

*Advent
Devotional
Guide
Christmas 2011*



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Spartanburg, South Carolina*

*“... for unto us a Child is born,
and unto us a Son is given!”*

Advent 2011

Light the Light!

As our congregation celebrates Advent this year, we will have a hymn to help focus our worship and attention: “Light the Light, the Fire of Life,” which is #82 in our *Celebrating Grace* hymnal. The hymn says,

Light the light, the fire of life, let the candle reveal His glory.
Jesus Christ has come to earth and for us shall come again.
Light the candle of His hope...Light the candle of His peace.
Light the candle of His joy...Light the candle of His love.
Light the light we all must hold...Light the light that shone that night.
Light the light that shows the way...Light the light by which we see.

As you prepare for your celebration of Christmas, we pray this Advent devotional booklet will help you light your own light and that you will find yourself illuminated. While reading each devotional, you may want to light a candle and let its flickering light remind you of God’s love that warms a cold world and illumines even the darkest places.

We pray that these devotions, which have been prepared by your loving sisters and brothers, will help you celebrate Advent and prepare you for the glorious celebration of Christmas.

We are grateful to the Worship Ministry Team, and especially Suzy Nicholas, for their work in organizing this project. We thank Louise Hunt for her artwork that adorns the front of the booklet. As you read these devotions and move through Advent, may you find within yourself a light that is aflame!

Faithfully,

Dean and Lisa Wimberly Allen

November 27, 2011

Fear, Intimidation, and Grace!

Jim Rentz

*Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19;
I Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 24-37*

As we read the scriptures for today, we travel from a positive response to God emanating from intimidation and fear to one emanating from love and grace. While it seems to me that fear must have some reasonable place in our relationship with God, somehow it seems more desirable for us to respond positively from a place of love and grace. Sometimes rather than being afraid of God, we can more readily understand being afraid of not living according to God's will because the natural consequences could be harmful. Yet, in truth, the scriptures are laced in both the Old Testament and New Testament with intimidating threats of what God will do to us if we don't live Godly lives. The same scriptures are laced with elements of peace, grace, and an everlasting love. As peace-loving Christians, how are we to come to grips with this dichotomy? This can be a daunting task.

I often wonder what God is really like. I wonder this because, at times, I am suspicious of the projections well-meaning human beings, including me, have attributed to God which may or may not have a thing to do with who He really is! In some ways I see God as the Great Projective Object whom we strive to come to know for who "He, She, or It" really is. That is why I hang onto scriptures such as Jeremiah 29:13 that say that if we seek God with all of our hearts, we will find Him. At times, due to the gravity of the search, all that keeps me "hanging in there" is faith itself.

As a boy growing up in a nurturing church and family, I was taught to develop and maintain a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and that would be the best route to take in knowing and experiencing God. That admonition has proven over time to be wise. Gradually over these 70 years of life, I have come to know and experience God to maintain a balance between judgment and grace. I have also come to know that the judgment is meant to direct me to live, in a crucible of accountability, a "grace-full" life which provides grace to others and to me.

In my mind, this Advent season is all about experiencing the balance between the love, judgment, and grace of God as He revealed Himself physically and spiritually during a most poignant time in history. When He left this flesh behind, He admonished us to represent Him in this world as we invite Him to be integrated into the depths of our being. I wish that integration for each and every one of us.

Have a rich and meaningful Advent season!

November 28, 2011

“And no one shall make them afraid!”

Dean Allen

Micah 4:1-5

Today’s scripture is a curious passage to read during our celebration of Advent, as most of us experience it. Our days of Advent often are filled with Christmas carols on the radio, beautiful displays in store windows, warm memories of Christmases past, and hopes for an enjoyable holiday season this year. Then, right in the midst of our baked goods, pretty cards, and eggnog, we hear a word from the prophet, Micah.

Micah is serving as God’s prophet during the eighth century BCE, most likely as the 700s are coming to a close. He is living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the Northern Kingdom of Israel has fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. During his days, his people have known of their distant kin being decimated by a foreign power, and Micah warns his hearers in the Southern Kingdom that the same calamity may befall them. His is a word of judgment and accusation, filled with condemnation of their social evils. Just as greedy people stay awake at night devising plans to exploit others, so God is devising a plan against them (Read Micah chapter 2 for details!). Like other prophets’ words, Micah’s words of condemnation are tempered by promises of God’s love and God’s peace. The final word is always a word of hope.

In Micah 4:1-5, we hear the promise of God’s love that will allow people to stream to God’s house for worship and will allow people to live their days in peace and prosperity. Notice the promise of swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. The implements of death and destruction will become tools in service of prosperity and peace. And, perhaps the deepest promise of all: “And no one shall make them afraid!” (verse 4b).

What does this word uttered by God’s prophet so many years ago say to us living in these days of Advent? It is a reminder that God cares for all that we do—our worship, yes, but also the social evils we support or the social goods we hinder. These words provide an opportunity for our reflection: Are there people in our lives, or affected by our lives, who have less than they need and who suffer even as our tables overflow during this season? Are there people who are afraid because they do not know how their rent will be paid or their prescriptions filled in the coming days? Are there ways we may help ensure that “no one shall make them afraid”?

And, finally, there is a word of hope and promise for all of us. Even as we find ways to help others, may we also celebrate large and small miracles that allow us to live without fear during these days and nights.

November 29, 2011

The Lord Will Rescue Zion

E.A. Cox

Micah 4:6-13

This passage tells of how the Lord will rescue Zion. What stands out to me is part of verse 12: “But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan.” As I go through my day, I often think that I have it all figured out, that I know what is going to happen and how I am going to react to it. But then something comes along and throws a wrench in the whole thing. And I begin, slowly, to realize that I have no idea what God is thinking. And I have even less of an idea of how He will use my circumstances in His greater plan. I do know that He promises to love me and never leave me. And these are the promises I must cling to when I come to a time of frustration and confusion. I must trust that He knows exactly what He is doing.

November 30, 2011

He Shall Be Their Peace

E. A. Cox

Micah 5:1-5a

In this passage of scripture, we read a description of Jesus. Verse four says he will “shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,” and the first part of verse five says, “He shall be their peace.” This time of year is often crazy and hectic. Decorations are going up. Final exams are approaching for students. Parents are thinking about presents for everyone and planning family gatherings. I love the idea that Jesus will be my peace. No matter how crazy things get, Jesus will be my peace. He is someone to whom I can go to find my center again. Someone whom I can trust as I spill the contents of my heart and who can calm my spirit. He not only will be my peace, He is my peace.

December 1, 2011

What Does God Desire?

E. A. Cox

Hosea 6:1-6

In this passage of scripture, God makes it clear what He desires from us: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (verse 6). We often get caught up in the idea that God wants us to “do” for Him. We think that we need to participate in this or that church activity and be at this dinner and that program. Now don’t misunderstand, “doing” for God is not necessarily a bad thing. It becomes bad when we “do” for him without love for Him as our motivation. God wants us to do things for Him as an outpouring of our love for Him. Parents sit in the freezing cold watching their kids play football because they love their children. Friends go to doctors’ appointments because they love one another. As Christmas approaches, think about your motivation for all you do. It is love? After all, “for God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

December 2, 2011

Words

Chris Cox

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Scripture: Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 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. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

There are many different angles from which to tackle this passage. We could sit here and talk about the calling that God places on each one of our lives (and though I am not going to be doing that, I'll still plug "Vito's Ordination Song" by Sufjan Stevens as a beautiful companion piece to this passage). We could talk about how God helps us overcome our litany of "I am only a..." excuses. Yet what jumped out at me about this passage was God telling Jeremiah that the young prophet was given the power to overthrow and raise up the kingdoms and nations of the world. God did not accomplish this by giving Jeremiah might or power as the world typically conceives it. God gave Jeremiah His words.

During Advent, we anticipate the coming of Christ. And though it doesn't involve shepherds, barnyard animals, or a show choir of angels, one of my favorite Christmas passages is found in the first chapter of John: a beautiful piece of poetry about the Word that is Jesus. The Word Jesus overthrew and raised up kingdoms in ways that were completely unanticipated in the realm of how things are supposed to work. Yet that seems to be the paintbrush with which God loves to paint.

The Word in John and the words in Jeremiah might be a bit of an apples-to-oranges (or Greek-to-Hebrew) type of situation, but there is that thread of God working via the unexpected. Whether it be a young boy who does not know how to speak becoming one of the greatest prophets or a humble child born in poverty ushering in the Kingdom of God, God moves in ways that defy convention. That still happens today. God works through the unexpected. He does not necessarily use what is powerful, popular, famous, celebrated, or whatever else the world loves. God did that through Jeremiah, God did that with Jesus, and God still does that today.

December 3, 2011

The Heart of the Matter

Suzy Nicholas

Ezekiel 36:24-28

In the fifth year of the Israelites' exile in Babylon, God called Ezekiel to be his prophet. He was to tell the scattered children of Israel that, for the sake of the LORD's holy name, the LORD would gather his people from all the countries and return them to their own land. Ezekiel 36:25-26: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean, I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." A new covenant was offered to those who chose to return to the God of Israel.

My husband and I, in the 1970s, lived aboard a 27-foot cruising sailboat. We had sold our house and most of our possessions in Oregon for the opportunity to experience life on the waterways of the East coast and beyond. For the next four years, our "home port" was Beaufort, NC. It provided security from June to November (hurricane season), as well as providing jobs on land to fund our adventures. During the rest of the year, we explored areas as far north as Rhode Island and as far south as the island of Bequia in the Caribbean. It was an exciting way to travel, most of the time. I had melancholy times when I sensed that something was missing in my life, soon swept aside by the next new anchorage. In April of the fourth year, we left Nassau, ready for the four-hundred-mile offshore sail to North Carolina. I was on the 3-to-6 a.m. watch, anticipating the sun-rise and soothed by the rhythm of the seas—when the epiphany came. Part of what's missing is a baby and a home and roots. When the ship's bell chimed and Jeff emerged from below, I told him my heart's desire. He said, "I'm ready!"

It took 17 years for me, after the baby, to be led by God, through our daughter, to the church and the heart and spirit of Christianity. As I continue to develop a relationship with Christ, the new heart and the new spirit fills me with gratitude and love.

In this Advent scripture, Ezekiel tells us that a heart of flesh will replace a heart of stone. Is this prophet foretelling the birth of the LORD incarnate, come to Earth with a heart of flesh? I pray that as we continually return to him, the LORD will give his Holy Spirit.

December 4, 2011

John the Baptist - Not My Favorite

Freda Chambers

Mark 1:1-8

Today's scripture echoes themes of comfort and confession. In the theme of Advent confessions, I have one to share. It's about a central figure in today's lesson: John the Baptist. John has never been my favorite Bible character. As an adult, I understand the value in preparing the way. Much good comes from careful preparation. Indeed, I am immensely thankful for the individuals who prepared the way for me to experience God's love in a personal way. But my childish impatience to get on with the story hangs on. Sometimes, it is hard to wait and pause—to reflect and confess. The reward is worth it. You know because you've shared it before. Take the time today to see what your heart is crying out. God will face it with you. He will comfort you. He will laugh and share your joy, too, as your heart reenters the Christmas season anew. Let the story of John the Baptist prod your anger or sadness, and rejoice as you feel the comfort of that small babe and majestic LORD.

December 5, 2011

One Desire: Three Hopes

P. Randall Wright

Psalm 27:4

Psalm 27 is actually two distinct poems. The first six verses comprise a powerful song, expressing unshakable trust in God. In the remaining verses, the psalmist laments, crying out to God as one in need of help in great distress. Verse 4 seems to express the desires of the psalmist's heart as he both celebrates God's faithfulness and pours out his lamentations.

This one verse is plenty to ponder during the Advent season. The poet expresses one desire and three hopes. So, for today, tomorrow, and the next day, we'll narrow our focus on Psalm 27 to verse 4 only.

One desire: the first hope. Notice how the writer phrases the desire. "One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after..." Asking involves seeking. We don't ask God for something and sit back to wait for our desire to appear magically. When we ask God to fulfill our desire, God doesn't make a list and check it twice to find out if we're naughty or nice before God responds to our request. No, God meets us along the paths of our seeking, and therein our desire is fulfilled. Asking involves seeking.

The psalmist asks for one thing, but he articulates three sub-requests. One desire: three hopes. The first hope is "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." I don't believe the psalmist wants to set up residence in the church house; rather, he wants to be a member of God's household and to experience God's inescapable nearness all of his days.

When I sit in the magnificent sanctuary of Fernwood Baptist Church, with highlights of the Biblical witness before me in color, art, and glass, I sense an ever-present nearness of God. I know I can't sit in there forever; there is work to be done outside the walls of the church. However, the nearness to God I feel in the sanctuary is something I wish to keep with me wherever I am.

This Advent I invite us all to long for the nearness of God as we live in God's household—our family of faith.

December 6, 2011

One Desire: Three Hopes

P. Randall Wright

Psalm 27:4

Psalm 27:4 is packed with meaning and encouragement. “One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after...” Asking and seeking are inseparable in the spiritual life. The psalmist asks and seeks for one thing, but he articulates three expressions of that one thing. One desire: three hopes. Yesterday, we considered the first hope: To live in the household of God, in God’s inescapable nearness, is his first hope. The presence of God he feels while in the temple is what he longs to feel while he is away from the temple.

But how can he do that? The answer might be in his second hope: “...to behold the beauty of the Lord...” There is beauty all around. I look out upon a rainy autumn day and find beauty in the earth, and I feel the nearness of God. I see beauty in the faces of children at play, and I know that God is with us. I hear the sounds of sacred music and am awash in its beauty, and suddenly God is near. I open the pages of the Bible and read of God’s mercy and grace and affirm God’s presence in history even to this moment.

“Behold” is a good Bible word. To behold something is to hold it in my awareness...to let it be before me, so that I can take in this something’s many facets. Again, we are active participants in beholding the beauty of God. God’s beauty is all around us, if we would but take the time to behold it.

Stop and behold the beauty of the Lord. Celebrate God’s nearness in your beholding. Then say with the psalmist, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

December 7, 2011

One Desire: Three Hopes

P. Randall Wright

Psalm 27:4

The third hope of the psalmist's desire is intriguing: "...to inquire in his temple...." There are many translations of the word "inquire," including "to say prayers," "to ponder over," "to consider," and "to contemplate." The particularities of language are intriguing. Any of the above translations fit, but I like "to inquire."

I have some questions for God. Do you? There are the usual ones. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the good die young? God, why don't you intervene to alleviate suffering? Why was Jesus crucified?

Then there are other, more personal questions we have for the Almighty. In the quiet or privacy of our prayers, we ask...we inquire. I'm happy we have the freedom to make our inquiries, and I'm convinced that God accepts our questions and helps us find answers.

Remember what the psalmist said: "One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after...." Active seeking involves asking questions, and the writer was no stranger to sorrows and difficulties which raised questions. As we read verses 7-14 of Psalm 27, we understand how the psalmist may have questioned God.

"Do not hide your face from me." "Do not turn your servant away in anger." "Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries." The psalmist knows that life is not always experienced with a fresh awareness of God's presence and beauty. Sometimes we have questions.

A striking characteristic of the laments in the psalms is that while they begin with sometimes brutal and painful honesty, they end on notes of strong and abiding hope. After his lamentation in Psalm 27, the poet ends with words of hope and encouragement.

"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart wait for the Lord."

One desire: "One thing I asked of the Lord...." Three hopes: "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...to behold the beauty of the Lord...to inquire in his temple."

Advent is a season of hope. May we join the psalmist as he seeks hope in God.

December 8, 2011

What Is Important?

Marcia Harris

Philippians 3:7-11

If you have had the task of downsizing to a smaller dwelling, or cleaning out your parents' house after their deaths, you recognize how hard it is to know what to keep and what to discard. Things which once seemed to be very important may give way to other things which hold significantly more value.

The apostle Paul acknowledged his credentials: his birth into a Hebrew family, his education in Jerusalem, his Roman citizenship. For him, however, the value of those things paled when compared to the trust and hope he placed in Christ.

What about our lives do we think makes us important? Do we place unnecessary value on where we were born, where we now live, who our friends are? Or do we, like Paul, recognize that those things are inconsequential when we look at our relationship with Jesus Christ?

Prayer: LORD, as we travel toward the manger, restore our sense of what is important. Help us to re-examine our values so that we may better know you. Amen.

December 9, 2011

Looking Toward the Prize

Marcia Harris

Philippians 3:12-16

When I was 5 or 6 years old, I attended a Fall Carnival at the school where my father was the principal. One of the games I played was Bingo. After many tries, I finally won a game, and an Old Spice gift set was the prize. I was thrilled to have something to give my daddy. I thought my effort was worth the reward. While I easily could have given up, I was intent on achieving my goal.

Paul emphasizes the importance of staying focused on the goal. We are reminded to look ahead and not to be distracted by the burdens of past sin. Christianity is a process of growing, striving, and maturing, and we should always be making progress toward our goal. We are misled if we believe there are no more struggles to face and no more enemies to encounter.

It is easy for us to be distracted, especially at Christmas. We are told to decorate a certain way, buy a certain gift, and celebrate at a certain party. It is important to remember, however, the One whose birth we honor. Our forward-looking will lead us to the day when we will be all that Christ saves us for and wants us to be.

Prayer: Holy God, may our hearts always reach out for you as we look forward to the goal you have for us. Amen.

December 10, 2011

All I Want for Christmas Is...Nothing?

Susan Plemmons

Psalm 126:3

When I was a kid, there was nothing so tantalizing as the thought of Christmas approaching. The December days seemed interminably long as visions of our family's aluminum tree (it was a '60s thing) with piles of presents underneath danced in my little head. I can remember fighting with my brothers and sisters over who would be the first to peruse the Sears catalog, which held endless possibilities of Christmas gifts. Of course, with five kids in the family, we knew we would get only a few things from Santa, but it didn't keep us from dreaming.

Then, as I became an adult, a funny thing happened. As I became blessed with the gifts that money can't buy—a beautiful daughter, a loving husband, healthy grandchildren—I found I didn't want or need a single thing for Christmas! God has so filled my life with gifts, I am overwhelmed by His goodness to me, and the thought that I need something material to make my life complete is totally absurd!

In a month or so, my daughter will ask me what I want for Christmas, as she does every year. And I will tell her, as I always do, "I don't need anything." Because, to paraphrase Psalm 126:3, "The Lord has done great things for me, and I am filled with joy."

December 11, 2011

The Bethany Project

Kelly Belcher

John 1:6-8, 19-28

It's getting close to D-Day – only two weeks left before you must produce another Christmas Day! Better get cracking! What are you sitting around reading devotionals for? Good grief, there's stuff to do! Gifts to buy—and wrap, too. Cards to mail. Decorations to fix. Food to make. Plane tickets to buy. Houses to clean. Trees to trim. Relatives to visit. Extra holiday events to attend. You'll be doing well to cram all this stuff into the next two weeks so that, on Christmas morning, you can start the show and direct the production, and the day will go well, and everyone will be happy!

Or not. It could be that, for these next two weeks, you could choose instead not to save your world from a horrible and disappointing Christmas Day. It could be that you could decide to keep Christmas as a holy day of gratitude for the goodness of living daily in the light of Christ, and you could look forward to feeling even more deeply on that day the spiritual abundance we share all the time. It could be that you can find many ways in the next two weeks to express to others how much you love them and to share your spiritual abundance with people, even (gasp!) strangers, as a way of marking Christ's birth.

Can we consider foregoing all the over-work and preparation in favor of holy-day keeping? It's a difficult prospect. Materialistic children will be disappointed. Judgmental mothers-in-law will be appalled. Competitive family members will disapprove. Most of us are addicted to our habit of laboring to produce the holiday, to prevent disappointment of anyone, including us. It's a shocking thing to ask us to neglect it cold-turkey.

Think of it as a project to work on bit by bit. Consider giving just one or maybe two days each of these two Advent weeks to John's sit-and-savor-the-coming-of-Christ idea. When somebody asks what you're doing or who you are, you can say you are "working with John on The Bethany Project."

It seems it was excitement and pleasure at the knowledge of the coming Christ that prompted John to respond constantly that, no, he wasn't the messiah, he was the Official Spokesperson for the messiah. Maybe he said it with some relief, as well.

It's a relief to realize we don't have to produce Christmas any more than John had to produce world salvation single-handedly. We are just the official spokespersons for the Christ known to a startlingly small number of people and sometimes, strangely, still unknown even to us. But we've got two glorious Advent weeks to allow Christ to be revealed inside our own hearts and to reveal him to others. It's okay to spend Advent time on The Bethany Project. The good news: the Messiah has already taken care of producing Christmas Day.

December 12, 2011

Did You Notice God's Presence Today?

Clarence Batts

Psalm 125

Sometimes I wonder how God must feel. He has sent prophets, His son, and the Holy Spirit and has given us the Bible to teach, show, guide, and tell us how to live in relationship with Him and His creation. But we complicate things! Many times we feel compelled to expound on God's word and to be pharisaical in our approach to living life.

Life is to be lived by God's measuring stick and not ours. Many individuals, who profess to follow Christ, have adopted a quasi-cultural standard to convince themselves that they are living life as God has commanded. Psalm 125, even though it was written on behalf of a nation, can be a personal prayer for God's guidance in our lives. This psalm reminds us of God's promise always to "be there" for each of us. This is not a promise to exempt us from the evil, hurt, and pain of life but a promise to sustain us through all of life's valleys and mountain-tops. God asks only that we put our trust and confidence in Him, and He will protect us. We need not despair when we see the unfaithful around us enjoy the fruits of this world, because He will not claim them on judgment day.

Advent is a reminder to each of us that God is still trying through His son to reach our "hard of hearts" to say how much He truly loves us and that following His instructions may be difficult but not impossible: we are lonely but not alone, uncomfortable but not without joy, and humanly unsustainable but divinely eternal.

Give praise to God for His protection and presence.

December 13, 2011

The Satellite Network

Martha Rentz

Psalm 125

I wonder if, at any time during the wise men's journey, the pilgrim's song of Psalm 125 came to them. Their wisdom shone in the trust of each mile traveled toward the star in the evening Bethlehem sky. The satellite network was powered by their trust in the Lord with listening hearts that were plugged into the same frequency of love and being a pilgrim of the good.

Psalm 125 is a gift designed for the seeker who travels into unknown places. Regardless of the circumstances, trusting in the Lord surrounds and protects our journey. Those whose ways in this world are weighted down with sly, shadowy tongues and trickery are removed from the righteous. We are called to continue our journey without the temptation of mixing it up with harmful interactions of evildoers.

May we all be blessed with the message of this Psalm and its gift of quietness and peace.

December 14, 2011

Suffering and Rejection

Robert Hendrix

Mark 9:9-13

We find in this passage another mystery. As Mark gives us only a passing glance at this scene after the Transfiguration, we must somehow glean a glimpse of truth. Those select disciples who accompanied Jesus onto the mountain try to understand what they have witnessed. Jesus instructs them not to tell about this experience until after he has “risen from the dead.” What are the disciples to make of all of this?

Why are we contemplating “rising from the dead” during Advent? If you are like me, it is a difficult subject to consider even during Lent. We may not want to think on these things, but we must acknowledge that it was all part of God’s plan. Jesus discussed this with his disciples many times, but they still struggled to grasp it, just as I am sure we all would. It was part of Jesus’ reality, and while hard to understand, it is part of our heritage.

The reference to Elijah is about one who will be a prophet like Elijah. John the Baptist was the one who would fulfill this role. Elijah had Ahab and Jezebel, while John had Herod and Herodias. Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus all suffered and were rejected. The disciples did not understand this at the time of this confrontation, but they, too, would face suffering and rejection in their lifetimes.

As modern-day disciples, where does that leave us? We hear about persecution in other parts of the world where those disciples face suffering and rejection. I wonder if I could be strong enough to face this type of suffering and rejection and yet maintain my faith. I believe it refers to the cross that Jesus has asked us to bear as part of following him. When confronted by a challenge similar to the one that the rich, young man received from Jesus, could we give up everything and be willing to serve God completely?

As an Advent prayer, I hope that each of us can search ourselves for the answer to this question. While we probably would prefer not to do this, I believe as we answer this, it will bring us back to a confirmation that we, as a church and as individuals, need to be Christ to one another and to our community. It is not only a part of our vision, but it is our calling. May it be so for us all this Advent Season.

December 15, 2011

Peer Over the Edge of the Cradle

Jason Loscuító

Hebrews 1:1-4

Have you ever had the experience of someone gazing at your new-born baby and saying, “She looks just like you,” or “She looks like a combination of both of you”? When our daughter was born, I would often wonder how anyone could determine which parent she most resembled. As she has grown older, I often hear people comment how she received certain features from either Chamlee or me. It is a fascinating experience to watch Abigail grow up and retain certain physical features that she inherited from us and yet remain a distinct individual with her own look and personality.

The author of Hebrews begins this sermon with a description of the nature of Jesus. Jesus is described as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” The author wanted this early Christian community to understand who Jesus was and what Jesus’ mission was during his ministry on Earth. If they wanted to understand who God was, then they could look to the life of Jesus who reflected God’s glory and God’s nature during his life on Earth.

During this Advent Season, we are called to prepare our hearts for the birth of the infant Messiah who was born in Bethlehem. We are called to travel to the lowly manger in Bethlehem and peer over the edge of the cradle into the face of the One who reflects God’s glory.

December 16, 2011

Peer Over the Edge of the Cradle

Jason Loscuító

Hebrews 1:5-14

The writer of Hebrews continues the sermon by describing Christ's superiority to the angels. The author uses a variety of references from the Psalms to describe Christ's nature. These passages were used to support the idea of Christ's deity in the early Christian community. They also describe how angels are servants, not beneficiaries, of the plan of salvation. We are also reminded that angels exist for our sake, and we exist for Christ's sake.

Biblical scholars believe that these Psalms were regularly sung in the early Christian and Jewish worship services and, therefore, were familiar to the congregation reading this sermon. Jesus is described as the Royal Son and Heir of God. He is the mediator of creation, unchanging and eternal, who is exalted to God's right hand.

December 17, 2011

“No Man Speaks as This Man Speaks”

Margaret League

John 7:40-52

At Christmas time we don't just celebrate the birth of Jesus, we celebrate His ADVENT—that is, His coming into the world from outside the world. He came with a message of love and hope and peace and joy. He spoke of repentance, of faith, of God's kingdom in the heart of man. Many turned a deaf ear because Jesus did not meet their expectations of the Messiah, but others listened and recognized that “no man speaks as this man speaks” (verse 46).

Let us listen anew this season as He speaks to us of –

- A _ tonement
- D _ isciplines requirements
- V _ ictory over the devil
- E _ ternity with Him
- N _ ewness of life
- T _ rue judgments

And let us respond to Him by _

- A _ bidding in Him through prayers
- D _ ependent on the leadership of the Holy Spirit
- V _ oicing one's praise
- E _ ngaging in Bible study
- N _ oticing opportunities of service
- T _ aking up our cross and following Him

Thus we will celebrate a great “ADVENT – ure”!

December 18, 2011

Faces of Love

Stacy N. Sergent

Luke 1:26-38

I have always been something of a museum junkie, and during the years that I lived in Europe, I gorged myself on them. From the Louvre and the Uffizi Gallery, to the Museum of Mechanical Music and (no kidding) the Mushroom Museum, I visited as many as I possibly could. The classical art museums in particular were a treat at first, as I saw up-close sculptures and paintings and stained glass that had previously existed for me only on the pages of books. But eventually, I confess, I began to yawn my way through gallery after gallery of religious art. “*Another Madonna and Child? Come on!*”

Only something out of the ordinary was able to recapture my attention, and I found that at a small church museum in Italy. There I saw woodcarvings of various scenes from the gospels, and the one that told this story of the angel’s pronouncement to Mary awakened me. The faces of Mary and the angel were so lifelike, with their mouths open in speech, that I felt as if I were eavesdropping on their conversation. The beautiful angel Gabriel hovered just above the floor a few feet from Mary, practically quivering with excitement at the good news he was delivering. But it was Mary who most drew my attention and fascination. Her expression was one of awe, even terror, mixed with inquisitiveness. I could almost hear the dozens of questions she was pouring out, even while the angel was still speaking. “She must have been so scared,” I thought, “knowing the town could stone her for getting pregnant before she was married. I mean, she probably figured nobody would buy that whole ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’ thing. And still she said yes.”

Fear would have been the natural response in Mary’s situation—not just fear of her neighbors, but certainly fear of God. When Gabriel greeted her saying, “The Lord is with you,” the scripture says Mary was greatly troubled. It’s something we hear as warm and fuzzy now, but any stories Mary had grown up hearing about appearances of God would have involved lightning, thunder, burning bushes, and promises that no one could see God and live. I have never experienced the love of God made manifest in an angelic messenger, but if I did, I am absolutely certain that I would not be able to respond with the kind of trust-in-spite-of-fear that Mary did. Because of her willing faith, nine months later Mary could not only see God, but cradle him in her arms. Mary’s courage opened the door for her to be the

vessel of the greatest revelation of God's love the world has ever known, in Christ.

Prayer: Our God, we confess that we often get blasé about your love, take it for granted. This season, especially, help us to remember that it is a gift. Give us eyes to see the story from a different angle and to be awakened anew to the mystery and wonder of your incarnation. Amen.

December 19, 2011

The Humble Are Blessed

Robert Hendrix

Luke 1:46b-55

In what interesting circumstances Mary finds herself! Surely, she is scared and confused, but we hear nothing of that in her Psalm where she responds to the amazing news she has received. When I think of *The Magnificat*, I usually think of the beautiful soprano solo that Meri or Kelsey Lynch typically sings during Advent. The music is wonderful, but these words are almost haunting. How can Mary so easily accept her plight? What must Mary be feeling as she sings, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”?

When we hear the word savior, we may not immediately consider God as our savior. In truth, we often think of Jesus as savior and somehow forget that Jesus is God incarnate. Mary knows Jesus only as her conceived child. We often need to remind ourselves that God chose to put as much of Himself as a human could hold to become our savior. While Mary has no true grasp of this herself, she remains a willing participant. The mystery of this conception may be beyond her understanding, as well as ours, but it is not beyond her love and her faith. She is overwhelmed that God would even consider her for such an opportunity, not once considering the ramifications of this situation. All she sees is the blessing that God has bestowed upon her.

And why is she blessed? She is blessed because of her humility. God is “mindful” of her humility and, therefore, trusts her with this tremendous blessing. Humility is not self-serving, but it follows the teaching that Jesus would later pronounce about the last being first. As Jesus states later in Luke 14, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” The paradox of this is remaining humble when we know that God will bless us for being humble.

This is a tremendous challenge for each of us. We feel that God has blessed us. We hope to use the spiritual gifts that God has blessed us with to do His will in the world. Often we must supplement our spiritual gifts with organizational or leadership skills to accomplish the goals we have established. Using these skills to accomplish goals and achieve success tends to lead us toward pride rather than toward humility. We need a balance in our lives so that we can remember that Jesus taught us humility and that God blesses the humble. If we lose that perspective, we will miss out on so much.

During this Advent season, the hope of God’s blessing for all of us is our fervent hope. But consider the truly humble, including those who cannot necessarily provide for themselves. Jesus often spoke of the poor, the

widows, and the orphans. In his day, these were the forgotten ones. May we all remember the forgotten ones of our day during this Advent Season. May we approach them as their humble servants and not with an air of superiority.

December 20, 2011

Mary's Song

Laura-lee Jones

Luke 1: 46b-55

Scripture: And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

This early morning in late October, as I write this for December 20, memories of 18 years ago flood my mind. We were working on the musical at the preschool where I taught music and science. "Clip-Clops" and "Birthday of a King" were ringing in my ears. People were joking that Stuart and I needed to be part of a live nativity, due to my obvious pregnancy. It had been a difficult pregnancy in the sense that medical tests had shown that the baby was most likely going to be born with a chromosome disorder. We were as prepared as young parents could be. Luckily, we had a friend who was my MD. (Actually, our doctor was born and raised in Spartanburg, Cal Hayslip.) Because of these potential problems, I had undergone extensive testing and many ultrasounds. On Friday morning, December 16, we had a very successful Christmas Worship service at school. On Saturday night we were at a Sunday School party at the Hayslips' home, where I told Cal that I was going to have the baby before Christmas. The next morning, as Cal kept Nathan in the church nursery, I told him that I was going to have the baby before Christmas. Cal was insistent that it was way too early to deliver. It was a great weekend of singing Christmas carols and celebrating the season. Then about 4 a.m. on Monday, December 20, lying in bed, I realized that I was in labor—more than five weeks early!!!! For all my talk of having the baby before Christmas, I really wasn't prepared. Aaron, a healthy baby boy, was born later that morning. Stuart went home to get Nathan. While he was gone, Hugh Burlington, friend and pastor (and former Fernwood Baptist member), sat with me. He read the scripture from Luke 1 as a "blessing" on the baby and the day.

I think through the 18 years since and how singing songs of hope and trusting in God give us strength even when we are most afraid. Like Mary, we experience times, times when things seem overwhelming and unsure, when we sing hymns, hymns that remind us of God's ever-present being, being in song calms our souls and fears, fears that could not be handled any other way!

Miraculously, we were able to bring little (4.5 lb) Aaron home early for Christmas. He was in church that Christmas morning, sitting in the back to avoid germs but helping us all to celebrate the miracle of life in God's kingdom!!

December 21, 2011

I Sing a Backward Song

Kelly Belcher

1 Samuel 2:1-10

The original song of *The Magnificat*, reproduced in the gospel on the lips of Mary at the annunciation, Hannah's prayer is a litany of things getting turned upside-down. Long before the life of Jesus or any recording of written material about his life, these words were recorded as the thanks of a grateful mother for the life of her son, a boy who would hear God's calling and move the House of Israel.

By the time of the gospels, faithful people had learned to expect the work of Yahweh to reverse the usual order of things. We have heard these lessons from Old and New Testament stories all our lives: warriors' weapons broken while the weak are armed and strong. The hungry will be fed, and the fat, dumb, and happy will starve and stand at intersections with "Will Work for Food" placards. Barren women will fill maternity wards, and grandmothers will be childless.

A familiar scriptural idea, we fortunately do not experience it very much. It's a good thing for us that God's word is seldom actually enacted by God's people! We are pretty high up in the food chain, and a Hannah-like reversal of Biblical proportions would be catastrophic for us. We'd be the rich who were sent away empty. No more fretting over the stock market – we'd be divested. We'd be the previously fat and sated who'd be permanently hungry. Hey, no more dieting to worry about! We'd be turned out of our houses and left on the sidewalk in front of Miracle Hill Ministries, wearing other people's cast-off coats and standing in the hot-dog line at the Soup Kitchen. That'd be the end of the monthly bill-payment scramble—no more mortgages or power or cable.

What if Hannah's prayer actually happened to us, and we awoke on Christmas morning in a manner similar to the dreams of Ebenezer Scrooge: if every person in Spartanburg exchanged places magically with someone of the opposite life-situation? Where would you wake up? Who'd wake up in your bed instead of you?

This reversal, the turning of the expected order upside-down, is the prayer of Hannah, the gospel message, and the Word of the LORD whose birth we await. It has little chance of happening unless we effect it ourselves. Hannah herself, barren and miserable, finally had her baby and then gave him away to God again, reversing her own curse. Can you imagine taking part in such a great reversal?

December 22, 2011

Sing...Bless...Tell...Declare...Ascribe...Worship...

Tonya D. Hill

Psalm 96

Early this morning (very early), my dog woke me up saying, “*You’d better get up now and take me out!*” And so we were up and out at 5:30 with the world still quiet, with no clouds in sight, and the stars were spectacular. In that moment, there was a sense of peace and “all is right with the world.” The beauty of the heavens, the fresh cold air, and the majesty of mountains seemed to wrap us up in a tight hug as we walked around... Even Beau seemed to sense and to appreciate the holiness of the moment of awe for and by creation.

Three hours later, was a different story. The morning news was reporting many reminders that not all is right with the world and that for many people, peace appears to be impossible. The sky was not clear. The sun was obscured by dark gray clouds. The noise from traffic was significant, and the “perfume” from a nearby paper mill was working hard to counteract the fresh cold air. However...those mountains...were still there and still hugging me!

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, *An Altar in the World*, she recalls an invitation some years ago to speak at a church. When she asked the priest, “What do you want me to talk about?” he replied: “Come tell us what is saving your life now.” Wow! What an invitation to be aware of all the moments of our lives. Psalm 96: 2: “Sing to the LORD, bless His name; tell of His salvation (help) from day to day.” Maybe there is a double meaning here in this verse: Tell of God’s day-to-day help, and also, day-to-day, tell of God’s help!

Life is a mixture of mountain-top and valley experiences and all the areas in-between. Perhaps there are clues in Psalm 96 to help us see and experience God’s salvation/help even when our vision is obscured, when peace is evasive, and when our hope is slipping. Sing...bless...tell...declare...ascribe...worship...

Prayer: God, help us always to be aware of how you are saving/helping us.

December 23, 2011

The Best Gift

Susan Plemmons

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Seventeen years ago today, I got the best Christmas present I ever could've received: I married my husband, Mike, right here at Fernwood, in the old chapel. There are many reasons why I love this wonderful man, not the least of which is he has always done the laundry, as well as the vacuuming and dusting. And now, since he is retired and I'm not, he does *all* the housework, including ironing my clothes for me. Yes, ladies, I got lucky on that count.

I love Mike because he loves the same things I do...art, music, traveling, reading. I love him because he loves to help others in any way he can. I love him because he never complains when he gets recruited to help me with all the mission activities we've participated in over the years.

But what makes me truly happy is when I come home from a stressful day at work. I only have to look at his smiling face to know that he loves me as much as I love him. What a wonderful feeling it is to know that I make my husband as happy as he makes me!

In the beautiful words found in the obscure Old Testament book of Zephaniah, in particular, chapter 3, verse 7, we see that God loves all of us that way. Isn't it amazing to think that when God looks at us, He smiles? Isn't it amazing to think that God takes great delight in *us*, that he rejoices over *us* with singing? The realization that God loves us, warts and all, is a powerful motivation to live our lives so we will not disappoint Him...or ourselves.

Let the knowledge that you are God's beloved creation be your gift this day and every day of the year.

December 24, 2011

Singing a New Song about an Old Story

P. Randall Wright

Psalm 96

When I was a pastor, I always enjoyed the challenge of trying to plan something new and fresh for Advent. I realized that we'd be singing most of the same Christmas carols, following many of the same Advent traditions, using the same decorations as years before, and reading the same Christmas story from the Bible. However, when I preached, I wanted to "sing a new song about an old story."

Psalm 96 is a coronation psalm, praising the coming of a new king. No, I don't believe the psalmist had Jesus in mind when he wrote the poem, but we certainly can understand how Christians through the ages have used these lines to celebrate the birth of the King of kings. "O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth..." (verse 1).

I suppose one way to approach the singing of a new song is to try singing the same one in a different way. We could, for example, let the trees sing! That's right. Didn't you know that trees sing? It's right there in verse 12. "...Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy..."

Some Christians have produced "Singing Christmas Tree" programs as a new way to sing the old song. I went to one of these productions once. Never went back. Too many lights and too much glitz and glamour. Too much loud singing and stage directing. "Singing Christmas Tree" productions seem to pale when one thinks about "all the trees of the forest" singing for joy. Wouldn't that be something?!

Singing a new song about an old story requires me to understand what I would call "spiritual multiple births." Jesus is born over and over again and has been since his birthday. We celebrate his birthday in grand style. But for me to sing a new song, Jesus has to be born in me again and again...and again and again and again. As I re-ponder and re-experience the Jesus story, I will have something to sing about. I will have a new song.

When I sing this new song, every part of my inner landscape will sing forth. My inner seas, fields, trees, and forests will sing for joy. The new song has to be born in me, though. I can't depend on the glitz and glamour of someone else or anyone's Advent preaching or the Advent celebrations of my church to make me sing. The new song about the old story has to be born in me; otherwise, it sounds like a cheap imitation...or a stage production so full of lights and sounds that the lyrics drown out the message.

So, my prayer for me and for anyone reading these thoughts is that Jesus will be born in us so that we can "sing to the Lord a new song."

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