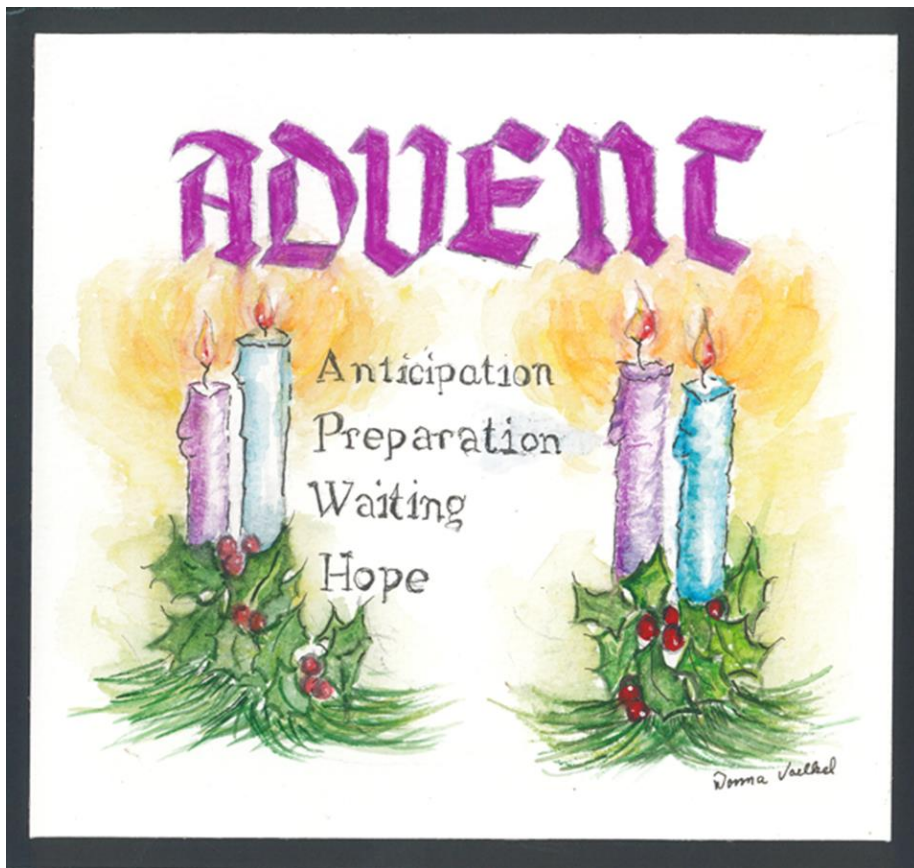


2023 Advent Devotions



Written by members of
Redeemer Lutheran Church



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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 to 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.

READ:

Isaiah
64:1-9

Mark
13:24-37

*Yet, O
Lord, you
are our
[Parent].*

Isaiah 64:8a
*(New
International
Version,
modified)*

PRAYER:

*O Lord, may
we continue
to open a
window each
day through
Advent and
the rest of
our lives in
the certainty
that we are
yours.
Amen.*

Advent Countdown

There's good news and there's bad news. The good news? Today is the start of Advent. The bad news? Today is the start of Advent.

This waiting period leading up to the birth of Jesus was always one of great excitement for me growing up. We decorated. We sent Christmas cards . . . and received a lot of Christmas cards because my father was a chiropractor. The nativity went up, and we opened a window of an Advent calendar each day leading up to Christmas and the birth of Jesus.

But I've noticed this concept of an Advent calendar has expanded. Now one can count down the days by getting a gemstone each day, tiny lighted Lego sets, a chocolate, or cosmetics. There is also a cat food treat each day for the cat in your life to mark the days of Advent. However, another showed up this week in my Facebook feed, and nothing says Christmas is coming more than the Die Hard Advent calendar because it's not Christmas Eve until Hans Gruber meets his end on Nakatomi Plaza replete with a young child in the ad smiling as Hans moves . . . falls . . . down the tower day by day.

Shiver.

Somehow this appropriation—or misappropriation—of this innocent but faith-filled childhood activity of anticipating Jesus' birth just seems wrong. I resonate with Isaiah's words (64:6-7):

"All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and made us waste away because of our sins."

But then Isaiah goes on (v.8): "Yet, O Lord, you are our [Parent]. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand." I find comfort in these words, in the thought that, despite all, I am the Lord's. God made me. God knows me. And in that certainty there is serenity . . . calm . . . hopefulness—all that Advent evokes and encourages. There is a new window to open today . . .

Monday, December 4

Becky Trover

That He May Teach Us His Ways

As I write this, we are well into the open war between Hamas and Israel. This after more than a year and a half of war in Ukraine. Americans are weary of hearing about war, about arguing over support for wars. And, sadly, we do not even hear on the news about most of the wars taking place in the world—in countries too small or too unimportant to us. At this time, 31 countries in the world are experiencing war. Some are civil wars, some insurgencies, some outright aggression between nations.

How is it that, in a time known as “the long peace” (post-World War II to the present), we find so much willful and senseless destruction of life? How do we who bear the name of Christ contribute to the conflict, directly or inadvertently? How do we close our eyes and our hearts to so much suffering? And how can we bear to open our eyes and our hearts?

Micah offers hope that many nations will learn peace and will beat their swords into plowshares, even as each nation’s people walk in the name of their god. How do we modern-day urbanites beat our swords into plowshares? Perhaps by allocating less of our resources to weapons and more to providing food, clean water, shelter, and health care to all—not just the wealthy and privileged.

May we be among those who learn the ways of the Lord and walk in his paths, so that we actively work for peace throughout God’s creation. We must learn to make peace in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, and in our own country. Only then can we hope to bring peace to a hurting world.

Come quickly into our hearts, Lord Jesus.

READ:

*Micah
4:1-5*

*Revelation
15:1-8*

*“. . . nation
shall not lift
up sword
against nation,
neither shall
they learn war
any more . . .”*

Micah 4:3b

PRAYER:

*Savior of the
nations, come.
Amen.*

READ:

*Micah
4:6-13*

*Revelation
18:1-10*

*... and the
lame I will
make the
remnant; and
those who
were cast off,
a strong
nation . . .
Micah 4:7a*

PRAYER:

*Great Quilter,
help us to take
our place in your
design.
Amen.*

Remnant

I was struck, on first reading the Micah passage, by the word *remnant*. Because, as a sewist, a remnant is the last bit of fabric on a bolt, not big enough for most projects, bundled up to be sold at a discount, found in the remnant bin at the fabric store. It's an orphan. But it sounds like it's supposed to be a good thing in this context?

That brought me to remember a verse from Psalm 118 (also quoted by Jesus, Paul, and Peter): "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner" (v.22). God doesn't do what people do or what people expect God to do. So God will make a great nation out of the lame, the cast-off, and the exiles in Babylon.

This makes me think of quilts. The current trend of buying all new, coordinated fabrics notwithstanding, quilts have traditionally been made with scraps left over from other projects and the good parts of clothes that are irreparably torn or worn. The quilter will cut and arrange pieces into a pleasing pattern, then layer the "top" with batting or an old blanket and use a sheet for the "back." The real work, in my opinion, is stitching or tying the layers together so that the quilt is stable and uniformly warm.

And this makes me think of the Beloved Community. Here we are, scraps, being pieced together by the Holy Spirit. Some of us coordinate, some of us contrast, some of us are new fabric, some are worn around the edges. We are layered with the love of God, and together we can help keep each other and the world around us warm.

Wednesday, December 6

Connie Criswell

Feeding the Hungry

Today, December 6, is the feast day of St. Nicholas in many Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, commemorating the 4th century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, now part of Turkey, who died on this date in 346 CE. Many Russian Orthodox churches are named for St. Nicholas, including the ones in New York and California where I was a member more than 50 years ago. He is revered for his holiness and generosity and is known in some circles as St. Nicholas the Wonderworker because of the many legends describing miracles he was said to have performed. Among these was averting starvation in Myra during the famine of 311–312. When a ship loaded with wheat for the emperor in Constantinople was in the port, Nicholas persuaded the sailors to unload part of the wheat for his city, promising them that they would not suffer any loss. Indeed, when they arrived later in the capital, the weight of their load had not changed, and Nicholas was credited with feeding his flock in this time of dire need.

Other legends depict him saving innocent men from execution and also keeping the daughters of a poor man from becoming prostitutes by secretly tossing bags of gold through their window at night. It is from these stories of his penchant for secret gift-giving that the historical model for Santa Claus arose.

Every December we at Redeemer are treated to an appearance of our own St. Nicholas, Larry Trover, who educates us about the historical Bishop Nicholas. Our St. Nick provides small bags with coins in them for us to take to give to people in need, adding more if we can. This is a beautiful, effective way to teach children to be generous. It is one more way that the Redeemer congregation feeds God's children, along with the monthly food giveaways in the parking lot, the garden produce giveaways on Saturday mornings, helping with the LSS food pantry and the dinners at First English, as well as the CROP Walk. The legacy of St. Nicholas is alive and well here!

READ:

*Micah
5:1-5a*

*Luke
21:34-38*

*And he shall
stand and feed
his flock in the
strength of the
Lord*

Micah 5:4a

PRAYER:

*O God, let us
follow the example
of St. Nicholas in
being generous to
others. Uplift and
bless those who
share what they
have, whether
food, clothing,
finances, or a
listening ear when
it is most needed.
Amen.*

READ:

Hosea
6:1-6

1 Thessalonians
1:2-10

We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. As we pray to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . So you received the message with joy . . . in spite of the severe suffering it brought you.

1 Thessalonians 1:
2-3, 6a

(New Living Translation)

PRAYER:

Dear Father in heaven, help us to be grateful for your love, and your grace, and your promise of Jesus' return. Teach us to do faithful work and loving deeds. Provide us with enduring hope so that we may spread your word and welcome new believers. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Gratitude and Faith

These verses in Thessalonians resonate deeply with the essence of gratitude and faith, offering a profound guide for meeting life's challenges with resilience and hope. Paul's words speak to a spirit of gratitude that extends beyond mere politeness. Such a spirit reflects a genuine appreciation for the people in our lives, recognizing the blessings they bring. Gratitude then becomes a catalyst for deepening our faith, as we reflect on the goodness around us and recognize it as a manifestation of God's grace. In doing so, we fortify our spiritual foundation, finding strength in the awareness that we are not alone in our journey.

This passage also highlights the Thessalonians' perseverance in the face of tribulations, a testament to the transformative power of gratitude and faith. Their enduring commitment to their beliefs, even amid challenges, inspires us to remain steadfast in our own faith journey. Gratitude becomes a shield, transforming our perspective and protecting us from despair while fostering a strong spirit that can weather life's storms.

As I contemplate these verses personally, I am compelled to adopt a similar approach to gratitude in my daily life. Recognizing my blessings, both big and small, even in the midst of trials, allows me to cultivate a resilient faith that can transcend circumstances. In moments of uncertainty, I can turn to gratitude as a source of strength, remembering that, like the Thessalonians, I am part of a larger narrative guided by a divine plan.

Through a real appreciation for the blessings in our lives, we can strengthen our faith and navigate the complexities of life with resilience and hope.

Friday, December 8

Connie Criswell

Words Can Save Lives

In March 1918 Russia formally withdrew from World War I as the Tsar's forces could not contend with both the Bolshevik revolution and the horrific losses sustained in the war with the German military. Russian soldiers were demobilized and told to make their way home as best they could. Nina Skripnitskaya was a young nurse who had cared for wounded soldiers in Odessa during the war, and she was determined to return home to Ekaterinburg, in the Ural Mountains. She boarded a train for the long trip home while still clad in her nurse's uniform, which resembled an old-fashioned nun's habit with ankle-length skirt and a big red cross emblazoned on it.

It was still winter, and deep snow lay on the ground. Suddenly, the train jerked to a halt as it was surrounded by a group of Bolsheviks. One of them went through the train, interrogating the passengers as to their loyalties. If anyone admitted to being pro-Tsarist, they were thrown out into the snow to freeze to death. When the Bolshevik encountered the sweet-looking little nurse, she stood up and let him have both barrels of the foulest language imaginable! The Bolshevik reeled back in shock and left the train without throwing anyone else off. As the train started up again, the woman in the seat next to Nina tapped her on the shoulder and said, "My dear, God gave you those words!" This may not have been what Jeremiah had in mind, but Nina saved many lives that day.

I met Nina and some of her compatriots in a small Russian Orthodox community in Saratoga, California, in 1968. She still had a colorful vocabulary! But I will never forget her or her courage in standing up to a bully.

READ:

*Jeremiah
1:4-10*

*Acts
11:19-26*

*Then the Lord
put out his
hand and
touched my
mouth; and the
Lord said to
me, "Now I
have put my
words in your
mouth."
Jeremiah 1:9*

PRAYER:

*Dear God, we
know you work in
mysterious ways.
Give us the
strength and
creativity to fight
injustice wherever
we encounter it.
Amen.*

Saturday, December 9

Joss Dana

READ:

Ezekiel
36:24-28

Mark
11:27-33

*For I will
gather you up
from all the
nations and
bring you home
again to your
land.*

Ezekiel 36:24
*(New Living
Translation)*

PRAYER:

*Thank you, Lord,
for showing us the
way even when
it's not clear.
Thank you for
giving us a home
and safety in you
and all that you
do. Please give
clarity and peace
to whoever may
need it.
Amen.*

God Shows Us Home

Home. Many of us spend a lot of time figuring out what home looks like. Maybe it's a place you feel safe. Maybe it's the people you surround yourself with. Maybe it's a state of being for you. In my case, home is all three of those things.

When I was 18, I packed up most of my belongings and moved into a small college dorm in Cincinnati, where I attended the university. To me, this was supposed to be a fresh start, a chance to reinvent myself and figure out who I wanted to be as an adult. And in many ways, it was, but not in the ways I had wanted it to be. I was far away from my family and friends, miles and miles from what I knew before. I had a toxic living situation with roommates who, to put it plainly, were not respectful of my personhood or my boundaries.

What's more, in my program at the time, I stuck out like a sore thumb. I constantly felt like I was being judged and looked down on for things I couldn't control. I didn't feel like I had anyone who understood me or could be there for me. I felt lost, misguided, confused, scared. I talked to God every day about my situation, constantly trying to make the most of it. One day, I realized what God had been trying to tell me all along: Cincinnati was not where I was meant to be.

I changed schools. I moved back in with my parents. I changed majors. Many would look at my situation and think I moved backwards, but I know that to be false. I'm happier than I've ever been. I'm at peace with myself. I've found home.



Sunday, December 10

Brad Binau

Home for Christmas

The crooner Crosby touched the hearts
of soldiers stuck in foreign parts;
in '43 he topped the charts:
"For Christmas, I'll be home," he sighed.

The ancient captured prophet cried
that going home was now implied
in words of comfort meant to guide
exiles to their once and future home.

Crying out (almost with foam),
sustained by bugs and honeycomb,
the Baptist also dreamt of home.
"The Lamb of God's the One! Not me!"

Home's not about geography.
It's more about psychology,
but not without theology.
It's where, if but in dreams, we find our peace.

Home means coming back to God,
however far we've gone abroad,
however much our lives be flawed.
Good news: God made the trip to be at home with us.



READ:

*Isaiah
40:1-11*

*Mark
1:1-8*

*"...Prepare the
way of the
Lord..."
Isaiah 40:3 and
Mark 1:3*

PRAYER:

*God of peace, fill up
our shallow spots,
bring down our
inflated egos,
smooth our rough
edges, and
convince us that we
are always home
because you are
Emmanuel—God
with us.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
26:7-15

Acts
2:37-42

*My soul yearns
for you in the
night, my spirit
within me
earnestly seeks
you. . . . O Lord,
you will ordain
peace for us . . .
other lords
besides you have
ruled over us, but
we acknowledge
your name alone.*
Isaiah 26:9a, 12a, 13b

PRAYER:

*Comforter, open our
restless souls to yearn
for you and earnestly
seek you when our
human minds and
hearts are troubled.*
Amen.

A Call in the Night

More than one religious tradition points to the middle of the night, around 3:00 a.m., as a time of spiritual significance, increased activity, a thinning of the veil between earth and unseen entities. Some of us may find this idea troubling, particularly the thought of finding ourselves awakened with possibly disturbing, bothersome thoughts running through our minds. In this sleepless state it's easier to replay arguments of the day, dwell on unsolved problems, blame ourselves, or obsess over anxieties. Confusion and unrest, perfectionism and doubts, such "other lords" may try to "[rule] over us."

A chaplain I listen to once shared that she believes this is indeed a spiritually opportunistic time of the night, but she has used it to intentionally seek out guidance and loving direction for her soul. It isn't that the demons of self-doubt don't disturb her, but she uses sleeplessness repeatedly to call out to a God she trusts to bring her comfort, to "ordain peace" in the midst of her anxieties.

I'm not sure that I believe in spiritual warfare in a literal sense. But even if I did, the idea of encouraging my sleep-deprived soul to yearn for God in the night and earnestly seek God's benevolent rule over my own depressing, anxious thoughts gives me real hope. Finding ourselves suddenly awake in the darkness has the potential to become an opportunity to draw God to us by name, to invite God to rule the chaos, to pray for our peace of mind . . . or at least for the willingness to give up trying to rule the world and run everything by ourselves.

Tuesday, December 12

Michelle Clemence

Expanding

I love the stories in the Bible about people's minds being expanded, their worldviews having to shift. It's especially fun when the people think they are being good or righteous. I'm thinking of Jesus' disciples rebuking parents who brought their children to Jesus for a blessing in Matthew 19:13-14 and Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30, in addition to Peter in Joppa and Caesarea (which happened in Acts 10 and is partially retold in today's reading from Acts 11).

I don't necessarily love having my own worldviews shifted! As children, our worlds are constantly being expanded from home to neighborhood, to church, to daycare, to school, to games, to media, to work, etc. By the time we are adults, we like to think we have a handle on how the world works, and we tend to think it works the same for everybody. That's the part I have had to relearn over and over as an adult: the world does not work the same for everybody. Not in this city, not in this country, not in other countries.

What I take for granted about food, shelter, clothing, transportation, health care, government, education, even leisure activities, may not be what others have or even want. This goes double for religion. God makes the world vary from place to place and makes each person unique. And God loves each one. How each person loves God back (or not) is not mine to police. I am on the loosening end of ". . . whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

Love and grace comprise the rules of engagement.

READ:

*Isaiah
4:2-6*

*Acts
11:1-8*

*"What God has
cleansed you
must not call
common."*

Acts 11:9b

PRAYER:

*Gracious God,
help me to be
loving and
compassionate
with all your
children.
Amen.*

READ:

Malachi
2:10-3:1

Luke
1:5-17

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."

Luke 1:13

PRAYER:

*Mother/Father of all creation, thank you for your world as we await the arrival of another Christmas and the continuing unfolding of our story.
Amen.*

Mixed Messages

The author of Malachi precedes verse 3:1 with the Lord chastising his priests for not properly honoring him, rejecting their "polluted" animal sacrifices. The verses that follow are not comforting: "But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire. . . . And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering of righteousness," as sung in Handel's oratorio *Messiah*.

In Luke, Zechariah is struck dumb by the angel because of Zechariah's confusion in not reacting enthusiastically to the news.

Science tells us, or at least me, that the universe has been created violently over the past 13.77 billion years since the "big bang," and life has evolved—at best, chaotically—on Earth over the past 3.5 billion years. The authors of Genesis say, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

We live in a complex creation: the night skies appear tranquil and nature pastoral amidst continuing change and competition for survival. The good news is that God cares, and God is with us, no matter how messy the world is or our lives are.

We walk in beauty. The story continues.

Thursday, December 14

Becky Trover

*These Boots Were Made for Walking
- Not Pulling!*

How we like to consider ourselves self-sufficient! The ideal of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps is pervasive. Few realize that this phrase began as a sarcastic image of someone trying to do something impossible, leading only to a fall—think about what would happen if you tried to make your way up a hill by yanking on the back of your boots. Good luck!

Nonetheless, we tend to cling to the idea of earning our way all on our own. Jesus encountered many folks who were confident in their righteousness based on their adherence to the law and the prophets. Some, like St. Paul, were able to reconsider everything else rubbish compared to the life of faith. Others, like the rich young man, sadly turned away from Jesus rather than give up self-control.

I know there have been times in my life when I was too afraid of the path the Spirit was calling me to take. I've cried out, "I don't want to lose myself! Please show me another way." With infinite wisdom and grace, God meets me where I am and patiently provides baby steps of growth. Gradually, oh so very gradually, I am able to let go of some of the rubbish in my life so that my hands are free to accept the treasure offered by faith in Christ and my feet are free to follow. I pray for the day when I learn to let go of those bootstraps completely!



READ:

*Habakkuk
2:1-5*

*Philippians
3:7-11*

*“ . . . not
having a
righteousness
of my own
that comes
from the law,
but one that
comes through
faith in
Christ . . . ”
Philippians 3:9b*

PRAYER:

*Thank you, Jesus,
for the
righteousness
that comes from
you alone.
Amen.*

Friday, December 15

Connie Criswell

READ:

*Habakkuk
3:2-6*

*Philippians
3:12-16*

*He stopped and
shook the earth;
he looked and
made the
nations
tremble. The
eternal
mountains
were shattered;
along his
ancient
pathways the
everlasting
hills sank low.
Habakkuk 3:6*

PRAYER:

*O Lord, open our
hearts to those
who are differently
abled, and instill
patience in us
when we are all
together
Amen.*

Breaking Down Barriers

There are many examples of the enormously destructive power of earthquakes throughout history. However, this reference can also be a metaphor for breaking down the barriers that divide people from each other, such as those often faced by people with disabilities, who can be perceived as less than fully human.

In the early part of the 20th century, my grandmother, Alice Burnham Fellows, founded a residential school for very young blind children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Blind children were often kept hidden then, regarded as shamefully defective by their families, and were not allowed in public schools until age 8. Grandma's school accepted children under the age of 8 and taught them many things: to dress and feed themselves, to use table manners, to read Braille books, and to sharpen their other senses, such as hearing, to make up for their lack of vision.

An article in the New York Times about the NEA Convention in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in July 1905 described a demonstration by Miss Alice Burnham Fellows and four little blind girls before the Department of Special Education one morning. The children, aged 7 and 8, accurately read from Braille books, sang songs, and were able to identify objects by their sound alone—e.g., knives, books, or pencils dropped onto a wooden table. The demonstration of “how to see by hearing” impressed the audience more than anything else; the girls were able to identify whether a dropped book was in Braille or ordinary print, since the difference in weight caused a variation in sound. Grandma was ahead of her time in breaking down barriers in the education of blind children.

As a society, we've come a long way in the perception and treatment of differently abled individuals. For example, some busy crosswalks have beep tones to let blind pedestrians know when it is safe to cross the street, and at nearly every worship service Redeemer has an ASL interpreter for those who are hearing impaired. We are all God's beloved children, worthy of respect.

Saturday, December 16

Emily Kent

Is the Order Important?

Why are we concerned with the order in which people get into “the kingdom”? Note that Jesus doesn’t say that the other people **WON’T** get into the kingdom of God. He just says that these other, perhaps undesirable, people will get in ahead of them.

So what’s the big deal?

This isn’t a dig against the tax collectors and prostitutes, but rather at the people Jesus is talking to, who obviously consider those other people beneath them. It’s a very us-vs-them moment, and the “thems” get the good stuff first.

In the reality of God’s kingdom, there aren’t any thems. Everyone is “us.” But humans don’t like that. We like labels and caste systems and feeling superior to others.

Be honest—who do you look down on? Who do you think less of, even if just for a moment, before you might correct yourself? The pan handler you’ve seen on the same corner for weeks at a time? The drug addict that is on their fifth OD call with the medics? A neighbor who votes the opposite way from you? What if you thought that person got Jesus’ favor before you, how would you feel? I’m going to guess it would not feel good.

I think that is Jesus’ point here. He wants to take these holier-than-thou people down a peg. None of us can do anything to earn the grace and love of God. But we all deserve to feel it and to know it—no matter who we are or what our station in life is.

READ:

*Habakkuk
3:13-19*

*Matthew
21:28-32*

*“Truly I tell
you, the tax
collectors and
the prostitutes
are entering
the kingdom
of God ahead
of you.”*

Matthew 21:31b

(New

*International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Gracious God,
thank you for the
gift of your love,
which is big
enough for all
people.
Amen.*



READ:

Isaiah
61:1-4

John
1:6-8, 19-28

*... because the Lord
has anointed me to
proclaim good news to
the poor ... to bind up
the brokenhearted, to
proclaim freedom for
the captives and
release from darkness
for the prisoners ... to
comfort all who
mourn ...*

Isaiah 61:1-2

*(New International
Version)*

*"I am the voice of one
calling in the desert,
'Make straight the
way for the Lord.'"*

John 1:23

*(New International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*Abundant God, it is easy to
let other things get in the
way of focusing on you.*

*During this season of
Advent, let us better
prepare our hearts and
lives for Emmanuel and
inspire us to respond to
your call of action.*

Amen.

Removing Obstacles

In my life, I have traveled many kinds of roads. I grew up in rural Knox County, where there are lots of winding and curvy roads, roads that take you up steep hills and down into valleys, and roads shared with frequent slow-moving vehicles like tractors and Amish buggies. I grew up on a dirt road with rocks, dust, and mud. For years I commuted to Columbus with traffic tie-ups, potholes, and unexpected accidents and road closures. Daily obstacles. It's easy to get distracted and lose your focus.

I wonder if this is part of John's message in the passage for today. "Make straight the way for the Lord." What does it mean to "make straight the way"? I think it is more than the obvious making straight something that is crooked. Perhaps it is a broader definition, like removing any obstacles in the path. And why would John be calling out this message?

John takes his ministry seriously, calling people to repent in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. In my mind, he is calling people to remove the distractions/obstacles from their lives that keep them from focusing on God's call to action. The companion passage from Isaiah outlines that call to action: "to proclaim good news to the poor ... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners ... to comfort those who mourn." These are vital actions needed so God's peace and justice will prevail in this world. Staying focused is necessary.

I find I am often distracted by the obstacles in my "way." Sometimes those obstacles are my attitudes or biases or my to-do list or busyness or other priorities. What tends to get in the way of your preparation for the coming Messiah? How can you minimize those distractions?

Monday, December 18

April Smith

Are You Ready for Battle?

Have you ever wished for a suit of armor to protect you from the struggles and temptations of life? As I flipped through my copy of the Contemporary English Version of the bible, searching for some writing inspiration, I looked at the User's Guide in the front and found the Ephesians 6 passage listed in the Finding-Help-in-Special-Situations section, specifically "Entering the Military." I laughed to myself, thinking that seems a bit too literal an interpretation and perhaps I should stick with The Message translation: "God's word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare" (6:17b-18a).

I thought back to my basic training days in the Army and tried to remember what kind of armor we were issued. The only thing I could recall was the heavy helmet, the M-1 steel pot, which was in service from 1942 until the mid-1980s. I guess that means it was an effective piece of armor if it lasted that long. The belt we had was called a pistol belt since that is where an officer attached a pistol, or an enlisted soldier a first-aid pouch and other small accessories—no real protection but handy to have. The other military meaning of the word armor refers to Army vehicles like the Abrams, Sherman, and Chaffee tanks!

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he wasn't speaking about literal armor to protect from human conflict but rather about God's power to protect from any evil thoughts or actions that would cause the early Christians to turn away from God.

In the military, soldiers take an oath to support, defend, and obey. That sounds very much like what Christians do when affirming their faith in the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we speak truth, walk with integrity, seek peace, work for justice, live by faith, and preach salvation through Jesus Christ, we are wearing the armor of God.

READ:

*1 Kings
18:1-18*

*Ephesians
6:10-17*

*Be ready! Let
the truth be
like a belt
around your
waist, and let
God's justice
protect you
like armor.*

***Ephesians 6:14**
(Contemporary
English Version)*

PRAYER:

*Protecting God,
keep us from
turning away
from you by
shielding us
from evil and
strengthening
our faith with
the desire to
always seek
peace.
Amen.*

READ:

I Grant You Refuge

*2 Kings
2:9-22*

I grant you refuge / in invocation and prayer.
I bless the neighborhood and the minaret
to guard them / from the rocket

*Acts
3:17-4:4*

from the moment / it is a general's command
until it becomes / a raid.

“...
saying to
Abraham,
'And in
your
posterity
shall all
the
families of
the earth
be
blessed.'”

I grant you and the little ones refuge
the little ones who / change the rocket's course
before it lands / with their smiles.

I grant you and the little ones refuge,
the little ones now asleep like chicks / in a nest.
They don't walk in their sleep toward dreams.
They know death lurks / outside the house.

Their mothers' tears are now doves
following them, trailing / behind every coffin.

I grant the father refuge, / the little ones' father who
holds the house upright / when it tilts after the bombs.

He implores the moment of death:
“Have mercy. Spare me a little while.
For their sake, I've learned to love my life.
Grant them a death as beautiful as they are.”

Acts 3:25b

I grant you refuge / from hurt and death,
refuge in the glory of our siege, / here in the belly of the whale.

PRAYER:

*Prince of
Peace, may
justice roll
down like
waters and
peace like
an ever-
flowing
stream.
Amen.*

Our streets exalt God with every bomb.
They pray for the mosques and the houses.
And every time the bombing begins in the North,
our supplications rise in the South.

I grant you refuge / from hurt and suffering.
With words of sacred scripture
I shield the orange from the sting of phosphorous
and the shades of cloud from the smog.
I grant you refuge in knowing
that the dust will clear,
and they who fell in love and died / together
will one day laugh.

By Hiba Abu Nada, Palestinian novelist, poet, and educator, killed in her home in Gaza,
20 October 2023, 10 days after she wrote this poem. Translation by Huda Fakhreddine,
Associate Professor of Arabic literature at the University of Pennsylvania.

I offer this poem as a meditation as I struggle to reconcile the Bible verse and
reality. By the grace of God, may we have a cease fire by the time you read this.

Wednesday, December 20

Kelley Frank

Remember

I have to admit I struggled with this passage a bit . . . well, actually, a lot. Before preparing this devotion, I hadn't thought much about the book of Malachi. The contents are filled with warnings and judgment and fire, not with the loving God I prefer. Earlier in Chapter 3 is the passage with which I am most familiar, thanks to Handel's Messiah: "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire . . ." (3:2). Yikes.

In reflecting a little more, though, I wonder if the writer's intense language is a way to get people's attention, to remind them not to trivialize, forget about, or be cynical about God. Maybe the writer is saying emphatically, even shouting, "PEOPLE, THIS IS IMPORTANT! Remember that God loves you and has always been with you, so quit complaining and get out of your comfort zone!! Renew your relationship with God, and make God's laws a priority again!!"

I am reminded of the scene in the Disney movie *The Lion King*, in which the young adult Simba has an encounter with the soul of his dead father, Mufasa. Simba has become comfortable in his new life (think *Hakuna Matata*, "It means no worries for the rest of your days"), but has been reminded by the wise shaman Rafiki that Simba has a call to restore the land to healing and wholeness. The message from Mufasa's spirit is similar to Malachi's message, I think—remember who and whose you are and act accordingly.

Malachi's message gets through to some: "those who feared the Lord and honored his name." And God responds: "And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

It is easy to get distracted and comfortable in our lives, isn't it? In what ways do you remember you are a beloved child of God and put God first in your life?

READ:

Malachi
3:16-4:6

Mark
9:9-13

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

Malachi 3:16, 4:2
(*New International Version*)

PRAYER:

God of all the ages, when we get preoccupied with daily life, nudge us to remember who and whose we are.
Amen.

Thursday, December 21

Nancy Magargal

READ:

2 Samuel
6:1-11

Hebrews
1:1-4

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made the purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high . . .
Hebrews 1:3

PRAYER:

His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor! the Almighty God! the Everlasting Father! the Prince of Peace!
Amen.

Make a joyful noise, dear friends!

He Sits at the Right Hand of the Majesty on High

We celebrate the birth of our Savior by remembering him as the babe in the manger. Angels sang, shepherds saw the star and worshiped, and wise men traveled from distant lands and brought gifts. Christmas is a time of great joy and wonder. A tiny baby saves us all!

That might seem a little hard to believe, but we have been surrounded through the ages by Christians whose faith, talents, and joy have moved them to express the importance of that baby's birth and the adult Jesus' profound majesty in fully appropriate ways. George Frederic Handel comes the closest to showing us how truly magnificent the life of the Son of God was. Most of us humans are painfully lacking in our spiritual understanding of the true value of God's gift to us. Music, however, can express some of the profound value of God's gift of his Son to a sinful world.

I am grateful to Handel, and all musicians, for lifting our souls into greater understanding of God's love for us through the gift of his only Son. At Christmas time I take every opportunity to listen to all kinds of music—from beloved carols to the thrillingly complex Messiah. I am able to worship God and celebrate Christ's birth through all my senses. So serve up the rum cake and sing out loud!



Friday, December 22

Connie Criswell

*Judgment and Restoration Oracles from an
African-Jewish Prophet*

Zephaniah, one of the 12 minor prophets, speaks of justice and hope in the late 7th century BCE. He emphasizes the coming day of the Lord, when God will judge Israel and other nations with purifying fire in a sacrificial holocaust. Then, the Lord promises salvation for the remnant of Judah and the return of those faithful who were scattered far and wide, such as from beyond the rivers of Cush.

Where is Cush? Also called Nubia in ancient writings, Cush is in the upper Nile region, south of Egypt in modern Sudan and Ethiopia. The Greek word for Cush is Ethiopia. The full name of this author, Zephaniah ben Cushi, implies that he was of mixed-race heritage. Chapter 1 states that his great-great-grandfather was Hezekiah, most likely the last righteous king of Judah before the current king, so Zephaniah had royal Jewish ancestry. However, in Hebrew, Cushi means "African," indicating that his father was of Cushite heritage.

Thus, God used this mixed-race prophet to proclaim God's divine word and warnings to the people of Judah. This assessment of Zephaniah's identity helps to correct the misinformed and often politically motivated views of African inferiority. Such views fed into the pseudoscientific racial theories of the 19th century and the later Nazi era, supposedly proving the inherent inferiority of Blacks. Unfortunately, these views are still with us. But the passage for today (Zephaniah 3:9-13) is a clear contradiction of such racist and nationalistic ideologies.

READ:

*Zephaniah
3:8-13*

*Romans
10:5-13*

*From beyond
the rivers of
Cush my
worshippers,
my scattered
people, will
bring me
offerings.*

***Zephaniah 3:10**
(New
International
Version)*

PRAYER:

*O Lord, we thank
you for the words
of wisdom from
so long ago that
still ring true
today. Turn our
minds and hearts
toward love for all
your people
everywhere.
Amen.*

READ:

*Zephaniah
3:14-20*

*Romans
13:11-14*

*... let us
conduct
ourselves
becomingly as
in the day,
not in
reveling and
drunkenness,
not in
debauchery
and
licentiousness*

*...
Romans 13:13*

PRAYER:

*Fun-loving God,
please be with
us, and keep us
safe as we
celebrate this
holiday season.
Amen.*

Well, That's No Fun

Here we are in "the most wonderful time of the year," a time rife with revelry, and this passage is a total kill-joy.

I am willing to admit here, publicly and published for all eternity, that I have engaged many a time in reveling—that is, "to enjoy oneself in a lively and noisy way, especially with drinking and dancing." I'm going to guess that many readers have indulged in similar shenanigans. It's difficult to imagine a wedding reception, a family reunion, or, dare I say, a holiday party without such activity.

How do we know if the party we went to was just a party or was something this passage is warning against? Don't worry, there's no need to run to Pastor Dave for confession to figure it out!

Listen—humans gonna human! And one person's "debauchery" may be another person's "fun." One person's "licentiousness" might just be Emily's normal Tuesday. Making "no provision for the flesh" is how you end up with purity culture and parents not wanting their children to have comprehensive sexual education. This is how churches try to control the behavior of people. For Music Man fans, this is how you get "trouble in River City"—people clutching their pearls over a pool table because they think it's going to send their children down a dark and dangerous path.

To Paul's dismay perhaps, I'm here to tell you moderate "provisions for the flesh" can be enhancements to life. What we should guard against is taking it to extremes. Like many things, it's not all or nothing. It's not clear-cut black and white.

Debauchery and licentiousness are subjective, based on morality. Even people that go to the same church may not share the same view of morality. It's not the church's job to police anyone's good time. It's our job to unconditionally love people. Do not let passages like this scare you into thinking there is something wrong with enjoying yourself. Even Jesus kept the party going that one time. My only ask is that you enjoy yourself safely, responsibly, and in moderation.

Sunday, December 24

Heidi Sherer

Peace for All

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, prophesies on the same theme in the verses immediately prior to Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. Much as Isaiah spoke of "the people who walked in darkness" who "have seen a great light," Zechariah names a "dawn from on high [that] will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78-79).

Then begins the tale of Joseph and Mary's journey from Nazareth, their arrival to harsh outdoor accommodations in which to deliver their baby, and the shepherds, also in darkness, being confronted by the light of an angelic announcement. It's difficult to imagine feeling peaceful in these exhausting or startling situations. And yet, the prophet Isaiah's "Prince of Peace" is the one about whom these angels speak, the infant whose destiny is to bring peace and "good will among people."

Before Isaiah proclaims the child born for us, he describes images of war. Jesus did not come into a peaceful world. Neither does he today. It is still hard to see good will among people. Light seems hidden from us when we sit, or walk, in the shadow of death's darkness. We fight today as so many others have done for centuries. It is familiar. Trusting in a possible peace between people can feel threatening, particularly letting go of "our side" and trusting in something new.

In a baby's delivery, transitioning from darkness to light is harrowing. It is painful for both mother and child. Darkness can be comforting in its familiarity. Breaking into the light can feel uncomfortable, like a death of the old and comfortable. Yet once child and parents meet face-to-face, nothing is the same. A new life together has begun.

READ:

*Isaiah
9:2-7*

*Luke
2:1-20*

*The people who
walked in
darkness have
seen a great
light. . . For a child
has been born for
us. . . Wonderful
Counselor. . . Prince
of Peace. . . and
there shall be
endless peace . . .
Isaiah 9:2a, 6, 7*

*" . . . and on earth
peace, good will
among people!"
Luke 2:14b*

PRAYER:

*Prince of Peace, be
with us in our birth
pains. In the darkest
hour, be our light.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
62:6-12

Luke
2:8-20

The angel said to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Luke 2:10

PRAYER:

"This is my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for lands afar and mine. This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine; but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine."

Amen.

["This Is My Song" by Lloyd Stone]

What Kind of News?

I'm writing this Christmas Day devotion on All Saints Day. The morning news brings word that the Israeli Defense Force is preparing the second phase of Israel's military response to the massacres carried out by Hamas fighters on October 7. The IDF is deepening its ground assault into the Gaza strip. This is good news for some. But unlike the song the angels sang to shepherds on a hillside just 45 miles from Gaza, such news certainly is not good news "for all the people."

Hearing the angels' song from Luke again this year, I wonder what kind of news would be welcomed by all people everywhere with "great joy." The gospel writer Luke believes the announcement of Jesus' birth should be the kind of news all people welcome with joy. And perhaps it could have been. But we humans have a really hard time giving people the freedom to believe what they want. So it didn't take long for Jesus' followers to join forces with the Roman Empire and start killing people who didn't believe what they believed. "Love your enemy" doesn't work for an empire. Good news for some becomes genocide for others.

Most of the time life seems like a zero-sum game. I betray my age when I say it often seems like life is either "the thrill of victory" or "the agony of defeat." What kind of news is news all people would receive with great joy? What kind of game ends with everyone a winner? Maybe news like: "Researchers Discover a Cure for Cancer," or "Teen Suicides Decline Sharply," or "Species Extinctions Hit All-Time Low," or "Global Kindness Epidemic Stuns Pundits," or . . . , or . . .

This Christmas morning, the angel song sounds again: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." What do you think such news might be? What kind of game ends with everyone a winner?

*A Blessed Christmas to
you and yours.*



*May the Prince of Peace
enter into our hearts and
into all the earth.*

Holden Evening Prayer

7:00 pm Wednesdays

Dessert at 6:15 pm

December 6, 13, 20



Christmas Eve Worship

10:00 am

7:00 pm

Sunday, December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am

Monday, December 25



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