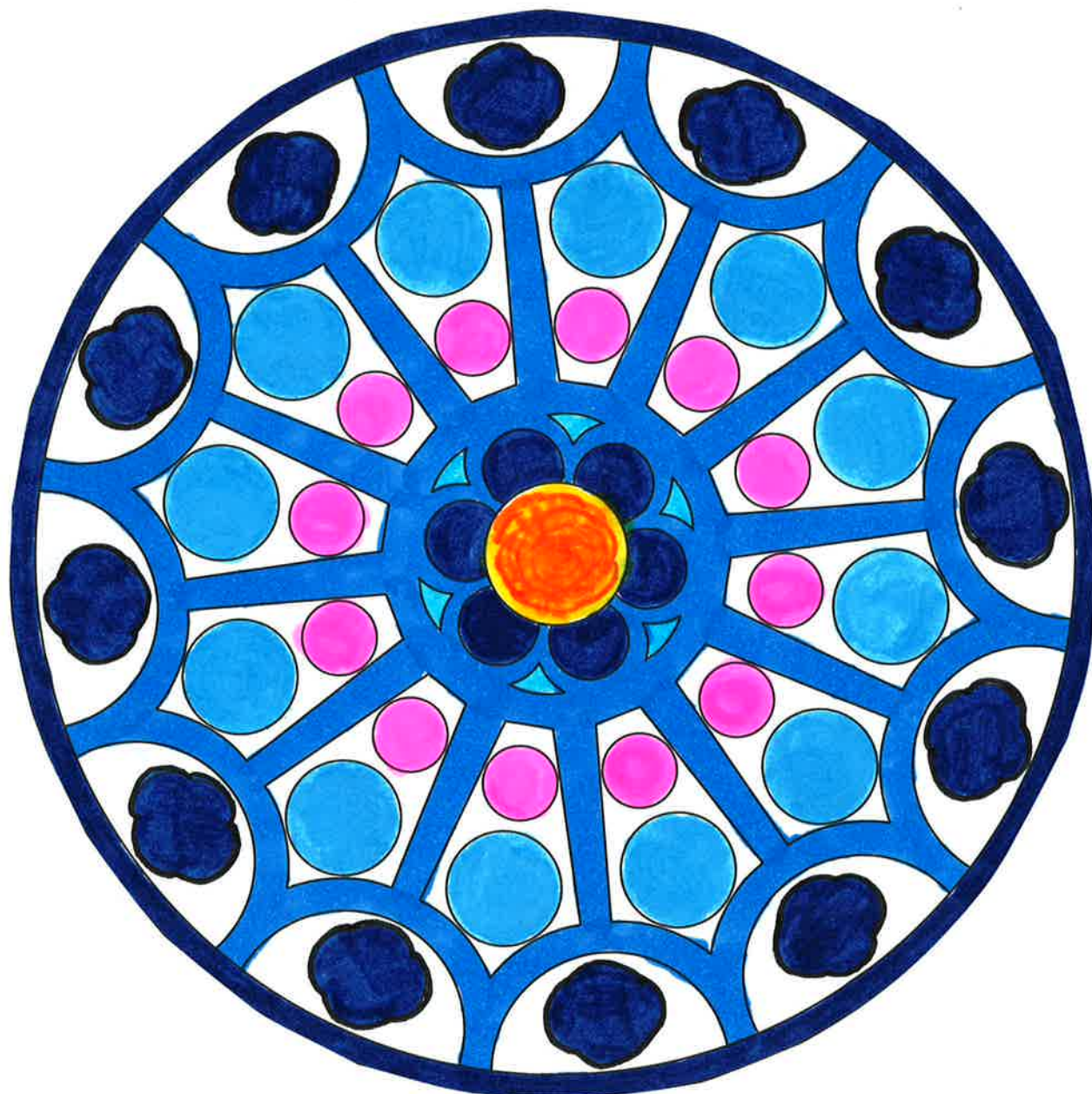


# 2011 Advent Devotionals



**November 27, 2011**

***Luke 21:5-19***

*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

Wow. Did you ever have a friend ruin the good mood you were in? I can picture the disciples strolling down the road and seeing the Temple appear before them. They are in awe of its beauty, and how big it is. It is a wonderful dedication to God. They turn their smiling faces to Jesus, clearly expecting Him to agree about its majesty, but as Jesus often does, He says something unexpected. He brought them back down to a reality that is hard to accept and understand. Jesus tells them that the day will come when none of these stones will be left to stand. This gigantic Temple, that means so much to everyone, will exist no more.

People that lived during that period believed in signs. So the disciples immediately asked what the signs would be. Jesus in turn warns them that they must not follow false teachers, that there will be wars, plagues, earthquakes. But before all of that they will be persecuted, and betrayed, and some will die. But don't worry. Don't worry? What exactly is Jesus telling us? Why the strangeness of an apocalyptic message? Why is this passage included in the Advent readings?

Jesus' followers did look to historical and natural events as signs of the end. And they did indeed get persecuted for their religion. But in our world today, most of us don't fear persecution because of religion. In fact, a lot of people take religion for granted. It is something that is or isn't in our lives.

And we, like the disciples, can get caught up in the beauty of things, in our physical churches and traditions. We can get caught up in a reliance on wealth and power, and also follow false teachings. We can become pointed in the wrong direction away from God. These are all obstacles to receiving Jesus now and preparing for him in the future.

We need to keep focused on what is important. Jesus wants to shake us out of our complacency. We will need our belief and strength in God in the hard times ahead. At some point in our lives we will feel pain and suffering. We will be depressed and down. We will feel betrayed.

Only God can comfort us. Only faith can give us the strength to fight our battles. Jesus didn't want the disciples to forget this. He doesn't want us to forget this. He doesn't want us to forget that God will always be there for us. He will not let us perish. As we start this Advent season, keep the focus on Jesus and not on the obstacles that will get in our way. As we wait for Jesus, remember, He is already with us.

**November 28, 2011**

***Matthew 21:1-11***

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'* This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*'Tell the daughter of Zion,*

*Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd\* spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*'Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'*

OK, so here we are at another Advent. It is the beginning of the liturgical year and I have been blessed with this mission to write a reflection. I get my little devotional, read the selection, and immediately think, "WHAT? This is a Palm Sunday reading. How does this work for Advent? Was I sent the right verses?" But after praying and researching, I began to understand why this passage was chosen. I was led to compare Christ's arrival in Bethlehem with His arrival in Jerusalem.

My first thought was that both times it involved a donkey, what many think of as a lowly creature. I have always pictured in my mind Mary's riding along, ready to give birth, while Joseph led the donkey. So, Jesus more or less rode a donkey into the city his birth. Then in this passage, Christ instructs the disciples to bring him a donkey to ride into the city of His death.

But think again.... The physical death of Christ on the cross led in turn to our birth into EVERLASTING life. Maybe I should just stop here because what else is more important? Is not HIS life and giving of everlasting life what our faith is about?

I am now struck by how much the "Christmas story" and the "Easter story" are about the same thing....ANTICIPATION! We remember aloud every Sunday that we are still anticipating but we leave out a small part that I think we should be saying:

**CHRIST was BORN!**

**CHRIST has DIED!**

**CHRIST has RISEN!**

**CHRIST will COME AGAIN!**

My conclusion? We wait and prepare for Christmas to celebrate HIS birth; every Holy Week we wait and prepare to recognize HIS Death and Resurrection; now we wait and prepare for HIS coming again!

Through it all Christ reminds us that He came humbly, even on the back of a donkey, and we should seek to do the same.

**November 29, 2011**

***Matthew 21:12-22***

*Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'*

*The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,*

*"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?''*

*He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'*

Earlier this year I toured the St Mark's Basilica, in Venice, Italy. St Mark's Basilica is famous for its gilded Byzantine mosaics and is known as the "Church of Gold". On entering this beautiful, old, historical building, the first thing you come across, is a large souvenir shop selling everything from A to Z. First, you pay to enter the Basilica through ancient doors. The space has been divided up into several areas for which you have to pay more in order to see them. Because of that, you never get the true sense of space and grandeur that a place of ancient worship should have. The mosaic gold pictures on the ceiling and high on the walls that are not hidden from view are indeed beautiful; but there was no sense of God; just for me annoyance that I could not see more without paying more.

After leaving the Basilica, this statement of Jesus is exactly what came into my mind.

"My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers."

During this Advent season perhaps we need to look into the divided spaces in our lives; places where we might not be necessarily charging God to get to, but keeping them tightly closed from his grace and healing within our own lives.

Perhaps the following will help in your prayer life to open up closed spaces in your life to God.

A.C.T.S

ADORATION: Think about how wonderful God is and then tell him.

CONFESSION: Tell him what you've done wrong and ask for forgiveness

THANKSGIVING: We are thankful to God for many things, So tell him.

SUPPLICATION: Tell God of specific needs and leave them with him.

**November 30, 2011**

***Matthew 21:23-32***

*When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

*'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*

The professor holds out his clenched fists for all to see in the brightly lit classroom. "In one of these hands, I hold the answer you seek." The students surround him with trepidation. The ultimatum is clear. They have to make a choice. Each hand holds a consequence. A commitment. Years of study, papers, and debates had led them to this moment: a grade. Each student wants to outwit the very one who has walked into their world, disrupted their routine, and now, they believe, holds the key to their future success..... or failure. Ten minutes to spare.

The students quarrel amongst themselves. Judging each other's answer. And in doing so - give none. Leaving them caught in inertia. The chief priests and elders, too, quarreled amongst themselves. Leaving them caught in their own conundrum.

The clock strikes twelve noon and the class is dismissed - without the answer being revealed. The students leave in stunned, disgruntled, silence.

Time continues without asking anyone's permission. The door opens and in walks the tenured custodian. The two go about their business - one cleaning up - the other readying for the next batch of scholars to walk thru the doors.

"Both hands," says the custodian quietly. "The answer lies in both hands."

**December 1, 2011**

***Matthew 21:33-46***

*'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'*

*Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:*

*"The stone that the builders rejected*

*has become the cornerstone;*

*this was the Lord's doing,*

*and it is amazing in our eyes"?*

*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'*

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.*

*They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

I just love the apostles. I can imagine them listening to this parable, their brows furrowed, their mouths frowning, their minds frothing over those bad tenants. They're especially focused because they know from their experiences in the world what happens to tenants who beat the servants and sons of landowners. Maybe they're even feeling proud because they figured out that the tenants are really the chief priests who just questioned Jesus' authority. So, when Jesus asks, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" they are so ready. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death..." they answer confidently. And they are wrong again.

I love the apostles because so often I think just like them. I too get caught up in the righteous anger of the parable and want for Jesus to tell me that the bad tenants will get punished. Like the apostles, I want the kind of justice that I know from my limited human experience. But Jesus shakes his head at us. "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?" There will be no death for the tenants, or at least not the brutal, physical kind imagined by the apostles. Ours is a creator God, one who prefers to build rather than destroy. Instead of carnage in the old vineyard, there will be a new vineyard right next door where, mysteriously, the rejected create a new world, a better way of living.

Strangely enough, the parable makes me think of Steve Jobs who built his own vineyard (Apple) and then was pushed out of it. Humiliated and rejected, he poured his gift for innovation into Pixar, the movie company that produced Toy Story and made animation a new art form. Then he returned to Apple and made it one of the world's most successful companies.

Find your way to the new vineyard this advent. Envision new kinds of justice. Imagine beyond your anger, hurt and disappointment. Partner with our creator God and build something new.

**December 2, 2011**

***Matthew 22:1-14***

*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

*'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'*

A parable on the Kingdom of God: it is like a wedding feast! Those first invited guests gave excuses for not taking up the invitation. They had a farm or business to take care of; that was their first priority. But the king was not asking them to abandon their businesses, just to turn loose of the activity in order to enter into the celebration that is the kingdom of heaven. Don't you think that if they had decided to attend and after the feast returned to their work, they would have returned with a different outlook and set of priorities?

I think the Advent message in this passage comes in the confrontation of the King with the guest who was not in proper wedding clothes. When accused by the angry King, the man was speechless. No apology or any excuses or reasons for his lack of respect and preparation. But the King (God) is probably not concerned about the man's clothes. Clothing here must be a metaphor for something else. We are told in other passages of scripture not to be concerned about how we will be clothed, and not to give favored treatment to the wealthy and best dressed in the group. So what does it mean that this man is not properly clothed?

Many times in the scriptures righteousness is compared to clothing. Psalm 135 prays "Clothe your ministers (priests) in righteousness". In Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, when the son returns, his father gives him a new robe to wear. Paul writes that we must be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. How can we do this, how can we bring Him close? We must all be sure that the business of our lives does not crowd out times for worship and prayer, study of God's word and close self-examination of the way we treat others...are we really truthful, and kind? We must all ask for God to show us where we are not following Him and then, when He shows us, not to be speechless, but ask immediately for forgiveness and the grace to follow Him.

Holy God, thank you that you have called each of us to serve in your kingdom. Thank you that you have given us the Spirit of Christ to empower this service with joy. Help us to live this day in a way that will please you and draw us and all others whom we serve into your love and companionship. Amen

**December 3, 2011**

***Matthew 22:15-22***

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

This passage reminds us of the many times we "render unto Caesar" and forget to "render unto God". So God sent Jesus to be among us, to be as one of us, to teach us and love us. Perhaps had Jesus not come to us as fully human and born of an earthly mother, we might never have been able to get our priorities in order. Thank be to God.

**December 4, 2011**

***Luke 1:57-68***

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.*

Zechariah stands out for me in this passage. He is the one who had the angelic visitation. He is the one who scoffed at the idea of his barren wife becoming pregnant. He is the one struck mute when he first expressed his disbelief and remained so until he went along with God's plan to name the "impossible" baby "John".

It is easy to picture myself in a similar situation; that is, being told something I know is very unlikely to happen and then, to my consternation, it happens. I, too, would have scoffed, even if it was an angel telling me my prayers had been answered - and would probably have been speechless when it turned out to be true.

The lesson I need to learn again and again is that if I am truly trusting in God, then anything is possible.

**December 5, 2011**

***Matthew 22:23-33***

*The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.' Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

The Sadducees were a Jewish sect who believed in Biblical literalism. They believed that in order to be right with God, one had to live strictly according to the rules laid out in the Torah (the first five books of our Bible). They also did not believe in the resurrection. So, they are asking him a rather loaded question, "Whose wife will she be?" as well as finding out where he stood regarding the resurrection. Jesus' answer challenges both their beliefs.

Jesus challenges me daily (when I'm willing to let him!). I have to remind myself that my dearly held beliefs need to be held loosely. None of us truly knows the power of God: The power of God to go beyond our human rules and beliefs, a power that holds love above all.

Moses was told by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." All three men long dead and gone, yet God speaks of them in the present tense! God, God of the living: Those of us still breathing, those whose breath has stopped, and those who have yet to draw their first breath.

God is larger than the largest image I can possibly draw up of him/her. God is so outside of my understanding that I get a headache just trying to imagine God. But, Jesus I can understand as a fellow human: someone who got hungry, who laughed and cried, who had friends and knew betrayal and suffering. And it is in Jesus that I catch glimpses of God who is beyond my understanding. In Jesus I see a love so accepting and powerful it takes my breath away.

**December 6, 2011**

***Matthew 22:34-46***

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

*Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah?" "Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

Our passage opens with one of the self-righteous and legalistic Pharisees posing a question to Jesus based on the laws given to Moses. 'Of all those commandments, which one is the greatest?'

All members at Trinity recognize the two main commandments given by Jesus as our own chosen Mission Statement calling us to love God and all others with our total being. Most of us know them by heart...and I believe that most of us try very hard to live these commandments in our daily lives. If we have the love of God in our hearts as we move through every minute of every day we experience so much more joy and find it easier to overcome those infinite minute problems that appear continuously across our pathways. Every morning I open the back door and look up at the sky, survey the trees and grass, inhale a deep breath of air and say "Thank you Lord God for allowing me this day. I hope to give the beauty I am experiencing to others." When it rains and snows, I say and feel the very same for I love the clouds and rain that falls and the pure whiteness of drifting snow flakes. I thank God for the blessing of being where I am on earth and ask that He blesses and is merciful to so many others who are experiencing hardships in life and for whom the bare trees are withered reflections of their lives, hopes and dreams. My daily prayers for others represent my way of showing love for those neighbors who need God's love, mercy and the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

However, we all know how difficult it is to love a neighbor who has wronged us in some manner; doing so means engaging in forgiveness which in some situations is a difficult task. Focusing on the love that God has given us helps to overcome the hatred resulting from being wronged; we must trust that over time, as Rob Bell says, "Love Wins"; wounds are healed, and forgiveness returns if we put our trust in God and remember that His love is all encompassing.

In the final verses of this pericope, it is Jesus who reverses the questioning process by challenging the Pharisees to recognize Him as the Messiah in offering an enigmatic query regarding his line of descendants in terms of his earthly and divine identity. (If David calls Jesus Lord, how can Jesus be David's son?) The Pharisees, although supposedly versed in the scripture of the prophets and the law, decline to answer or ask more questions. We wonder if they ever realized that Jesus' two most revered commandments constitute the whole of all prophetic scriptures and laws essential to obey the will of God. Love of God and love of neighbor is all that is needed.

**December 7, 2011**

***Matthew 23:1-12***

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father - the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

When we were children, we would love to play follow-the-leader. Sometimes we would ride our bikes on our country road which had little traffic or on the cowpaths through the pasture. Sometimes the leader would go real fast to make it hard for the rest of us to keep up.

As adults, we have many who desire to be our leaders. Just as in Christ's time, these leaders may not practice what they preach. Our task is to determine which leader we should follow, to look for integrity.

The scripture above tells us that there is only one Life-Leader for us all...Christ. Christ taught that we should love God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves. That is the standard by which we should examine all our motives and actions. We must examine the leadership that we follow to be sure that it leads us to Christ.

Dear God, be our companion and guide through this Advent season. We ask you to be our Life-Leader, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**December 8, 2011**

***Matthew 23:13-26***

*'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*

*'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath." How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.*

*'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*

*'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.*

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites...” Jesus is really “ticked off” ~ more angry than in any other reading in the New Testament! I am glad I am not any part of that crowd! I’m not really. No, really I’m not. If I was, I might be judgmental toward people more sinful than I. I might feel that it is appropriate to tell people how to live good clean lives despite the fact that I sometimes have a problem with some of the rules of life. I tithe, and show others what I am able to do, and help by reminding them when they fall short. I preach about the gifts of God, and all that has been given to me, but do not really feel it necessary to strip my comfort items to provide sustenance to those who live in standards beneath mine.

No, I am not part of that crowd, but perhaps I am deceiving myself into becoming a crowd of my own ~ maybe even more despicable than the crowd that drew the heated wrath of Jesus, - because, I know better!

Jesus is angry with all people who put works, however good, ahead of a loving relationship with their creator. He glowers at those who make a show of their giving, but are not giving out of love for another creature of God’s creation. He screams at those pompous individuals who do so much so to attain fame and honors so as to be admired by other people, and forget that those honors will not help when the time comes to meet the glorified God. When you stand in judgment, next to your neighbor, what can you offer from a life of some measure of self-indulgence, and too often short on faith and love? It is not the amount or level of hypocrisy, but the mere fact that there is any hypocrisy at all.

Two Commandments: “You shall love your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Why is it that you and I cannot follow these simplest of rules? Why can we not see the hypocrisy in our own lives, while we pass judgment on the way others live out their own? Perhaps this was the problem with the Scribes and Pharisees. They meant well, but, like me, they got too pumped up with their position among the people that they lived among, and were not humbled by the overwhelming and immeasurable love of God the Father and God the Son.

**December 9, 2011**

***Matthew 23:27-39***

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

*‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous bloodshed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.*

*‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” ’*

When reading this passage of scripture I was initially taken aback with the level of anger that Jesus was expressing. But then I stepped back a second and tried to put myself in his shoes. He had taken on a mission to spread the Good News of a new relationship with God. It is a gospel that redefines the meaning of Love for God, Love for one's self, and Love for neighbor. Jesus had come to this earth to walk among us and to share our very humanity. So when the people of the Jewish church of his time continued to discount and dismiss his message and furthermore mount a serious case against him, I think I can understand Jesus' frustration.

I wonder, as we approach another Advent season, if the Christmas decorations and music in the stores before Halloween frustrates Jesus. I wonder if all the hustle and bustle making merriment with extravagant parties frustrates Jesus. I wonder if all the stress mounting about the programming in our churches frustrates Jesus. I wonder if He would instead have us quiet our minds and souls to hear - again - his message to us. I wonder if Jesus would have us focus, instead, on hearing what he would have us do for all the suffering in this world today - for there is plenty of it.

As I read this passage - in October - I plan to take to heart my own feelings of frustration this fall. Instead of motoring into a higher gear during the Advent season this year I'm planning on taking more quiet time to really listen to what it is that Jesus would have me do. As I go about the task of putting aside those things that are less important so that I can prepare to take time to do this, I'm starting to get a sense of peace, and I think I'm on to something! My hope is that as I read this reflection in the parish devotion booklet, later during the month of December, I find that I have made Jesus happy by doing so.

**December 10, 2011**

***Matthew 24:1-14***

*As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'*

*When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*

*'Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.*

Reading this passage, part of my brain goes into checklist mode: Temple destroyed (check); false prophets (check); wars (check); famine (check); earthquakes (check). So we have had all these things but they keep happening. So when does this cycle end and what happens next? I find myself getting very confused and a bit overwhelmed. It isn't exact, and that is when it occurs to me that 'exact' is what I am looking for, not only in this passage, but in real life. Not only do I want a sign of what is to come in my life, but I want it mapped out for me, or better yet, turn by turn directions.

However, life doesn't come with a GPS; that is where faith comes in, and for me that is what Advent is about - using this period of waiting to ask God how I can strengthen my faith. It is easy to have faith when we are content and we know where our lives are going and what we think the future is going to look like.

All that Mary and Joseph knew was that they were going to have a Baby who was “from the Holy Spirit”. They had no idea what this would entail or look like. They didn’t even know where they were going to have their baby. They had to wait to see what it would mean for their lives. Maybe we could all use a little bit of their faith. I know I could.

**December 11, 2011**

***John 5:30-47***

*‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

*‘If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.*

*‘You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?’*

This passage is Jesus explaining to us what is, ultimately, unexplainable. Jesus is God made a man. Man is definable, perishable and limited. God is indefinable, eternal, and limitless. Because of our inability to understand God, Jesus helps us to understand by giving us the comparison. He compares his own ministry with John the Baptist’s ministry. In doing so, He also lets us know that it is just a lesser example...

John the Baptist was ...”the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me. (Verses 35-36)

If this is true than Jesus as a man is only a sample of the “greater” Risen Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, the Father. Wow, I can’t wait to be with Him.

Thank you, Father, for the Joy of Christmas, which we celebrate the birth of Jesus, who was made man, so show us YOU. AMEN

**December 12, 2011**

***Matthew 24:15-31***

*“So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’ —do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look! He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look! He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. “Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*”

Jesus in this reading today is talking about the literal end of world but live long enough and each of us will have an “end of the world experience” in our own life. Some of us may have more than one, but it is a guarantee that we will all experience at least one. I am speaking metaphorically of course. It will be a time when our safe little world collapses right in front of our own eyes unexpectedly and without warning. We are left devastated, scared, alone and in a dark place with no sense of hope. All we can see in the dark is pain and loss.

This end of world experience can be caused by a divorce, a sudden death of a loved one, a diagnosis of a dreaded illness, a serious accident, a crippling war wound. Name it there are many more. We wish there was some place we can run to and hide for protection. We may turn to false messiahs (like alcohol, drugs or a whole host of other poor choice) to deaden the pain or in the hope they can offer some relief. Others may lose faith in the messiah they used to believe would protect them. Words of encouragement or hope from caring family and friends offer no comfort. In the end after we are exhausted, lost all hope, tried every panacea we can find we are left empty and emotionally destitute. Reality has set in our world has come to an end.

In this passage Christ is telling us that there will be hard times. We are forewarned. However, it is not the end if we turn to Christ in hope and faith seeking the peace that surpasses all understanding. Christ tells us when all seems lost, He will be there for us. He will bring light to darkness. He does not promise that our world will not end but he does promise to be there to lead us to a new beginning. In Mark chapter 6 when after Christ fed the five thousand he sent his disciples ahead by sea to the next location he saw that they were on the water struggling to make it and all were afraid for they were in a dark and lonely place and could not manage their boat due to winds. He walks out to them over the turbulent waters, and the disciple not knowing what it is, were gripped in fear. Christ sensing their fear and calls out to them with the simple words “take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid.” Once we lose all and our world has ended there will be hope and redemption for us through Christ. Christ promises this. We need to trust and hear His words “Take heart! It is. Do not be afraid”. Given the impertinence of our lives it is comforting to know that Christ is always there with us even to the very end and beyond and we will see again the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with great glory.

Spiritual exercise: meditating regularly on the impermanence of our life can make us more open and accepting of the many changes that are inevitable in life.

**December 13, 2011**

***Matthew 24:32-44***

*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

The fig tree. Poor fig tree, it seems to always come out on the worst end of things. At a time when it should have been bearing fruit and wasn't, Jesus burns it up. And now, it is used as an example of signs that will appear when the last days are approaching. This portion of Matthew is the end of Jesus' rather long answer to his disciples' question (at the beginning of Matthew 24): "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" And then immediately after Matthew 24:44, he tells several parables about readiness: the unfaithful slave who did not take proper care of his master's property in his master's absence; the parable of the ten bridesmaids, 5 of whom were ready with extra oil and so were able to go into the banquet; the parable of the talent, in which the person with one talent merely hid it until his master returned, and did nothing to increase the gift.

We are to be ready when the Son of Man returns. How is it possible to be ready for this? Jesus himself says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

In our daily lives, we are in a constant state of "getting ready." We get up in the morning and get ready for work. When we're at work, we might get ready for a meeting, or help our boss get ready for a meeting. At home we get ready for dinner, or we get ready for company to arrive. And then at the end of the day we get ready for bed. In each instance, we know what time these events will occur, we know what will be expected of us, and there are specific actions we take so that we are ready. How then, do we get ready for something when we don't know a specific time or date? And how do we know what to do to get ready?

We don't like to be unprepared, and we don't like situations when even our most careful preparations don't protect us from the consequences of something interrupting our plans. We're on the road to work, there's an accident, and we're delayed. Then perhaps we miss that important meeting, or we're not there to give that report to our boss. Or maybe we're delayed on the way home, and there's no time to adequately prepare what we had planned for our company. And our refrain in those situations is usually, "If only I had known, then I would have \_\_\_\_\_" You can fill in the blank with whatever seems to fit.

But the coming of the Son of Man will indeed interrupt us: ". . .two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left." It will be like it was the day Noah entered the ark, "they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away."

For those times in our lives when things change in an instant, such as a diagnosis of a grave illness, or sudden and severe injury to ourselves or someone we love, it is our faith and our relationship to God that sustain us (even if we can perceive this only once we're on the other side of the event). When we're going through the flood, we turn to God and rely on Him as much as we can. So perhaps that is the key to being ready. Trust God to sustain us; nurture our relationship with Him through prayer; seek His will in all things. Under His sheltering protection we can be ready for anything.

**December 14, 2011**

***Matthew 24:45-51***

*'Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

In reading this passage, I consider in the larger sense that God has set all of us over his household and expects us to love and care for this earth, its creatures and one another. If we are true and faithful servants then we will respect and honor that trust and do everything in our power to ensure that we care for all of God's creation. By so doing, the kingdom of heaven will be ours.

It is our moral responsibility to share our time, talents and riches with others since it is through the grace of God that we were given these gifts in the first place. If we fail to live up to God's trust and do not respect and care for our fellow man, then we will have to face the consequences of our actions. When we do not share our gifts, we fail to be faithful servants of God and Christ. We also fail to receive the grace and blessings that come from sharing those gifts with others. This punishment so often is internal in the form of guilt and regret. Those feelings can fester and leave us feeling empty and unhappy.

So the message here is simple, live your life each day as the faithful and wise servant. Be a faithful steward of the assets that God has given you so that you may share those riches with others and be a living example of God's love.

**December 15, 2011**

***Matthew 25: 1-13***

*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, "No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'*

The parable of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids in the Gospel of Matthew is one of series of instructive teachings on the appropriate way to conduct ourselves while we are waiting for God to appear. Other passages just before and after Matthew 25: 1-13 tell us, that we are to feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, care for the sick, and visit those who are imprisoned. We are to use whatever personal strengths and material resources we have (talents) to further God's kingdom on earth. We are to remain watchful, sober, and industrious, doing the jobs that God has assigned to us: "Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives." The parable of the ten bridesmaids must also be understood in the context of these admonishments about how we are to conduct ourselves while we wait for God's coming into the world.

In this parable, the five wise and the five foolish bridesmaids (or virgins as they are described in some translations) are waiting for the bridegroom to come. This parable is based on the Palestinian custom of the bridegroom coming to bring the bride from her parent's home to his own. The bridegroom is often interpreted as God coming for us. It is generally understood as the second coming of Christ, when the "righteous" will be given eternal life, but those who are not prepared will find the door the wedding banquet shut. Being invited into the wedding banquet is being invited into God's eternal kingdom. You know neither the day nor the hour that God will come for you.

I always struggled a bit with this passage. Why couldn't the bridesmaids who were prepared for God's kingdom, share a bit of their oil with those who were ill-prepared? One interpretation which was shared with me, was that the oil represents one's personal faith in God. It takes a lifetime of studying God's word, of living in Christian community, of confronting and dealing with adversity in one's own life, and of prayer to have sufficient oil to keep your lamp burning. Everyone has a personal faith journey and a personal relationship with God, which can't be readily transferred to someone else. The wise bridesmaids gave some instructions on where to get more oil. They were not unfeeling. We can talk about our faith, but we can't just transfer our faith to someone else. Every person's journey of faith is unique. We each must take personal responsibility for being ready for God. There is discipline and hard work involved. Notice that neither the wise nor the foolish bridesmaids were perfect. They all became drowsy and slept when the bridegroom was detained. But the wise bridesmaids were able to recover from their lapse, and be ready when God appeared.

In the first century synagogue the coming of the Kingdom of God was often interpreted as "God's active, personal intervention to redeem and restore Israel". It is God coming to us in this world in a powerful way. If we have spent sufficient time nurturing our faith, building up our personal "stores of oil", we will be ready when God appears. We can even help in some small way to bring God's redemption into this beautiful, yet broken world, and we even get invited to a huge celebratory banquet at the end of life too! Advent is the time in the liturgical calendar when we are expectantly waiting for God's redeeming love to appear in this world. May we spend time preparing our hearts and minds this advent season, so we are truly open to God's redeeming, restorative love when it comes to us.

December 16, 2011

**Matthew 25:14-30**

*'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

The striking characteristic of The Parable of the Bags of Gold is that each of us has gifts of service to support our ministries—no matter how fruitful the gifts, no matter how sparse. In this parable, a slave master entrusts his wealth to his servants before embarking on a journey. Upon returning from the journey, the master is pleased to see that two of the servants have invested their master's wages, thus multiplying the financial wealth. The third servant, mindful his master was a severe and cruel man with anathema for unlabored gain, buried the money for safekeeping. Upon learning his wealth had not been multiplied, the master scolded the slave and commissioned him to "outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth." There was no reward for faithful service.

No appreciation for faithful service? No acknowledgement that we did not make the situation any worse as a result of our involvement? I believe God wants all of us to get involved in ministries and service to others. Otherwise, why bother to partake in worship? None of us have gift-wrapped answers to life's complex questions. The best we can do is to freely share our talents and, along the way, make a positive difference.

**December 17, 2011**

***Matthew 25:31-46***

*'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'*

Judgment Day.

As we wait for December 25 to come and anticipate the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are sure when it will be. We can plan where we will be and with whom we will celebrate this wonderful day.

But when will Judgment Day come: today, tomorrow, next week, next year? Where will we be and with whom will we be facing our Lord. Will we be alone? Will it come swiftly? How can we prepare? Each day we get up without knowing what challenges we will face for that day.

On the elevator this morning, did you let everyone go first?

Did you smile at a stranger and look into their eyes?

When someone dropped something, did you stop and help them pick it up?

Did you let the person in from the side street?

Did you tell your mother, father, husband, wife, grandfather, grandmother, sister, brother, friend - that you love them?

Did you pass the homeless person by without even looking at them?

Did you try and reconcile with a friend, coworker and talk things out?

Did you see Jesus today?

Will you know him when he comes?

Did you say your prayers today?

Did you sing a song praising him and glorifying his name?

Did you thank him for the blessings you have been bestowed upon in your life?

In Matthew, clearly you want to be with the people on the left and not the right. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Get ready to go to Heaven. Follow our shepherd and help the sheep. Jesus is with you all the time, make good use of your time with him and Judgment Day will be glorious!!!

**December 18, 2011**

***John 3:16-21***

*'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.*

*'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'*

In November I was remodeling my condo and I was looking forward with anticipation to completing my project. I know how good it would look and I just wanted to see it finished so I could share it with my friends. My anticipation was much like that of a child waiting for Christmas wondering what was under the Christmas tree.

This is the time of year when we wait and prepare to celebrate God's most precious gift to us, His Son, Jesus Christ. John 3:16-21 starts out telling us that all we have to do is believe in Jesus and we are saved. I know most of would love to stop here, however, the ensuing verses can start to make some of feel uncomfortable. It says that if you don't believe in Jesus you are not saved and are condemned. The only way to get to heaven is to believe in Jesus and that is it. This birth that we are getting ready to celebrate holds so much for us. This little baby is going to be a light to show us how we should live as long as we embrace Him.

I hope that this Christmas season you will take the time to tell your friends of this gift God has sent to us. Show them the same love that was given to us in the birth of baby Jesus. Anticipate and share the love that God has shared with us in Christ Jesus. May you have a Merry Christmas that last all year long.

**December 19, 2011**

***Luke 1:1-25***

*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*

*In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.*

*Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink;*

*even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’*

*Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.*

*After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’*

Zachariah is stunned by the news that he and Elizabeth will bear a child. Thoughts must be swirling around in Zachariah’s head – a baby – at our age?? Is this for real? In the sanctuary of God, the angel Gabriel appeared and announced that Zachariah and Elizabeth will have a baby boy. Gabriel – full of information – informs Zachariah of the baby’s name - John – and foretells what to expect: this will be a happy time – lots of partying and rejoicing; God’s gonna love this kid; you’ll never have to worry about any problems with alcohol – he won’t be a drinker. The Holy Spirit will be quite evident in John. Then Gabriel goes on to outline John’s vocation in life. First, he will soften the hearts of parents to children; in other words, he will show the way of love and care to the youngest among us. Second, John will kindle the hearts of many people toward wisdom and righteousness. Third, he will prepare the way of the Lord, which, as we now know, is the foretelling of the coming of the Messiah. Understandably, Zachariah reacts with skepticism and is promptly struck dumb by Gabriel. The reoccurring question in scriptural birth stories seems to be “How can this be?”

This mysterious God of love that we love – loves to surprise us. The Angel of God, Gabriel, surprised Zachariah so much he couldn’t speak? Jaw-dropping awe.

We live in a culture that fosters skepticism, suspicion, and doubt. Our jaws usually drop because of scandal, gossip, or crime.

Think deeply today about the mysterious God of love that surprises us in the ordinary routine of the day. Where is new life emerging when we least expect it? What causes you to ask that very question “How can this be?” And then? Drop your jaw and give thanks.

**December 20, 2011**

***Luke 1:26-38***

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born\* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.*

The Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, were written to help Theophilus (and all subsequent readers) know the truth of the Christian teachings he had heard and thus come to have a well-grounded faith in Jesus Christ and be saved.

The Son Mary will Bear:

The first thing Gabriel reveals about Jesus is that "He will be great" (1:32). This Jesus is going to be a great man. That is the first thing Theophilus needs to hear about Jesus. You may have never heard of Nazareth, Theophilus, and this young girl may be poor and obscure, but don't judge by merely human outward appearances. Her son is going to be great. You no doubt have studied the lives of many great men in Greek and Roman history. But do not be deceived Theophilus: "What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). In spite of all appearances to the contrary, this son of Mary is going to be great. Come with me, Theophilus. In this gospel we are setting out on a journey towards a new view of greatness. Don't judge prematurely. Give yourself time for this man to prove himself. It is not easy for you, a noble Roman official, to comprehend a statement like, "He who is least among you all is the one who is great" (Luke 9:48). But it is true, and Jesus himself will prove it to you, if you listen now to what I have to say and then watch how he lives and teaches. This Jesus is going to be great. Now learn greatness from him.

It is obvious to me that we have still not learned this lesson in our world today. I believe we are called to continue to have faith and embrace this difficult concept within our culture in the present time. How many times do we judge others before knowing them? Probably countless times! Luke's Gospel reinforces the fact that a counter cultural revolution is underfoot! It is the least among us who is great. It is another warning that we have it all wrong...the things we hold dear and cling to in our culture and personal lives are not important. We exalt things which separate us from the divine...our I-phones, blackberries, cars, and other material assets create a facade of power, importance, and high ranking in society. Luke's message is simple....don't judge and don't cling to what is material. Hold dear and exalt the message of Jesus... the man who stooped to the level of a servant and washed his disciples' feet. Live with faith in the awareness that the divine is always in our midst and is most likely found within the margins. Be aware that in your day to day life you may encounter Jesus in a most unexpected form. Strip away your attachments to our culture and be a radical follower of Christ! It is in the simplicity of Jesus' teachings that we are able to see the Kingdom of Heaven among us! Amen.

**December 21, 2011**

**Luke 1:39-48a**

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'*

*And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

What is the significance of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth before the birth of Jesus?

When Elizabeth greeted Mary and recognized the Messiah in Mary's womb they were filled with the Holy Spirit and with a joyful anticipation of the fulfilment of God's promise to give a Savior. What a marvelous wonder for God to fill not only Elizabeth's heart with his Holy Spirit but the child in her womb as well. John the Baptist, even before the birth of the Messiah, pointed to his coming and leapt for joy in the womb of his mother as the Holy Spirit revealed to him the presence of the King to be born. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to enable us to know and experience the indwelling presence of God and the power of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit is the way in which God reigns within each of us.

Do you live in the joy and knowledge of God's indwelling presence with you through his Holy Spirit?

**December 22, 2011**

**Luke 1:57-66**

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.*

*On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.*

Now the time came for Elizabeth, and she bore a son...

What great joy Elizabeth must have felt after being childless for so many years. Her friends and relatives are excited as they gather for custom of circumcision and naming of the child on the 8th day. But Elizabeth surprises them by insisting that the child not be named in the usual manner -after his father or other family member- but should be called John as the angel had instructed. She stands her ground against their objections and the gathering asks Zechariah, who agrees with his wife that the name should be John. For his obedience to God's will, Zechariah's speech is immediately restored.

What extraordinary happenings in this community, everybody is talking about them. What does it all mean? There must be something special about this child.

Elizabeth maintained her faith, she is rewarded with a child; she goes against custom and was obedient to the Lord. Zechariah is finally unquestioning and obedient and follows God's will and is rewarded with the return of his speech. And the child, John, "the hand of the Lord is with him". God's hand is in these unusual events and He has a plan for this special child.

**December 23, 2011**

***Luke 1:67-80***

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:*

*'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,*

*for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.*

*He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David,*

*as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*

*that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.*

*Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,*

*the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness*

*before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;*

*for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,*

*to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

*to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

*The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*

Years ago there was a hearts game in my kitchen. The banter around the table got so animated that we declared the rest of the game to be silent. The silence made the experience even more intense. There was so much I wanted to say, so many smart comments to make, but truly the silence forced us to focus on the game.

I wonder if silence allowed Zechariah to focus? To focus on life, to focus on the promises of God, to focus on Gabriel's announcement. For nine months Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, had been unable to speak. The angel Gabriel said that Zechariah was made mute because he did not believe when the Gabriel told him that he and Elizabeth would give birth to a son. Really all Zechariah asked was: how will I know that this is so, my wife and I are both old. Seemed like a fair question to me.

In Gabriel's message Zechariah was told to name the boy John. When the baby is born, as soon as Zechariah writes on a tablet that the infant boy is to be named John, his tongue is loosed and he breaks out in song that is contained in today's reading! He declares with absolute certainty that baby John will become the prophet of the most high, that he will prepare the way of the Lord! And so he did!

Doubt. Time. Focus.

Over the years there have been many occasions of doubt in my life. Fortunately, for me at least, I was not made mute. But what usually comes are long periods of time with that doubt or question always right there, wanting an answer, waiting for some reply, some response from God. The answer might come through reading, through a sermon, through a friend, through an experience. It always comes, for me, in times of focus and silence. For many years I struggled with the suffering of God's people. I really didn't understand why a good God would allow bad things to happen to good people. I am not certain I know the answer yet. I do believe that as

Saint Paul has written: suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope and hope never disappoints us. I also know and believe with all of my heart that God works ALL THINGS FOR THE GOOD; ALL THINGS. I have come to that confidence by reading scripture, through the preaching of others, by my own experience and the experiences of others' suffering. The confidence came ultimately through times of focus and silence.

Doubt. Time. Focus. Prepares the way of the Lord!

**December 24, 2011**

***Matthew 1:18-25***

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

We can meet God everywhere. We can meet God in everything. God is with us.

Sizing up the dilemma – of Mary being pregnant and all - Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary quietly. It would be in her best interest so as help her avoid suffering public disgrace. Given ancient cultural mores, his decision made sense. But then.....just as Joseph entered into sleep, he had a dream. Joseph met God in his dream. How can that be? And Joseph was given what appears to be a clear message to relinquish his best laid plans, go ahead and make Mary his wife, and name this unborn child Jesus.

Isn't it our natural proclivity to size things up and then make some decisions about the best way forward? Striving so very often to make prudent, wise decisions, the idea that Joseph 'listened' to the voice of God in this dream and changed his plans knowing the consequences is almost unfathomable to me. Marrying Mary, by all outward appearances, would bring nothing but trouble. Yet, he took the risk.

And I realize that unless risk is taken – the chance of moving toward new life diminishes. When you are faithful to risk you engage your life. Only through the door of risk can growth enter.

Joseph clearly was a man of deep faith and integrity. Joseph's faithfulness to his relationship with God despite the cost amazes me. Allowing the voice of God heard in his dream to inform his actions, even when doing so defies logic and reason, makes me pause.

Joseph lived deliberately. By that I mean he was intentional and careful when making decisions while at the same time, deeply attentive to the voice of God within, and willing to take this risk for God's sake.

This night we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. That birth comes about because of those who were willing to 'risk' themselves for the sake of Christ, to come among us trusting that God was with them in whatever messes cropped up.

God is everywhere. God is in everything. God is with us – Emmanuel – this day and always.

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