

2022 Advent Devotions



Written by members of
Redeemer Lutheran Church



While the world rushes by outside, bringing into our lives both new and painfully familiar challenges, we hurtle toward Christmas in a blur of red and green. It is easy to lose our center. That is why Christians choose to pause, and make time for an Advent spirit to fill us. Making time for these devotions slows our steps, calms our hearts, and wakes us to the presence of the God we often don't realize is holding us in love. Together we wait ... we reflect ... we prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child who is coming to us, and the Christ who is already with us.

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Sunday, November 27

Emily Kent

READ:

Don't Worry About It!

*Isaiah
2: 1-5*

*Matthew
24: 36-44*

*But know this, that if
the master of the
house had known in
what part of the night
the thief was coming,
he would have stayed
awake and would not
have let his house be
broken into. Therefore
you must also be
ready, for the Son of
Man is coming at an
hour you do not
expect.*

***Matthew 24:43**
(English Standard Version)*

PRAYER:

*Dear Lord, the holiday
season can trigger anxiety
for many people. We pray
for calm during the hustle
and bustle, and for
reminders to focus on the
things within our control.
Amen.*

Nothing says Advent like victim blaming and fear of the Rapture, right? To quote Randy Jackson from "American Idol," "Yeah, it's a no from me, Dawg."

Why does this passage equate the coming of the Lord (presumably something good) with something criminal? That has NEVER made sense to me. In the previous verses, we hear about people going about their lives until the flood came and swept them away. They were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." In other words, they were *living* and focusing on *love*. Yes, that is a much better way to focus one's energy, on love rather than fear.

As someone who has anxiety issues from time to time, and who also loves people with anxiety issues, I don't need extra things to worry about. If the *angels* don't know when Jesus will return, we probably aren't going to figure it out. No offense, Jesus, but I have to pay my bills, keep my family healthy, get my homework done, take the dog to the vet, etc. I can't worry about your future travel plans.

Constant vigilance is exhausting. If it's not something within our control, then it's not something we should actively worry about. It's better to focus our attention on loving people as Jesus commanded. When he does come, I think it will be more like a friend who was in the neighborhood and wanted to drop by unexpectedly, rather than like a thief. We can welcome him to our messy, lived-in, and loved-in houses. And if we start to apologize for the toys on the floor or the dishes in the sink, Jesus might well say, "I came to see you, not your house. Don't worry about it."

Receding Floodwaters

In the story told in Genesis of Noah and his ark, the entire world was inundated by a massive flood, killing all the land-dwelling plants, animals, and people, except for those on the ark with Noah. After the floodwaters receded, the land dried and life returned.

The people of southwest Florida—especially the area near Fort Myers and Sanibel Island—suffered through a flood of near-biblical proportions caused by Hurricane Ian in late September. We all saw gut-wrenching photos and videos of the destruction Ian caused. I have friends who have a home near that area in Charlotte County, in the Rotonda West subdivision, where the eyewall passed through. Fortunately, my friends were out of town at the time but returned a week later. They told me that they had lost five large trees and had some damage to the roof of their house, but the contents of the home were intact. They knew they were very lucky, as the area around them “looked like a war zone.” A few days after they returned, the electricity was restored, so they were able to move back in. They have since been busily making repairs, working with contractors, and dealing with their insurance company. After a couple weeks, they convened their local singing group, the Charlotte Chorale, for a rehearsal. They were all more-than-ready to sing and make music together, to lift their spirits and to be joyful that they were all still alive and well.

Sometimes our lives seem like we are being inundated by a flood of troubles and sorrows. For those who are prone to depression, it can feel like being under water. In 1982 I had one of my worst-ever bouts of depression after moving to a new city (Durham, NC) for my job. Recently divorced, I could not find joy in anything and felt so lonely. However, with some counseling I decided to try to remedy the situation. I chose a restaurant in a nearby college town and went there after work one Friday. I saw a young lady dining by herself, happily reading a book. After that, I enjoyed my meal. Next, I decided to go to a Saturday matinee, where I wouldn’t be surrounded by couples. I practically had the movie house to myself and laughed out loud at the funny film. Later, I joined the choir at Duke Chapel and also a group that put on Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Singing has always brought me so much joy. Eventually I shook off the depression and, like Noah, could say that the floodwaters had receded and the ground was really drying!

READ:

*Genesis
8:1-19*

*Romans
6:1-11*

*. . . and
Noah
removed the
covering of
the ark, and
looked, and
saw that the
face of the
ground was
drying.
Genesis 8:13b*

PRAYER:

*O God, give us
the strength to
persevere in
times of
natural
disasters or
overwhelming
depression,
knowing that
the
floodwaters
will recede and
we will again
be able to sing.
Amen.*

Tuesday, November 29

Becky Trover

READ:

Fear and Dread

*Genesis
9:1-17*

Well then. Fear and dread of me resting on “every animal of the earth”?

*Hebrews
11:32-40*

*The fear and
dread of you shall
rest on every
animal of the
earth, and on
every bird of the
air, on everything
that creeps on the
ground, and on all
the fish of the sea;
into your hand
they are delivered.*

Genesis 9:2

As I write this, there is an infestation of ants in my house, and they certainly don't seem to fear and dread me. In fact, I suspect that they're going back to their nest with my anti-ant bait and having a good laugh at my feeble attempts to chase them back outdoors, where I think they belong. The latest science says there are 2.85 million ants per person on earth, so even if I eliminate the dozens I see on my counter . . . it's a losing battle, to say the least. And what makes me think it's a worthy battle?

Our ideas of what it means that God has given us everything on earth can seem to lead to a propensity to use up and destroy. What might happen if we, instead, would cultivate an attitude of care-taking, of nurturing, of supporting growth and life? Could we learn to share with all of God's creation? Perhaps even learn to share with one another? Could we learn to be God's hands to bring a blessing to our planet?

Let's work to tread more lightly on the earth, to see all life as a gift from God to be cherished—yes, even those pesky ants.

PRAYER:

*Lord, grant us the
grace to honor your
covenant to bless the
earth through us.
Amen.*

Wednesday, November 30

Connie Criswell

The Big Tent

In this section of Isaiah, God promises the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile, producing so many descendants that the people will eventually have to expand their living space. This passage gives us the image of a “big tent,” which today can refer to churches that accept and embrace political, social, and theological differences in their congregations. In our time of extreme political polarization, this is not easy to achieve.

In a big-tent church, all are truly welcomed, and there is room for anyone with a hunger for justice and mercy and a thirst for God. People are not asked to check their convictions and beliefs at the door but are gently made aware that others who believe differently are also made in God’s image and are God’s beloved children. Not everyone with firmly entrenched ideas who visits a big-tent church is willing to confront their fear of change, but for those who stay, interacting with someone very different can be a growth experience and an expansion of their worldview and faith.

When I first came to Redeemer, I read the plaque on the wall in the narthex, which explained that Redeemer was the first Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Lutheran church in Ohio and had been RIC since the early 1990s. This meant that no matter what one’s sexual orientation or gender identity was, that person was welcome at Redeemer. I know there are many churches that would not tolerate openly gay members, much less a gay pastor. However, Redeemer welcomed such a pastor with open arms and happily celebrated his marriage to a terrific life partner.

Redeemer has become a big-tent church over the decades and continues to grow. In the various ministries at Redeemer—such as the food giveaways, community meals at First English, or participation in a grassroots justice organization—we can see members of many races, beliefs, and sexual orientations participating side by side, following Jesus and sharing God’s love with all.

READ:

*Isaiah
54:1-10*

*Matthew
24:23-35*

*Enlarge the site
of your tent,
and let the
curtains of
your
habitations be
stretched out;
do not hold
back; lengthen
your cords and
strengthen
your stakes.
Isaiah 54:2*

PRAYER:

*O God, bless our
congregation,
and let it
continue to grow
as a truly big tent.
Amen.*

READ:

Casting Lots, Rolling the Dice

Isaiah
4:2-6

Acts
1:12-17, 21-26

*And they
cast lots for
them, and
the lot fell
on Matthias;
and he was
added to the
eleven
apostles.
Acts 1:26*

PRAYER:

*O God, give
us the wisdom
to make good
choices in our
lives and the
strength to
live with their
consequences.
Amen.*

In many of the Bible stories, tough decisions were made by “casting lots.” Just what *lots* were is not known; they might have been sticks, small stones, coins, or even knuckle bones, but the concept is similar to our rolling dice, flipping a coin, or even saying, “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.” The belief was that God made the ultimate choice. In this passage of Acts, after Judas Iscariot committed suicide, the eleven remaining apostles chose his replacement by casting lots to decide between two viable candidates, and Matthias was so chosen.

How do we “cast lots” in our own lives? We have many choices to make, such as settling on a career, finding a job, or choosing a suitable mate. One example in my life was choosing which job offer to accept when I finished graduate school in organic chemistry in 1980. I had five offers from chemical and oil companies, with salaries that seemed huge compared with my small graduate-school stipend. I went on interview trips to all of these companies to meet potential coworkers, visit their laboratories, and survey possible places to live. It was a difficult choice, as they all were in places where I would have been happy to work.

I finally settled on Union Carbide Agricultural Products Company in South Charleston, WV, because I liked the group of coworkers the best, and I was told the division would be moving to North Carolina a year later. Little did I know what was in store for us! After I had been with the company for 4 years, one of our plants in Bhopal, India, suffered one of the worst industrial accidents ever when an underground tank of methyl isocyanate exploded in the middle of the night, sending a cloud of vapor high in the air. When it condensed, it landed mostly on the tar-paper shacks of poor people clustered outside the plant’s fence. Thousands of people died horribly that night, and our company was blamed. It was awful feeling responsible for this disaster, even though it was later determined that sabotage had caused it. Two years later, the corporation sold our division. Fortunately, I was able to find a job at Chemical Abstracts Service in Columbus, where I worked for 27 years before retiring.

When we roll the dice to make a decision, we have to live with the consequences. Due diligence and consultation with trusted advisors and loved ones can help to avoid pitfalls, but eventually the choice is ours, and the future can never be fully known. If rough spots occur, hopefully we can count on faith, family, and a beloved church community to help us cope.

Friday, December 2

Heidi Sherer

Gracious Guidance

I'm not sure how I resonate with a God who "gives" us adversity and affliction, but I can imagine those who wrote these words may have experienced such suffering and may have assigned those actions to God. Just prior to these verses God is named as one of mercy and justice. God is also called gracious, hearing the cries of people and answering. This seems to describe a relationship much like that of a comforting parent with a child in distress. Whether calming a child awakened from a nightmare or soothing another in pain after a bicycle fall, parents hear children's cries and are their first guides. God is also called "teacher." Many of us can relate to having good teachers. The ones who encouraged us when learning wasn't easy, offered relatable examples until we understood something new, and were patient with our confusion—those probably stood out for us as students.

The mentors we find in parents, teachers, and other helpful people in our lives can offer us guidance we can see, a set of ears to hear our cries, and words of direction about the ways to walk. As the days' light hours decrease and the cold of darker seasons approaches, it is much harder for some of us to feel hopeful and certain on our paths. But God is still here offering direction, no matter which way we turn. This direction may show up in the form of a family member, a friend, a fellow church member, a coworker, a neighbor. We live in a community of others who have also experienced adversity and affliction. God's grace works through those in our lives who show up in our darkness, loss, and struggles. Whether we turn right or left, if we cry out for help and pause to listen, we may hear words of encouragement saying, "This is the way!"

READ:

*Isaiah
30:19-26*

*Acts
13:16-25*

*... you shall weep no more.
He will surely be gracious to
you at the sound of your
cry; when he hears it, he
will answer you. Though the
Lord may give you the
bread of adversity and the
water of affliction, yet your
Teacher will not hide
himself any more, but your
eyes shall see your Teacher.
And when you turn to the
right or when you turn to
the left, your ears shall hear
a word behind you, saying,
"This is the way; walk in it."
*Isaiah 30:19-21**

PRAYER:

*God of Grace, hear our cries,
and teach us to listen for the
cries of others in need of
guidance. When we feel lost,
remind us that you are with us
in our darkness. Open our eyes
to see your presence on our life's
path, and show us the way to
walk with you and others on this
path.
Amen.*

Saturday, December 3

Kelley Frank

READ:

A Blanket of Comfort

Isaiah
40:1-11

John
1:19-28

*Comfort, comfort
my people, says
your God.*

Isaiah 40: 1
*(New International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Great Comforter, you
know our pain.*

*Blanket us with your
comfort, console us,
and ease our distress.*

*Let us be your
blanket of comfort for
others.
Amen.*

Comfort. Some people probably think of it as a trivial, unimportant word. In our society, I think people generally think of comfort through a financial lens, as in a “comfortable living.” But there is so much more to this word! Oxford Languages defines *comfort* as “a state of physical ease and freedom from pain or constraint” (noun) and to “ease the grief or distress of; console” (verb). Synonyms include *ease*, *coziness*, *relief*, *well-being*, *security*, and *relaxation*. In this Isaiah passage, the author repeats *comfort* for emphasis. This is not a trivial word. The composer George Frideric Handel based one of the recitatives from his famous oratorio “The Messiah” on Isaiah’s comfort text. In our own ELW hymnal, Isaiah’s text is the basis for the hymn “Comfort, Comfort Now My People” (ELW 256). For the people hearing Isaiah’s prophetic message, his words of comfort were a reminder to the people of Judah to trust in God despite the Assyrian invasion.

I think this message of trust carries over to our current world. I most often equate comfort with a blanket. A blanket is cozy and also provides security, eases my distress, and aids in my well-being. The prayer shawl I received from the gifted “comforters” at Redeemer is one of my “blankets” that console me and remind me of God’s loving care for me.

How and when might others need to be comforted in our community and world? I think of those who are grieving, those who are hungry, those who are imprisoned, and those who are lonely or depressed. Comfort is needed in times of trouble, when we feel like we are in the desert, and when we are feeling down. We can call on God to console us and free us from pain and distress—24/7. And we can be God’s hands and feet to reach out to others as a “blanket” of comfort.

Sunday, December 4

Julianne Johnson

The Stump

READ:

*Isaiah
11:1-10*

*Matthew
3:1-12*

A stump—imagine it—just a stump. No longer are there any leaves, no longer any fruit. No branches to climb or to provide shade. No sturdy trunk. Just the stump. That brought to my mind Shel Silverstein's children's book *The Giving Tree*. It's a love story really between a tree and the boy that the tree loved. When the tree was full and the boy was young, both were happy and loved their time together. As the boy ages, it becomes more of a one-sided relationship—the boy wants, and the tree gives and gives and gives—until the tree is just a stump. Then when the boy comes as an old man, the tree gives him one more gift, a place to sit.

I had not really remembered that the Isaiah passage talks about a green shoot from Jesse's stump—and from his roots a budding branch. We just had a tree taken down to the stump—how strange to imagine a green shoot growing from that, and a branch from its root.

This passage from Isaiah is a familiar one during Advent as we prepare for the coming birth of Jesus. Spending time with the image of the stump has helped me appreciate the rest of the reading. It builds from the image of a dead stump—one with “the life-giving Spirit of God” hovering over it—to this promise: “The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.” Wow! Wrap your mind around that!

*A green shoot
shall sprout from
Jesse's stump, from
his roots a
budding branch.
The life-giving
Spirit of God will
hover over him,
the Spirit that
brings wisdom and
understanding. . . .*

*Isaiah 11:1-2a
(The Message)*

PRAYER:

*Lord, we anticipate
your coming and the
promise of the whole
earth brimming with
knowing God-alive.
Amen.*

Monday, December 5

Judith Bird

READ:

All Righty Now

*Isaiah
24:1-16a*

*1 Thessalonians
4:1-12*

*The new wine
dries up and the
vine withers; all
the merrymakers
groan.*

*Isaiah 24:7
(New International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Dear God, help us to
remember that you
are not a panacea for
the bad things that
happen in our lives
but that you are a
companion who
accompanies each of
us through the rough
patches. Come, Lord
Jesus.
Amen.*

Every time I go to sign up to write a devotion for the Advent booklet I think to myself I should look at the passages ahead of time, and every time I don't. It happened again this year. How bad could Isaiah be? Isn't he the prophet that foretold Immanuel's coming?

Well, Isaiah 24:1-16a takes a different tack: "See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants. . . . The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered."

All righty now. Isn't this just a joy? What does this have to do with Advent?

Reading further, it doesn't get any better: "Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left. The new wine dries up and the vine withers; all the merrymakers groan."

Well, not any better, but it does seem to resonate with news today coming out about climate change. Somewhere I read (I read a lot of headlines and then can't remember where) that the U.S. has warmed 68 percent faster than the planet. Now *that's* just hunky dory.

Reading on in Isaiah there is more about the city left in ruins: " . . . its gate is battered to pieces."

But wait, then everything changes! In verse 14 we're told, "They raise their voices, they shout for joy; from the west they acclaim the Lord's majesty." Say what?

It goes on: "There in the east give glory to the Lord; exalt the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, in the islands of the sea. From the ends of the earth we hear singing: 'Glory to the Righteous One.'"

So, bad things happen. There are hurricanes . . . wildfires . . . droughts . . . COVID . . . shootings and war and elections, but the God of Advent, this Jesus Christ—Immanuel—still comes . . . God with us no matter what.

All righty now!!

Tuesday, December 6

Michele Disbro

Take the Challenge!

READ:

*Isaiah
41:14-20*

*Romans
15:14-21*

Year after year, when I sign up for the Advent devotions, I just pick a date. Later I go home and look up the Bible verses, hoping it won't be a difficult text. So far, I've been pretty lucky. So when I opened up my Bible and started reading the Romans verses assigned for today, I thought, "OK, this isn't too bad." Paul was complimenting the church in Rome for being kind, knowledgeable, and motivated to guide others. Paul could have been talking to Redeemer members. We are kind and welcoming to visitors. We participate in many wonderful ministries. We offer many opportunities for book studies, Bible studies, and discussion of important topics. Way to go, Redeemer!

I was almost to the end of the reading when verse 20 stopped me in my tracks. Paul was writing to the Roman church about sharing the Good News about Christ with those who did not already know Christ. Hmmm . . . do we do that? There are so many people in my life who have not been brought up in a church and others who were but have left the church. I often justify my silence about the Good News by thinking I'm respecting different viewpoints or perhaps I'm showing others I'm a Christian by the way I live my life. Would Paul be complimenting me for that?

Well, now I'm feeling uncomfortable. How could I go about sharing my faith without making things really awkward for me and the person I might choose to talk to about my faith? Redeemer members claim to like a challenging message, so here's a challenge for us: invite someone to church. Now that I've typed that, I'm wondering if I have the courage to do that. How about you? Maybe we've chatted with a friend about something at Redeemer—why not go a step further and invite them to church? Or maybe we could reach out to someone we haven't seen at Redeemer for a long time and invite them to worship? It's a bit scary, isn't it? I think Paul would be cheering us on. Are we up for the challenge? I'll be cheering us on, too!

*I myself feel
confident about you,
my brothers and
sisters, that you
yourselves are full
of goodness, filled
with all knowledge,
and able to instruct
one another. . . .
Thus I make it my
ambition to
proclaim the good
news, not where
Christ has already
been named, so that
I do not build on
someone else's
foundation.
Romans 15:14, 20*

PRAYER:

*Courageous Lord, fill
me with the courage to
be uncomfortable and
the confidence to share
your Good News with
others.
Amen.*

Wednesday, December 7

Michelle Clemence

READ:

How Do I Know?

*Genesis
15: 1-18*

*Matthew
12:33-37*

*But [Abram] said,
"O Lord God, how
am I to know that
I shall possess it?"*

Genesis 15:8

PRAYER:

*Lord, I believe; help
my unbelief.
Amen.*

The verse from the Genesis passage that gets quoted most often is 15:6, "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Sometimes it's waved around as "You don't have to *do* anything; just believe," and sometimes it's "Believe, *or else you're unrighteous.*" But two verses later, both of those interpretations are blown out of the water when Abram asks, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" and the Lord answers with a task, a sign, and a covenant.

Abram (later renamed Abraham) is a great ancestor in the faith. A big chunk of Genesis relates his conversations with and questions of God, even occasional lapses in faith and attempts to take things into his own hands. But God perseveres. God had selected Abram and his wife Sarai (later Sarah) to parent God's chosen people, and God continued to shepherd them through their trials, travels, tests, and doubts.

God continues to do so with us, too. Belief and doubt are not opposites; they are both components of a living faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts his followers to ask, to seek, and to knock (Matthew 7:7). And after his resurrection, Jesus indulges Thomas's need to see for himself (John 20:27). Believing with our whole heart can be a great source of joy and comfort, but questions and doubts don't have to be scary or discomfoting. God created us to be curious, to learn, to evaluate, and to grow, and God is happy to be in conversation with us over any and all aspects of our faith and life.

At the beginning of each Sunday worship service, Pastor Dave welcomes believers, doubters, and those who are a combination. These are not just nice words; the Redeemer community really welcomes all because God welcomes all.

Thursday, December 8

Julianne Johnson

Evil Exists

These days I often feel like evil is out of control in our world and in our society. Whether it's the senseless destruction of Ukraine by Russia, the control of much of Haiti by gangs, the numerous mass shootings in our country, the hateful language directed toward each other, the rise of white supremacy, or the outright lies of those seeking political office, it seems that evil is common and people get away with it all the time.

In our October book study, we discussed the book *The Shack*. It's the story of a man, Mackenzie (or Mack), whose daughter is murdered by a serial murderer. Mack experiences God in three persons—Papa (a black woman), Jesus, and Sarayu (the Holy Spirit). This experience occurs at the shack where his daughter was murdered. Mack's interactions with each of them help him deal with his many feelings.

Toward the end of the book, God talks to Mack about his feelings for his daughter's murderer, who has not been identified or charged in any of the murders. Talk about evil. But as Papa talks to Mack, s/he points out what Peter does in this reading—that we are all God's children, and God doesn't want anyone lost.

That was a hard discussion for Mack to have, and it's a hard lesson for us to learn as well. There is evil in this world, and it may feel like there are no consequences for evil actions. But God's love is not a rosy, feel-good love. It is a wise, discerning, redeeming love—far beyond our understanding. And it is available to all—imagine that.

READ:

Ruth
1:6-18

2 Peter
3:1-10

Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as one day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the end because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.

2 Peter 3: 8-9
(The Message)

PRAYER:

O God, you love every person and all of your creation with a love beyond our imagination, and even our understanding. When we are angry, when we are prone to judge others, remind us that your love is for all.
Amen.

READ:

Legacies

Ruth
4:13-17

2 Peter
3:11-18

Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." . . . the women of the neighborhood gave him a name. . . . he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:14-15, 17

PRAYER:

Loving God, thank you for the women who have given life to us, the women whose lives and examples prepared the way before us, the close friendships of dedicated women, and the communities that recognize the importance of women's work. Nourish and restore us in this Advent season as we remember the women who love us and whom we love. Amen.

The book of Ruth is among the shortest in the Bible, which includes few women's voices. One estimate is that between 111 and 173 women are actually named (with over 600 unnamed). By comparison, about 3,000 men are named in the Bible. We know the patriarchal convention of passing names through the man's family line remains, and this story is not much different—but with a small twist. Ruth, daughter-in-law of Naomi, is praised directly as being one who means more to Naomi than seven sons. True, Naomi's next-of-kin will bear her son-in-law's name, but the women reportedly named him.

Those women of Naomi's time recognized and honored the woman who made it possible for the ancestor of David, whose lineage would include Jesus, to be born. This "restorer of life" and "nourisher" of Naomi's old age was given life by a woman through God's blessing. Parents and grandparents today hope their offspring will function like this for them. When that hope is not fulfilled or when those of us without children grow old, we can turn to other family members and friends, as well as to our church families, to step in and help restore and nourish us. As one such adult without human children, I look forward to that support. (My feline dependents will be forever dependents!)

Living in the current time also gives me more opportunity to leave legacies other than my own children's names. As a speech-language pathologist, I'm able to positively impact the lives of other people's children. As a writer, I may leave my work behind for others to read. And my life's nourishment in old age isn't dependent on men or on bearing children, because women today may work in many more professions and can support themselves into and through retirement. This was not the case for Ruth or Naomi, which made their relationship even more precious.

Regardless of our family status, gender, or age, we are all in need of Jesus and the nourishment and restoration of life that his example and his teaching bring to the world. In turn, we can offer that kind of support to each other

Saturday, December 10

Emily Kent

Honest and Simple

In today's passage, John the Baptist is saying, "Y'all better start acting right, because stuff is about to get real. You do not want to be on the wrong side of this." And the people freaked out and started asking what they should do. His answer boiled down to, "Share your wealth with others, and live honestly."

This doesn't mean we all should live minimalist lifestyles, or that we can't have nice things. It is fine to work hard, earn money, and buy nice things. BUT, if we have more than we need, John is reminding us to share with those who are less fortunate.

Right now there might be clothes in your closet you haven't touched in 3 years. I don't care if you think you'll lose weight and fit into them again; this is your sign to get rid of those things. Find a way to donate so that someone who needs clothes can get them.

Right now you may have a pantry full of food for "what if." This is your sign to check all the expiration dates on those foods. If they are still good, do an honest assessment of whether you need all of them. How many of them have dust on top? If they have dust, you don't need them. Clean them off and donate them. If they are expired and no longer usable, throw them away. And before you buy more, take the money you would have spent on stockpiles and consider donating it to the food pantry. The pantry has more spending power per dollar than you do.

It's not just clothes and food; look around your house. What do you have an excessive amount of? Plastic cup collection? Toys? Craft supplies? Musical Instruments? (Ouch, that one smarts!) Maybe this is your sign to consider whether you have too much of a good thing. Is there someone who might benefit more than you from your extra items?

I think our congregation is already an honest and generous group of people. But it doesn't hurt to have a reminder from time to time. The idea to buy only what you will use, use only what you need, and use your wealth to help others is out of step with a society that thrives on greed and excess. That was the message in John's time, and it's the same message now.

READ:

*1 Samuel
2:1-8*

*Luke
3:1-18*

*John answered,
"Anyone who
has two shirts
should share
with the one who
has none, and
anyone who has
food should do
the same."*

*Luke 3:11
(New International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Great Provider, help
us find
opportunities to
assist those who
may need extra
support this season
and throughout
the year. May we
share and serve
with grateful, joyful,
and generous
hearts.
Amen.*

Sunday, December 11

Kelley Frank

READ:

Joyful Deserts

Isaiah
35: 1-10

Matthew
11: 2-11

*Wilderness and
desert will sing
joyously, the
badlands will
celebrate and
flower.*

Isaiah 35:1

(The Message)

PRAYER:

*Emmanuel, meet us
in our desert times,
when our worldview
is bleak and parched.
Guide us through
and out of our desert
to a lush oasis, where
water gushes from
springs and the
wilderness rejoices.
Amen.*

Our daughter and son-in-law were in ministry in Las Cruces, NM, for several years. We had the pleasure of visiting them many times and exploring the desert environment in that area. The stark dryness of the bare, sandy land and minimal greenery was a significant contrast to the bright cactus blossoms and occasional puddles of water or snow-covered vegetation we saw on our outdoor adventures. It was very different from the lush flora we generally see in Ohio.

When I review our pictures from our adventures, I am reminded of how beautiful the desert is. But even as I appreciate its splendor, I have gained respect for and an understanding of the harshness of the desert environment with its parched land and rocky edges. When you are in the desert, daily essentials most of us take for granted, like water, are scarce resources. And when you are going through a desert time in your life, the way through or out can be difficult and seem never ending. *Survival* is the word that comes to my mind.

To me, this passage in Isaiah is about encouragement and hope, transforming the desert from a place of survival, fear, and scarcity to an environment of plenty. Isaiah says that “water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs” (35:6-7, NIV). Isaiah’s own words are an oasis: “Tell fearful souls, ‘Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right’” (35:4a, The Message).

Are you or others you know experiencing a desert time in your life? May these images of a joyful desert bring you strength and resilience during difficult times.

Monday, December 12

Michele Disbro

Listening and Caring

In the book of Acts, Luke tells about the actions of the apostles. Rather than simply being a passive spectator of God's awesomeness, Luke encourages both the Jews and the gentiles (and us!) to live into the power of God living within us. We are encouraged to reach out to others with compassion and the sharing of resources. But Luke clarifies that outsiders were wary of joining them, and that same scenario is prevalent today. So many people are wary about the church. Many of the positions and actions taken by Christians seem to contradict what they proclaim. How can the outsiders trust the insiders?

Redeemer's mission statement declares that we are followers of Jesus, sharing God's love with all. Our vision is to foster understanding and healing in community. To accomplish this, it is important to truly listen and understand what others might really be experiencing and feeling. Prior to acting, we are challenged to take the time to talk and listen to others. That act of listening and caring can build trust and relationships and can show others that they really matter.

Here again, I challenge all of us. Let's take the time to engage someone and truly listen to understand that person's concerns. Who knows—we may just discover that we've turned an outsider into an insider.

READ:

Isaiah
29:17-24

Acts
5:12-16

Through the work of the apostles, many God-signs were set up among the people, many wonderful things done. . . . But even though people admired them a lot, outsiders were wary about joining them.

Acts 5:12a, 13
(The Message)

PRAYER:

Open my ears, Lord, so that I truly listen to others. Fill me with patience and compassion to understand a different viewpoint or lifestyle and to respond in love.
Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

Becky Trover

READ:

Division or Mercy?

***Ezekiel
47:1-12***

***Jude
17-25***

*It is these worldly
people, devoid of
the Spirit, who are
causing divisions.*

Jude 19

PRAYER:

*Lord God, grant us
the grace to see your
mercy in our lives
and extend it to all.
Amen.*

We certainly live in a time of great divisions. It is especially sad to me when people who claim the name of Jesus cause much division and animosity. They certainly do not think of themselves as worldly or devoid of the Spirit. Yet some claim that they know who is blessed and who is cursed, who has been or will be "saved," who deserves respect and who deserves to be treated as less than human. How can any of us presume to know the heart of another person, let alone the mind of God?

Let us love and serve a God who loves all, who blesses all, who desires all to be respected. Let us love and serve a God who isn't bound by the law, particularly not by the rules and behaviors that people pick and choose as a litmus test for who is "in" and who is "out." Let us love and serve a God who tells all of us plainly, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Jude spells out pretty clearly the path we should follow: "But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life."

Wednesday, December 14

Michelle Clemence

Pigs

I have been thinking about the swine herd in the Matthew reading since July.

This past summer, in Sunday School, we were talking about the Enneagram. I am a Type 1 (Perfectionist), and one of my personality traits is that I pop off in anger when I am unhappily surprised or frustrated. I hurt people's feelings when this happens, but I don't mean to. Often, when I can curb this tendency, I end up saying nothing even though the surprise situation really is wrong and needs corrective action. One person in class suggested using humor to defuse the tension, but my humor is dry and sarcastic and can leave open wounds, too. So someone else suggested a humorous image to think of to break the tension internally so that I can then speak rationally. The image suggested was the pigs in this story running headlong down the hillside into the lake.

I realize that a herd of animals drowning is not a laughing matter, but a herd of animals running chaotically really is. So I have been using this image as a take-a-moment reminder since summer. It has been helpful.

I'm not sure where to go with this story in terms of a "devotional" message. I am certain that defusing tension and preventing a blow-up is not the reason Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include a version of this story in their gospels. But I am equally certain that the Holy Spirit was working in Room 2 on the Sunday morning this image was suggested to me. In this case, looking at a passage of scripture a little differently has resulted in a little more peace and kindness in the world. Come to adult education on Sundays, and it might change your life, too.

READ:

*Zechariah
8:1-17*

*Matthew
8:14-17, 28-34*

*. . . and behold,
the whole herd
[of swine]
rushed down the
steep bank into
the sea . . .*

*Matthew 8:32b
(English Standard
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Gracious God,
may we be open
to all the ways to
follow you that
your Spirit reveals.
Amen.*

Thursday, December 15

Nancy Magargal

READ:

We Are a Community of Faith

*2 Samuel
7:1-17*

*Galatians
3:23-29*

*... you are all
children of God
through faith. ...
There is no longer
Jew or Greek,
there is no longer
slave or free, there
is no longer male
and female; for all
of you are one in
Christ Jesus.*

Galatians 3:26, 28

PRAYER:

*Gracious God, bless
our Redeemer family
with an everlasting
faith in you as we
celebrate the birth of
your son, our savior
Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

How lucky we are to be a community of faith here at Redeemer. I am part of a vibrant church family and feel fortunate to call my fellow members sisters and brothers. Especially during this Advent season, I feel a true sense of belonging, well-being, and joy. As in all families, there is sometimes friction and disagreement. How typically human we are! But no matter our differences, no matter our disagreements, no fears, no shortcomings, and no labels put on us by the cruel world will keep us from the sure and certain knowledge that we are one in Christ Jesus.

Even through our all-too-human highs and lows, we do manage to stay focused and unified for one reason alone. We **are** a community of faith! We are an embodiment of Martin Luther's words: "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace so sure and certain that [one] could stake [one's] life on it a thousand times." What a wonderful gift that is!

As we celebrate Christ's birth this Christmas season, let us rejoice not only in God's boundless gifts of grace but also in our membership in this remarkable, loving family of faith.

Friday, December 16

Kristi Hildebrand

The Answer Is Almost Always Jesus

I heard a joke once: A pastor was giving a children's sermon, and he asked the kids, "What has a bushy tail and collects nuts for the winter?" A young girl timidly answered, "I know the answer is Jesus, but that sounds like a squirrel to me."

I was getting bogged down in these two scriptures. In 2 Samuel, prior to our assigned passage in Chapter 7, God makes big promises to David and his descendants in what is known as the Davidic covenant. In our passage (verses 18-24), David is responding to those promises with gratitude. Then in the Galatians passage, there is an explanation of how heirs come into their inheritance, including a comparison to slaves, which I was not going to touch. So I was stuck.

But then like that child hearing the children's sermon, I remembered that the answer is almost always Jesus. The Galatians passage is explaining that, because of Jesus, we are all included in the covenant God made with David. First, God promises in that covenant never to remove God's gracious love from God's people, and then Jesus redeems us and makes us no longer slaves but children of God. So now we can know that God will never remove God's gracious love from us.

That is the most simple and yet the most comforting message we can ever receive!

READ:

*2 Samuel
7:18-24*

*Galatians
4:1-7*

*And you
established your
people Israel for
yourself to be
your people
forever; and you,
O Lord, became
their God.
2 Samuel 7:24*

*So you are no
longer a slave but
a child, and if a
child then also an
heir, through God.
Galatians 4:7*

PRAYER:

*Thank you for your
gracious love, Lord.
Help us to
remember your love
and extend it to
others we meet.
Amen.*

Saturday, December 17

Brad Binau

READ:

Love Is Truth

*2 Samuel
7:23-29*

*John
3:31-36*

*“O Lord God, you
are God, and your
words are true. . . .”*

2 Samuel 7:28a

*Whoever has
accepted his
testimony has
certified this, that
God is true.*

John 3:33

PRAYER:

*Lord of all hopefulness
and giver of every
good gift, thank you
that through Jesus
you have revealed the
love that is the most
potent force in all
creation.
Amen.*

During my sophomore year in college, I suffered through a “dark night of the soul.” I didn’t think of it in those terms at the time. It would be years before I learned about the 16th century mystic, John of the Cross, who gave that name to what I experienced. The “dark night” involves a frightening sense of losing things that had previously given meaning to life, particularly ways of understanding the faith. It is like having your internal gyroscope spin out of control. You lose a sense of direction, especially theologically. For me, it was my Sunday School faith collapsing under the weighty new insights I was encountering in college religion courses. I did not know what was—or if, in fact, *anything* was—true.

Truth (the word anyway, if not its exact meaning) stands out in the two lessons assigned for today. After learning of the great blessings he is about to receive, King David praises God saying, “Your words are true.” The writer of the fourth gospel proclaims that Jesus came testifying to the very essence of God. Not only did Jesus talk about what he had seen and heard, the way a courtroom witness testifies, but he incarnated the very essence of who God is. And whoever accepts the testimony of Jesus—i.e., whoever commits to living like Jesus lived—affirms that “God is true.”

In the throes of my college spiritual chaos, I groped for what, if anything, could still be trusted as true. Perhaps the greatest gift I have every received, the answer to a prayer I didn’t even know I was praying, struck me out of the blue and turned my life around: *Love* is truth. Everything theological that had spun out of control came to rest on the new ground of this realization: Love is truth. Jesus, the Word of truth who became flesh, lived that love to his dying breath. The meaning of the manger can be grasped only in the shadow of the cross. The life that was the light of all people shines brightest in the darkness, even—maybe especially—during a dark night of the soul. All of our Advent hope comes to rest on that ground.

Sunday, December 18

Judith Bird

God with Us

Reading those words this year brought an almost immediate sense of calm and relief. Yes, relief—that feeling of being home again, safe in the words of a well-known, comforting story that has been part of my whole life.

The world today needs that kind of refuge . . . a retreat into the familiar, a tale that is one with the core of one's soul. For me, it is akin to taking a deep breath.

Ahhhh.

Yet, it is also the message: *God with us*.

I've never been one to revisit movies or reread books although I know children often find comfort in hearing a story read again and again. And some I know will rewatch the same movie every time they are ill.

Reading this Christmas account from Matthew for the first time this year felt like a homecoming—a return to the understanding that each of us is beloved of God, who sent his son to confirm that relationship.

God with us today . . . every day . . . always.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his Spirit, washed in His blood

READ:

Isaiah
7:10-16

Matthew
1:18-25

“. . . and they
will call him
Immanuel”
(which means
“God with us”).
Matthew 1:23b
(New International
Version)

PRAYER:

*O Lord, help us to
remember year-
round that you
sent Jesus to be
with us not just
sometimes but
always.
Amen.*

READ:

Genesis
17:15-22

Galatians
4:8-20

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.
Genesis 17:20-21

PRAYER:

O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael, keep us in your loving embrace. Help us put our origin stories in perspective and live as your beloved children.
Amen.

Origin Stories

Why do we tell origin stories? As humans, we love narratives, especially those that help us relate to others. We tend to trust people more if we know a bit about their history. In many cultures, origin stories foster tribal cohesiveness when the members believe they are all descended from a common ancestor. Both modern Jews and Arabs trace their origins back to the patriarch Abraham, with Arabs descending from his elder son, Ishmael, and Jews from the younger son, Isaac. The Bible focuses on Isaac and his descendants, while saying little about Ishmael, the son of Abraham by an Egyptian slave woman. What we often forget is that God blessed *both* Ishmael and Isaac and promised both of them many descendants.

We all carry around our own origin stories. They shape who we are. With the advent of commercial genealogy websites that process personal DNA samples, our origins are now easily determined; old family stories can be confirmed or refuted. In my case, DNA solved a 105-year-old mystery in 2018, as my sisters and I finally discovered who our paternal grandfather was. When we used to ask Grandma about him, she would refuse to discuss the matter. After she died, our dad told us that his mother had discovered, shortly before he was born, that she was in a bigamous relationship and had immediately cut off all contact with the man.

When our DNA results were available, we saw that we had some first cousins we knew nothing about. We made contact with them and enjoyed visiting and swapping family histories, although they also knew very little about our mutual grandfather. The main source of information about him was old newspaper accounts, and what a lurid story he had! He was the Bernie Madoff of the 1920s, having defrauded people of their life savings. In a 40-year span, he was the “guest” of four different state penitentiaries and died in 1936 in the Wisconsin state prison. No wonder Grandma was so tight-lipped about him.

Now that we knew what evil our grandfather had perpetrated, was there anything good we could say about him? After all, my new cousins, my sisters, and I had all inherited part of our genetic makeup from him. Despite his flaws, he was truly gifted intellectually and musically, able to pose convincingly as a lawyer, a financier, or a theologian and to play piano and organ in a silent-film theater in Milwaukee. Fortunately, his descendants did not inherit his larcenous proclivities but did benefit from some of his good gifts, such as the love of music.

My relatives and I are glad that we learned this part of our origin story when we were old enough to keep it in perspective. It serves as a reminder that inheritance need not be determinative. We are all given life and the opportunity to pursue both good and ill. With God’s help we will be a blessing to those who come after us.

Tuesday, December 20

Hope, Anyway

While the Genesis reading for today doesn't make us feel anything close to merry or expectant or contemplative, it's worth reading the whole passage in this Advent season. God grants to Abraham and Sarah what God had promised them, a son of their own through whom God would create a great nation (Israel). Verses 1-7 are actually a lovely story and *may* invoke feelings of wonder—after all, God gives to Abraham and Sarah this long-awaited child when Abraham is 100. It makes Sarah laugh.

But Sarah is not amused by the presence of Abraham and Hagar's son, Ishmael. She demands that Abraham banish mother and child, and it seems that both may perish. But just when all seems lost, God provides water for the boy to live and promises to be with him his entire life, creating from him another great nation.

The easy takeaway from this story is that when things look to be hopeless, God will step in. But we all know that the world doesn't work that way—or our sin doesn't make space for God to work that way. The free will God has gifted to God's people stands in the way of our living in the fullness of life. God's beloved people are still victims and perpetrators of crime. God's beloved people still get sick when they are far too young with diseases they cannot survive. Addiction takes the lives of young and old alike. And certain groups of people are still oppressed by others, cast out, and left to manage on their own—like Hagar and Ishmael.

In this season of hope, may we trust that in the midst of our trials, in the ways that sin saturates our world, in the heartache, God is not far off. God longs for us as parents long for their children and sits with us in our weeping. May we long for the day when wholeness returns, when Jesus comes again. Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come.

Julie Hutson

READ:

Genesis
21:1-21

Galatians
4:21-5:1

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

Genesis 21:17-18
(New International Version)

PRAYER:

God for whom we wait, you accompany us in our sorrows and in our joys, in our sinfulness and in our discipleship. We thank you for the love and mercy you show to all people, made known to us in the gift of the one for whom we wait, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Michelle Clemence

READ:

Turning

*1 Samuel
2:1-10*

*Matthew
1:1-17*

*“There is no
Holy One like
the Lord, no
one besides
you; there is
no Rock like
our God.”
1 Samuel 2:2*

Our God has done some wild and crazy things: creating all things, including platypus and people; raising the poor from the dust and shattering the weapons of the mighty; making foreign women and prostitutes the mothers and grandmothers of the kings of Israel; taking on the human body, as a baby, in a backwater town in an occupied country. God knows human joy and sorrow, confusion and certainty, and the love and challenges of family life.

God’s craziness is not limited to times long past. God works today through teachers, musicians, activists, scientists, preachers, janitors, volunteers, artists, administrative assistants, even tax collectors and sex workers. All sorts of people work toward the realization of the Beloved Community, where everyone is fed, housed, clothed, educated, healthy (or receiving treatment). Are you ready to take part? God gives each of us unique gifts. How will you use yours?

PRAYER:

*Lord, help us to
be ready for this
world to turn;
help us also to
be ready to turn
this world.
Amen.*

Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me, and your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end of the age to be.

Your very name puts the proud to shame, and to those who would for you yearn,
you will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the world is about to turn.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

“Canticle of the Turning” (v. 2) by Rory Cooney

Thursday, December 22

Connie Criswell

A Promise of Salvation

Salvation can have more than one meaning. To Jews, it means liberation from a military conqueror. This passage from Isaiah contains a promise of such salvation and assurance of the Lord's protection of Zion, the sacred place. This prophecy came during a time of upheaval surrounding the failed siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, the king of the neo-Assyrian Empire, circa 701 BCE. He had laid waste to the countryside of Judah but had failed to capture the city of Jerusalem, only 20 years after Assyria had overrun the northern kingdom of Israel. According to Isaiah, the people of Jerusalem could look forward to the Lord's establishment of a just rule over a secure and peaceful Zion, at least for several more generations.

Seven hundred years later, Palestine was once again under the yoke of a superpower, this time the Roman Empire. The people were forced to pay punitive taxes, collected by some of their own people. More enlightened emperors allowed the Jews to continue celebrating their holy days and festivals in Jerusalem, although insisting that the Roman emperor was a deity who was to be worshipped publicly. The Jews were longing for a messiah, a military leader who would lead them to salvation from their captors.

But things worked out differently. At this time a baby was born in the backwater province of Galilee who grew up to preach the reign of God as a beloved community, where no one would be in need. The Romans eventually executed this Jesus of Nazareth for treason, once hailed as "King of the Jews." However, 300 years later the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the state religion. In time, *salvation* among Christians grew to mean "deliverance through Christ from the consequences of sin," quite a different concept from military liberation.

In this Advent season, what does *salvation* mean to us? In a world beset by seemingly intractable problems, "deliverance from sin" can seem an appropriate goal. But following Jesus requires something more if we are to make the beloved community a reality. Participation in our church community can be a good place to start: uplifting each other through worship, song, and prayer and giving each other comfort in times of sorrow and loss. May we all strive to make ours a community where none are in need.

READ:

Isaiah
33:17-22

Luke
1:46b-55

*Look on Zion,
the city of our
appointed
festivals! Your
eyes will see
Jerusalem, a
quiet
habitation, an
immovable
tent, whose
stakes will
never be
pulled up, and
none of whose
ropes will be
broken.*

Isaiah 33:20

PRAYER:

*O God, we give
you thanks for
our beloved
community, and
for the promise
of salvation
through Jesus
Christ.
Amen.*

Friday, December 23

Scott Steiner

READ:

Receiving Blessings

*2 Samuel
7:18, 23-29*

*Galatians
3:6-14*

*"... now therefore
may it please you
to bless the house
of your servant, so
that it may
continue forever
before you; for
you, O Lord God,
have spoken, and
with your blessing
shall the house of
your servant be
blessed forever."*

2 Samuel 7: 29

PRAYER:

*Gracious God, we're
grateful for the many
blessings you have
bestowed on us. Help
us to live every day
fully and faithfully.
Amen.*

I have an 11-pound, 11-year-old Chiweenie pet dog named Xena Crystal Steiner. Xena and I go on four-to-six little walks every day. During these "mostly" quiet walks, I pray. For most of the past 11 years, I wasn't really sure why I was praying or what I should be saying to God or how to ask God to help the people I love. I would also pray for people outside my inner circle of family and friends, but again I wasn't really sure what to ask God to do for the rest of the world.

It wasn't until recently that I realized that God blesses us every day with the gift of life. That is why it is called the "present," because living in the moment and appreciating the moment is the gift, or present, which is the blessing from God. The value of the gift is determined by how we live in all those moments from birth to death.

Most of us have received physical gifts from others for different occasions throughout our lives. Sometimes the gifts are amazing and sometimes not so amazing. But the usual reason for gifting is to show love for another person. My prayer for all of us is to experience God's love through all of God's blessings and to let our thanks to God shine through the way we live all the moments of our lives. May the world be blessed, in turn, by our kindness, joy, passion, openness, and gratitude—every day in every way.

And of course, I hope you get and give hugs . . . lots and lots of hugs.

Saturday, December 24

Brad Binau

The Danger of the Manger

"Good news of great joy for all the people!" That is the Christmas story in a nutshell. In fact, it is the entire Christian gospel in its most condensed form. Yet Luke enhances the meaning of this "good news" by including a particular detail in the narrative: the manger. Why this detail when other things that we would love to know about are omitted? Three times Luke mentions the manger in his nativity account, making it the centerpiece of the story. What might that mean?

I think it means that Luke wants us to make a connection to the opening verses of Isaiah where the people of Israel are criticized for not allowing God to "feed" them: "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (1:3, RSV). With the birth of the Christ child, we can know where to get the food we need, and God will guide us to that place: the manger. No more need for cults or idols. The manger means that God, the one whom Jesus called his Abba, will satisfy us if we look to the manger.

But with the manger comes danger. We can sentimentalize, even trivialize, the manger. We have domesticated it into a sort of rustic bassinet, but it was what it was: a feed box without frills. The God who invites us to feast at it is not cloistered in a suite at the Bethlehem Ritz Carlton. This God meets us in the midst of the ultra-ordinary. But even when we grasp the manger for what it is, we face the dangerous temptation to stay there too long. We may never leave, never join the shepherds on their missionary journey to spread the good news of great joy.

If we go to the manger to be fed, and if we come away from the manger seeking to serve, then we will encounter the greatest danger of all: living lives of self-giving love. When we follow the shepherds' example, we can expect the same response to the good news that they received: amazement (Luke 2.18). Some who heard this news didn't know what to make of it. Others received the news that power is made perfect in weakness as a threat. Becoming messengers of love to those who know only the ways of power and control puts us in a vulnerable, dangerous position. But it is a vulnerability and a danger that God has already taken on in the person of Jesus.

On Christmas morning we will feast at the manger/table of the Lord. The entirety of who Christ is—friend, healer, judge, forgiver, savior, God from God and light from light—will meet us there. And the courage to face all the dangers that the manger implies will be the best Christmas present ever.

READ:

*Isaiah
9: 2-7*

*Luke
2: 1-20*

*She gave
birth to her
firstborn son
. . . and laid
him in a
manger. . . .
Luke 2:7*

PRAYER:

*Comforting
God, when we
face danger
because of our
witness to the
self-giving love
of Jesus, give
us the peace
and the
courage that
passes all
human
understanding.
Amen.*

Sunday, December 25

Dave Shull

READ:

The Cost and Wonder

*Isaiah
52:7-10*

*John
1:1-14*

*And the Word
became flesh and
lived among us.
John 1:14a*

PRAYER:

*O holy child of
Bethlehem, descend
to us, we pray; cast
out our sin, and enter
in, be born in us
today. We hear the
Christmas angels the
great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide
with us, our Lord
Immanuel!
Amen.*



The deadline for submitting these devotions is the day after All Saints Sunday. Which means I'm *writing* this the day after All Saints Sunday . . .

When you come forward for communion, I love looking each of you in the eye as I give you the bread or a piece of apple. In that moment, you're not a part of the whole congregation. You're Kathy, or Danica, or Skye, or Miles, or April, or Bruce, or Elinn.

When you came forward for communion on All Saints Sunday yesterday, many of you had tears in your eyes. For me, the tears of All Saints Sunday are the cost and wonder of following this Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this morning. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The Greek suggests that the Word "pitched a tent" with us. This Jesus opens himself to the cost of letting individual people like us into his heart and life. He falls in love with broken, beautiful individuals like you and me. And, like he did in front of the tomb of Lazarus, his eyes fill with tears at the loss of each life he loves. That's the cost of pitching his tent with individuals. That's the cost of following this Jesus and doing the same. We let individuals into our lives and feel the loss when each life we love is no longer physically with us.

Jesus pitching his tent with us is also a wonder that's beyond words. Tents are temporary. So the wonder is that Jesus moves around with us. It's not like he stays someplace that we have to keep coming back to if we want to be with him. He goes with us. The promise of Christmas, the promise of "he pitched his tent with us," is that he chooses to be where we are. For him, "being-with" is a wonder that's worth any cost that comes with losing those he loves. Just as the wonder that comes from being-with the lives we love is worth the cost of the losing. Jesus wouldn't dream of being anywhere else. And neither would we.

Merry Christmas to each one of you!

Holden Evening Prayer

7:00 pm Wednesdays

With Dessert at 6:15 pm

November 30, December 7, 14, 21



Christmas Eve Worship

7:00 pm Saturday

December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am Sunday

December 25



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or call the church office for information on
worship services, meetings, classes, and Bible study.