

*Advent
Devotional
2020*





Advent Greetings,

We live in a world of instant messaging; in a world where we try to fit three days worth of activities into one single day. When the Advent season comes along (which really looks more like Christmas...and starts right after Halloween...) instead of slowing down we tend to speed up. We fill our lives with more “noise” and walk farther and farther away from that listening place where we might hear the still small voice of God.

One of the more challenging things to do in youth ministry is to have young people sit quietly. But, once they do, they begin to hunger for reflective silence; to have a place where they can meet God. You and I are no different. It's not that God isn't here – *God is!* But we are often too busy to notice or recognize God's presence.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of listening to the insights and reflections of the young and mature alike. I repeatedly wished that others could hear what people have to say about God, their communities and the world. This devotional is a way for our stories to be told.

And so here we are – people of all ages – sharing our darkness and our light; our fears and our hope—sharing ourselves. And in the process, finding commonality centered on the one who sent his only son into the world out of his amazing love for us.

May this simple devotional enrich your Advent journey. May you find time in this busy season to sit quietly with God and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Thank you to all who contributed to this devotional.
Your insights and wisdom are a blessing.

Pastor Jeremy Fuerst
Pastor Shannyn Fuerst
Vicar Pam Karas
Misi French
Wendelin Dunlap
Barb Sharkey
Julie Pierce
Karla Petersen
Cynthia Beck
Diane Machatka
Natalie Jones Baitcher
Helen H.

Julaine Hall
Nan Beth Walton
Barb and Rick Friedhoff
Ashlyn Bryson-Beane
Estelle Morley
Rebecca Keith
Adam S.
Linnea G.
Cameron W.
Brynn H.
Karen Fox

First Sunday of Advent

Sunday, November 29

Misi French; Office Manager at Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 80:3-4

"Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved. O Lord God of hosts, how long will your anger fume when your people pray?"



A plea for restoration. It is a personal plea. It is the prayer of our nation. It is the hope of people across the world. We can relate all too well to the psalmist here. What does restoration look like? Certainly, we don't want to go backward as a society. I believe it is the restoration of our hearts which moves us to care for each other.

The second verse is where it gets interesting to me. We don't often talk about God's anger. I think it's because it makes us uncomfortable and it seems to contradict our image of a loving and compassionate God. I grew up a bit afraid and confused by talk of God's anger, but as I matured and continued to study, I came to see the Old Testament God as a mama bear...protecting and defending her young.

This perspective came from one of my Old Testament professors while I was working on my degree in biblical studies. Professor Gravrock did an intensive study on every passage in both the old and new testament's which spoke of God's judgment and wrath. The largest percentage of God's anger by far was directed toward those who hurt or oppress the marginalized. That was pivotal for me. He concluded that God's judgment was Good News (unless of course you were the abuser) and that God's anger championed the weak and vulnerable.

So, is there a place for anger in the life of a Christian? We profess love and grace, but we are also called to strive for peace and justice...for restoration. Parker Palmer is a Quaker and a well-known author. In his book, *On the Brink of Everything*, he writes, "Anger harnessed as energy that animates social action on behalf of new life for all is redemptive."

God's anger is clearly directed at those who abuse and oppress others, but might that same anger be partially directed at those who stand by and let it happen? I believe that we are active participants in restoration. We are called to do more than hope and pray, we are called to be a mama bear. I have been praying for healing and restoration for several years and never more intently than this past year and I've added this to my prayers, "We are trying Lord. Millions of people around the world are trying. Please hear our prayer and give us a sign of hope."

In Advent we anticipate God's response. At Christmas we get our answer - the promise of restoration. And throughout the year, we give our response. What will your response be?

Prayer: Lord keep us strong. Remind us to look to you for hope and guidance and then to channel our anger and frustration on behalf of justice and peace for all. Amen.

Monday, November 30

Wendelin Dunlap; Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 80:5-7

"You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have given them bowls of tears to drink. You have made us the derision of our neighbors, and our enemies laugh us to scorn. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved."



When I read this, I remember a situation where I felt totally abandon and prayed to be saved. I was in Canada alone for a day trip up to UBC. The air was brutally hot with thunderstorms predicted later in the evening. I was somewhere along route 99 and on my way home. When I pushed the gas pedal, nothing happened, and my car began to slow down. Luckily, I was in the right lane and could coast onto the shoulder with my car's last breath.

Smoke started billowing from the engine as I realized that my cell phone plan didn't include Canada. Tears welled up as I prayed for help. As the first tear rolled down my cheek, I black BMW SUV pulled over in front of me. For a fleeting moment, I thought, surely that beautiful car couldn't have broken down too. A man jumped out and began running toward my car with water bottles and told me to pop the hood and get out. He quelled the smoke and then invited me into his air-conditioned car while he used his cell phone to call my roadside service. The incidence response truck arrived, but the man in the SUV stayed. I kept thanking him for everything. He pointed to a religious symbol on his dashboard and said that Allah had sent him.

The tow truck arrived. I thanked the SUV driver and offered blessings. We arrived at the repair shop a few minutes before it was closing for the weekend. My car was unrepairable, and there I was...in Canada...miles away from public transit...with no cell phone...with my reusable bags and yoga mat...stranded. After helping me clean out my car, the tow truck driver asked me what I would do. Tears welled up again. He asked if I knew anyone in Canada who could help. I said that there was one possibility. My good friend from Bellingham's daughter works in Vancouver. He pulled out his cell phone and handed it to me. It went directly to voicemail, so I left a message and tearfully prayed again. He said to wait a few minutes for her to check her voicemail. She probably hadn't picked up because of the unknown number. When the 360 area code flashed on his phone, my heart jumped. She was in Stanley Park, waiting for her daughter to finish up work. My car had broken down in her former hometown, so she knew exactly where I was and said that they would pick me up at the Tim Hortons adjacent to the repair shop.

As we drove past where I had been stranded, the skies opened with pounding rain. But I was safe. I, my yoga mat, and even a much-needed bottle of wine were delivered from the side of the road in a foreign country to my doorstep within a few hours by earth-angels. My car became a Canadian. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Gracious God, even when you are invisible, you are there. You were there in my tears, in my prayers, and in those who also believe in your grace. Thank you for reminding me that your face is shining upon me, and I am saved. Amen.

Tuesday, December 1

Barb Sharkey; Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 80:17-19

"Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one you have made so strong for yourself. And so will we never turn away from you; give us life, that we may call upon your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved."



Growing up in a Lutheran church in western Pennsylvania in the fifties, Advent was a time of measured, patient waiting. My family helped with the early decorations in the sanctuary, unpacking the ceramic nativity and placing it beside the pulpit, the manger empty until Christmas Eve.

The Wise Men started in the window shelves at the back of the church, and slowly made their four-week, (rather than two-year), journey toward Bethlehem. Each Sunday the acolyte lit another candle on the Advent wreath, signaling we were moving ever closer to Christmas.

There was comfort in these traditions and routines. Christmas could not sneak up on you, because you had four weeks of contemplation beforehand. Sunday morning Advent services did not require special meals or gifts, it was just quiet waiting.

This year COVID-19 has interrupted lives in so many horrific ways: loss of loved ones, loss of economic well-being, loss of routines and traditions, feelings of isolation and loneliness. But the Sundays of Advent will progress nevertheless: quietly, steadfastly, dependably. Christmas will come. The sun will rise on a new day. Hope and faith will intertwine to bring us through the darkness, slowly making our way to Bethlehem.

Prayer: Dear God, Please help us to hold steady in these days of decreasing daylight. Let the light of the Advent candles fill our hearts, and let their warmth remind us of your love. Amen



Wednesday, December 2

Julie Pierce; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:1-2

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.”



My dear mother-in-law would frequently remind us to be gentle to and tender with one another. I especially remember our telephone conversations ending with that precious reminder. Her life was spent devoted to her Lord, her family, her friends and those in need.

These verses speak to me especially during this time of Covid-19 and the unrest I sense in our country.

I'm guessing that each of us is in need of some comfort and I rejoice that this scripture reminds us of this as well as to be tender toward all whom we encounter, whether or not we know them.

How will you comfort and be tender toward yourself and others today?

Prayer:

*Holy God our Father, Holy Son our Brother, Holy Spirit our Mother,
Thank you for this beautiful scripture which reminds us to give comfort and treat all whom we encounter with loving and tender care. Amen*



Thursday, December 3

Karla Petersen; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:3

"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"



This passage references a practice at the time for rulers, when planning a trip, to send forerunners ahead of the anticipated travel. These 'preparers' were responsible for making sure the trip would be as easy and safe as possible. If a section of the travel was rough or uneven, they would make sure the route was smoothed out and safe, even to the point of leveling mountains and filling in valleys. They would secure lodging and make sure food and supplies would be available. They would make the route through a desert as quick and straight as possible to get through the wasteland before running out of supplies.

The voice that cried out in Isaiah is speaking to us in these days, too. For all the troubles around the world throughout history, we are living through a doozy of a period right now. We don't have to look far to see vast deserts of hatred and anger. It is hard to see past the mountains of economic, social and political challenges. And it is too easy to get lost in deep valleys of grief and fear and anger that a pandemic has drawn us into.

We, though, as Christians, already know how this story of humanity ends! We walk into Advent every year, knowing that the child who is coming has already brought Light and Love and Peace. By honoring this season, which seems to be growing darker, we prepare the way in acts that show what the coming of baby Jesus is really about. We feed the hungry. We sit with the grieving. We speak up for justice. We love and love and love, especially those who are harder to love. In this, we are preparing the hearts of those around us, as well as we ourselves (or maybe especially ourselves) to recognize the coming of Jesus and the presence of a God of Love and Light and Peace.

Prayer: God of Light, We come with hearts longing to welcome You. Please be with each of your children who are hurting, hungry, fearful, angry, and grieving. Give us the eyes to see the rough places that need to know Your presence. Give us the courage to walk right into those hard and fearful places with love and faith to prepare the space for You. Grant us the strength to 'sit with', to 'stand with', to 'speak with' for as long as it takes. And gift us with the sure knowledge that Your Love and Your Light is with us, around us and in us, no matter where we are in our life journey.

In Your mercy, Oh God, hear our prayer.

Let it be so.

Friday, December 4

Cynthia Beck; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:4-5

"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."



I chose to write about this verse because of my love for it as it is heard in the thrilling music of Handel's Messiah. The notes of the Messiah gloriously paint the story of the valleys, hills, and mountains being brought smooth and straight.

This verse is, as are most Biblical verses, full of imagery and symbolism. The soil, rocks, and hills are the obstacles. I visualize an army of laborers who, with bare hands and rudimentary tools, dug, planed, ground down, and hauled materials from long distances to remove obstacles from the highway so that the way would be smooth and straight for our God.

Bringing lessons of this verse into modern times, I think of our country and the many who long for a measure of peace in our nation. The obstructions that were the mountains and valleys of the verse can be thought of symbolically as divisiveness, prejudice, and dishonesty, among others, making the highway to peace rough. Like the carving out of a highway in the desert, there is much work to be done to make our country's obstacles low. With God's help, we can.

I have deeply appreciated the opportunity to write about this verse for the Advent Reflections. As I read this verse, I was inspired to read more, to learn more about the interpretation of the verse, to listen to parts of the Messiah again and again, (and again) and to read other passages written by Isaiah. I thought about how I would capture it visually, with my fingers and hands, in American Sign Language. I felt lifted onto a hill, to look around and see, to keep awake!

Prayer: Gracious God, during the coming Advent season, we strive to walk the path of faith, knowing that God has cleared the way. God has made our path straight, the rough places plain, the desert has been watered. God of all nations, we ask for courage and fortitude as we discern and make low the obstacles to peace in our country. Lord, hear our prayer.

Saturday, December 5

Diane Machatka; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:6-8

"A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."



The writer asks "what shall I cry," and in response the next sentence does not tell us what to say or do, but tells us that we, like everyone, are grass, that our time on earth is short. Is that a warning, to stop muddling around, whining that you're not sure what to say, and speak out?

Our lives are short. This verse gives us a sense of urgency, that we must cry out and our time is short. At the very same time it shares the comfort of knowing that the love of God endures and we are part of something eternal. In her book *Living With Contradiction*, Esther de Waal wrote, "It is the humble and honest acceptance of my frailty that frees me from pretense, from the effort to impress, from the attempt to justify, from the determination to achieve." We must act, but we are free of the folly of our own importance.

What shall I cry? These words are a prayer. We know that God's saving work has been done already, and we can rest in that blessed assurance. But God's work is also in progress, ongoing. What am I called to say and do today that makes real God's kingdom for this world?

Advent reminds us that we are both always in a time of looking ahead and always in a time of already having arrived in God's grace.

Prayer: Lord, what shall I cry? When I see pain, fear, joy, or hope I hear your call to cry out. Teach me and use me to work your grace. Amen.



Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 6

Natalie Jones Baitcher; Central Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:9

"Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, Lift it up, do not fear; Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"



I am an avid hiker. When my husband and I travel (pre-COVID days...) we make it a point to take a hike in whatever part of the globe we are in. He proposed to me atop the mountain of Machu Picchu in Peru, and we spent one wedding anniversary climbing Mt. Psiloritis, the tallest mountain on Crete, when I was deployed to Greece.

There is something truly majestic in standing atop the world looking down on God's creation! When I am on a mountain top, I can't help but feel surrounded by the power and beauty of God and God's works on Earth. But even from the highest peaks, I know that I will have to descend again to the low places.

We humans are subject to the highs and lows of this world – from the mountaintops of seeing our loved ones for the holidays and celebrating life's wins to the deep valleys of sickness and brokenness and sin and fear.

As Christians, when we experience the high mountains of God's love and forgiveness we are called shout it from on high. We are called to share God's word and the promise of Christ this advent season! So let's lift up our voices with strength and share the good news: Christ is coming again into our world and into our hearts! Here is our God!

Prayer: Great creator, thank you for the beauty of this world. From the highest of mountains to the lowest places we know that you are with us. Give us strength to share your promise and to shout your praises and good tidings to the world. Amen.

Monday, December 7

Misi French, Office Manager; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:10-11

"See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."



"See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules..." The language here feels like force and domination; the language of a warrior. Too often those in power (who come with might and rule) get caught up in being in charge, controlling others and making all the decisions. So many in our society can get caught up in making and enforcing rules without much concern for how it affects others. But God's rule, his might, his 'leadership' is always lifegiving.

What does God do with his power? "He will feed his flock like a Shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

In what areas of your life do you have the power to make decisions that affect others? Parent? Supervisor? Board member? Citizen who votes?

How might you follow the example given?

Feed his flock – nourishing others physically, emotionally, spiritually

Gather in his arms – embrace and accept those who are different

Carry them in his bosom – support and encourage

Gently lead – teach and empower

No matter our station in life we all have opportunities to do these things, be it family, friend or stranger. Some of the most impactful interactions I have had have been with strangers and people living on the street. 'Keep Watch' is a common Advent theme and I would encourage each of us to *keep watch* for the chance to care for someone in these ways.

Prayer: Lord as we encounter people throughout our lives, may they (through us) experience the hope of Advent and the peace and love of Christmas. Amen

Tuesday, December 8

Helen H; High School Freshman 2011

Psalm 85:1-2

"You have been gracious to your land, O LORD, you have restored the good fortune of Jacob. You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins."



Psalm 85:1-2 is saying that the Lord forgives and is good to His people. Every person created by God sins. He sent His only son to die for the sake of our sins. No matter how great or little, God will always forgive our sins. He is good to His people and restores what is lost to those who follow and love Him. The Lord covered their sins and forgave the iniquity of His people.

It is sometimes difficult to forgive those who do us wrong, yet Jesus said to forgive them 77 times. Our imperfections cause us to sin daily, sometimes without realization. God's love for us is so great that he forgives us willingly and with open arms.

Rarely are people forgiven by their debtors with such graciousness and love. This only goes to show how great God is and how much some take forgiveness for granted. It is not common to stop and think that we are forgiven every day and to be thankful for it.

The Lord restored Jacob's fortunes and was gracious to His land. He showed love and compassion for the things He cared for. This is a good lesson to everyone to be thankful and caring every day we are alive. We were put on this Earth for a reason. It is natural to sin, but it is by choice that we ask forgiveness and thank those who forgive us.

To me, this verse means loving even when it's hard, forgiving even when something unforgivable is done, and being thankful every day for the things I am given, material and otherwise.

This reflection can be applied to people everywhere and if taken into consideration, lives will be changed for the better.

Prayer: God, thank you for your endless love and forgiveness. You gave Your only son for the sake of our sins and never think twice if we are worthy of your forgiveness. You have set expectations for us, ones we do not always follow. Your love is unfathomable. Thank You, God for always forgiving. I am forever thankful and my life is Yours. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9

Vicar Pam Karas; Central & Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 85:8-9

"I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him. Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land."



We're in a time of waiting – waiting for the Christ child who will come. The very act of waiting indicates that something is going to happen – something will change. The psalmist writes, "let me hear what God the Lord will speak," and I think yes, let me hear!

Advent is different this year as we prepare for Jesus' birth. We wait not only for Christmas day but for a time when we'll be able to be together, and we long for God to speak peace to us – now, in this place, during this time of a pandemic and unrest.

The words that stand out to me in this passage are unspoken – listen, trust. In order to *hear* what God is saying to us we must listen, be open to what God is saying and we have to trust that God means what God speaks. We trust that by turning our hearts to God we will hear God speak peace to us. Trusting in God's faithfulness we find peace in the ordinary as well as the new. This Advent season may not look like any other, but we will find peace in worshiping and gathering in new ways as God leads us to new discoveries.

Prayer: O God, be with us during this time of waiting, that we may have ears to hear your Word and hearts to follow where you lead us. Amen



Thursday, December 10

Pastor Shannyn Fuerst; Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 85:10-11

"Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven."



I have been very aware of the word "and" lately. *Rather than an "either/or" the word "and" allows someone to hold different emotions, feelings, or experiences side by side. For example, I can miss in-person worship AND enjoy the new opportunities digital worship extends to the community. I can be energetic AND exhausted by work. We can support good police work AND the Black Lives Matters movement. We can engage ministry projects inside AND outside the church community.*

The use of the word "and" in *Psalm 85* holds two experiences, needs, hopes and desires together. *Mercy and truth. Righteousness and peace. Truth and righteousness. It does not have to exist as an either/or. Mercy and truth can co-exist, as can righteousness and peace, as can truth and righteousness. Rather than answers, this passage leads me to more questions.*

- What happens when these things come together? (Mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, truth and righteousness)
- Why do they come together?
- How do they come together?
- Where does the "and" lead us into forward movement?
- Is the "and" a combined effort of us and God?
- Can two seemingly opposing truths be held together?

I find Advent to be a wonderful time of pondering and exploration. This "and" gives space for duality as I wonder and wander through these, and many, other questions.

Prayer: Holy God, walk with us in the "and" spaces of our lives. Draw us together with connectedness and sit with us in the discomfort of the in-between places. We pray this Advent for peace, faith, joy, love AND for mercy, truth, righteousness, reconciliation. Amen.

Friday, December 11

Julaine Hall; Faith Lutheran Church

Psalm 85:12-13

"The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet."



Although the times were grim in some respects, the psalm brought a new light to our darker world. This psalm brings promise of prosperity, increase in yields of the land, that righteousness will go before the Lord, and that he follows a path of peace, to interpret it literally.

In a figurative sense, he is here to show us a better way, to help us, to love us, and to empower us to choose and do what is right. A quote from Joseph Joubert, "A part of kindness consists in loving people more than they deserve."

This new psalm promises someone will come here show us just that: true kindness.



Saturday, December 12

Pastor Jeremy Fuerst; Central Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:1-3

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.



This autumn I have been glued to a TV show (which is rare for me). Yet I cannot stop watching “*Fargo*.” In the latest episode, a young boy, Satchel, and his caregiver, the Rabbi, are on the lam, hiding out in a bizarre bed & breakfast run by two estranged sisters in Liberal, Kansas. While the Rabbi is off on an errand, Satchel inadvertently walks in on a hotel guest who is tipping some contraband.

“Well, now we got a secret, you and me,” says the man.
“How’s that?” asks Satchel.
“The sisters can’t abide spirits of any kind...alcohol, I’m saying.”
“I know what spirits are.”

The unspoken weight dangles underneath Satchel’s response through the rest of the episode.

That one word – spirit – conjures up myriad images: Pentecost, fire, wind, breath, creation, water, baptism, the book of Acts, dancing, prayer, community, alcohol, or even airlines. Yet Isaiah takes us even further with an image of God’s Spirit that pushes the limits of our understanding. How often do we associate the Spirit with the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and the mourning?

I get God sending people on a mission, but take note *to whom* the Spirit sends us! In the historical context of these passages of Isaiah, life was sufficiently difficult to render 2020 a cocktail party by comparison. Those who returned from Babylonian exile did so with shattered hopes and dreams because life was not as they had imagined it might be. This was not some opulent homecoming party.

What the people of Isaiah’s time learned – and what we have yet to learn – is that the Spirit sends

us to the place of pain where there is deep suffering and loneliness. It is as if Isaiah gives us a glimpse of God's social imagination by honing our focus on those who are suffering. In fact if we distance ourselves from the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and the mourning, we may very well be losing touch with the Spirit of God itself. It is worth taking a spiritual inventory and engaging in self-examination to determine whether we are out of touch with the hurting of this hurt world.

This runs far deeper than our own personal suffering. If anything, all that we identify as suffering in our own lives ought to compel us to transcend that hurt in order that we might be the presence of God to others. It is, after all, the Spirit of God which comes to us in our hurting that we might in turn bear that presence of God to others who are hurting.

Our world has no shortage of hurting these days, it seems. If we take the prophet at his word, then this very well denotes that an abundance of the Spirit is to be found as well. Perhaps the Spirit is waiting on us to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear where it may be found.

*For your Spirit woven into the fabric of creation
For the eternal overlapping with time
And the life of earth interlaced with heaven's vitality
I give you thanks, O God.*

*For your untamed creativity
Your boundless mystery
And your passionate yearnings
Planted deep in the soul of every human being
I give you thanks.*

*Grant me the grace to reclaim these depths
To uncover this treasure
To liberate these longings
And in being set free in my own spirit,
To act for the well-being of the world.*

*Recall the events of the day
And pray for the life of the world.*

Celtic Benediction by J Philip Newell



Third Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 13

Nan Beth Walton; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:4

"They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations."



I am especially drawn to texts like this because I hear God's charge to me in the words. We have so much to do to make this world safe for everyone. We have watched as some cities, including ours, have places of ruin, some from an ancient hurt and some from a new assault. There have been times of feeling hopeless as we watch the devastation appear once more. What can one person possibly do?

Notice the first word in this text: "They". God does not send us here to work alone, but to work together with others. I have been watching and listening as many of you make profound encouragements for those of us who follow your words. I have listened to the words of the young men and women in this congregation and elsewhere, who teach us the amazing truths that God has written on their spirits.

I also love the King James version of this verse: "And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations." That word "desolation" also implies solitude, loneliness, despondency. There is a deep hole in our hearts at times, and for many, this very time. But, we shall raise one another out of these desolate places, into a newer, cleaner, sparkling life. It will take our time and effort, but we can erase the stains and make the world a better place for those who follow us!

Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Most gracious God, help us to find those places of desolation in this world. Help us to work with one another to bring your healing and peace to the ruins of our cities. Amen.

Monday, December 14

Barb and Rick Friedhoff; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:8-9

“For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.”



Advent is a special time "of hope" "of reaffirmation" in the everlasting covenant of God with the people of Israel and we as descendants and offspring, are people who the Lord has blessed. Understanding that we are both loved and blessed should give us confidence and be a source of strength and real joy.

Relying on God's everlasting covenant we can have the courage to love justice that promotes equity and hate the robbery that deprives God's people from having the access to opportunity they need to thrive and be safe in today's world.

Prayer: Today Lord, help me to feel loved and blessed by your presence in my life. As an offspring of the people of Israel help me to treat all who I encounter today as Blessed.



Tuesday, December 15

Ashlyn Bryson-Beane; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:10

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."



When I read this verse I instantly felt the truth in what Isaiah is saying. This goes all the way back to the very beginning of my life, when I was put into the foster care system the day I was born. For the first 10 months, I was in multiple homes but throughout my story there were many people who I believe God sent to make sure I stayed safe. When I was 10 months, He put me in my mom's dream and found me a forever home. As I look back on this story and my life in general, I realize I have never been alone, and I was always taken care of.

Throughout my life, and everyone's lives, we have had times where we feel alone and scared or fear what could happen. In those times in my life, I have always been taken care of. That was God taking care of me. God knows what I need, and knows what I don't need. Even though I might make some wrong decisions in my life, I always make it out and learn from those, and God forgives me.

As a junior in high school, I just kind of go through my day getting all my work done, talking to my friends, and hanging out with my family. But one of the most relaxing parts of everyday, is when I get to sit at the dinner table with my family, and thank God for everything He has given me, and I pray that He will continue to help me, my family, and the world. Whenever I am having a hard time, I pray more, and I trust that whatever happens He will be there for me.

Prayer: Dear God, today I pray that you will be there for us and continue to clothe us with your garments of salvation. Remind us who may be feeling alone or scared right now, that you are there. Amen.

Wednesday, December 16

Estelle Morley; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:11

"For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations."



As I prayerfully pondered these words from the prophet Isaiah, certain words rose to the surface and ignited my imagination. The whole concept of nature, seasons, and gardening arose first. I was raised on a Midwest farm where my father did the farming and my mother gardened. I learned early on that despite all the planning, expertise, knowledge, and labor, it was ultimately God who was in charge. God gives the growth, the increase, and causes the plants to "spring up."

The words Righteousness and Praise also "jumped out." By definition, Righteousness is uprightness, morality, right, justifiable, virtuous, good and honest. And Praise means to express approval, admiration, commendation, grateful homage, to glorify, magnify, exalt, honor and applaud.

Why and how are these two words linked together? Isaiah says "the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations." A lot of action is taking place. Are we being called to action by being missionaries, evangelists, bringers of the good news of Jesus Christ to all nations? How is it all happening? Do we have a part? And what are our tasks or responsibilities?

In these Advent days, as the season of gift-giving approaches, I am reminded of John 3:16 (often called 'the Gospel in a nutshell') and how it links with the Isaiah verse. "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son---" God's love is not just for "the righteous", "the chosen few", a limited number of people or groups – No, but it is for the whole world! As we reflect on God's Word and the birth of God's Son, let us remember that there can be no better or greater gift than life eternal through Jesus Christ, God's only Son!

Prayer: Creator God, we praise you for your faithfulness and we know that you have "the whole world in your hands." Keep us ever mindful of and grateful for our countless blessings, especially your constant love and care. Amen

Thursday, December 17

Natalie Jones Baitcher; Central Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them a light has shined.”

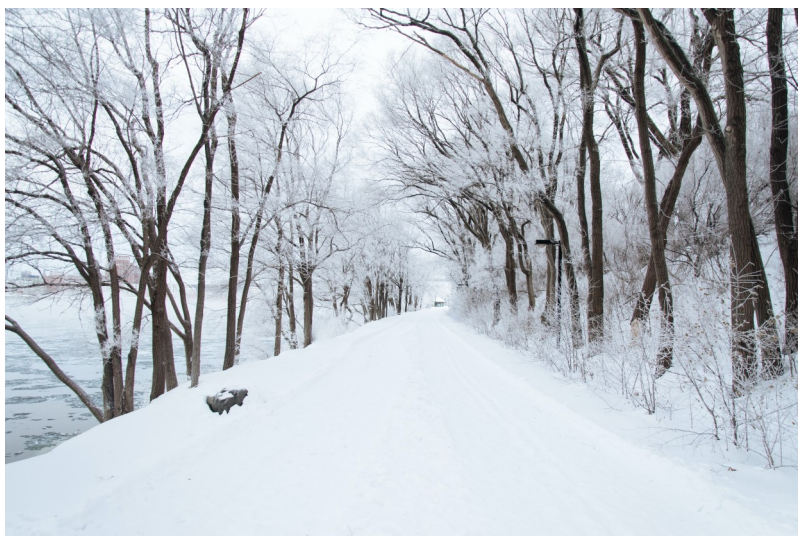


Darkness is something that we've all come to be familiar with in the Seattle winter months. It seems like sunshine and long days will never return. We get up and go work in the dark. We come home from work or school – still dark. Even when I'm cuddled up in a warm blanket by the fire, I can still feel a deep yearning in my soul for the glorious warmth and light of the summer sun. Sometimes it feels like this season of Advent is the same way – we are all feeling a deep yearning for the glorious warmth and light of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes all we can see is the darkness surrounding us, especially in the midst of this unusual and unpredictable year! We are the people walking in darkness and living in a land of deep darkness. Fear and stress and anxiety about the future often seem to weigh us down. Fortunately, we can look forward to God's promise that the light will come.

I trust that God is in this world and God will keep coming into this world through the promise of Christmas. And we can all raise our hearts and heads to bask in the promised light of Christ.

Prayer: Dearest God – as we anxiously await your promised coming this Advent season, comfort our souls with your love. Remind us that your light has shined through the darkness and let us be your light to our world. In your name, Amen.



Friday, December 18

Rebecca Keith; Faith Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:6

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”



This text is forever linked in my heart with its musical setting in the joyous chorus “For unto us a Child is born” from Handel’s *Messiah*. In the beloved oratorio, this chorus comes right after a dark and partially minor solo set to Isaiah 9:2: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” The solo turns to a major key when the text refers to light, but it is Handel’s setting of today’s verse that tells us that the shining light is the Messiah, the child given to us. The chorus begins with sweetness and light in the sopranos and strings. As the rest of the choir and instruments join in, the music builds until it explodes in a swirl of pure joy and triumph when the names of this child are sung. And what descriptive names they are – wonderful, mighty, everlasting, peace.

As you read this text, may you experience God’s presence and light overcoming the darkness with hope and joy. If that does not work, try listening to Handel’s music!

Prayer: Dear Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, thank you for the gift of music and the light and comfort it brings our lives. Thank you for being the child given to us to light our dark days.



Saturday, December 19

Adam S. High School Senio; from 2011

Isaiah 9:7

“His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”



Peace seems like a difficult gift to promise as we approach the Christmas season. Unemployment is up, the economy is down and there seems to be no end in sight. It is difficult enough to promise a physical gift like a robe or some slippers, much more an ideal that we all would wish to possess. And yet, we are bombarded with advertisements which encourage us to believe we need a treadmill to become thinner, clothes to appear more attractive, or the newest videogame to be accepted by our peers.

Preying on our want to feel accepted, the media exploits us to any extent necessary to access the money in our pockets. The problem occurs when we let ourselves become taken advantage of, tricked into the lie of the more stuff we have the better.

Don't forget that Christmas is meant to be a time of celebrating what we have, not what we want, there is where we can find peace. Then not only that, once we find our own peace (if we are able to find it) how can we keep it within the Christmas season? Isaiah tells us that Christ will uphold our peace through justice and righteousness.

So take some time during each day during this season to stop, think, and ask;

Where is my focus?

Am I worried too much about “stuff?”

Where is my family in all of this?

What can I do to enjoy the Christmas season more?

Am I worried too much about what cannot be controlled?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 20

Linnea G. from 2011

Luke 1:26-30

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'"



Imagine the confusion and fright that Mary must have experienced when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and greeted her as God's favored one! You and I would most likely experience Mary's same feelings of fear and confusion if an angel were to suddenly appear and greet us! We frequently are assailed with doubts and fears when we perceive that God is calling us for His purposes. We wonder what changes His calling might bring to our lives and why He would seek us out. After all, we, like Mary, are lowly and humble creatures and we may think that we are unworthy of God's calling.

We can take great comfort from Gabriel's words to Mary that she need not fear for she had found favor with God and the Lord was with her. Gabriel even addressed her by name, "*Mary*". What a loving and compassionate God we have who calls us personally by our first names!

Like Mary, we can rejoice that God is calling us because He has found favor with us. Mary, a humble, young girl, would have the honor of serving God as the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also a great honor and privilege for us to serve our God when He calls us. We are His favored ones and He promises to be with us. As we answer His call and put our trust in Him, we come to feel and understand the transformation He is working in our lives. His Holy Spirit guides us through His Word, through prayer, through worship, and through our fellowship with family, friends, and other believers.

Gradually we begin to realize how richly God has blessed us and how marvelously He has changed us. By the gift of His Grace, we are filled with courage to answer His call and do His will. Leymah Gbowee, Nobel Peace Laureate and keynote speaker at the 8th Triennial Gathering of the WELCA, puts it so simply and yet so powerfully and eloquently when she states, "*He who has called you will equip you!*" Know that you, like Mary, have found favor with God. Know that you need not fear for your God is with you. And, like Mary, He calls you by name for His purposes. Will you, like Mary, heed His call?

Prayer: Dear Lord, We are so thankful that You have found favor with us and that You call us by name to serve you. Help us to put aside our fears and doubts and allow You to transform us so that You may use us to bring glory to Your name. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen

Monday, December 21

Cameron W. College Junior 2011

Luke 1:31-33

"And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."



Most of what is happening in these three verses is impossible for me to really comprehend. What in the world do I do with the angel, or virgin conception (not to mention everything else)?

Those will be life long lessons as I continue to discover God's glory through life and all that he has done for me. There is one word, however, that I can hang on to from this verse and find peace in: forever. Jesus' kingdom is today. Today! And Tomorrow! And here on earth!

We have the honor of living in this beautiful, fallen creation for the glory of our God and Jesus Christ! But this kingdom did not just end with Christ on the cross, or even in his resurrection, but continues on with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But where it all began was not just in the virgin birth either, but in the conception, which is revealed here by the angel. And for this, we rejoice and praise his name forever and ever. Amen



Tuesday, December 22

Brynn H. College Freshman 2011

Luke 1:34-37

"Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'"



"For nothing will be impossible with God," this is concept that I have yet to understand or feel in my faith. I recently started my freshmen year of college at Western Washington University and this time of confusion; freedom, uncertainty, excitement and anxiety have taken me over completely. I have been trying to find out who I am without my parents and sister being around to guide me every step of the way, to guide me in school, or in sports or even in my faith.

This is a time for me to explore life and God is a part of life that I haven't really explored yet. I have met so many people here and have encountered many questions about my faith and what I believe, and sometimes I can or can't answer. I struggle with the thought of questioning what I've been taught about Jesus Christ, God and the Holy Spirit. How do I know if what people are teaching me is right in God's eyes or is it wrong and therefore I should know better and not listen. How can you tell what's right and wrong when it comes to God. How do you know what's possible with God by your side?

I seem to only have questions and no answers that satisfy me. How can nothing be impossible when humans fail everyday, when they are beaten down, when they have no hope, or even when they have no faith in God? I have failed many times in my life and I will keep on failing until I die, that's what being human is about, failure. I go to a church service every Tuesday night and I hear many different speakers preaching the Word of God, some of them I agree with and others I can't understand if they are talking about the God I've come to know and love.

The definition of impossible is "not able to occur, exist, or be done," I thought seeing the definition would help me understand what God can do by my side. I seem to be more confused than ever about God, my mother and father, brother and sister in one. I have no good idea how to end this devotional, only to say that if God makes everything possible why are so many people, including me, in this world confused? Why are there so many unsatisfied questions?

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please send me answers. I feel lost without them. I pray that this Christmas season all the people who have questions can receive satisfying answers.

Wednesday, December 23

Karla Petersen; Faith Lutheran Church

Luke 1:38

"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'
Then the angel departed from her."



The times throughout scripture when someone simply says, "Here I am" often bring me to my knees. The thought that God would call an ordinary person in ordinary time to do something extraordinary is amazing enough. But what makes me so emotional is the response, "Here I am." The power and the humility of that statement catches my breath and makes my heart beat faster. That is amazing faith!

The thing is, when I have witnessed that 'yes' in someone's life, it is not immediately a wonderful journey into glory. Within our humanity, when we say 'yes' to God's calling into ministry or into a new way of life, it is most likely going to be pretty messy, a lot of hard work and sometimes, days full of hardship, judgement from others, doubt and tears. Saying 'yes' may lead us into some of the hardest and most fearful times of our lives. When we say, "Here I am" it is answering a call into servanthood. But it is also a step into deep faith and, oddly enough, hope.

The hope is born in witnessing God's work through us ordinary human beings. When we listen to God's call and walk into the unknown and often messy places, we follow Mary's 'Here I am' into the presence of Jesus, into unconditional love.

Unconditional love... that is such a lovely place to be.

Prayer: God of Love, As we wait with growing impatience to welcome our Lord, we ask that you keep welcoming us into callings and adventures that will bring Your incredible Love and Light and Peace into this broken world. Give us the faith and the courage to say, "Here I am" every single time.

*In Your mercy, Oh God, hear our prayer.
Let it be so.*

Thursday, December 24

Barb Sharkey; Faith Lutheran Church

Luke 2:1-7

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her baby to be born, and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was not room for them in the inn."



For the 2019 Christmas Pageant, when I was one of three directors, we still did not have an Infant Jesus for the manger scene on pageant day. I had a life-like doll ready to go, but seeing a real baby had always been a highlight for kids and adults alike.

I was sitting in my "director" spot in the first pew, script in hand, when a mother I did not recognize with a months-old infant came in and sat at the end of the pew. The pageant started, but I was obsessed with that sweet baby. Would it be rude to ask her, a complete stranger, if we could borrow the baby...to be held by a sixth-grade Mary whom she had probably never met before? Yes, *completely inappropriate*, I told myself. *Keep your mind on the pageant!* I told myself. But I couldn't. I literally coveted that infant.

I had noticed one of our Sunday School teachers, who was helping behind the scenes, speak to the mom when she came in. When I could stand it no longer, I left my seat and slid out the door and found the teacher. Did he know the mom?

No, he didn't, but when she had entered the narthex door near him, knowing we were without a Baby Jesus, he had approached and asked: If the baby happened to be sleeping or calm when the manger scene came, would she mind placing the baby in the arms of Mary? She could stay right there in the scene if she liked.

The mom had come to see her child's cousins in the program, and had no problem sharing her baby.

When the time came, the visiting baby fulfilled the role perfectly with no crying, calmly awake while surrounded by oddly dressed little strangers holding stuffed sheep.

To this day I don't know if our guest was a baby boy or girl. Throughout the many years of pageants, Baby Jesus and Toddler Jesus have been portrayed by both girls and boys, and one year the toddler part was even shared by twins. At the same time.

What is the point? Over two thousand years ago, a child came, a child who grew into a man who taught a better way to live in community, turning things upside down.

May we continue to learn from his example and teachings to be bold, to take a chance, to welcome a stranger, and to see what might happen.

Prayer: Dear Creator, Thank you for giving the world your son to embody kindness and generosity, compassion and forgiveness. Help us to welcome with joy all in our midst. Amen.

Nurturing the Moment

A waiting person is a patient person. The word "patience" means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere.

The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her womb.

Eternal Seasons
By Henry Nouwen

Friday, December 25

Karen Fox; Central Lutheran Church

Luke 2:8-11

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'"



Most of us don't know anyone who is a shepherd. My knowledge of shepherds in Bible times is that they were hard-working, uneducated folks entrusted with valuable livestock and generally ignored by the better-off members of the community. I imagine that it was easy to frighten them - especially when they experienced other-worldly beings appearing out of nowhere at night with a command directly to them, "Don't be afraid."

We also hear that message, centuries later. When angels address us, we should listen. God is trying to get our attention. We wait for what seems like ages for peace, for resolution of conflict, for freedom from worry. That is what we remember in the season of Advent - the long wait. Then we hear the message from the angels - "Don't be afraid."

Be like the shepherds - pay attention, follow God's commands, embrace the miracle and then, go tell the Good News.

Dear Lord, Make us fearless in carrying out your commands. Amen





The Christ-child Within

I think that we have hardly thought through the immense implications of the mystery of the incarnation.

Where is God?

God is where we are weak, vulnerable, small, and dependent.
God is where the poor are, the hungry, the handicapped, the mentally ill, the elderly, the powerless.

How can we come to know God when our focus is elsewhere, on success, influence, and power? I increasingly believe that our faithfulness will depend on our willingness to go where there is brokenness, loneliness, and human need.

If the church has future it is a future with the poor in whatever form. Each one of us is very seriously searching to live and grow in this belief and by friendship we can support each other.


I realize that the only way for us to stay well in the midst of the many 'worlds' is to stay close to the small vulnerable child that lives in our hearts and in every other human being.

Often we do not know that the Christ child is within us. when we discover him we can truly rejoice.

Eternal Seasons
By Henry Nouwen



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May the celebration of our Lord and Savior's birth draw you closer to him and to those around you.

May God's Spirit stir in each of us a desire to love him and each other in new and creative ways!

Merry Christmas

Advent 2020
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