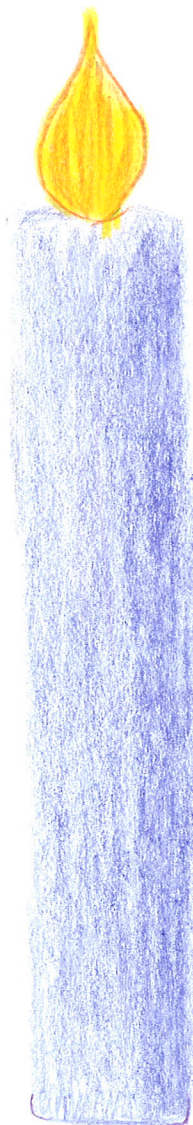
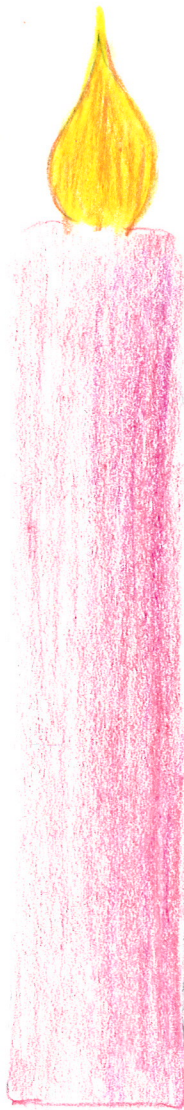
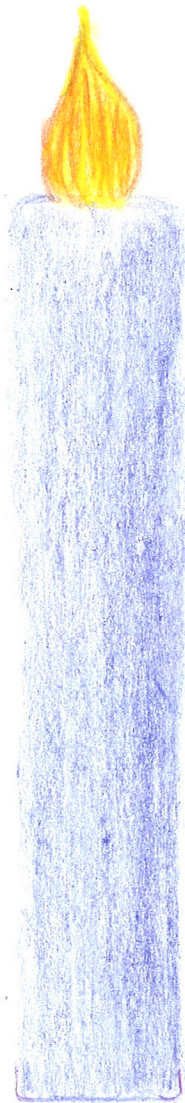
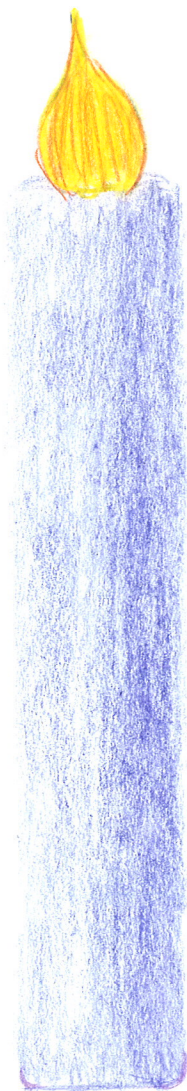


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Reflections

Advent Devotional for November 28 Matt. 25:1-13

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 New Zealand Prayer Book's Night Prayer reads: *Lord, it is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be still in the presence of God.*

**Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.
Five of them were foolish and five were wise.**

It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done; Let it be.

**The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.
The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.**

The night is dark. Let our fear of the darkness of the world and of our lives rest in you.

**The bridegroom was a long time in coming.
And they all became drowsy and fell asleep.**

The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace.

**At midnight the cry rang out: Here comes the bridegroom!
Come to meet him!**

The night heralds the dawn.

**Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.
The foolish ones said to the wise,
Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.**

Let us look expectantly to a new day.

**No, they replied, there may not be enough for both of us and
you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.**

New joys.

But while they were on their way to the buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

New possibilities.

Later the others also came. Lord, Lord, they said, open the door for door for us! But he replied, Truly I tell you, I don't know you.

Be faithful, prayerful and mindful in all that you do and say - today. Tomorrow is not an option. Now is the time.

Now is the place.

In your name we pray. Amen.

Advent Devotional for November 29 Luke 20:1-8

Luke 20:1-8

One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders and said to him, 'Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?' He answered them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' They discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from. Then Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

The first thing that always resonates with me whenever I read this passage is that the Jewish leaders all lied to Jesus. Not a necessarily smart thing to do in my mind. He asked them a really simple question which they all knew the answer to. They all knew whether they did or did not believe that John's baptism came from heaven. I suspect most thought it did not. To me, answering Christ's question honestly by saying, I did not believe in John's baptism would have been an acceptable answer to Christ.

I do not believe Christ was really looking for an answer but for honesty and truth, and did not find any. Not finding any honesty or a commitment to be open and truthful, Christ knew they would not be open to his message. I think the Jewish leaders in this parable can represent me or really anyone, and this parable tells us we must be honest with God and ourselves in order to be open to receiving the "Good News". If we are like the Jewish elders and are not open and honest to God and admit our doubts, fears and failures we are not open to receiving God's Word. God is there for us always and forever but we

need to be fully open to him and in part that means approaching him with honesty and in truth. Just imagine the incredible gift that the Jewish leaders missed out on if they had only been honest to Christ. Like the Jewish leaders, let's not miss out on God's gifts.

Spiritual exercise: Scripture tells us to meditate on God and his Word and works. One of numerous verses that speak of meditation is 1 Timothy 4:15 : "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all" (King James Version). Christian meditation is simple and does not take long and can have a profound impact. Find a quiet spot sitting with your back straight which helps to promote concentration and focus on an aspect of God such as love, mercy or compassion. Do this for 20 minutes daily. There are lots of books out there on Christian meditation that can help you with this powerful spiritual practice that can enrich your life in many ways.

Advent Devotional for November 30 Luke 20:9-18

Luke 20:9-18

He began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.' When they heard this, they said, 'Heaven forbid!' But he looked at them and said, 'What then does this text mean: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

This passage from Luke tells a powerful message of what happens when we become selfish and rebellious against God. Jesus tells this parable for the Pharisees and the scribes, but its meaning can apply to anyone.

In this parable, a man plants a vineyard and leases it to tenants. Vineyards are mentioned frequently throughout the Old Testament. The people listening to Jesus would equate the vineyard to Israel and equate the owner to God. God entrusted the care of this land to the people living there. He did not worry because he knew everything was well looked after by the people. Eventually, the owner sent slaves to gather his share of the produce from them. The tenants, having grown greedy and did not want to give the owner's share back to him.

Over and over, God sent prophets to the people reminding them of the law. They were always rejected. Finally, Jesus tells them, God sends his Son to them but the tenants will once again reject Him and God's law, and God will have his vengeance. The Pharisees say, "Heaven forbid" that this happens. But Jesus looks straight at them and says you hope it won't happen, but it has already been prophesied. Jesus

quotes to them from Psalm 118. The stone that the builders rejected becomes the most important stone of the building. Jesus is that stone.

What is it that the tenants and we today constantly reject? To love God with all our hearts and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We become self-centered and selfish in our lives and forget the greatest commandment of all. God sent prophet after prophet, and finally his beloved Son to remind us.

But there is good news in this parable. The story does not end with Jesus' death. Jesus becomes the cornerstone of the building of our lives. As long as we build upon our faith and honor God's law of love, the foundation of our life will remain strong and we will be able to love and care for others.

Advent Devotional for December 1 Luke 20:19-26

Luke 20:19-36

When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent. Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.' Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.'

“Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest.” Although I am very familiar with this story in Luke, for the first times these words seemed to jump off the page at me. People pretending to be honest. How many times have I pretended to be honest? Have you? How many times have I sought out my own gratification and relief at the sake of another, whether I was aware of it or not? I reread that verse and take this meaning from it – Jesus is keeping a close watch on me, hoping and praying that I will be honest. Honest not only with those around me, but honest with myself as well, which is perhaps the hardest thing to do. To look deeply within myself and see who I truly am. God sees that part of me. God sees that part of me and loves me, in spite of it or because of it – it makes no difference. That is what Advent means to me – God loves me. God loves me so much that God became Emmanuel. Joy to the World indeed.

Advent Devotional for December 2 Luke 20:27-40

Luke 20:27-40

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.' Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

The season of Advent is about the promise of new life. We reflect on the birth of the Messiah that is fast approaching, and on the new life we have inherited through the Incarnation of the Son of God. However, as we reflect on all this new life, and as we imagine the birth of baby Jesus, many in our community are facing the reality of death.

The passage of Luke 20:27-40 deals with the strange reality of death. This passage is so strange to us in our modern context, that I think it highlights the absurdity that death seems to have in the face of such overwhelming new life in Christ. The Sadducees that approach Jesus in this passage are referring to the "levirate" or "brother-in-law" laws from the Torah, and are trying to trap Jesus into a logical absurdity. Jesus and the Pharisees believe and teach a resurrection of the dead, and the Sadducees believe neither in resurrection or in angels.

Jesus turns the absurdity of their questioning on its head, and meets death in the face with the reality of new life in God. The resurrection Jesus promises in this passage carries the new life of advent beyond death. First, his promise unites those of us alive now with those who have already died: "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." Second, his promise is to all of us of extraordinary and unimaginable life after life after death: "Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." The new life we hope for during the Advent season, eagerly awaiting the coming of God-with-us, unites us with our friends and family that have gone before us, and gives us hope that we will live an extraordinary and unending life in Christ both today and forever.

Advent Devotional for December 3 Luke 20:41-21:4

Luke 20:41-21:4

Then he said to them, 'How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? For David himself says in the book of Psalms,

*"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.'"*

David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' Jesus Denounces the Scribes in the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

Jesus is again warning his disciples. He looks around and sees potential danger for his followers. He sees the pride that the Pharisees have in themselves. They are eager to feel important, certainly more important than the poor widow.

The Pharisees expect to be treated in a certain way, to dress in the finest clothes, to be given the best seats, to be shown great respect. While at the same time, they are cheating their followers. And all the time they are being hypocrites by making a big show of their prayers. Their actions belie their faith. Their actions don't show God's love to anyone. They have become so caught up in the feelings of entitlement that they have forgotten the true message. They think that just going to the synagogue is enough. They don't carry over their faith to their daily lives. They are content to make a show of their faith but not let that faith show on an everyday basis.

We are called to live out our faith. We can't just sit in our pews on Sunday, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, take communion and then go out and live our lives as if we never set foot in a church. We've all seen people like this. People who make a big deal about their attendance in church, but who have no tolerance for others. People whose lives don't reflect what Jesus has taught.

It's an easy hole to fall into. It's easy to become prideful and boast about "what a good person I am because I go to church". But how do we portray our beliefs to the world around us? Can others look at our lives and see Jesus? Can they see what we believe? Are we kind, caring and compassionate? Or are we judgmental? Do we think that everyone has to believe exactly what we believe? Or are we tolerant of other opinions? Do we think we are better than our neighbor who doesn't go to church regularly?

If we are to truly follow Jesus, then our actions have to reflect our beliefs. We have to live our faith, not only in the pews but in our daily lives, in our actions, in what we say, and in our relationships with family, friends, and coworkers. We need to step out of the church and into the world as people who do

what they believe. Then we are truly Christians. When we show God's love and practice God's love every day.

Advent Devotional for December 4 Luke 21:5-19

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 one 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; 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.

This passage is interesting in that Luke portrays Jesus offering an expectation of an advent experience for all Christian believers. Our celebration of advent focuses on the anticipated arrival of our Lord, but these words of Jesus provides an analogy which we may not have previously observed. For He depicts an advent comprised of our looking forward to entering the kingdom of God.

Initially in this passage, Jesus predicts the end of the world as typified in the fall of the beautifully adorned Jerusalem temple. The depiction of this advent experience is different; it is not filled with joyful expectations but a delineation of predicted earthly disasters as signs of the end of time as we know it. However, history repeats itself in the number of earthquakes, floods, famines, and pandemics which destroy and claim the lives of loved ones, wrecking havoc on our earthly existence.

Jesus also predicts not only his own suffering and death but those of many disciples as well. Being handed over to those in the synagogue for trial foreshadows his own experience and that of others. And who came forward to speak in his favour...neither disciples nor family? A really unusual advent prediction from our usual focus at this joyous time of year. However, Jesus, in reminding us that nothing of one's body will perish is referring to our spiritual bodies rather than our physical ones.

The end of time? Man always appears to need a sign...a foreseeable pathway...a map to use to travel life's roads. It is probably the reason the disciples ask Jesus for a sign so as to prepare for it. Jesus replies with a warning to beware of false prophets who claim to make predictions. The preaching of repentance, in anticipation of the end of time for the sole sake of salvation, is still being revealed in the abundance of television evangelistic homilies. Too many Christians focus on their own salvation rather than giving of themselves to others through service, prayer and evangelism. "To love your neighbour as yourself" takes second stage to self-preservation. Our work in mission and outreach towards all our

communities, international and domestic, comprises a small section of our tasks as Christians serving our neighbours. Our worship and prayer time together provides the strength we need to sustain ourselves and others through the many challenges of our earthly lives. Evangelism is not only an outward appeal to others to share our beliefs in God but to live our lives as examples of the teachings of Christ. Therefore salvation should not be a goal in itself; however, spreading the love of Christ is. Perhaps we should anticipate the kingdom of God not as a destination but as a continuation of being with Him in praise and worship.

Jesus informs us that our faith in Him may expose us to physical trials and persecutions, by family, friends and enemies; however it is that same faith that will sustain us and enable us to overcome whatever trials we encounter. Jesus gives us the wisdom and the knowledge to shield ourselves from the challenges reigned upon us because of our beliefs. He tells us that it is by our “endurance” that we will gain our souls. That is the advent message our Lord offers all Christians. It is indeed a mighty one. We have just gained a new perspective on the Advent experience Jesus has given us. How great is that?

Advent Devotional for December 5 Luke 21:5-19

Luke 7:28-35

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ (And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)

‘To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.”

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.’

This reading concludes a larger section about John the Baptist. In the verse preceding this reading; Jesus has declared that John the Baptist is more than a prophet. In fact, John is the one spoken of in Malachi 3 the one would prepare the way for the Messiah. John is the immediate precursor of the Messiah. Unlike the other prophets, John saw Jesus in flesh and bones, and personally pointed him out as the Messiah. For that reason, Jesus says of John: “among those born of women (that would be just about everyone!) none is greater than John. But as great as John is, he is nothing compared with those who share in the blessing of being in God’s kingdom. So Jesus would say of John: “yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he!”

Not surprising is Luke’s aside: the crowds of people understood and accepted what Jesus was saying; the religious leaders did not. The crowds were baptized by John, the religious leaders were not.

Jesus compares the generation to children in the marketplace. What do childrens' games have to do with the kingdom of God? The children in Jesus' parable react with disappointment because they cannot induce anyone to join in their musical medley. They complain that if they play their music at weddings, no one will dance or sing; and if they play at funerals, it is the same.

Jesus' message of the kingdom of God is a proclamation of good news and of great joy for those who will listen; but it is also a warning for those who refuse.

Why did the message of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus meet with resistance and deaf ears?

Because it was not what the religious leaders wanted or expected.

The Pharisees were really good people just trying to do and believe what they were taught that God expected them to be and do. Their expectations blinded them to the reality of God in their lives. I wonder how my expectations blind me to God in my life? I only know this; looking back at those dark times of pain and suffering when I felt abandoned by God, God was with me every step of the way. I wanted God to be like a mommy and kiss it and make everything better. My expectations was wrong. God never ever promised that. What Jesus promised is this: "I will be with you always even to the end of the ages."

Advent Devotional for December 6 Luke 21:20-28

Luke 21:20-28

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

The Coming of the Son of Man 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

These are frightening images: Days of vengeance, distress, wrath and destruction. Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the reaction of the people: "people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." Frankly, I would be terrified.

This discourse takes place when Jesus is in the temple teaching surrounded by the people, including the Jewish religious authorities. Various Jewish authorities question Jesus in an attempt to trip him up, unsuccessfully. Finally, they point out the beauty of the temple with its "beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God" (Luke 21:5). Jesus warns that the day will come "when not one stone will be left upon another." (Luke 21:6) Then Jesus is asked how people will know when that time will come, and Jesus answers.

Every evening when I watch the news, my heart aches when I hear and see the brutality that we visit upon one another. I know there is plenty of heartbreaking news that never reaches our evening news from around the world and I am ashamed to say that I'm glad I don't have to hear more bad news that I already do each day. Yet I know that suffering and terror abound.

There are some who believe that this text also refers to what is known as Jesus' Second Coming; that Jesus will literally return in a cloud with power and great glory. But what if Jesus' Second Coming, although it may culminate in something dramatic, shows up now in those small moments of grace and

love that occur every day? What if you are instrumental in bringing forth the kingdom of God in your daily life?

Notice the response that Jesus calls us to in the last sentence: “Stand up and raise your heads”! Hardly a posture of fear and trembling! Jesus calls us to stand tall in the knowledge of Gods’ love for each and every person. Jesus calls us to look past the suffering to the hope that stands behind it.

What you do makes a difference! Acknowledge the darkness, but do what you can to bring some of Jesus’ grace, love, and light to it. You may never know the impact a call to a person you haven’t seen at church in a while may have, or even a kind smile to a frazzled person you see on the street. Those little things have enormous power. You are a light in the darkness.

So, take heart in the darkness! Jesus is coming/is here/will always be here! Stand up and raise your heads for Jesus is coming!

Advent Devotional for December 7 Luke 21:29-38

Luke 21:29-38

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’ Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

I believe Jesus is trying to tell us in this passage, that we all have gifts, have potential and the ability to grow, produce and love and to contribute to the good of us all. We all bear invaluable fruit, as does the fig tree. These gifts come from God. We know He is near to us and with us always. Nothing will ever change this. We are loved and gift laden - each and every one of us.

Then comes a warning to us all: Do not become so enamored and driven in our daily lives by ambition, acquisition, and success that we do not see God. The precious gifts that he has so generously given us will allow us to discover and realize that the Kingdom is here now and we are equipped to do our share to participate in that Kingdom.

It is well known that the daily hustle, bustle, battering and temptations that life presents to us can blind us to the God given gifts we do possess and to neglect to use them for the good fo our fellow man. Who knows when God's love and light will reach us. it is out there and available to us constantly. Will we be ready and available to see and realize it?

Advent Devotional for December 8 John 7:53-8:11

John 7:53-8:11

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

As I contemplate John 7:53-8:11, I realize the timelessness of this passage. The meeting in the temple courts of Jesus, teachers, Pharisees and a lone woman caught in the act of adultery reminds me of redemption, self-examination, and how Jesus leads me from darkness to light—provided. I'm paying attention to His message.

As a Christian, I know Jesus died to free mankind—and me-- from sin. He is my Redeemer. John 7:53-8:11 illustrates that point to me twice. Once, when the sin of adultery is brought to Jesus' attention and the second time, when teachers and Pharisees used the question of Jesus' specific punishment of the accused---which, of course, was a ruse to have a basis for accusing Jesus. I don't believe we should become cavalier about sinful acts and think, "Oh well, Jesus will forgive me." Such thoughts become clever stories to excuse behavior we know is wrong. Rather, as human beings, we all make mistakes. With forgiveness comes that elegant question: "What did you learn from your mistake?"

Self-examination before I judge is a tough—and sometimes painful--notion! I get up each day and don't bother to ask anyone if I'm right or wrong, yet get highly offended when another smacks against what I think is right. Jesus placed the declarative statement before the accusers, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." In other words, Jesus seemed to say, "Is everything you've done so righteous that your own past is clean?" Jesus reminds us we'd better examine the consequences of our own actions before we come to conclusions about someone else.

The impression of darkness is evident in John 7:53-8:11 by the darkness of spirit this woman must have experienced which led her to adultery; the darkness of misguided judgment of teachers and Pharisees and the darkness of deliberate trickery aimed at Jesus. As always, Jesus leads me toward the light, toward the opportunity to begin anew, providing the blessing of another day to do better than the day before.

I realize how the darkness is everpresent of spirit could encompass, I search for Jesus to guide me.

Advent Devotional for December 9 Luke 22:1-13

Luke 22:1-13

Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.' They asked him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for it?' 'Listen,' he said to them, 'when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.' So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When I first looked up my assigned piece of Scripture from Luke, I thought, "What does this have to do with Advent? How can the Last Supper have anything to do with what I was assigned?" As you will see as you read this passage, the words will jump out at you as they did to me.

Verse 12 states, ".....Make preparations...." Advent is the season for preparing for the Nativity. Use this time to read the Scripture readings discussed in this booklet. Pray that these readings will prepare you for the true meaning of Christmas during these hectic weeks prior to December 25.

Advent Devotional for December 10 Luke 22:14-30

Luke 22:14-30

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!' Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this. A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among

you as one who serves. "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jesus said, "I have wanted so much to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer! For I tell you, I will never eat it until it is given its full meaning in the Kingdom of heaven."

There is something so beautiful about sharing a meal with another. Indeed there is something very intimate in sharing a meal with someone in their own home. Likewise it is an honor to be invited to do so. I have also felt that intimacy and honor when participating in the Lord's Supper. The Eucharistic Prayer has always been a source of fascination and wonder. It is powerfully beautiful.

Jesus called his closest disciples together to share the Passover meal. But he implemented a new tradition. He broke bread and wine and called them his body and blood. He offered it to them. Little did his disciples know that within hours from that moment the events would be set into motion that would climax with their beloved Teacher's sacrificial death. But first - he calls his closest followers to him.

Luke's gospel goes on to tell about an argument that ensues among the disciples. They are concerned about deciding who among them is the greatest. Jesus turns their belief upside down, once again. He states that the greatest must serve. John's gospel tells the story of how Jesus gets up from the dinner table this very evening, ties a towel around his waist, washes all of their feet, and then states, "I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you."

To participate in the Eucharist is to become intimate with Jesus. He meets us at the altar railing - wherever we find ourselves that minute, that day, that week. To participate in the Lord's Supper is to be filled spiritually, when we are truly present in the moment. But to participate in the most sacred mystery is also to be called. We are called to get up from the table and go out and serve others. As we pray at the conclusion: "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord."

This Advent season, our Heavenly Father calls us to come closer to Him - again. He calls us to sit with Him, to ponder all that He has done for us. He calls us to remember that He loved us so much that He chose to live among us on this earth. How can we resist the great, honorable invitation to do so?!

Advent Devotional for December 11 Luke 22:31-38

Luke 22:31-38

'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.' He said to them, 'When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'No, not a thing.' He said to them, 'But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me,

“And he was counted among the lawless”; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.’ They said, ‘Lord, look, here are two swords.’ He replied, ‘It is enough.’

In this reading the Lord is reminding us that our faith will be tested by Satan. He tells us He has prayed that our faith will not fail us. We also know on the night Jesus was taken to be tortured and crucified, even Peter who loved him so, denied him three times. As human beings in today’s world our faith is tested on a daily basis in so many ways.

As the season of Advent approaches and we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, let us call to mind the sacrifices Jesus Christ made for us and renew our promise to maintain our faith by daily prayer and sacrifice.

Dear Lord, as we celebrate the coming of the beautiful season of Advent and prepare for the birth of your Son, we pray that your love will sustain us no matter how our faith is or under what circumstances our faith is tested. So that our to the Babe will be one filled with the the hope that we will continue to grow in our faith and praise of his name though Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Advent Devotional for December 12 John 3:22-30

John 3:22-30

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized. John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.’ John answered, ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.” He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.’

So after Jesus has disclosed a great message of God’s love to Nicodemus, he need to change his location so he goes to the Judean country side to spend quality time with his disciples. It shows the need that sometimes a change of pace in life is for our benefit. Honoring the Sabbath and taking vacations is a necessary part of life. In addition, it is important to set a part quality time with those we love and are close to. In today’s society, life can get busy and we can neglect relationships. Jesus, at the same time, was welcoming people into a community by baptizing them. Now, in the story, Jesus moves to the background as John is baptizing and welcoming people into the community. This emphasizes the importance of being hospitable towards others. It is interesting that the Bible does not tell us why people come to be baptized, however, it can be assumed that it is because people long to be accepted and in relation with others. This longing carries over into our relationship with God. We long to be in relation

with God. The Bible even gives us a foreshadow to tell us that John's ministry will be coming to an end and he will be thrown into prison.

In the Jewish tradition, it is essential for one to be right before God also known as being pure. This can be seen in the laws in Leviticus for purification. There were many different assumptions to how one becomes pure, so it is easily understood why a discussion would arise over it. Being pure, in this sense, they were trying to figure out whose baptizing was legitimate so the disciples go to their teacher in hope to clear up the confusion. When we are confused about something it is important to go to someone knowledgeable in that area to seek advice. Seeking advice is important on life's journey as we are not meant to journey alone. Moreover, it is, especially, important to go to God with anything and everything that is on our hearts. Essentially, John's disciples give him the news that Jesus is baptizing as he was doing. John informs his disciples that their comparison of John and Jesus is not necessary because gifts are given by God. It is important to remember that we may be doing the same job as others, but God has given us the gifts in order to that job. It is our calling or vocation. Let our hearts be open to the abundance of God's grace.

John presents us with a great example of humility as he informs his disciples that he is not the Messiah or anointed one. John knows his task was to prepare the way for Jesus. This reminds us that we need to confess that we are not God. Also, this is a helpful reminder that we all have a specific role in God's work in the world. It may not always be easy to discern what type of work that it is, but God has a special purpose for all of us. God is the bridegroom and, we, the church is the bride. This is a reminder that we are in relation with God and co-workers with God. The analogy about the friend is to remind us of the importance of relationship. When we listen to others and to God, we become filled with joy because we can discern what the next steps are on our journey. John tells us that attentive listening has given him joy. May we attentively listen so we may be filled with the sense of joy that John had. John in his last line states it is necessary for God to increase and him to decrease. This is a call to give up self-control. It is not always easy, but John realizes that when he allows God to be in control that his joy overflows. As we move closer to celebrating the birth of our Savior, may our joy overflow!

Advent Devotional for December 13 Luke 22:39-53

Luke 22:39-53

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [[Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was

with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'

Jesus is warning his disciples again about the temptation that is about to change their lives forever. He does it in a "usual place. This was his place of prayer. Everything about the events to take place were to be bizarre and horrifying, except one, this was Jesus's place of prayer. He had walked with his entire ministry. Prayer was his connecting link with his Father in heaven. It was the place where he re-connected his sense of ministry, gained strength, rejoiced, and spoke honestly of his own struggles. So now, at the most crucial moment of his life, he is prepared to face this awful test. For surrendering to God in prayer was not some last minute attempt to get out of it, not to have to face his death on the cross, but an extended conversation, a continuing walk with the Father, to whom he had repeatedly submitted his will.

Do you have a time set aside in your day where you continue your conversation with God. A "usual place" in silence or out in the world -- where you can share the best of the day, your struggles and concerns, where you can say "Father, your will not mine" -- where you can be sure he hears and changes our lives through prayer in his time not ours?

Advent Devotional for December 14 Luke 22:54-69

Luke 22:54-69

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly. Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, 'Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?' They kept heaping many other insults on him. When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.'

Remember Luke was writing about Jesus.

Imagine hearing a familiar voice claiming that you were not his friend – his mentor. How sad would you be, at this critical point in your life, to have all of your friends desert you, and flee fearing for their lives. Imagine, after all of your teaching, after all of your miracles, after all of the love you have poured out on these people – they still don't get it!

Is this when he decided – I guess I'll have to give Paul a try? Peter. Brave enough to follow at a distance and mingle in the crowd in the courtyard, yet denying his allegiance at his first testing. The pangs of guilt unbearable as he gazed into the eyes of Jesus as the cock crewed as if on cue. Jesus, in full knowledge of his impending ordeal, looked at his chosen pillar, and must have wondered if all was for nothing. Did he pity Peter for his shortcomings? Was he surprised that Peter was there at all? I am certain that his reaction was not to chide with an "I told you so!" and he was not angered to rebuke or further endanger Peter. He just looked and absorbed just one more sting to this horrible day.

How many time have I looked into the eyes of an artist's portrayal of Jesus, and feel the pangs of my own denials? How many times have I sworn to be a better person only to sin again and again? But this is about Jesus. He has promised that he and the Father have an endless abundance of grace, and even though I would hide my eyes from his, when I am failing, my very soul is telling me – yes even now he loves me. In these few segments of his life, he looked into the eyes of his captors – maybe some of those who laid their robes in his path last week, and did them no harm. He looked into the eyes of his accusers, and proclaimed "I am the Christ." He will look into the eyes of an emperor, and not waiver. He will look into the eyes of his prosecutor, and stand in silence. He will look into the eyes of his Mother, and bid her goodbye.

Advent Devotional for December 15 Mark 1:1-8

Mark 1:1-8

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight" ',

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Unlike the other synoptic Gospels, Mark does not start off with a birth narrative; instead, he presents us with the birth of Jesus' ministry as an adult, beginning with his baptism into the renewal ministry - a renewal movement that had already begun.

Mark does not mention the relationship between John the Baptizer and Jesus. He gives us the bare bones of the story:

*John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance

*John spoke of one who was to follow who would baptize with the Holy Spirit

*Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John

- *Jesus saw the heavens part and the Spirit descending like a dove
- *Jesus heard a voice from Heaven calling him "My Son, the Beloved"
- *Jesus was drawn into the wilderness, tempted by Satan and waited on by angels
- *Jesus returned to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God

Bare bones. It almost reads as if someone had asked Jesus "How did this all get started?" and Jesus told of the beginning of what was important to Him . . . no virgin birth, no angels singing to shepherds, no wise men from the East bearing gifts. Instead, a story of repentance and a call from God to what was to be a very dangerous mission. So dangerous that John the Baptizer, Jesus and all but one of his closest disciples were killed.

I love the Christmas season with all of its conflation of pagan rites, Christian mysticism, and magical stories. But I love even more the "bare bones" story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It feels so much more real to me.

Advent Devotional for December 16 Matt. 3:1-12

Matthew 3:1-12

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." ' Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

When I first got this reading, I had my usual "OH NO" reaction. John the Baptist? Locusts and Honey? Some nut job running around in camel hair saying "REPENT"! I was like the Jews in the reading; fine he can baptize the Gentiles but I sure do not need this nut. OK get serious, now where do I start with this reading? It is too big, too complicated, too much?

So I read the passage a second time and the word that sticks out to me is PREPARE. Then I immediately thought of the song from Godspell... "Prepare ye the way of the Lord". Then I started doing a good amount of studying and it seems so many people focus on REPENT! What did or does repent mean. One definition said to repent was to change your mind and act on that change. Well I am going to repent over my first reaction to this reading and act on what is standing out to me. So I am going back to PREPARE.

During Advent we are to be preparing for the first coming of the baby Jesus. The Messiah in human form coming to be among us. When we are going to have a major event in our lives and we know about it ahead of time, we prepare; whether it is a nursery for a new baby or a move to a new house, or any planned change. But how often do we think about PREPARING for the coming of Christ? I often think of preparing for the coming of Christ as I think of the people who on Palm Sunday prepared the way for Jesus to arrive in Jerusalem without knowing it the Resurrection was coming.

So back to the reading, I truly believe John the Baptist is telling us to PREPARE and REPENT today! Why do we often wait to repent until we have a crisis such as a death, a health or personal issue, or on Sunday when we say confession? I believe that we are being called EVERYDAY to PREPARE and REPENT. How do we do that is very personal. For some of us it is doing some type of daily office, a Bible study, or other church related activity. But now that I have read this I have become so much more aware that I need to PREPARE every moment to see Jesus face to face. I cannot afford to procrastinate and wait until I am on death's door.

So how did I go from PREPARING to REPENTANCE? Well I had a change of mind and am acting on it by being open to listening to GOD and being prayerful. I am not going to wait until my repentance is the usual kind filled with sorrow and guilt but I am going to REPENT and PREPARE with Joy for the coming of Christ. For me I want Christ in my life every day so I need to PREPARE at all times. I cannot wait until the last minute, I need to be ready now and I can only do that with a change of mind with equal action. The good news is I can have my REPENTANCE that is filled with Joy and I am going to show my change of mind by trying to show GOD's love in all I do from cooking breakfast, typing a report, and REPENTING at all times.

Advent Devotional for December 17 Matt. 11:2-15

Matthew 11:2-15

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!

Happiness comes in short lived moments.
The rest of the time is spent waiting.
Daniel May wrote a song after his mother died and the first verse goes like this:

"What is the meaning of life as we know it?
And who is the teacher?
And who is the child?
When there are no road signs to point our direction
Sometimes it seems like the whole world is running wild"

During this advent will we do lots of shopping making sure that we buy the most expensive gifts we can find, go to lots parties and just go, go, go - essentially running wild?

OR

Will we reflect on the birth of baby Jesus and the miracle of his life and teachings?
Will we look for a parable that speaks to us now in 2010?
Will we extend some kindness to a stranger?
Will we look for our Star which is shining on our Jesus in our hearts?
Who will we meet along the way?

Let us stop and be still as we wait for this Silent Night and Holy Night.

Advent Devotional for December 18 Luke 3:19

Luke 3:1-9

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '*

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to

flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

The phrase “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” always catches me. What in the world does that mean? How does bearing fruit equate with the usual meaning of repentance – regret, remorse, self-reproach? I wonder if the meaning of the word ‘repentance’ is in need of a fresh coat of meaning? Might repentance be about re-thinking everything? Might it refer to the need for a radical paradigm shift? a new orientation? a new birth? Repent!! – Look Anew!!!! Bear fruit in new ways; re-view the way you think about things!! We prepare the way of the Lord when we are open to the possibilities that lie beyond our comprehension – accepting God outside our carefully constructed and beautifully decorated box. It is then, and maybe only then, that we will be freed (or saved, if you like churchy words) to savor the love of God!

Where are you being called to re-envision your vision of God?

Advent Devotional for December 19 John 3:16-21

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.

God so loved the world...

To many who recognize scripture passages by the mention of chapter and verse, this stands out as one of the most known and oft quoted.

As a choir member, we often sing John Stainer’s beautiful setting of these most comforting words. Some of us know this music “by heart”. One choir college has used this piece as the gold-standard for a capella singing. We often here these words in the Rite I Eucharist. However, through all this familiarity, have we ever stopped and stood back to discover what these words really mean to us?

Here in the beginning of our liturgical year, God himself is offering us his only Son, coming to us in the flesh, to be our savior! Coming to all that believe that we will not die – that we will have everlasting life, that through this son, the world might be saved! Can we comprehend the enormity of God’s gift to us?

Can we feel in our own daily lives the love that comes to us through this Son?

The light has come into the world. Because we believe, we will be in the light. Those who do not believe will be in darkness.

Let us therefore, rejoice that the light and the truth are ours, by God's grace and the great gift of his Son!

God so loved the world!

Amen.

Advent Devotional for December 20 John 5:30-47

John 5:30-47

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement 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?'

Stories that center on some sort of belief usually make us feel good about ourselves. There are endless variations of the Santa story where someone--usually a bah-humbug adult --doesn't buy into the myth of the man in the red suit. As the story plays out, the stone-hearted villain eventually learns to believe what we knew all along--that Santa exists and there's magic in Christmas.

In this section of John's Gospel Jesus has just performed a healing miracle on the sabbath and has claimed intimacy with God by calling Him Father. The Jewish authorities are bent on killing him. In this passage, they serve as the stone-hearted villains who don't accept the unfathomable--that Jesus is the Son of God. They don't know how to believe.

It's easy for us to shake our heads and marvel at a group of religious men who witness a miracle and don't believe it; who listen to the voice of God, but don't hear it; who know the scripture but cannot

recognize their messiah. Surely, if we had been in the crowd, we would have been able to let go of the tradition we were steeped in; we would have accepted the challenge to our known world and authority; we would have believed.

Or would we?

What happens when someone suggests that we change our worship service? Are we open to the possibility that a new form of worship would enhance our relationship with God? Are we ready to let go of the familiar routines that offer us stability, even comfort from week to week? Are we willing to accept a challenge to our view of the sabbath?

Believing in Jesus was risky, life-changing, and just plain difficult for these Jewish authorities. Although we are church goers and members of the fold, there are still times when God stands before us, urging new belief, and we must do the hard work of learning how to let go, how to see differently, how to rethink our assumptions.

As Christmas approaches, God, let me not congratulate myself on my belief, but examine my life for moments when I am deaf to your voice, blind to your miracles, and reluctant to do your will.

Advent Devotional for December 21 Luke 1:5-25

Luke 1:5-25

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.'

This is the day that Zechariah has been serving for since he was trained in his priestly order, it's a HUGE honor to have his name drawn by lots to be the priest to go into the temple with incense and offer prayer.

It is important to remember that Zechariah was older, as was his wife Elizabeth. As you read in the scriptures they were childless. They had everything a couple of their time could want; except the thing that was most important according to their society, someone (i.e. a male) to carry on the family name.

Now Zechariah is in the temple, praying, and Gabriel appears, telling him not to be afraid, that he is an angel, sent by God, to tell him his prayers have been answered. Gabriel goes on to describe that Zechariah is to name this son John and outlines the ways in which he will be different from the rest of society. Zechariah, awestruck by what is going on, questions the angel and, as a result of his lack of, shall we say immediate, unabounding faith in what has been said – is struck mute until the birth of his son.

The scripture goes on to explain that when Zechariah left the Temple there was great confusion over what had happened because he couldn't speak, but eventually they figured out he had a vision. He finished his service, went home and nine months later Elizabeth had a baby boy they named John, who later became John the Baptist. But I want to go back to the reaction Zechariah had to Gabriel.

Have you ever had something you prayed for, dreamed about, wished for with all your might...and it just didn't happen. I am sure lots of people have, I know I've been there, and I know at a certain point although I may have continued praying and wishing and dreaming, I stopped believing in the possibility.

Now imagine you get a visit from an angel who says that impossible prayer is indeed possible and God wanted to make sure you knew it was going to happen and what you had to do. If that were me I would have some curiosities at the very least if not doubts, and I too am sure I would have been struck mute along with Zechariah, but at least it would give me a good solid amount of time to ponder the Glory of God!

Advent Devotional for December 22 Luke 1:26-38

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 for ever, 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 pays close attention to God’s activity in the lives of ordinary people-when they least expect it! God making the impossible-possible! Mary had to be wondering who is this Angel Gabriel , why is he telling me that I am favored and furthermore why is he assuring me that the Lord is with me? As she was still processing those questions, the angel begins to reveal God’s plan for the salvation of all humanity in which she has been chosen to bear God’s son! I have to admit, if I was in Mary’s shoes, I probably would have had to pinch myself a few times just to make sure I was not dreaming! I would have questioned my mental state! But, Mary simply asks “how can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel provides a brief explanation and advises her of Elizabeth’s unlikely conception. His last sentence to Mary was: “For nothing is impossible with God.” Mary does not argue, or bargain, or ask for further explanation. She does not request proof. She does not respond with “why me-of all people!” She instinctively responds as a woman who trusts God with words similar to a familiar hymn: “Here, I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.”

God is still active in our lives and the world today. God is still our hope. God continues to shower us with blessings and love even when we do not respond faithfully. When we turn away from those invitations, he continues to pursue us and welcome us back. God never gives up on us. The season of Advent is about watching and being ready. What does this look like? I would have to answer this as: faithfully carrying out the tasks that are set before us (Matthew 24:45-51), using the gifts God gives us wisely and fruitfully (Matt. 25:1-30)-with joy!

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for reminding us of your greatness, justice, and promises realized in the Annunciation. You come to us in new and surprising ways, making the impossible possible. God of grace and God of mercy, grant us wisdom, grant us courage to follow the example of Mary who responded in faith and courage, trusting in the strength and wisdom that you provide. May the light of Christ in our hearts be the light we of Christ we spread to the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. A-men.

Advent Devotional for December 23 Luke 1:39-48a(48b-56)

Luke 1:39-56

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 fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

*Mary’s Song of Praise 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;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*
And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Joy to the world the Lord has come, let Earth receive her King... It is a song that Elizabeth and the unborn John the Baptist could have easily written two thousand years ago rather than Isaac Watts in 1719. With the sound of Mary's greeting, it is written that Elizabeth said "the child in my womb leaped for joy." Here, John the Baptist wasn't even born yet but already recognized the presence of the Messiah in Mary's womb, John had already begun his ministry on this Earth. He was preparing the way for the Messiah to come into the Jewish nation, to proclaim the Good News of the Messiah's coming. Like John the Baptist, we too, in our Baptismal Covenant, are called to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ. At every baptism, we renew our commitment to this by responding, "I will, with God's help."

During Advent, a period of waiting and preparation for the coming of the Messiah, I believe we are called to reflect on how we are going to proclaim the Good News of our Lord. In a time of hustling and bustling, I find myself forgetting one of the basic teachings of Jesus, to Love your neighbor as yourself. Many times I find myself upset at a person in a parking lot for taking "my" parking space or disappointed that my "perfect" gift for someone isn't available when in reality I need to remember that the greatest gift I can give or receive has already been given two thousand years ago in a stable in Bethlehem. The Advent season should be a time when we proclaim the Good News not by words but by our actions. We are called to open ourselves to Jesus and as Joy the World goes on to say, Let every heart prepare him room... Have you?

Advent Devotional for December 24 Luke 1:57-80

Luke 1:57-80

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.

Zechariah's Prophecy 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.

The Song of Zechariah is a psalm of thanksgiving at the beginning, (verses 68 – 75). It gives thanks to the Lord for deliverance for his people, Israel. Of course, the psalm is to be read in relation to the birth of Jesus even though that has not happened yet. We have only had the visit of Mary, while pregnant with Jesus, to Elizabeth, John's mother. While a psalm of thanksgiving, it anticipates the very deliverance it celebrates. As such it bears many of the themes that undergird the hope of a messiah: from the house of David, spoken about by the prophets of old, a mercy promised to the ancestors long ago in covenant. In this context it epitomizes something about Advent and our Christian hope. Our Christian view of the

world waits with hope the coming of the Lord in all fullness at the same time that it celebrates the in-breaking of God's kingdom in the world where we live our day to day lives. We celebrate the 'already' nature of what we wait for, what is 'not yet'. That is the essence of Christian hope.

At the end of the song, Zechariah turns his attention to his own child, John, in what sounds like a 'prophecy' of what is to become of the child. Two metaphors are used to express the hope for salvation of which Zechariah sings. One is in the form of the child over whom he sings. A child bears all the hopes and desires of those who nurture it in its infancy. As the parents celebrate the child's birth, they celebrate all that they envision for that child in the future. The second is the coming of dawn. As one sits in darkness the light of the sun begins to spread across the landscape even before the sun rises and is visible. So in Advent we look forward to what is promised, the coming of the Lord in the birth of Jesus. We prepare ourselves for that even as John was to prepare the way of the one to come. On the other hand, our waiting and hope already participate in the celebration of the Lord's Advent or coming. Our future hope is shaped by past traditions, but in turn it shapes our present living.

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