our lives and cast out all darkness, that we may revel in Your beauty. Amen.*

Corinne M. Nunez, Deacon



Tuesday, December 19, 2017

Luke 1:1-15

Ah, Luke, the Beloved Physician. My colleague, of a sort. Luke was converted, and traveled with Paul, documenting what he saw, and going back to interview the eyewitnesses for his report.

But why? Were these things not already known and spoken among those who had seen and lived with our Lord? Of course they were. But experience of the Almighty may not be enough for our logical minds. Unfortunately, spiritual experience may give way to a need for explanation.

How often has my faith failed me, that I must look for explanation rather than resting in my experience of the Lord? How often have I decided that I must be logical, and look for details, when the entirety of creation cries out that God is with us? How often have I missed the miracle of the Incarnation, preferring instead its details?

Such are our minds. But in His providence, God has seen fit to give us both. Cling to the Word, all of it. Let its majesty fulfill your faith. And, if necessary, let its proofs satisfy your intellect.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father, in Your wisdom You have granted to us what we need: proof of Your presence, proof of Your providence, proof of Your love. By Your grace, grant to us a faith that demands no proof, and a peace that allows us to rest in Your love. In this season, You came to us and were with us. And You are with us still today. Amen.*

Richard L. McGough III, MD, Elder

Wednesday, December 20, 2017

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Luke 1:26-38

**W**hen I was a kid, the season of Advent was filled with anticipation, cookies as far as the eye could see, and questions of doubt. Will Santa know which house is ours? How will he fit down the chimney? What if reindeer don't like carrots?! As an adult, I know (a little) more than I did then, but doubts remain: How will I buy presents for everyone on my list? How will we coordinate travel plans? How should we handle uncomfortable situations? And they are coupled with a bigger question: How will I get everything done in time? Though decades separate these different concerns, the theme is the same: we lack confidence and have doubts. Scripture reminds us, like Elizabeth and Mary, that we are His chosen servants. With faith in God and His plan, we are never alone and nothing is impossible. Even chimney descents.

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, thank You for putting us on Your list and giving the ultimate gift of Your Son, Jesus. Please open our eyes to see Him in everyone we meet and our hearts to receive the love that surrounds us everywhere we go this season. In His name we pray. Amen.*

Katharine N. K. Zeglen, Deacon



Thursday, December 21, 2017

Luke 1:39-48a

**O**h, my soul leaps with inexpressible joy.  
Like a mother holding a newborn.

With great expectation, I wait for You.

You knew me before creation.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I believe, but cannot see.

Your promises are true.

You have chosen me.

A humble servant.

**Prayer:** *Father God, with joy we praise You, for You have come to be with us, and You have called us as Your own. Guide us now, that we may love and serve You with all of our lives. Amen.*

Charie E. Daviston, Deacon



Friday, December 22, 2017

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Luke 1:57-66

This Advent season looks a bit different in our family as we eagerly anticipate the birth of our third child, a son, this coming February. There is a lot to consider with the decision of what to name a child. In our case, our daughters both have rather traditional names that came from within our extended family. When choosing our son's name, we have kept that in mind and are looking over our male relative's names and deciding what will be the best fit. It is not an easy decision, and it is one the child will live with for the rest of his life!

In our Scripture passage, Zechariah and Elizabeth were in a similar scenario with their firstborn son. In Jewish tradition for that time, the baby would not be named until the eighth day upon his circumcision ceremony, and it was expected that a firstborn male would be named after his father. In an earlier passage, we learned that Zechariah had been visited by an angel proclaiming that he would be a father and the son would be named John. At the time, Zechariah doubted God's gift to his family and was, as such, afflicted with dumbness. When it came time to name the child, the gathered priests and family assumed the baby would be named Zechariah, and were shocked when Elizabeth spoke out and said he was to be named John. This simply was not done in their culture, and when they turned to Zechariah for confirmation he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately, God rewarded Zechariah for his faithfulness by restoring his speech, and he began shouting praises for God.

This laid the foundation for John the Baptist to become an outspoken preacher and right-hand man of Jesus. In the end, a name is just a name. It is a collection of letters strung together to identify a person. In this instance, John's name was so much more, because it represented the faith of his parents in God's will. It broke cultural norms and set John apart to be a chosen follower of Christ and leader of the early Christian Church.

Prayer: *Lord, we are in awe of You and of the many miracles of this season. We ask that You would walk alongside us during our waiting, and that we would have the faith of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus, and give us voices to always shout Your praise. Amen.*

Kathryn F. S. Geary



Saturday, December 23, 2017

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Luke 1:67-80

**T**he journey leading to Christmas is filled with periods of waiting, and, in this passage, we find ourselves at the end of one such period and in the middle of another.

After not believing God's promise, Zechariah waits mutely for months until the promise is fulfilled in the form of a son. Zechariah breaks his silence, praising God for His mercy and promises of the past, and prophesying about God's future gift of Jesus, for whom his son John will prepare the way. This marks the beginning of the end of a wait that began ages ago.

God shows us mercy and keeps His promises even when we don't believe that He will. As we await the coming of Christ, may we look both to the past and to the future, rejoicing in the blessings we have received and trusting that God will be with us.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, thank You for showing us Your mercy and shining Your light upon us, even when we fail to believe in Your promises. Guide us as we walk through this Advent season so that we may grow to be strong in spirit. Amen.*

Emma R. Balaan, Deacon



Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)*

**L**ight is essential to biological life; light in life indicates vitality and prosperity. Light is essential to vision. In Genesis, God summons light – its creation is a direct result of God’s command. It is with light that the first day of creation is born. This occurs in the second sentence of the Bible.

One of the most dramatic passages in choral music occurs about eight minutes into the beginning of Franz Joseph Haydn’s oratorio, *The Creation*. The orchestra begins with an extended, wandering prelude depicting the earth without form and void. The narrator enters, still very quietly, with the opening words of Genesis. On the word “light,” the full orchestra and choir burst forth with a *subito fortissimo*. The oratorio moves swiftly from this defining moment.

What a marvelous image we have to usher in our journey through the Bible and our ongoing image of the Divine: Jesus, the Light of the World. “Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” Echoing Isaiah, Matthew says of the arrival of Jesus, “the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” The Psalmist speaks of the Lord being the “Light of My Salvation” T. S. Elliot has a stunning poem in his pageant play, *The Rock*: “O Light Invisible, We Praise Thee.” The poem/prayer is a meditation in and of itself.

In these days of winter, when darkness increasingly covers the earth, we all crave the coveted hours of daylight. We light lanterns and tapers; we cover our Christmas trees and cottages with colorful coruscations; we escape to places where we can soak in sunshine. We yearn for spring, when each day unfolds with more brilliance than the one before. With this escalation of effulgence we associate budding flowers and trees – the reassurance of renewed life.

Not only do we long for more light, we long for the warmth associated with its luminosity. And so it is with God’s presence in our lives. We have an inborn need for the radiance and warmth emanating from the Light of the World. What are the sources of light in your own world which illuminate the love and grace of the Divine?

**Prayer:** *Dear God, we want to see your brightness. Clear sun of righteousness, shine on our path and show us the way to the Father. In you, O God, there is no darkness at all; the night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in our hearts, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

John 1:1-5

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (John 1:1-5)*

**I**n the dramatic opening of his gospel, John the apostle boldly declares the identity of Jesus. Jesus is the incarnation of Almighty God. He is both fully human and fully divine. He is God. In Him exists creation, redemption, and salvation.

Jesus Christ is the light of life and salvation, yet He came to us as a humble Child, born in a stable. Despite the truth He shared and the healing He brought, we often deny Him, His Word, and our desperate need of salvation which only He can provide.

**Yet, He loves us still.**

The darkness of the world and the darkness of our own sin have not diminished the radiance of our Lord. His light shines in our darkest hours, illuminating His love, His mercy, and His invitation to us to come and live in His light.

What do you face this glorious Christmas Day? Amidst the celebrations of this day, are you facing illness or the loss of a loved one? Do you face joblessness or financial stress or severe marital discord? Whatever you face today, celebrate the brilliant light shining in our darkness: the light of our Lord, Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem!

Merry Christmas!

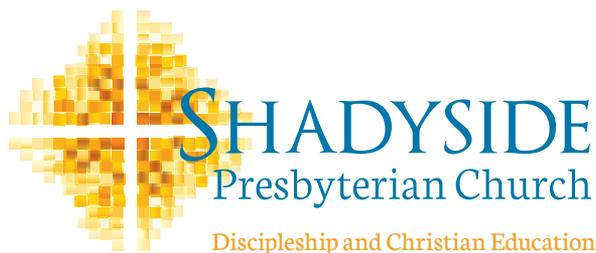
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