

Advent Devotional 2010

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year. It means “coming” and points to the coming of the Messiah, as foretold by the prophets. During Advent, we are given the time to anticipate the celebration of Jesus’ birth – time for preparing our hearts to rejoice in His coming - and time for welcoming Christ into our lives. Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time for repentance and confession. It is always a time for silence, reflection, prayer, and spiritual renewal.

For a number of years, this Advent Devotional Guide has been a source of strength and inspiration to many who have been able to read it and share in its lessons. The success of this special project has been due largely to the efforts and dedication of many of my friends, colleagues and family members. I am grateful for the fact that so many others have shared in my commitment to making this Advent Devotional Guide a reality.

As I started to think about Advent this year, my thoughts turned to the story of the Magi and how they followed the Bethlehem Star to the place of Jesus’ birth. Imagine the faith, hope and excitement that must have accompanied their journey to the manger. It seems fitting that we take the time this Advent to consider how we too are called to “follow a star” as we look forward to the fulfillment of God’s promises – both in the birth of our Savior and in the return of our Lord Jesus to usher in God’s Kingdom. This year’s devotional is composed of a few newly written devotions together with a number of devotions chosen from previous editions.

As always, it is my intention that these devotions will aid in our celebration of the season and in our preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. May you be blessed as we consider together what the Christmas and Advent stories, as well as our own personal experiences, have to teach us about the richness and the meaning behind this twenty-some day journey leading up to the celebration of Christmas. - Rev. Pete Ullmann

An Online Version of this Devotional Guide
can be viewed in its entirety at:
www.PresbyteryMiddleTennessee.org
www.cherokeepresbytery.org

* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV. c. 1989

Sunday, November 28, 2010

Matthew 2: 1- 12

“STARLIGHT”

Matthew 2: 1- 12 TEV “Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the baby born to be king of the Jews? We saw His star when it came up in the east, and have come to worship Him.’”

And as we know from Matthew’s telling of the story, Herod was deeply worried and perplexed, and asked his visitors to bring him back news if they discovered the child so he could also “go and worship him.” The Wisemen were “wise,” however, and saw through Herod’s evil intentions.

“And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was. They went into the house and when they saw the Child with his mother Mary, they worshiped Him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

On leaving, they returned to their country by another road because God has warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

Starlight. . .star bright
First star I see tonight
Wish I may, wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight.
Tonight I wish for heavenly peace
And for an earth where wars shall cease
A world where every girl and boy
Is deeply loved and filled with joy.

I wish for people near and far
To seek the never fading star
That leads them to a baby small
Who comes to save us one and all.

I wish for those who feel ashamed
To set aside their need to blame
Themselves for every hurt they feel
And know the love of God that's real.

And may their darkness be made bright
By stars that sparkle every night
Where wishes really do come true
And everyone is made brand new.

Starlight. . . star bright
Hear the wish I wish tonight
Wish I may, wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight.

**Prayer: Clear away the glare of street lights and the fog
from our inner eyes to see the same star the Wisemen saw.
Lead us to the home of our hearts where we may worship
the promised one whose name is Jesus who came to set
all people free from their sin. Let us lift up our eyes to the
wonder of starlit skies beyond all measure, in the name of
the Child before whom we bow and worship. Amen**

Rev. Phil Leftwich, Executive Presbyter
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee
Franklin, Tennessee
Advent, 2010

Monday, November 29, 2010 1 Corinthians 15: 50- 58

A TIME OF PREPARATION

**1 Corinthians 15: 51a "Listen, I will tell you a mystery!
We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."**

This year will be my fiftieth celebration of Christmas. Like a shiny garland on a tree it is a long string of happy memories. Of course the earliest ones I don't actually recall, but even those are on the garland, captured in the stories my aunts, uncles, and parents tell about the few years when their children were infants. So many of

the stories involve their relationships with each other, in fun and partnership. Like when "Mama Dee" (Grandma DeBevoise) chasing the cat, knocked the Christmas tree completely over, or how all of the siblings worked furiously together early one Christmas Eve morning pasting green stamps into books to run down and redeem before the store closed so first grandchild, cousin Bob Harding, could have a red, pedal-push fire truck. My own memory weighs in pretty early with Christmas celebrations in the manse where my father was serving as a pastor, and the excitement and joy in the circle with my brothers while we waited after worship services every Christmas Eve for my mother to serve peppermint ice cream with a candle in it. We thought it was the most ancient and mystical of Christmas sacraments. Looking back I can see it was neither, but it was precious.

Then we grew, and Christmas celebrations change with age. Presents held much more power for older elementary children, especially in the anticipation of them. And then as a teenager it was about special performances and friendship, singing in the school chorus, or staying up all night at the Living Nativity Scene, or taking a date to the Christmas Dance, and coming home late, late to my Grandmother Jones and my mother sitting up sewing repairs in stockings and their offering me a cup of tea, coaching me to share with them details of the evening.

Now I see how Christmas celebration has changed once again for my own parents, and is not so much about attention even to grandchildren, as it is about each other. So on Christmas morning they are no longer racing off to someone else's home, but seem content to rise in bathrobes, and fix their own special breakfast. They never speak of longing to go back, but seem warmly happy in their current celebration. And for me it is a sort of comforting assurance to think that perhaps I also might enjoy Christmas celebrations future as much or more than I have delighted in Christmas celebrations past. Even as I am changed.

And I wonder if maybe it is like that in the resurrection for those I have loved. Are they celebrating Christmas in the life to come? (While it is a new thought for me I can't think of any reason why they wouldn't). If so, is there anything to indicate that their celebration consists of lamenting that they are not sitting in the midst of my current Christmas circle of college student cousins?

That is not what the evidence and the pattern of sanctification in this mortal life indicates. I suspect in their Christmas celebrations in the life eternal they are doing a new thing. And while, as a part of joy, perhaps that celebration to come contains a taste of Christmas past (I still eat peppermint ice cream on Christmas Eve), doesn't it make sense that its focus is on their joy in the resurrection?

Christmas celebration changes with the years, and maybe that's to help prepare us for the ever changing joy of Christmas celebration to come.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the way in which you use Advent and Christmas over time to sanctify us, to help prepare us for the people you are shaping us to be. In the name of Jesus Christ who makes all things new again we pray. Amen

Dr. John T. DeBevoise, Senior Pastor
Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church
Tampa, Florida
Advent, 2005

Tuesday, November 30, 2010

Psalm 46

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CHRISTMAS PEACE

Psalm 46: 10 "Be still, and know that I am God!"

As our society heads into it's predictable, expected fever pitch of the holidays, I always find myself longing for a peaceful hideaway. As the streets get more and more crowded and the stress of finding the perfect gifts for our loved ones builds, God somehow gets pushed to the sidelines. Sure, we mouth words of Jesus Christ coming in a manger and we sing choruses of Silent Night, but our lives do not express the true meaning of Christmas.

In an Internet world where information is worshipped and more is better – more knowledge, more computer literacy, more websites – the idea of a peaceful Christmas is too removed to be reality. It is difficult to step away from the computer that pulls us in for more access and knowledge just as it is difficult to step away from the

stores and stuff and things that inevitably lead to a materialistic Christmas far removed from the Baby in the manger.

Our Scripture reading from Psalm 46 offers a different voice. This passage is not one readily looked to as an "Advent text", but how appropriate it is in our season of frenzy and busy and stress. "Be still and know that I am God." Despite your lists and lists of gifts to buy and food to cook, "Be still and know that I am God". Despite your panic that you might get left behind in this computer driven world, "Be still and know that I am God." Despite the tension of wanting a truly meaningful Christmas and the world's answer to a meaningful season, "Be still and know that I am God."

These words of Scripture were spoken long before the Christ Baby, but I somehow sense that in that barn when Baby Jesus let out the first cry of a newborn, Mary and Joseph watched in awe and stillness, knowing full well of God's amazing love and surprising gift. I somehow sense that as the shepherds and the magi gathered to see this Christ that there was not much talking and noise. I somehow sense that there was a stillness in the air and everyone felt the presence of God with them.

I invite you this season to find a place to "Be still and know that I am God." Whether that place be the stillness of a sanctuary, the beauty of the outdoors, or the quietness of time alone with God, find that place and that time to sit and listen and feel God with you and pointing you toward where to find the Baby in the Bethlehem Manger.

Prayer: Gracious God, speak to us this day in the stillness of this moment. Speak to us not of earthly things and desires but of Holy guidance and peace. Help us escape the noise and life and confusion and find refuge and strength in You. "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." (Psalm 46:11) We pray in the name of the Baby Jesus who leads us to life everlasting. Amen

Rev. Monnie Caine, Pastor
Normandy Presbyterian Church
Normandy, Tennessee
Advent, 2000

Wednesday, December 1, 2010

Psalm 118: 6-7

THAT MUCH LOVE!

John 3: 16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

It’s been almost a year since last Christmas, and oh how our worlds have changed! New friends, new jobs, new goals, new homes, and new relationships; health challenges, loved ones lost and found, new technologies, new blessings and new dilemmas. The price of gas is up, the stock market is down, and the iPod is here to stay (for a while – at least).

As the lines at Walmart get longer and the daylight hours grow shorter, another Christmas approaches and is a perfect time to STOP and put the changes of the past year in proper perspective. The sun still rises each morning and sets each evening. Dogs still bark and babies still cry. Chocolate still tastes delicious and God still loves us!

On this annual celebration of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, we remember that God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to become one of us so that we might be returned to perfect fellowship with Him. Jesus became incarnate on that first Christmas morning so that we sinners might have everlasting life. God loves us THAT much!

So, while our financial, social and logistical circumstances vary from year to year, God is the constant that gives our lives purpose, and focus, and peace. Knowing that God loves us “that much”, and that Jesus came to earth and died on the cross to restore us to a right relationship with God, all is well this Christmas. Merry Christmas!

Prayer: O God of Christmas past, present, and future, in light of all the variables in our lives, we know that your love and salvation are the stable blessings that are ours. We know that we are blessed to be your children, your church, and the recipients of your Gift that came to us on that first Christmas

night and remains with us through eternity. Let us celebrate with Christians everywhere a merry Christmas. Amen

Mrs. Carole Ullmann, Elder
Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church
Tampa, Florida
Advent, 2007

Thursday, December 2, 2010

Isaiah 9: 2-7

THE ONE THAT WILL LAST

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.”

My first memory of Christmas came when I was a young boy in the late 1960’s. One of the more popular toys during that time was the Mr. Potatohead doll, which at the time was a real potato with plastic body parts (ears, nose, feet, etc.). I remember that every time I went to the store with my mom and saw a Mr. Potatohead, I begged her to have it. My parents tried to tell this kindergarten-aged child about the birth of Jesus but that was not a part of my reality at that age.

On Christmas day, I remember that it rained and we couldn’t go outside to play with our toys. My parents bought me a lot of presents – clothes, a Big Wheel, some cash money and other gifts. All the other presents didn’t matter because I received my beloved Mr. Potatohead. I played with it over and over again and remember being so happy! I felt as if I had the greatest gift of all.

Mr. Potatohead eventually became like all other gifts throughout the years – they all became old, worn-out and forgotten. But as I have grown older and learned more about Christianity and the life of Jesus, I cannot help but remember how God through Christ has led us thus far.

As I look back at my life and prepare for this Advent season, it is not about the accumulation of material gifts. This is the time in which we are preparing for the One who is to come – the Wonderful Counselor who will guide us; the Mighty God who will deliver us; the Everlasting Father who will shepherd us; and the Prince of Peace who will show us how to live with one another.

Mr. Potatohead and other material things will get old, lose their usefulness and eventually be discarded. However, we are to expect the One who is everlasting!

Prayer: Everlasting God, during this Advent season help us not to focus on things that will not last but to focus on the One who is everlasting. Amen.

Rev. Byron Wade, Pastor
Davie Street Presbyterian Church
Raleigh, North Carolina
Advent, 2005

Friday, December 3, 2010 **1 Kings 19: 1- 18**
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“FINDING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES”

Luke 2: 12 “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

1 Kings 19: 11b- 12 “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

Perhaps it was the timing of the two events, or maybe it was the work of the Spirit, but for some reason, I saw an Old Testament text in a new way. Let me explain.

A group in our church has been studying the Old Testament, and in preparation for one of the discussions, I spent some time reviewing the stories of Elijah, found in I Kings (chapters 17-19, 21). There’s the story of Elijah and the widow whose son dies, and the one about the big contest on Mt. Carmel. Then there is the account of Elijah running away from Jezebel. He goes out into the wilderness and wants to die. He’s depressed and discouraged, and feels alone. An angel feeds him and sends him on to Mt. Horeb, where he spends the night in the cave. At that point, two interesting things happen. First, God asks Elijah a question, “What are you doing here?” And then God tells him to go out and stand on the mountain because the Lord is going to pass by. Next comes the two verses recorded above: the ones about the wind and the earthquake and the fire – but God was not in any of these. Then there is the sound of sheer silence...the implication being that God was found in the sheer silence.

As I read that familiar passage again, it occurred to me that this story of Elijah has some interesting parallels to our Advent journey. First, it always seems that as November turns into December, and Christmas gets closer and closer, it becomes increasingly more likely that we will get stressed out and depressed and feel alone. There is a lot to get done. We head out with our shopping list, intent on finding presents for our loved ones, and we become frustrated when we cannot find the gift we want, or nothing seems to be “right.” We come home, the house is a mess, and there is baking and decorating to do. We feel like running away – going someplace and just sitting down and hiding. And if we die – that might be OK too! We have had it! At this point in Elijah’s story, the angel comes and tells Elijah to eat and drink and rest, otherwise the journey will be too much for him. It turns out that Elijah is not as alone as he thinks! The angel cares for him and about him. The same is true for us during Advent. We are not as alone as we feel, and the angel’s advice is appropriate for our journey too: we need to “Eat, and drink, and rest,” because we have more traveling to do, and we may not make it, unless we take care of ourselves.

The next part of the story is God confronting Elijah with the question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Is God asking Elijah why is he here, in this cave, instead of where he is supposed to be? Or, is God wondering what Elijah wants? God’s question is

ambiguous. But it does lead Elijah to reflect on his situation. It occurs to me that the same question is not a bad one for us to ask during our journey to the manger. Perhaps we should periodically stop what we are doing and ask ourselves, "What are we doing here?" Are we where we should be? Are we doing what's important and necessary, or should we be focusing on something else? Are we where God wants us to be? "What are we doing here?"

And then one final observation from the Elijah story: Elijah is instructed to go out, and stand on the mountain because the Lord is going to pass by. And three, very God-like things occur. There is wind, and an earthquake, and fire – all signs of God's presence. But the scripture tells us God was not in any of these. Rather, God was in the sound of sheer silence! As we come to Christmas there are a lot of activities that are fun and treasured: singing Christmas carols, baking cookies, decorating the Christmas tree, opening presents, enjoying family times, the Christmas Eve worship service, just to name a few. But where is God in all of this? The scriptures teach that, at Christmas, we will find God in a really strange place: God is in a "babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger!" Who would have thought? What a strange place for God to be? And maybe, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of Christmas, it takes some "sheer silence" for us to realize the wonder of that: that the God of all that is, can be found in the form of a child: Emmanuel, God With Us!

Prayer: Lord God, in the midst of all the preparations that come with Christmas; in the midst of the busyness we feel: help us to take time to eat, and drink, and rest. Help us to wonder about what we are doing and what we can do to serve you. And open our eyes to your presence in unexpected places. Still our hearts, that we may be open to the quiet way you come into our lives. This we ask in the name of the one who comes. Amen.

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church
Ellicott City, Maryland
Advent, 2010

Saturday, December 4, 2010

Exodus 33: 17-19, 34:10

"I KNOW YOU BY NAME"

Exodus 33:17-19 "The Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Exodus 34: 10 "He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you."

The new covenant the Lord gives to Moses is, indeed, awesome. But, we often forget about it. Whenever we are in distress, we often feel that the Lord is no longer performing marvels, that the Lord has abandoned us. In Exodus 33:17, the Lord says to Moses, "for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Our Lord knows our name! Are those not the most comforting words that we can hear? Comforting words are always a blessing and they help us spend our life being faithful servants of our Lord, knowing that the grace of our Lord is with us even in the darkest moments.

I received such comforting words at my confirmation. Our pastor gave each of us a small New Testament, the kind you can put in your pocket. He had chosen a verse for each confirmand. Mine was 2 Tim 2:1, "You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." We will all agree, being a teenager is not fun. My parents were not divorced, but they did not love each other anymore. They were fighting over everything. It was always the other one's fault. It was not fun. In receiving this small New Testament and reading the verse, I knew then that, whatever would happen, I would be surrounded by God's grace.

God's promise to Moses, "I know your name" is also a promise to all of us. God knows our names. By sending Jesus among us, God's promise is fulfilled. Jesus came into this world to give us the

assurance that whatever will happen, God will not forget our names. Christ is present in our world and in our lives. He is at my side and at your side.

Prayer: “Lord, we glorify your name. We give you thanks for your love and your grace that surround us. We are your children, you know our names. Help us to become more faithful, so that we will serve our neighbors and we will love our enemies, as Christ has commanded us. Help us proclaim to those who do not believe in you, that your promises are fulfilled. By sending your Son, Jesus Christ, you are present among us and you know our names. Give us the courage to let others know that your love is for everyone in the world, that you know everyone’s name. We ask this in the name of our Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.”

Mrs. Aline Patte, Elder
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Nashville, Tennessee
Advent, 2010

Sunday, December 5, 2010

Isaiah 9: 2- 7

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“THE CHILD”

Isaiah 9:6 “For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

It is Christmas time again. Many people write Christmas newsletters to include in their Christmas cards in order to catch everyone up on all of their family news. If I were to write one my big news this year would be the birth of my son Nathanael. Yes, life has changed a lot for me since last year. It is full of diaper changes and feedings. I can’t even remember the last time I had a night of uninterrupted sleep. But it is also a time of joy.

Watching Nathanael grow up, discover the world and learn new things is amazing. I find myself thinking “I can’t wait until Nathanael and I can ...(fill in the blank)” I want to take him to the park, show him how to blow bubbles, take him to see the fish at the aquarium, and teach him the joy of reading. Everything is new and exciting again.

Having a child gives me a whole new perspective on the birth of Jesus. What must it have been like to be Mary and Joseph watching Jesus grow up? Jesus was just a little baby and yet He was also God. Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise found in Isaiah 9:6. The Mighty God, Prince of Peace was in one tiny package. Did Mary and Joseph think about that as they watched Jesus learn to sit up and to crawl? When they saw him stand for the first time or take his first steps did they stop to think about who Jesus was or did they just enjoy the moment? I don’t know the answer to that. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

I do know, however, that because of my son I now look at both life and the Christmas story a little differently. Everything is fresh and new. It is full of excitement. Perhaps that is part of what Jesus meant in Matthew 18 when He said that we should become like little children. We should see the world with the eyes of a child. We should see it with excitement and wonder and the desire to learn everything we can. Maybe this Christmas we can try to see the Christmas story with the eyes of a child. Instead of skimming over the nativity story because we are already so familiar with it, we can look at it again as if for the first time. What would life be like if we were to see it from a child’s perspective? What would we learn?

Prayer: Dear Lord please help me to see life as through the eyes of a child. Let me look at the Christmas story with a new perspective. I want to experience the joy of Christmas all over again. Amen

Mrs. Dawn Ullmann
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church
Calhoun, Georgia
Advent, 2010

Monday, December 6, 2010

Luke 3: 10- 14

HE'S COMING TO TOWN!

Luke 3: 10 “And the crowds asked John, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’”

“You’d better watch out! You’d better not cry! You’d better not pout; I’m telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.” These words have been a part of Christmas for years. I can remember when those words meant everything to me. The simplicity of that song held an important truth for me: Christmas morning depended in part on what I did in the weeks before Christmas.

Times have changed. I’m older and I have passed the magic of Santa Claus on to my children, nieces and nephews. The grandness of Christmas has not diminished, however. While my appreciation and understanding of Christmas has changed, the truth of that song remains constant. The future still depends in large part on the present.

That forward looking point of view is an important part of the Advent season. Advent is a time to anticipate the coming of Christ and His Kingdom. It is an interval in the church year devoted to waiting and watching. That is also the witness of this passage from Luke. John the Baptist declares that the Messiah is coming and that He will usher in the Kingdom of heaven. John tells his listeners that the time for repentance has come. Hopes for that Kingdom depend on individual decisions and actions in the present.

The truth of children’s songs and the witness of Scripture sometimes merge. They do in this case. Advent is a time for faithful watching. Children wait for St. Nick and we wait for Christ. In both cases, what we want most depends on making helpful changes that benefit both us and others. This time of anticipation is best spent doing what is necessary to realize our hopes for Christ’s Kingdom. Waiting is not meant simply to ease the passage of time; it is an opportunity for Christians to keep their promises to Christ and to the church.

There is one important difference that separates the life of discipleship from children’s Christmas songs. Christians make changes not from fear, but from love. God’s perfect love for us was never more clear than in the birth of the One whom we call Lord and Savior. Advent is a time of faithful waiting. It is a time for taking stock and making changes. It is ultimately a time to give thanks to God for the gift of salvation in the coming of a Savior. So wait! But wait in ways that return human devotion for holy love and personal commitment for divine faithfulness. Under those circumstances, this Advent season and Christmas will be everything we have waited for and more.

Prayer: Eternal God, give us the patience that we need to watch and wait faithfully for the coming Kingdom of heaven. We also ask for the courage to make changes that express our faith in and love for the One who reigns in that Kingdom. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen

Dr. Steve Frazier, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Fairbury, Nebraska
Advent, 1997

Tuesday, December 7, 2010

Matthew 18: 1- 5

SHOE BOX DAY

Matthew 18: 3- 4 “And Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.’”

Today is “Shoe Box Day” at our church. When the children and teens come to Logos this afternoon, they will each bring a shoe box filled with gifts for a child on the other side of the world, a child who, without the shoe box, would have no Christmas at all. The shoe boxes are for Operation Christmas Child, a ministry of Franklin Graham’s Samaritan’s Purse, which sends millions of shoe boxes to children all over the world.

Today, each child and teen will write a letter about himself or herself to put in their shoe box. Then, they will wrap the shoe box and get it ready to be added to shoe boxes from hundreds of other churches.

For me, the wrapping is the best part of this ministry. I'm the sort of person who likes creased corners, matching patterns, neat wrapping, small pieces of tape, handsome packages. But today, our children will teach me, again, what is important about Christmas and entering the Kingdom of God.

You see, our children wrap their own shoe boxes, and because of shipping procedures for Operation Christmas Child, the bottom and top of the box must be wrapped separately. Have you ever tried to do that? It's not easy. So, as you can imagine, some of the boxes wrapped by our elementary children will not have any creased corners or matching patterns. Some packages will have a hodgepodge of paper, some will have more tape on them than paper, and some boxes won't have enough paper to cover the box. But, the love and care that go into the wrapping of those shoe boxes will far surpass the love and care I intend when I wrap my gifts this Christmas, creasing the corners and matching the patterns.

Today, our children and teens will imitate Christ through their unselfish giving, their humble wrappings, and their immeasurable love as they prepare their Christmas gifts for children they will never know. And I will be reminded once again that this is how to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Prayer: Dear God, I thank you for children whose expressions of love are simply blatant. And I pray that when I, once again, wrap my gifts this Christmas, I am able to imitate their humility so that I, like them, may be great in the Kingdom of heaven. In Christ's name I pray. Amen

Mrs. Suzie Lane, Elder
The Logos Ministry
Nashville, Tennessee
Advent, 1999

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Luke 1: 26- 38

THE ANNUNCIATION

Luke 1: 26- 27 "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."

My name is Gabriel, and I'm one of the messengers of our Heavenly Father, blessed be His name! When I looked at the duty roster that the Father posts every month, I noted that I was down to visit earth to tell a woman that she was to be the mother of God, the mother of the Messiah.

Well, I thought, the Father has done great and wonderful things. He always has a plan, but it often works out over so much time and in such messy ways. So I decided to show Him how modern people work with organization and efficiency. I would use the lessons I learned in "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People".

The first thing was to choose the mother. I worked up a web site in purple and gold (the color of royalty), put King Solomon's Temple in the background, and added some great trumpet music. Then I attached the job qualifications and invited women who might be interested to apply.

"Wanted", I wrote, "a woman of good character, in good health (please attach results of a thorough physical examination done within the last three months). Must be married with a strong family support system; must have adequate income to provide exceptional educational and enrichment opportunities (attach IRS Form 1040 for the previous year). Must have health insurance and live in a city with good health care facilities. A sense of humor is desirable!

I printed it out in full color and took it to the Father. He looked at it, crumpled it up and threw it in the wastebasket. "I've already picked her out", He said. "She's an unmarried teenager who lives outside Bethlehem. She's dirt poor, but that doesn't matter."

“But Father,” I argued. “What does matter? The girl has no qualifications at all. Why her?”

“Because she trusts me”, He said. “She believes that whatever I say I will do and whatever I ask will be good for her and good for the world. Faith, that’s all I ever asked of anybody.”

“All right,” I said, and I offered to e-mail her, but the Father prefers personal visits. So I went to Nazareth and told this non-descript little child that she would have a son, the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His ancestor David.

She asked a few questions and thought a minute, and then answered, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” When I told the Father, He just nodded. “That’s all I ask of anybody,” He said.

Prayer: Thank You Lord for accepting us and for calling us, regardless of our many flaws. Help us to share the kind of faithfulness and trust that Mary had. Teach us to trust and to follow You all of our lives. Amen

Rev. Don Padget, Honorably Retired
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee
Allardt, Tennessee
Advent, 2000

A CHRISTMAS CREED
Written by: Ted. R. Witt Sr.
United Methodist Clergy (1909-2000)

I believe in Christmas because I believe in both God and humanity.

I believe in the beauty of Christmas, which began in Bethlehem. **I believe** in the eternal nature of Christmas, which is dressed out in eternal love.

I believe in the glory of Christmas, because peace is found in its celebration.

I believe in Christmas because it dares me to be a noble and righteous person all the year.

I believe in Christmas because it affords me an excellent opportunity to be thoughtful and generous.

I believe in Christmas because it brings the best to the front. I am at my best at Christmas time.

I believe that Christ and Christmas belong together.

I believe that Christ and Christmas belong in my heart.

As confirmation of my belief in Christmas, I pass God’s peace and wish all persons a merry and holy Christmas.

Thursday, December 9, 2010

Luke 2: 8- 20

LIGHTS! LIGHTS! LIGHTS!

Luke 2: 20 “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

About a decade ago, my parents moved to Wichita Kansas, where my sister and her daughter lived. One evening, in December, Grandma and Grandpa took Candice driving to see Christmas lights. Although I wasn’t with them, I will never forget the description of the little toddler in the backseat almost hyperventilating from the excitement. As she’d see the

decorations, she'd say "Lights! Lights! Lights!..." My own daughter is that age now, and seeing how excited she gets sometimes over other little things, I can only imagine what some of her reactions will be during this Christmas season.

I believe God longs for us to have those kind of wondrous experiences when we see His workmanship, or even get a glimpse of Him.

Recently, I saw God at work in my life in a way that I hadn't experienced for quite some time. While I wasn't quite as excited as my niece was about seeing the Christmas lights, I was still awed by how God was with me, and was grateful that the gifts He gives us aren't only given at Christmas and Easter, but daily – sometimes when we least expect them.

Unfortunately, sometimes we have to look for His blessings. I remember one year of driving and looking at Christmas lights when the window was foggy – kind of hard to see out! It's also hard to see the beauty in Christmas lights, or even nature, if we're too busy merely driving and not looking around.

What gifts has God extended to you recently? Did it bring hyperventilating joy, or a peaceful "thank-you" to your soul? Is there something that God has been showing you that you haven't fully seen yet? Take time to look around today. Does God have something to share with you?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for helping us to see joy in the world around us. Help us to see You more clearly this Advent season. Amen

Mrs. Carrie Gruhn
First Presbyterian Church
Anchorage, Alaska
Advent, 2002

Friday, December 10, 2010

Matthew 2: 1- 12

A GUIDING STAR

Matthew 2: 9 "When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the Child was."

Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. That's what we've always been told, and I'm sure it's something that we have all experienced. As children, we all probably asked our parents more than a few times, "How much longer until Christmas"? Somehow, we could feel the excitement of this special time of year, long before THE DAY actually came.

Even after growing up, many of us still find ourselves longing for the celebration of Christ's birth. We count down the days until Christmas is finally here and we can celebrate once again with our family and friends. One way that we deal with having to wait is by engaging ourselves in a season of deliberate preparation. We do things that will get us ready for the celebration that we know is coming. We shop for gifts for those we know and love. We set up Christmas trees, cover our houses with decorations and hang wreaths on our doors. We go to church, sing Christmas songs, light candles and bake cookies and treats. We spread cheer to the homebound and the lonely. We pass the time before Christmas with ritual and tradition – things that help us get in the "Christmas Spirit", and things that help prepare us for the joy of Christ's birth. Nevertheless, waiting is difficult! We want Christmas to come, and we wish we could make it come on our own timetable!

Maybe that's why I marvel at the story of the Wise Men from the East and how they traveled long and far to lay their gifts at the feet of the Christ Child. For days, weeks and perhaps even months, these men traveled across the sandy desert to find the One whose royalty they knew was worthy of their efforts. There was no "count-down to Christmas" for them. When they set out, they didn't know how far they would have to go. They didn't know where they were being led. They didn't know how long the journey would take. As a matter of fact, we find out that by the

time they arrived, Jesus had already been born! No, the Wise Men didn't have much to go on, but they did have one thing – the only thing they needed – the STAR!

In other words, we could say that the Wise Men had a FOCUS. As these men from the East traveled to see Jesus, they kept their eyes focused on the star that guided their way. They kept their sights set on the place to which the star would lead them. They were intent on traveling as far as they had to go in order to find the One who had been born King. When they grew weary from their journey, they looked to the star. When they doubted whether they would ever arrive, they looked to the star. When they wondered who this King would be, they looked to the star. When they thought about giving up and turning back, they looked to the star.

During this season of Advent, let us participate in the rituals and traditions that help prepare us for the Christmas celebration. But more importantly, like the Wise Men, let us keep our focus on the star that will lead us to the real reason for the season – the Child in the Manger. Let us keep our eyes fixed upon the One who came to give us salvation and abundant life. Let us keep our sights set on the Child who alone makes Christmas a time of joy, hope, love and peace for us and for all people. Let us keep our hearts attuned to the love of God that was made known in flesh and blood in the stable of Bethlehem. That kind of focus is what will lead us to the best and fullest kind of Christmas celebration.

Prayer: God of Christmas miracles, set your STAR before us during this season of Advent and lead our way as we seek to join in the celebration of our Savior's birth. Help us to keep our focus on Him as we remember the miracle of your incarnation and the mercy of your undying love. As we make our way toward Bethlehem, help us to see the miracles of your grace in our lives and help us to know the truth of your constant presence with us. Today and everyday, O Lord, may our eyes and our hearts be set on You! Amen

Rev. Pete Ullmann, Pastor
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church
Calhoun, Georgia
Advent, 2005

Saturday, December 11, 2010

II Thessalonians 3: 6-13

“DO NOT WEARY OF WELL-DOING”

**II Thessalonians 3: 13 “Brothers and sisters:
do not weary of well-doing.”**

Paul's new church in Thessalonica had a problem; and it was serious enough to cause Paul to address it in his letter to the Thessalonians. Evidently, some of the Christians in that church were so certain that Christ's return would be imminent, that they were sitting around waiting for it to happen. They didn't see any point in working in their fields or in their shops -- to do anything productive; because Christ was going to come again and take the faithful to be with him. So why bother? Why do anything but wait? Christ would come and that would be that!

Paul addresses this problem in several ways in Second Thessalonians 3:6-13. First, he says that there are traditions in the church that need to be followed. And then there is the example he set when he was there. He could have imposed on the hospitality of others, but he didn't. Next, he urges the community to set a boundary: if you don't work; you don't eat. And lastly, he exhorts the Christians of Thessalonica, “Not to weary of well-doing!” Other translations have, “Do not weary of doing what is right,” but I like the RSV phrase, “Well-doing.”

As we await Christ's coming again, I think this is a good exhortation for us to remember: “To not weary of well-doing.” We get so preoccupied with all of the activities of December and all the things that need to be done, that it is easy to forget about the needs of others. And those needs are great. Which is where the “well-doing comes in. What can we do to help others?

Off the top of my head, I can think of the following: We can:

- donate some food to a place that feeds the hungry;
- visit someone who is shut in;
- give someone a ride to the doctor;

- send a card to a friend or relative, or someone who needs cheering up;
- bake cookies for a neighbor who doesn't have family nearby;
- purchase gifts from agencies like the HEIFER PROJECT, or ALTERNATIVE GIFTS, or the SAMARITAN'S PURSE that help the needy in other countries;
- visit someone in the hospital;
- have your children donate the toys they no longer use to a charity;
- serve meals at a soup kitchen;
- adopt a needy family through the Salvation Army or other community organization;
- wait with someone while their loved one is undergoing an operation;
- spend time with loved ones;
- offer to get groceries or buy presents for someone who can't get out to do those things for themselves.
- Volunteer your time to an organization that is doing good.

Those are just a few things we can do to help others. What is possible varies by where we are located and the needs that are around us. But Paul's admonition requires us to open our eyes and to look for the opportunities that are all around us – ways that we can share the love that Christ came to bring, and times when we can make a difference in the lives of others.

Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Amen” - St. Francis of Assisi

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church
Ellicott City, Maryland
Advent, 2010

Sunday, December 12, 2010

Matthew 2: 1- 12

HIS STAR IN THE EAST

A Gorman, Tennessee night sky takes my breath away. There are no street lights or the hum of an interstate here at the home of my parents. It's as though the stars' brightness knob has been turned up three notches and the volume knob has been turned completely down. If I slow down from my regular life's pace, breathe deeply and gaze instead of glancing upward, I begin to notice that the intensity and size of the stars varies. I am awed by the vastness of the speckled sky. Inevitably, I wish I knew more or had someone with me who knew astronomy and could point out the major stars and constellations above my head so I could appreciate the skies even more.

After the birth of Christ, some wise gentlemen, astronomers of their day, noticed a new star. It excited them! They were moved by it! They were compelled to pack up and go in search of the reason for this new light in the sky – **“the One who has been born the King of the Jews. We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2: 2)**

The Magi shared their discovery with others. They pointed out the star to the people of Jerusalem and asked where the new king could be found. The star had been in the skies above their heads, but they couldn't see it until it was pointed out to them by the Magi. Once the residents of Jerusalem saw the star, they reacted not with reverence and a desire to worship, but with fear. The most concerned resident of all was the current king, Herod. To him, the star was not a miraculous sign, but a threat to his power.

The Magi eventually found their way to Bethlehem and the Child they sought to worship. They fulfilled what they were led by God to do. After they worshipped Jesus and gave Him their gifts, we no longer hear about the star that guided them. It seems to have shined for a specific time and purpose and disappeared when the Magi returned to their homeland. But how many times have we seen a new star in the sky of our lives and reacted like the residents of Jerusalem? We feel panic instead of promise, fear instead of opportunity and distress instead of joy.

**“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned.”
Isaiah 9:2**

During this advent season, take time to gaze into the sky, find a bright star and rejoice. Remember the story of the wise men who saw the star as a guide to the Christ Child and follow their lead. Worship Christ the Lord!

Prayer: Dear Lord, Open my eyes to the stars shining before me that I'm too busy to see. Guide me to follow your light and worship Christ this day in all that I do. Strengthen me to do the work you have for me to do and to see it as joy. In the name of the Christ Child, Amen

Mrs. Carie Turner
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee
Franklin, Tennessee
Advent, 2009

**“BETHLEHEM'S STAR OF LOVE”
By: Carie Turner
Advent, 2010**

Look up and see,
heavenly beauty
In a shining, starry sky.

If one should fall,
From among them all,
Arching briefly across the night -

Just think - the God who ordained its fall to earth,
Also arranged one over Christ's birth.

Be reminded of
Bethlehem's star of love.

Monday, December 13, 2010

Matthew 1: 1- 17

PLUMB AMAZING

Matthew 1: 5- 6: “...Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.”

There are some things in this world that are just amazing. Where I grew up the most surprising things were described as “plumb amazing.” Nothing was more amazing than that. I grew up rooting for the Washington Redskins at a time when they were so bad that I was embarrassed to admit that I was a ‘Skins fan. When they finally won the Super Bowl that was plumb amazing. I never thought I'd live long enough to see that!

I have that same feeling of amazement when I read the genealogy Matthew recites in his account of the Gospel. Rahab? What on earth is someone like that doing in Jesus' family tree? She is a Gentile for heaven's sake. And there is more to it than that. You know what I mean. Rahab isn't the kind of woman any man in his right mind would take home to his mother. Rahab is a prostitute. Isn't it amazing that Matthew thinks a woman who lost her sense of right and wrong belongs in this list of people?

And what about Ruth? She is a fine woman. She is loyal to a fault. I can only imagine how much her mother-in-law Naomi loved her. But Ruth is a Gentile too! In fact, she is a Moabite. Deuteronomy says that there isn't a place for those folks in God's family even after ten generations have come and gone. That is what makes finding Ruth in Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy amazing. It's plumb amazing! I can imagine Matthew's first readers thinking, “That's amazing. Now I've seen it all!”

So what's the point? What is Matthew driving at? He wants to amaze us. We are always ready to hear that Jesus loved sinners. We expect the Gospel to tell us that Gentiles have a place in God's family. We aren't surprised when the most amazing cast of characters show up in Matthew's stories about Jesus. But it's one thing for Jesus to hang out with people like that and quite another to say that they're a part of His family.

But that's what Matthew wants us to believe. Matthew calls Jesus the son of Abraham. He completes God's promise to Abraham. God promises to give Abraham a son and then a family bigger than anything he can imagine. Most importantly, Abraham's family will become a gift that God uses to bless the entire world. God's love is so far-reaching that He can't bear to turn anyone away. Generosity like that is amazing!

But that God-given generosity, that amazing grace becomes "plumb amazing" when Matthew says that God's concern for everyone is so great that they are included in Jesus' family tree. That is the kind of intimate relationship we all want. We want that with our family and friends. We want that kind of relationship with God too. That is how God made us. That is what God made us for. So there we are. We are in the genealogy Matthew claims for Jesus. We are Rahab. We are Ruth. We are all the unexpected names that show up in Jesus' family tree and in His life and ministry. It is plumb amazing when you stop to think about it. So stop! Take the time to remember that God gave us the amazing gift of a place in Jesus' family from the very beginning.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, thank You for the gift of a place in Your family. Thank you for including us for no earthly reason. Renew our sense of amazement every morning. Renew our sense of amazement when we remember what You have done for us in Jesus' birth. Lord, also help us to be as generous in our love for others as You have been in loving us. We ask this in Jesus' amazing name. Amen

Dr. Steve Frazier, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Fairbury, Nebraska
Advent, 2004

Tuesday, December 14, 2010

James 1: 12-18

THE BEST GIFT

James 1: 16- 18 "Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving with every perfect gift, is from above,

coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of His own purpose He gave us birth by the Word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of His creatures."

In October of 1982 I was appointed pastor of two small Catholic churches which serve most of Caroline County on the Eastern Shore Maryland. The area was entirely agricultural but the parish served people engaged in business and professional life as well as farming, along with some retirees from other places. The congregation was small by Catholic standards, fewer than four hundred households, and it did not take long to know anyone who wanted to be known.

Whatever their occupation it seemed as if farming was in nearly everyone's blood, so most people kept a garden. As the various crops matured families often found themselves with a surplus of this or that (and always of summer squash it seemed) and they would decide to share with their pastor. People knew I lived by myself and did my own cooking – perhaps they figured to save on the parish grocery bill. Most days in late Fall I would find a generous sack or two of produce upon returning home or when taking in the morning paper – sometimes more than one or two.

Before long it got rather overwhelming, which may account for the fact that I never actually saw anyone bringing the stuff. I began to think I was running a home for orphan vegetables. Fortunately that very year a nearby motherhouse of Benedictine Sisters cranked up an outreach to the poor, who were numerous in our county, and I found they were able to put it all to good use.

As Christmas approached so did the pastor's share of holiday baking. Some were thoughtful enough to indicate that theirs could be frozen for later consumption but even so it came to a lot more than any one man could, or should, eat in a year. Once again the surplus went to the Sisters, who were dealing with their own surplus but found ready consumers among those served by their school for developmentally disabled persons as well as their outreach to the poor.

One Saturday afternoon I got a phone call. "Father, this is Larry Smith. Will you be home for a while? We have something we

want to give you.” I said yes, sure, come on by, and when I put the phone down I went right for the parish photo directory because I had no idea who these people were. I recognized them as people I had seen regularly in church, but if we had ever spoken I did not remember it at all. In about half an hour the doorbell rang. As I greeted Larry’s wife Sue and their two young daughters I saw Larry pulling a fair-sized cardboard box out of the back of a beat-up station wagon with considerable age on it. Sue said, “We needed to bring our gift while you were home because it has to go into the freezer.” I began to wonder how many cookies Larry was bringing up the walk. What the box actually contained was two dozen single portions of home-cooked meals frozen in Tupperware containers. “We know you cook for yourself,” Larry said. “We thought these might come in handy when things get busy and you don’t have time. We’ll be going now, just wanted to bring these by.”

I think that was the best Christmas gift I ever got, so thoughtful, and from people who were not out to impress anyone. They repeated the gift each of the five years I served there, then went on without fanfare, living their quiet, private and dutiful life, not looking for a lot from the church or anyone else. I like to think that this experience gave me a way of thinking about God’s gifts. God’s true gifts respond to our needs, not our wants, nor does God give us anything not for our good.

**Prayer: God, Father of the Light of the World,
the Word made flesh, Jesus our Lord:
Let our gift-giving be like yours,
not calculating, never looking for effect,
but with the good of the other always in mind.
We ask this in the name of Jesus,
our Brother and our Lord
whom we welcome in this season. Amen**

Rev. Michael Burton Roark, Associate Pastor
St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church
Salisbury, Maryland
Advent, 2005

Wednesday, December 15, 2010

Luke 1: 39- 56

LUCKY MARY!

**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.”**

Over the centuries, lots of folks have thought the Virgin Mary was a lucky woman. Mary was fourteen and pregnant – Lucky Mary! Joseph was an honorable man and so resolved to divorce her quietly – Lucky Mary! Elizabeth told her that the baby she carried would be holy, but in spite of that, Mary found herself in a stable with the animals, far away from home, when her time came – Lucky Mary!

Sometime that night the Child was born. That silent night – that holy night was pierced by the persistent cry of a newborn: a helpless infant to be nursed before they had disposable nursers, and changed (no disposable diapers) and comforted (with perhaps only a rag for a toy). There wouldn’t be much sleep from now on – Lucky Mary!

Lots of people wanted Jesus to be a mighty warrior. Others expected a wonderful teacher. Imagine how Mary, His mother might have felt when He turned water into wine and spoke eloquently to the crowds. How proud she must have been as He led the parade on Palm Sunday.

But then somehow it all soured. The trial had been brief. The sentence was brutal from the same crowd that was so friendly just a week before. “Crucify Him!” They shouted, and Pilate gave in. And Mary saw her son hanging on a rough hewn cross dying between two criminals. She saw her child stripped of power, glory and honor as she watched him die. Lucky Mary!

The Virgin Mary was a plain peasant girl. Mary wasn’t lucky; but she was faithful and she wasn’t holy but she was willing to be used by God. Her song as recorded in Scripture is one of joy and faith. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!...Henceforth all generations will call me blessed...”

And we do – and people always will call her blessed as Scripture says; not because she was lucky; not because she was super human or even especially talented in some way; but because God chose to use her for a purpose, for His purpose! And she answered simply:

“I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Prayer: Gracious God, enter now into each of our lives. Teach us to recognize the many ways in which you have blessed us and continue to bless us even today. Help us to be open to the leading of Your Spirit, so that when You call us, we might answer as faithfully as Mary as we say, “Let it be with me according to Your Word!” Amen.

Rev. Pamela Rucker, Pastor
Nicholasville Presbyterian Church
Nicholasville, Kentucky
Advent, 1997

Thursday, December 16, 2010

Luke 2: 1- 7

AN AWESOME SURPRISE

**Luke 2: 6- 7 “While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped Him in a blanket and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.”
(The Message)**

SURPRISE is such a perfect word for Christmas! Children are surprised at the tiniest gift under the tree, carolers surprise anxious listeners with melodious refrains, parents surprise their children with unexpected treats.

I remember so many Christmas morning surprises, but the best Christmas surprise is still the one that happened on Christmas Eve when I was 15 years old. We lived in Tennessee, and had always celebrated Christmas at home. But, this year, the week

before Christmas, mom and dad had gone to Pennsylvania unexpectedly to be with our grandparents. Grandpa had suffered a heart attack, and Grandma, who suffered from Alzheimer’s could not be left alone. Wonderful family friends took us in. We all knew our parents would return as soon as possible, but since cell phones were unknown and long distance was a luxury, the actual date of their return was a mystery. As the days wore on, we feared they would not be home for Christmas. Christmas Eve day approached and still they were not home. That night, with heavy hearts, we went to church, the first time we had been in worship on Christmas Eve without our parents. We walked solemnly to the front of the sanctuary to kneel for the Lord’s Supper with tear-stained faces. Pastor Blakeburn, knowing our story, lovingly served us bread and juice and assured us of the promises of God’s love and our parents’ return. We stood slowly, turned around to leave, and were greeted by our parents who had returned at that exact moment, to our awesome surprise.

But, that surprise is nothing compared to the surprise of God’s Son born to a poor girl who was faithful to her God. And, the whole world was surprised!

“How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.”

Henri Nouwen says, “The surprise is not that, unexpectedly, things turn out better than expected. No, the real surprise is that God’s light is more real than all the darkness, that God’s truth is more powerful than all human lies, that God’s love is stronger than death.”

(From Here and Now by Henri J.M. Nouwen)

Watch for surprises of God’s light this Advent. Be a surprise to someone this Advent. Prepare for God to surprise you in awesome ways.

Prayer: Loving God, during this Advent season, as we seek to surprise others in wonderful, unexpected ways, prepare us

for the surprising birth of your Son, the startling promise of new life, and the unfathomable truth of your love for us. In Jesus' name, Amen

Mrs. Suzie Lane
The Logos Ministry
Nashville, Tennessee
Advent, 2009

Friday, December 17, 2010

Matthew 6: 25-34

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“THE BUTTERFLY”

Matthew 6: 28-29 “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Is there a creature here on God's green earth that is more beautiful than a butterfly? God really out does Himself every time God creates a butterfly. He creates these animals with impeccable beauty. They live a very short time with only one purpose in life, to collect and spread pollen. Yet, during this short life, God provides every butterfly everything they need to survive and prosper.

In the lesson Jesus has for us today, He presents a powerful teaching. This teaching is a call to live a life of faith and trust. For indeed, if I am at least as important to God as the butterfly, then God has a specific task for me to perform, and will provide me what I need to complete that task. God will provide me with the food that I need, the clothing and shoes I wear, the tasks for me to perform, but most importantly God provides me with His Spirit which serves as my conscience to guide my path and deliver me from evil, if only I will just listen to Him.

But, you know it goes better than that!

For any parent will tell you, they want nothing more for their children but for their children to be happy, and since God ultimately is our parent, It makes sense that God is going to do anything He can to make us happy – and God did. For God made

the ultimate sacrifice for us, sacrificing his Son, so through God's gift of “grace” we can enjoy the forgiveness of sin and can join God and Jesus in Heaven for Eternity?

So happiness is out there for us. Happiness, peace, grace, love and joy are all there waiting for us. These are great gifts to us from God. All we have to do is trust God, follow the path he sets before us, and have faith that God will open the right doors and supply our needs to follow God's path and obey God's commandments.

What a Christmas present He is giving us!

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for the peace and the assurance that comes from knowing our future is secure in your hands even when we cannot see the open door. Amen

Mr. Charlie Watkins, Elder
Calvary Presbyterian Church
Jacksonville, Florida
Advent, 2010

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Isaiah 9: 1- 7

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WALK IN THE LIGHT

Isaiah 2:5 “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Is there any doubt that we live in a darkened world? Turn on the nightly news or look at the headlines of your local paper, and the dim reality of the world we live in is right there staring us down. Double-digit unemployment numbers... Home foreclosures at record levels... People's hard-earned savings lost in the stock market... People around our communities turning to drugs, alcohol and other unhealthy options to try and deal with their stress and sorrow...

When Christians speak about Advent as a time for awaiting God's Kingdom, no wonder we think about that Kingdom as something reserved for us entirely in the future. The darkness around us has a way of blinding us to the fact that God's Kingdom isn't just something in the future – indeed, it is meant to be seen in the here and now!

Presbyterians have a way of talking about the things that Christ's Church is supposed to do. We call those things the "Great Ends of the Church". One of those things is "the demonstration of the Kingdom of God to the world". Think about that! What we believe is that the Church has a responsibility to put the Kingdom of God on display for the world to see – right here and now! We have a duty to give the world around us a glimpse of what life in the Kingdom of God will be like.

Maybe those glimpses are a little bit like someone shining a flashlight in the middle of a moonless night. There is still a lot of darkness, but where the light shines, we begin to see bits and pieces of what's around us. Likewise, when the church does what it is supposed to do... when she shines her light in a darkened world... we begin to see the truth of God's Kingdom around us. The Scripture says, "...come, let us walk in the light of God". This Advent season, let us take that advice to heart. Let us walk in the light, as we seek to give the world glimpses of God's reign.

Prayer: God of light, we pray that your love will shine brightly in our hearts and in our lives. There is so much darkness around us, but we trust that you are God who is able to illumine even the darkest places. Use us, and use your Church to bring the light of your truth to our world. Shine through us that we might give others a glimpse of your glorious Kingdom. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen

Rev. Pete Ullmann, Pastor
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church
Calhoun, Georgia
Advent, 2009

Sunday, December 19, 2010

Isaiah 40: 1-5

"MIXED EMOTIONS"

Psalm 137: 3-4 "For our captors there required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" But how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Isaiah 40: 1-2 "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term."

How are you feeling today? Hopefully it is a good day: the sun is shining, you are full of energy and excited about all the things you are about to accomplish or have accomplished! You are well on your way to preparing for Christ's coming and your spirits are bright. You are enjoying the season – with all its hustle and bustle, with the Christmas carols playing in the store and the decorations everywhere. Christmas is a fun and wonderful holiday/celebration.

But there is another, important emotion that is part of the Advent/Christmas season, and perhaps you are feeling that today. It's the feeling of "longing" – for something different, something better. Maybe your life is NOT great; in fact, it could be pretty terrible. Or perhaps you feel burdened and depressed, and you long for a change. Maybe you feel oppressed by forces beyond your control and long for relief. Or you might just feel uneasy and unsettled, and not "at home" anywhere. It's the sense of longing that is communicated in the minor tune and words to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" – when it talks about "mourning in exile here..." and "gloomy clouds of night" and "death's dark shadow".

While this longing in its many forms is not pleasant, I believe it is an important part of our preparations for Christ's coming for the following reason. If "all is right with the world," then we have little need of a savior "to ransom us" or "to come and cheer our spirits by your advent here" – as the carols says.

Many years ago, I was part of the Cumberland County Playhouse's production of the musical "Godspell". Near the end of

the show, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying goodbye to his disciples, and a cast member sings a song entitled "On the Willows There" That song led me to understand more fully the depth of feelings communicated in Psalm 137 – from which the words for the song were taken. The Psalm portrays how **difficult** the exile was for the people of Israel. It threatened their very identity and created intense feelings of hatred! Just read the end of the psalm! They longed for something different but they saw no way for their world to change. It took a new word from God to transform their world. That word, "Comfort," is spoken in Isaiah 40:1ff.

The hope of Christmas is that God **can** and **does** intervene in our worlds; that God **can** and **does** "bid envy, toil and discord cease, and fill the whole world with heaven's peace." And as God acts to make our worlds new and different, then we can

"Rejoice, rejoice!"

Because God has indeed "come to us" in the form of Emmanuel, God with us!

Prayer: O God, in a world...

**where soldiers are killed on a daily basis,
and young people throw their lives away on drugs;
where children go to bed hungry,
and people don't have a place to lay their heads;
where disease ravishes our bodies,
and creates turmoil in our spirit;
where ...**

(add your own longings and concerns)

**Turn our sorrow into joy and our weeping into
laughter. Send us Emmanuel, so we too may rejoice!
In Christ's name we ask this. Amen**

Rev. Sid Venable, Pastor
Mt. Hebron Presbyterian Church
Ellicott City, Maryland
Advent, 2010

Monday, December 20, 2010

Isaiah 45: 17- 19

OUT OF CHAOS

ISAIAH 45: 18 "For thus says the lord, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established it; He did not create it a chaos, He formed it to be inhabited!): I am the Lord, and there is no other."

Out of chaos Christmas comes
right on time as expected
with all of the rituals and traditions,
holly and cedar reminders
of heritage and seasonal yearnings,
like toy soldiers who march in rank,
and nutcrackers who grin in wonder
at the reoccurring themes of
childlike delight and eagerness.
Even the most solemn give way
to deep feelings of longing.
Our thoughts turn to happier times
wrapped in memories neatly kept
in boxes like secrets from the past.
Wonder surrounds the present
in unexpected ways that tantalize
our senses with sights and sounds,
smells and tastes of once a year,
but most of all the reaching love
of words inscribed on cards
that arrive in our mailboxes. . .
smiling faces around a table
filled with laughter. . .
and the quiet embraces of
hugs and kisses beneath the mistletoe.
Yes. Christmas is among us!
Out of chaos it arrives
right on time as expected. . .
a reminder of what can be.
Joy. . . peace. . . hope. . . and love.

Rev. Phil Leftwich, Executive Presbyter
Presbytery of Middle Tennessee
Franklin, Tennessee
Advent, 2009

Tuesday, December 21, 2010

John 3: 14- 21

LET US MARVEL

John 3: 16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

I started going to Sunday School when I was 11 and I believe that it was sometime in November. We had been hiding from the Gestapo in a small French village. There was no Protestant church in the area. When we were able to go back to the city, my Godmother pushed me to go to church. I was taken by the message and by the hymns we were singing. We were rehearsing hymns for our Sunday School Christmas celebration. The following hymn is the one I loved the most.

“Let us marvel at the love God is giving us! Our wish is fulfilled in this shivering newborn. He is without voice, He, the Word; without a crown. He, the King; not known. He, the Greatest; in the darkness when He only can see. He sleeps on a bed of grass, under an old cracked roof.” (first verse, my translation)

The love God is giving us surpasses all understanding. God did not choose to come on earth as a warrior, or a rich person, or a CEO of a major company. God chose to come in the form of a newborn baby. For me, it was wonderful to hear that God had given us a newborn – God’s only Son.

Like many of my peers, I thought that no one loved me. Surrounded by Sunday School teachers, our pastor and his family, I became aware that the love of God is bigger than any love a human being can give. The fourth verse ends with this

affirmation: “For happiness, I have your suffering. And I have life in your death.”

God’s love is shown in Jesus’ suffering and dying on the cross, and in His resurrection. Let us marvel at the love God is giving us!

Prayer: Lord, we do not deserve your love. We try to hide from you because we want to be in control and are afraid to let you guide us. But you are always near us, forgiving and loving. Thank you for Sunday School teachers, for pastors and for men and women who have helped us grow in faith. Through the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, His suffering on the cross, His death, and His resurrection, you have shown us the Light and the Way. Give us the courage to become faithful disciples. This we pray in the name of your Son, the Newborn who is the Word, the King, the Greatest. Amen

Mrs. Aline Patte, Elder
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Nashville, Tennessee
Advent, 2003

Wednesday, December 22, 2010

MATTHEW 2: 1-6

WHAT MAKES THE WISEMEN WISE?

Matthew 2: 1- 2 “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed His star at its rising, and have come to pay Him homage.’”

I attended Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and had the good fortune to study under two of the most faithful and brilliant men I have ever known. Jack Kingsbury and Paul Achtemeier were celebrated scholars. But there was more to their status than just their considerable academic credentials. They regularly asked us to explain how we would apply what we had learned in class. They believed that faith seeks understanding, but they also believed that faith requires effective application.

It's tempting to think of faith as a body of facts with which we agree. That turns Christian faith into an academic pursuit that doesn't have much to do with everyday life. But that happens at times, doesn't it? Look at Herod! Visiting wise men want to know where the new king is. Herod asks Israel's religious leaders for an answer. And they know! Matthew paints a picture of men who can answer unexpected questions.

But the answer they give Herod is only good for as far as it goes. And there's the problem. Their answer doesn't take Herod or Israel's religious leaders to Bethlehem along with the wise men. Instead, Herod and his associates are troubled by the wise men's startling news. A new king will be a threat to their power and status. So what are we left with? Wise men who have made the trip to see and worship the new king of Israel. All they know is what their astrology tells them. So they turn to the experts for answers to their questions. Once they have those answers they quickly take off to find the Child King.

What a contrast! Men who have grown up with God's people and know the sacred writings are oblivious to what is going on all around them. More than that, they can't be bothered until their status and power are threatened. A group of unusual wise men are making the best of what they know and asking for help they need to complete their task and journey. Which is the more faithful group? The answer is obvious.

What does that mean for us this Advent season? Knowing the right answers about Jesus won't help us much if those solutions don't change the way we live. When we join a congregation we promise to continue Jesus' ministry as members of that church family. A faith that doesn't keep that promise probably isn't worth much. But faith that is really looking for effective answers is also really looking for ways to be faithful in loving and serving God. Faith that simply prepares us for Christmas gifts and a rerun of Thanksgiving dinner isn't the kind of faith God wants to see at work in our lives.

In the end, Herod and Israel's religious leaders know, but they don't do. That is unfaithful! The wise men don't know, but they find the answers they need and do. That is faithful! Their search leads them to Scripture. They act on what they know. And they

end up in Bethlehem worshipping Jesus. God calls us to a similar faithfulness. We don't need more facts. We need to remember the faithful wise men in scripture and our lives who practiced what they believed. If we do the same we won't be caught unprepared. Jesus won't return and find us with a head full of facts that haven't changed our lives.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, thank You for the gift of faith. Forgive us for the times when we have acted unfaithfully. Renew the work of Your Spirit in us so that we live out our faith every day as we wait for Your Son's return. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Dr. Steve Frazier, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Fairbury, Nebraska
Advent, 2004

Thursday, December 23, 2010

Luke 2: 25- 33

HELD IN HIS HOPE

Luke 2: 29- 32 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your Word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Roman patrols guarding a hurtful peace. Money changers explaining how much mercy one may afford. Teachers and students of the laws of heaven and earth arguing in a patch of sun. Pilgrims searching for a glimpse of paradise regained. Beggars and the lame winning some and losing some. Animals waiting. Priests tending sacred fires.

And in the middle of it all, in the very middle of it all, an elderly man who has learned how to hope. The presence of the Spirit within him has given him a longing that will not go away, a longing that will settle for nothing less than the promise of God. He has

known suffering, but he has kept hoping. He has heard easy answers, but he has kept hoping. He has wrestled with the long silence, but he has kept hoping. He hopes for the redemption of his people, and for the redemption of all nations. We are not told exactly how he kept hoping. Just that he did! His furrowed brow. His trembling hands. His creased soul.

And in the end, God finds him beautiful. God comes in a mother and a Child and wants to be held in his hope. Now he can rest. The whole world may rest. Thanks be to God! Joy to the world!

Prayer: O God, in Christ keep us in Thy hope until we be found in Thy peace, now and forever. Amen

Rev. Dr. Carson Brisson
Professor of Biblical Languages
Union-PSCE
Richmond, Virginia
Advent, 1997

Friday, December 24, 2010

MATTHEW 2: 1- 12

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TOOLS, KNOWLEDGE & WISDOM

Matthew 2: 1- 2 “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wisemen from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the Child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed His star at its rising, and have come to pay Him homage.’”

I love winter. One reason is the stars. At no other time during the year are so many stars shining so brightly. Throughout the ages, stars – especially the North Star – have directed our way. In the days of the pilgrims, stars guided the ships, like the Mayflower, to the new world. When Lewis and Clark explored the Louisiana Purchase, they used the North Star to guide them West. The “Christmas Star” guided the Magi to the birth place of Jesus. Even today, when we hike our “trails” at night, the stars can illumine our path and guide us safely home.

The Christmas Star was just one tool given to the Magi by God to direct their paths to Him. God also gave them the knowledge necessary to use this Star, and the wisdom to follow that star. You see, God not only gave the Magi the tools they needed to follow His path for their lives, but He also gave them the choice to follow His chosen path which led them to Jesus – and they did!

Just as God gave the Magi the Christmas Star as a tool to direct their paths to Jesus, He gives us a tool to illumine our paths toward righteousness. This tool is the Bible, God’s Holy Word – the story of the salvation of humankind. But this tool will only direct our path if God’s Spirit gives us the knowledge to understand the Word, and the wisdom to use it. With God’s Spirit, we can use the Bible just as the Magi used the Christmas Star; for direction towards righteousness, towards God, and the path that He has chosen for us.

God gives us the tool. He has also given us the knowledge we need to use the tool. Pray that God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will give us the wisdom to choose to follow His chosen path for our lives.

So this Advent season, let us resolve to study God’s Word and allow His Word to direct our path towards righteousness and toward God.

Prayer: Gracious God, grant us this Advent the eyes to see Your star, the knowledge we need to understand Your star, and the wisdom to follow that star. Grant us this Advent season the greatest joy we can ever imagine... the joy of following Your path to righteousness. Amen

Mr. Charlie Watkins, Elder
Calvary Presbyterian Church of Big Lick
Jacksonville, Florida
Advent, 2002

Saturday, December 25, 2010

Mark 1: 1-8

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A GOOD THING

**Mark 1: 1 “The beginning of the good news of
Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

Merry Christmas! Advent is complete and the wait is over! The day for which we have prepared has arrived. Jesus is born! The Child has come again. The Word of God’s love has come to us in real life flesh and blood, in the innocence and humility of a Child born in a manger.

If ever there was good news, this is it! God has loved us so much that He has sent His only Son into our world to live as one of us, to know our hurts, our trials and our pains. God has sent Jesus among us to live for us, to teach us, and to pay the price for our sins. That is good news! In the words of Martha Stewart, “It’s a good thing!”

Interestingly enough, that is how Mark chooses to begin his Gospel. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!” No birth stories. No angels singing. No shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. No wise men journeying from afar following a star. No Herods ordering the murder of innocent children. No angel visits announcing a heavenly birth. Instead, Mark gets right down to business saying, “Here’s the good news! Jesus! The Christ! The Messiah! The Son of God! He’s here!”

What more can be said? What more needs to be said? Mark wants us to know that the story of Jesus is God’s story of good news! Jesus has come into our world to save people who have been stuck in sin. He has come to set the captives free. He has come to wash away the wrongdoing that has stained us and muddied our lives. Jesus has come to be the long awaited Messiah – the Son of God – the One who can set our lives right with God once again.

That is the true message of Christmas. It’s the message of God’s eternal and saving love. It’s the message that God cares about us and wants us to live in right relationship with Him. It’s the

message that because of God’s work, we are free to be the children we were created by God to be. Christmas is the good news that Jesus has come into our world to be “God for us”; the Savior we so desperately need! It is certainly good news indeed!

Maybe we can take some time today to thank God for the “good thing” that He has chosen to do for us. Perhaps we can reflect a while on the good news of God’s saving activity in our lives. If we are lucky, maybe we can find a moment to savor the richness of the God who put on skin so we could see Him right here by our side. That’s Christmas! It’s a present without equal! It’s good news indeed! Let us be glad and praise our God!

Prayer: Emmanuel, God with us, we thank you for the miracle of Christmas and the good news that you love us and choose to be with us always. Help us to live each day with the thanksgiving that comes from knowing your mercy and grace in our lives. Help us to spread the good news of your presence with us to the world in which we live. Give us joyful hearts and the desire to live each day for you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen

Rev. Pete Ullmann, Pastor
Calhoun First Presbyterian Church
Calhoun, Georgia
Advent, 2005