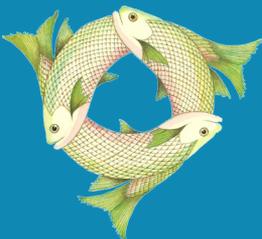


GOSPEL BASED ADVENT REFLECTIONS 2022



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ADVENT I

Sunday, November 27, 2022

Please join us in person or online for worship and Sunday's sermon on today's passage.

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶ 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day[b] your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Advent I

Monday, November 28, 2022

Luke 20:1-8

¹ One day as he was teaching the people in the temple and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders ² and said to him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?” ³ He answered them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: ⁴ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” ⁵ They discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” ⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from. ⁸ Then Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Reflection:

In the late '90's there was a popular TV show called Malcolm in the Middle, a comedic portrayal of a modern American family. The theme song of the show included a repetition of the phrase “You're not the boss of me now, You're not the boss of me now, You're not the boss of me now, and you're not so big.” (Ironically, written by They Might Be Giants). The song always made me grin, not because I was in grad school studying power, authority, and influence, but because I could hear the familiar echoes from childhood, from the working world, from life in the Church, and even from scripture. As this passage from Luke's gospel reminds us, the human tendency to protect our prerogatives is as ancient as humankind. You're not the boss of me. Who said you could do that? Who died and put you in charge? I'm telling... Sound familiar?

Social scientists define authority as “power conferred for a purpose.” The chief priests, scribes and Pharisees who confronted Jesus were the beneficiaries of a system that authorized religious leaders by the positions they held in the temple hierarchy and religious community. They had been chosen by their gender, by the status of their family, by title and position. Under Roman occupation, they NEEDED a religious system that functioned smoothly, from compliance with Torah to the credentialing of religious authorities. You can see how Jesus posed a problem to their system of authority. A carpenter and itinerant rabbi, teaching in the courtyard of the temple, not emphasizing adherence to the Law. This non-authorized preacher had the audacity to proclaim the Good News of God's expansive grace, mercy, and love. And hungry hearts listened. So, the temple authorities did exactly what threatened leaders do. They ganged up on him. They confronted him. They sought to discredit him. Who told you that you could teach here? Who do you think you are?

Like the temple authorities, we are familiar with the kind of authority that comes from titles, connections, compliance, and position. But the Bible has another word for authority, exousia or “from the essence.” Exousia is the innate authority that comes from a person’s self. It is integral. It is bestowed, not by organizations, positions or titles. Exousia is authority given by God.

This thread of God-given authority is woven throughout Luke’s gospel, sometimes explicit, often inferred. It was exousia that drew the Angel Gabriel to an unmarried teenage girl whose faith, humility and trust would make her the God-bearer. It was exousia that drew shepherds and magi to the stable where the newborn baby nestled in the cow’s feeding trough. It was exousia that turned the ears of the great scholars to a young boy teaching in the Temple with unprecedented wisdom and insight. It was exousia that stopped the harangue of the temple officials against this man who not only taught, but embodied, the Good News of God’s unfailing love. Jesus didn’t have to tell the authorities, “You’re not the boss of me.” Who he was, how he was, and what he was spoke louder than any retort could have.

One of the gifts of Advent is the reminder that each of us was bestowed with exousia at our baptism. The authority to tell of God’s love, and to live as if love makes all the difference is our privilege, our responsibility, and our joy as we wait for the One who will come again to make all things new.

Sam Faeth

Advent I

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

Luke 20: 9-18

⁹ He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants and went away for a long time. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴ 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.’ ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Heaven forbid!” ¹⁷ But he looked at them and said, “What then does this text mean: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?’” ¹⁸ “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Reflection:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”.

¹⁸*“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”*

I like this quotation. It is beautifully significant in telling the truth of how our faith can be experienced. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” The tenant farmers could kill the son of God but God would raise him up to be the chief cornerstone. So, if you put yourself against the chief cornerstone, you will lose and He will win every time. God always wins and those who are against Him always lose.

In life we are all dealt some very unusual scenarios. Some are wonderful and some are horrendous. With every experience we react according to our own sensitivities and as a bonus we learn and know that God is with us and loves us. Our faith grows and becomes more solid. It is a good feeling - one of strength or maybe even one of question, soon to be understood a little better with each happening. We need to believe and put our trust in Him and continue to be faithful.

In reading the passage again, note that if we wrongly start thinking that we own the vineyard, the stone will fall on us and scatter us like dust.

Peace!

Tina McGuire

Advent I

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

Luke 20: 19-26

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said and then to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. ²¹ 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. ²² Is it lawful for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not?” ²³ But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ²⁴ “Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?” They said, “Caesar’s.” ²⁵ He said to them, “Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” ²⁶ 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.

Reflection:

Immediately we are given a vivid picture: angry scribes and chief priests want to take revenge on Jesus for a parable that cast them in a negative light. These religious leaders seek to get back at Jesus, to lay hands on him, but they are fearful. They are scared of the people who see Jesus in a positive light. So, they hatch a plan to send spies to Jesus. The spies will try to trick Jesus into saying something wrong, something that could land Jesus in trouble with the Roman governor.

How will the spies do this? By flattering Jesus, buttering him up by saying they know Jesus is right in what he says and teaches. They say that Jesus shows deference to no one, but teaches the way of God in accordance with truth. The spies, though they are only pretending to be honest, in fact are telling the truth. Jesus is right and he does teach the truthful way of God. But that is unimportant to the spies; they hope Jesus will let his guard down because of their fake praise. It seems as if the spies are projecting. False flattery would work on them.

The spies ask Jesus if it is lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. It’s a clever question. If Jesus answers yes, he will be unpopular with the people and maybe the chief priests will be less fearful of taking their revenge on him. If Jesus answers no, he may be seen as a traitor and the governor will see to his punishment. Either way the scribes and chief priests win. But Jesus sees through the plan and takes charge. He tells the spies to show him a denarius, a Roman coin. They do and Jesus asks simply whose picture and title is on the coin. The spies are caught off-guard. They

answer “Caesar’s.” Jesus then gives the spies an unexpected answer: give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Jesus is not finished. He also says to give to God the things that are God’s. The spies do not trap Jesus. Instead, they are stunned into silence!

Taxes aren’t popular now, and they weren’t in Jesus’s time either. The message here seems deeper. We see a separation between church and state. There are rules that our government asks us to follow. And we see in this story that we are to follow those rules – even if we do not like them. As followers of Jesus, we also have a different calling, a higher calling. We are to give to God the things that are God’s. What must we give to God?

What are the things that are God’s? We are.

Eric Taylor

Advent I Thursday, December 1, 2022

Luke 20: 27-40

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.” ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Reflection:

Here, the Sadducees show how incredulous they are about life after death. They pose questions to Jesus that are designed perhaps to trip him up in his reasoning. Or, perhaps, they want to learn from his reasoned answers.

In either case, their questions are flawed because they assume resurrection perfectly mirrors earthly life. Of course no one really knows what resurrected life looks like. St. Paul proposes the idea of “spiritual bodies,” which causes us to think that resurrected life is different from earthly life, and yet use of the word “bodies” suggests there are similarities.

*Our tradition embraces the notion that after death we are united with friends and those whom we love. Quaint stories abound about how this reunion takes place. For example, in the final episode of the television series *Lost*, all of the series’ characters are reunited in the end despite their prior separation, despite their prior death. Some say this is the first glimpse of their afterlife together.*

Some years ago, I had a recurring dream that I was alone at night in a boat on Lake Placid. My wife Dana and I have spent much of our lives in Lake Placid. We were married there 30 years ago. Because Lake Placid is a very meaningful place for us it makes logical sense that I might have dreams about it.

The lake is a special place at night. In my dream, there are no visible street lights or lights from the town. The light comes mostly from the moon and the stars that fill the sky. The only other light comes from the houses on the lake in the distance. The house lights are an inviting, warm yellow color, not like the whitish moon and stars. My boat moves closer to a particular house with its lights growing bigger and brighter as my boat approaches the shore.

There is no wind. There are no waves. All is still. All is quiet. I have no anxiety. I have no fear. My boat continues to draw slowly nearer and nearer to the shore, until I now sense this is not just a house, it’s a home, perhaps my new home.

I suspect this dream is my consciousness’ view of resurrection. There is something oddly familiar about this new home I am approaching, and yet I know I have never been there before. I instinctively know it is home because I sense the warmth of love of others. I ponder many questions. Who is there? Are there friends and family? Are they there to welcome me home after my long journey?

Our faith and our life experience form our vision of resurrection. Throughout our lives, we seek to be closer and closer to our God that we know as perfect love. And God never abandons the faithful or fails to nourish generously. Our spirit travels beyond the grave until it finally finds that place of perfect peace with God and all that we know as love. At the end of this journey is the place we call our spiritual home, at one with all we love and at one with perfect love, our Creator.

How do you see resurrection?

The Rev. Bob Zito

Advent I

Friday, December 2, 2022

Luke 20: 41-21:4

⁴¹ Then he said to them, “How can they say that the Messiah[a] is David’s son? ⁴² For David himself says in the book of Psalms, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand ⁴³ until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ ” ⁴⁴ “David thus calls him Lord, so how can he be his son?”

⁴⁵ In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and who love respectful greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

¹ He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, ⁴ 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.”

Reflection:

First, I needed to understand what this passage was saying, so I did some research.

While Jesus challenges the leaders who were questioning him (Jesus as the son of David), he gives a warning to the people about those same leaders. We’re told to watch out for these people because they want attention and control and are users of positions to exploit people such as widows. They don’t have genuine goodness towards the people.

Then Jesus looks towards the temple where there are receptacles to accept payment for running of the temple. The rich are being ostentatious by showing their wealth by how much they contribute. But then he sees a widow (like the ones whose houses were devoured). Her contribution represents a greater gift because it was a higher percentage of her wealth and all she had to live on.

I began to reflect on two themes and how they show up in my modern life. One is about the true meaning of leadership. For many of us, excellent leaders aren’t the ones who have the most to contribute or see themselves as important. Like Jesus, the leaders we often respect are the ones who are willing to serve, are humble, and show a true caring for the human condition. I found this many times in the two previous companies I worked with for 25 years. I tried to carry on that example for my staff during the busy holidays.

The other theme is about anticipation and giving as a reflection of the Advent season. Though I worked for very busy companies, I had to focus on what was exciting to me: family, community, and the winter season. Not only did I look forward to the lights, smells, music, and comradery, I often thought about giving. I've never liked to give gifts for the sake of it, because it looks good, or to win accolades.

How can we see ourselves as generous during this Advent season? How can we show our commitment to God during this season that isn't represented by material gifts but through service or caring? We can all be generous in various ways, and whatever level of generosity we offer should be valued. I hope inspiration will come to me soon in what I can offer my family and friends that represents caring and love in this Advent season.

Leigh Bost

Advent I Saturday, December 3, 2022

Luke 21: 5-19

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ “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.”

⁷ They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸ 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.”

⁹ “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.”

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹ there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹² “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. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, ¹⁵ for I will give you words[c] and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Reflection:

Well, “Merry Christmas” to you, too, Jesus! I just want to shut out the world and gaze into your baby face. I want to hear angels sing. I want a gentle donkey and snow-white lambs. I want magi, good food, and presents. I want to feel happy and safe. Bless me, Sweet Baby Jesus!

And you’re reading straight from my news feed: the war in Ukraine, weather and climate change, COVID, famine in Somalia, the division of our people. It’s all a little too real ~ and a little too much. I’m tired of crying every time I listen to the news. Lord, I need a break!

“Do not be terrified,” you say. “You can’t stay in the stable forever. The world is what it is. It’s not a Hallmark Christmas special. It is serious, hard, and dangerous. But I am with you. I will give you strength, courage, and wisdom. Hang on. Endure.”

I will try, Jesus. I will go where you would have me go and do what you would have me do, just abide with me.

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness.
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still if Thou abide with me.*

“Abide With Me,” by Henry F. Lyte

Mary Howell

Advent II

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Please join us in person or online for worship and Sunday's sermon on today's passage.

Matthew 3:1-12

³ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ 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."

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ 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? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ "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. ¹² 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."

Advent II Monday, December 5, 2022

Luke 21: 20-28

²⁰ “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ 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, ²² for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. ²³ 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; ²⁴ 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 nations, until the times of the nations are fulfilled.

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Reflection:

This passage from Luke perfectly dovetails with thoughts I’ve been having lately when I watch the horrific videos and read about events in Ukraine:

Jerusalem surrounded by armies – Ukraine surrounded by armies.

Desolation in Jerusalem – Desolation in Ukraine.

People in Judea fleeing to the mountains – People in Kyiv fleeing to the mountains.

Potential exists for Russia to use atomic weapons in Ukraine which would result in unparalleled destruction. Wow, I think to myself; that is pretty scary. Then something happens in my mind. Something gets turned around in my head because I think: God is real. God is in charge.

Everything is all right.

Luke paints a grim picture for Jerusalem, but then says, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Stand up and raise your heads, he says to them, because your redemption is drawing near.

I think about a Sunday at Trinity: sitting in the pew, singing hymns, passing the peace, going forward for communion. I think about how wonderful it is that we are peaceful, loving Christians, not fighting and

killing each other or threatening each other with atomic weapons. We can pray that the world will be like us at Trinity, like millions of other churches, parishes, and Christians all over the world, following Jesus, following His simple precept to love one another.

Lee Stockdale

Advent II Tuesday, December 6, 2022

Luke 21: 29-38

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “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, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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.”

³⁷ 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. ³⁸ And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

Reflection:

Be a fig.

A fig is an inverted flower. Fig trees have no blossoms on their branches. The blossom is inside. Waiting.

Figs are harvested according to nature’s clock, fully ripened and partially dried on the tree.

Figs were succulent and abundant this year. Some say the decrease in pollutants, due to COVID and increased fuel prices, gave all trees restoration and new life.

An explosion of recipes has ensued on social media, ignoring that the figs are splendid just alone, with juicy sweetness dripping off our fingers. They are pure and beguiling, a connection to ancient sensations before modern appliances gave us recipes.

In Roman times figs were considered to be restorative. They were believed to increase the strength of young people, to maintain the elderly in better health. (Pliny (52-113 AD)).

According to some researchers, it was this fruit that was plucked by Eve and not an apple. In the holy book of Islam, fig (anjeer) is mentioned as “The Fruit of Heaven.”

Because fig flowers bloom internally, they need a special process for pollination. They cannot rely on the wind or bees to spread their pollen ☐ that’s where the fig wasp comes in. The fig cannot survive without the fig wasp to spread its genetic material, and the fig wasp cannot live without the fig, because that’s where it lays its larva.

Goodness, how much of the impossible did Jesus know, and when did he know it? His parables are science, filled with things revealed to him before the world knew.

Remember the blossom inside you. Rely on others to help you be a good fruit. Remember that you are delightful just as you are; you do not need society’s recipes for how you might be made better.

Be a fig. Then, be alert...and watch.

Sandra Finley

Advent II Wednesday, December 7, 2022

John 7: 53-8:11

⁵³ Then each of them went home, ^{8:1} while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² 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. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Reflection:

I remember driving along a rural road in Ohio with my grandmother when I was nine or ten years old. There was an elderly man standing in his undershorts and boots hanging laundry on a clothesline stretched across the front yard of a blue cinderblock house. I told Grandma to look at him and started laughing. I said he must be poor. Directly after we passed the house, she pulled over, stopped the car and turned to me in the back seat. I could see that she wasn't angry; rather, in her kind and quiet way she said that everyone deserved to be treated with respect, that I didn't know anything about the man's life. While we didn't speak about this episode again, it's one of my best memories because she lived her life this way. That advice—to be nonjudgmental, to treat everyone with respect and kindness—were guiding principles that I applied throughout my teaching career.

I'm the fourth of five siblings. When I hadn't yet turned ten, I surreptitiously cut a slice from a freshly baked cake that my mom was taking to her card club. She was upset because we all knew what the cake was for. Cake in hand, she left for her party, and Dad was left to find the culprit. The cutoff of possibilities ended with number four, as number five was only three years old. Dad sat the four of us older children down and in turn asked about cutting the cake. We all said, "Not me." Three were right but I lied. He told us to think about the fact that one of us wasn't being truthful and went out to mow the yard. We sat quietly but tension quickly began to mount. To the delight of my siblings I tearfully confessed, regretful for lying and ensnaring them in my mistake. I was relieved to get that burden off me. While I expected to be punished, I was surprised when Dad asked me how I was going to make things right. I made the mistake so I was responsible for fixing it; this was an early lesson that mistakes can carry consequences. I decided to apologize to my mom and siblings; he accepted that and added that I would need to spend time in the house while the others went out to play. A fair resolution for everyone. I'm sure he knew there would be more mistakes in my lifetime. Thank you, Dad.

Sharon Vansickle

Advent II Thursday, December 8, 2022

Luke 22: 1-13

¹ Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. ² The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.

³ Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve;

⁴ he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. ⁵ They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. ⁶ So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. ⁷ Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸ So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." ⁹ They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" ¹⁰ "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 ¹¹ 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?"' ¹² He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." ¹³ So they went and found everything as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

Reflection:

Please note: This reflection contains reference to a violent crime.

Having been raised by the Book of Common Prayer rather than the Bible, I am no biblical scholar. But having been asked to respond to this text with a meditation, I will do my best, offering what I can based on how the text makes me feel, and what it conjures in my soul.

As the disciples and Jesus prepare for the holy Passover, he knows that danger and betrayal are near and takes the precautions necessary to proceed with the feast. He was never one to cower, never one to let fear curtail his work of love.

We know that there is evil among and within us, even as we tend the garden, nurse the newborn, celebrate a union, break bread with friends, or any of the other holy, wonderful, and joyous moments of this life. To me, it has always seemed a sad and tragic fact that dark must exist for there to be light. And I have spent many days and nights struggling to accept this. For me, the key has been in learning how to accept it without bowing to the fear that comes with the knowledge that dark is ever and eternally near. If only I could be more like Jesus!

Forty-five years ago my dear childhood friend was raped and murdered, and her boyfriend shot and killed before her eyes. They were both 14 years old and on their first date. The perpetrators, soldiers from nearby Fort Jackson, were captured, jailed, and given the death penalty.

I have never recovered. The anguish is always ready to flow at a moment's notice. But I have learned to make myself strong enough in love to reduce my fear, still my anger, and curtail the nightmares. I pray this is true for my friend's surviving sister.

The impact on "co-victims" like me, family members and those who were close to victims, cannot be overstated. It is everlasting and it is handed down in one way or another to our children, and it is present in our relationships.

*From 2012 to 2021, there were *57,683 homicides in America. For every victim, factor in two (a very conservative number) of co-victims. Even when we use this low estimate of only two co-victims per murder, 115,366 people are walking around with depression, fear, anger, and PTSD or other serious related issues. The initial murder compounds and its reach becomes exponential over time.*

How, dear Lord, how do we keep ourselves armored in love, keep ourselves rooted in compassion, in the midst of this violence among our fellow citizens? How can we possibly do as you have done, prepare for the feast and live in that very moment of love, despite evil intent knocking at the door?

It is only you, Lord, who powers us to put one foot in front of the other, only you who gave your human life so that our sins could be forgiven (and sin we have!). Yours, Lord, is the work of love and it is not work for the meek.

*No, love is not soft. Love is a warrior. Shield up, friends!
How can we put our communal and God-given power of Love to work on behalf of Creation? We can, with God's help. We will, with God's help.
Let us prepare and keep the feast.*

Jane Childress

Advent II Friday, December 9, 2022

Luke 22: 14-30

¹⁴ When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves, ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²² For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" ²³ Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵ But he said to them, "The kings of the gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ "You are those who have stood by me in my trials, ²⁹ and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, ³⁰ 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.

Reflection:

Greatness. From politicians to sports teams to the advertising we're bombarded with daily, greatness – what it is, who is great, who's greater, and who's worthwhile – seems to be a constant topic of conversation. "Make America great again." "America is already great." "We're number 1!" "When you care enough to send the very best." "You're worth it."

In our polarized and deeply divided world, the propensity to group people in our minds as either "one of us" or "not our kind, dear" based upon factors such as their sexual orientation, race, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, the school they went to, or the neighborhood they live in, has never been more prevalent. I was honored to be asked to serve for the second time on my high school's reunion planning committee. In that role, I was absolutely floored by the incredible number of people who

contacted me stating they would not attend the reunion because someone else was – someone whose political beliefs, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs didn't jibe with their own. There was even a small group that refused to attend due to a difference of opinion about when the reunion should take place. They held their own gathering a few weeks after the main event.

Does focusing on all these superficial differences make us great? Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "Come, follow me"?

"Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." "Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly." "...the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." I'm no theologian, but it seems Christ is asking something else of us – more love, fewer divisions, more inclusion, and a servant's heart. May this blessed Advent season find us thus: seeking greatest in the form of showering our fellow man with boundless love and acts of service.

Cassia Imholz

Advent II Saturday, December 10, 2022

Luke 22: 31-38

³¹ "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,
³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³ And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!"

³⁴ Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me."

³⁵ 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." ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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."

³⁸ They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

Reflection:

I can be anxious sometimes. I like to be prepared! Before a trip, or an activity, or even a night out, my brain rumbles with thoughts and ideas of how to be PREPARED. I collect a bag full of remedies to take with me so that all will be well. At least that is my flawed human hope!

Keeping my natural tendencies in mind, my interpretation of this passage

is that Jesus is trying to prepare his flawed human disciples for the coming days. Soon he will be crucified, and scripture will be fulfilled. Jesus knows his disciples' human limitations—he even knows Peter will deny him three times—so he prepares the disciples with a parental mixture of threatening, love and prayer, and encouragement.

I love this idea of Jesus in a parental role. He wants his disciples to be ready for what is to come. If they have what they need, they will be ok (once again, my interpretation.)

During this time of Advent, may we look back on this text and remember that Jesus expressed his love by preparing his people. At this holy time of anticipation, may we take the time to ready ourselves for the birth of our savior in whatever way we best commune with the Lord, whether through prayer, on walks, in community, or in quiet solitude. Amen.

Susan Covington

Advent III

Sunday, December 11, 2022

Please join us in person or online for worship and Sunday's sermon on today's passage.

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' ⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'

⁷ 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?

⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ 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.

Advent III Monday, December 12, 2022

Luke 22: 39-53

³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." ⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done." ⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. ⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

⁴⁷ 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, ⁴⁸ but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" ⁴⁹ When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" ⁵⁰ Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹ But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵² 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 though I were a rebel? ⁵³ 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!"

Reflection:

Often I am reminded that the disciples of Jesus are, like all of us, merely human. They struggle, we struggle each day to live in the responsibility of being humans here in creation. Were this a Lectio Divina, I would focus on the severed ear. That is a starting point. The disciples are angry and fearful at the arrest of Jesus. One of them lashes out wildly and injures an innocent bystander. We see this in our world. Road rage, random shootings, and horrific things fill our minds. Too often the recipients of our anger are innocent bystanders. After thousands of years of more of the same, it leaves us exhausted.

I find resolution earlier in this Gospel passage where Jesus is exhausted in prayer. Jesus prays not for his will but the will of the Father. He is visited by an angel and bolstered in his strength. Jesus prays so earnestly, with all his strength, that sweat pours from him like great drops of blood. The will of the Father does not put us here in creation to succumb to random acts of violence. I believe that like Jesus, we need the visitation of angels to give us strength in our prayers for God's dream of a fulfilled world.

Chris Kamm

Advent III Tuesday, December 13, 2022

Luke 22: 54-69

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a female servant, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him, for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ 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." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

⁶³ Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴ they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it who struck you?" ⁶⁵ They kept heaping many other insults on him. Jesus before the Council

⁶⁶ 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. ⁶⁷ They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe, ⁶⁸ and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

Reflection:

The story in Luke of Peter denying Jesus three times is heart-rending to me when I imagine how Jesus must have felt to have his dear friend betray him not once but three times. When the cock crows Peter remembers Jesus' prediction that he will three times deny Jesus, and he realizes what cowardice he has committed not to stand firmly by his friend. The reason I believe the story is heart-rending to me is that I know the feeling of not being faithful to Jesus when I pass along gossip, when I don't love my neighbor as myself, when I don't give a friend the benefit of the doubt, when I don't do something I know somebody needs because I am "too busy" to cook a dinner or run an errand for them. I ask Jesus to remind me and call me up short when I do these things that show I am not following Jesus' example of how to live fully as He would have me do.

Lynne Diehl

Advent III Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Mark 1: 1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight,”

⁴ so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Reflection:

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.” Verse 7 stood out for me. Imagine walking the paths in the wilderness of Judea in a pair of leather thong sandals. As you walk dirt, animal excrement, mud from mud pits build up between your toes, under your nails, and are ground into your heels, covering the leather straps. You arrive at the mud-brick house of your friend. In keeping with the sacred duty of hospitality, your sandals are removed and your feet are washed by the slaves of the household - the lowest rank of servant. It is an unpleasant task indeed. But for you, the traveler, it must have been a welcome feeling.

I grew up on the east coast of southern Florida. When I went to the beach, it was great to have a spigot at the sea wall to wash the sand off my feet. It’s a simple thing, and I’m not sure if it was intentional hospitality on the part of the city of Palm Beach, but it was a welcome feeling. Right now, this is how I can relate. Our contemporary culture has many power dynamics involved in offering and accepting hospitality. Neighbors and co-workers have roots from around the United States and the world and receiving the kindness of our hosts takes many forms.

So, what insights have emerged in this reflection? I’m focused on mercy. I am not worthy: not worthy to be the lowest rank of slave, not worthy to be the traveler, not worthy to have the sand washed from my feet. But

the Lord always has mercy. John is proclaiming the beginning of Jesus' ministry—a ministry filled with mercy expressed as compassion, kindness, and love. To live out my ministry, it is my responsibility and desire to show mercy to others, to help those who are hurting, to be kind to those who offend me, to build bridges of love to the unpopular. What might you do to live out your ministry? Whose sandal might you untie in merciful humility?

Sandy Grant

Advent III Thursday, December 15, 2022

Matthew 3: 1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ 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.’”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance,

⁹ and 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. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² 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.”

Reflection:

*“Come thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.”*

The beginning of Chapter 3 of the Gospel of Matthew immediately reminded me of my favorite Advent hymn above. We are filled with anticipation during the sacred weeks of Advent, waiting for Jesus, the Messiah.

In the first four chapters of his gospel, Matthew teaches us about Jesus and his arrival. In Chapter 3, verses 1-12, John the Baptist is fulfilling the promise God had made, to send a prophet who will teach the people about the coming Messiah. In verse 3, Isaiah refers to John the Baptist “crying out in the wilderness” as he preaches to the people to prepare the way for Jesus by baptizing them in the Jordan River and denouncing their sins. Baptism is a symbolic process that shows a person has received new life in Jesus Christ.

As a young bride my great aunt spent time as a missionary in South America. One of the ways she taught the children there was to use a flannel board, with paper scenery and people, to teach Bible stories. I remember hearing those same stories with my cousins, and John the Baptist was an important figure. He is known in Christianity as the forerunner of Jesus, as he was called by the spirit of God to live in the wilderness and preach. He was called “The Baptist” because he called on his followers to embrace the baptismal ceremony and demonstrate repentance of their sins. Many people came to hear his message and to be baptized.

I was fortunate to visit the Jordan River several years ago. People are still coming! They come to this seemingly barren spot in the desert in cars, buses, and on foot, in large groups and small. The lines never ending. They change into white robes before walking down to the river. All are just like us, seeking the forgiveness, salvation and hope that baptism and following the Lord promise. It was an amazing and inspiring sight that I will never forget!

This is an exciting moment in Matthew’s gospel, as the arrival of Jesus is imminent. John preaches faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and shows great courage as he warns those who are there for show by calling them snakes and vipers. His message to them is that God knows their deception; that nothing matters to Him except repentance. Jesus will know those whose hearts are false and will separate them “with unquenchable fire.” Those who truly believe and humbly repent, He will baptize into His Kingdom forever.

*“By thine own eternal Spirit,
Rule in all our hearts alone:
By thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to thy glorious throne.”*

Stuart Camblos

Advent III Friday, December 16, 2022

Matthew 11: 2-15

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷ 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?

⁸ What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ 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.’”

¹¹ “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. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ Let anyone with ears listen!”

Reflection:

The passages in Matthew 11: 1-15 speak to me about the power of faith and believing. First, Jesus’ disciples show great faith in Jesus when they are given “marching orders” to go into the land and proclaim the Good News. It would not be easy: “if you do not go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you do not deserve me” was the message from Jesus. Their belief in Him had to be strong. After Jesus placed this charge before his twelve, he went on to preach and teach in the surrounding villages. John the Baptist, meanwhile, had been locked up in the prison by Herod Antipas for denouncing his marriage, which was illegal under Jewish law for wedding the wife of his brother, Herod Philip I. When John heard what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, “are you the one we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?” Jesus told them to go back and tell John of the many miracles he had already performed, and let John decide for himself if he was the Messiah that had been foretold by the prophets. Moreover, Jesus praised John the Baptist for being the greatest prophet since Elijah, demonstrating the great belief he had in John. In fact, it is

said that if you read the books of the prophets carefully, you will see they lead to John, who could be considered the “Elijah” who was expected to arrive and introduce the Messiah. All of the passages in Matthew 11: 1-15 demonstrate the faith the disciples had in Jesus; the belief John’s disciples had in him and the extraordinary faith Jesus and John had in each other.

Tom Dowden

Advent III Saturday, December 17, 2022

Luke 3: 1-9

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Reflection:

Sometimes I wonder why crowds of people gathered to hear John the Baptist. I mean, who wants to be called “a brood of vipers?” It isn’t exactly uplifting. And then he said that being a descendant of Abraham was not a guarantee of the favor of God, because God can raise up lots of children of Abraham. I would think that such a pronouncement would be shocking to the Jews of the time. Plus, he was unconventional in his dress and lifestyle - out in the desert eating locusts.

So, what did they see in John that was so compelling?

First, John reminded the people of the mighty prophet Elijah, who had fled into the wilderness and experienced miracles there. Like Elijah, John had an unflagging faith in God. Both challenged the political powers of their day. Indeed, I wonder if the reason for the listing of the Roman leaders and high priests (Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, et.al.) in this passage is to call attention to the subjugation of the Jewish people in the time of John, and thereby underscore the risks he was taking.

So, with the backdrop of the resemblance to Elijah, John had a singular purpose, and he knew and lived his one calling. He was born for one reason - to prepare the people to receive the Messiah. The familiar and beautiful words of Isaiah reverberated in the ears of his listeners. He never deviated from this singular purpose, in his words or in his life. He called with urgency for the people to repent, to cleanse themselves, to be ready, for the long-awaited Messiah is coming. Life as they knew it was about to be radically overturned. No wonder people flocked to hear him, to be brought to a place of such spiritual focus - to be ready to meet the Messiah.

Repent. Prepare. Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Wait with hope to see the salvation of God.

Linda Watt

Advent IV
Sunday, December 18, 2022

Please join us in person or online for worship and Sunday's sermon on today's passage.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Advent IV Monday, December 19, 2022

John 5: 30-47

³⁰ “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.
³¹ “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true.
³³ You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.
³⁹ “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. ⁴⁰ Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ⁴¹ I do not accept glory from humans. ⁴² But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ 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? ⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?”

Reflection:

“I can do nothing on my own.” How much anguish and embarrassment could I have avoided if I had learned this lesson earlier in my life? Jesus, the Son of God, who became human for my sake, who in his ministry healed, forgave, courageously stood up against religious hypocrisy and raised people from the dead can do nothing without God. Why did I think I could?

I have lived a very blessed life, for which I am now incredibly grateful. Instead of these blessings humbling me at the graciousness of God, I became proud and arrogant. I foolishly thought that I had accomplished things on my own. I even left organized religion at thirty-five because I had “had enough” and was going to live my life my way. What an idiot. I was in my early fifties before God brought someone into my life who patiently invited me to church, and I finally decided to give it another try. See there, I did it again! I didn’t decide anything, God in his infinite mercy, love and

grace brought me back to him.

Since that day, I have learned so much more about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I am shocked that my arrogance led me to put myself on equal footing with God, thinking that I could determine my own path. Every day I am humbled by His blessings of a church family, my own family, my incredible job, the beautiful place I live. God is in everything and is everything.

James Bradley

Advent IV Tuesday, December 20, 2022

Luke 1: 5-25

⁵ 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 descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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."

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his

delay in the sanctuary.²² When he did come out, he was unable to 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.²³ When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said,²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Reflection:

Zechariah was a priest from the family line of Abijah, and he was chosen, by lot, to pray and offer incense in the temple. He did, in his ministry, what pastors are called upon today to do. He practiced and taught Jewish law, and he prayed with and for the people. At the time he was chosen to enter the temple, a crowd of people stayed outside to pray, as was the custom.

His wife, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Aaron. She, like Zechariah, was a devout Jew. Luke described them as “blameless,” that is, with no faults. The fact that they had no children, however, was a blemish. Women were expected to bear offspring, and if they did not, they were punished for upsetting God in some way. Elizabeth and Zechariah could not figure out what they had done wrong, and, in faith, they earnestly prayed for the child that never came.

So it was that Zechariah entered the temple and experienced a most unusual encounter. Gabriel was a highly favored angel selected to deliver the most important messages of God. In at least two other sections of the Bible, Daniel 8:15-26, 9:21-27, and Luke 1:31, Gabriel was named. Of course, Zechariah was terrified as he did not expect to see anyone, especially an angel! When Gabriel delivered the good news that Zechariah and Elizabeth would be parents in their old age, Zechariah was understandably confused and needed clarification. Gabriel punished Zechariah for his questioning by making him mute. My advice here: never doubt an angel!

When Zechariah came out of the temple, unable to speak, the assembly realized that a messenger of God had visited him. And when Elizabeth conceived she felt that the weight of her “error” had been lifted. Therefore, Zechariah and Elizabeth became the parents of John the Baptist, the last great prophet before the birth of Christ.

The message we can all take from this passage is that when we feel God’s presence, we should respond, “What would you have me do?”

Leslie Welker

Advent IV Wednesday, December 21, 2022

Luke 1: 26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."
²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection:

Mary, mother of Jesus, has inspired innumerable perspectives. In museums everywhere she poses in blue, looking wistful. She is Queen of Heaven, recipient of prayers and adoration. She's on a bar menu of non-alcoholic cocktails. She is now on wallpaper for i-phones. She's the ideal of motherhood.

I like her best as she appears here, in the Annunciation story, young and confused, a very human girl.

Gabriel delivers a high-minded speech about thrones and eternal reigns, and she replies with a down-to-earth objection: she's a virgin. It can't happen. Her reference to virginity shows none of the cultural and emotional baggage associated with it; it has nothing to do with morality, but has to do with basic physical reality. She knows what's what.

She is soon convinced; perhaps the mention of her cousin Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy brings it home to her. Her commitment is very personal; it is not until some time later that she seems to grasp the world-changing aspect of her situation and declaims the thrilling Magnificat. For now she says "Here am I." This is the simple faith of a simple girl, able to trust that God is in charge. What courage, to fly in the face of her truth, to abandon knowledge and "let it be with me" according to God's command.

Erwin Gunnells

Advent IV Thursday, December 22, 2022

Luke 1: 39-48

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

Reflection:

Mary set out to visit the town of Judah, excited to see her cousin Elizabeth to tell her the strange but wonderful news. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting to her, the infant within her womb leaped for joy. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she cried out to Mary and said: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth then asked Mary: "How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Then Elizabeth told Mary how the child within her womb had leapt for joy as Mary approached her. Elizabeth added: "Blessed are you who believed what God had spoken to you."

Can you imagine how these two women felt, both with child through extraordinary circumstances? Can you imagine the conversations that happened when they discussed how each came to be in their current state? What joy it must have brought to each of them, to have one another to discuss this special time in their lives.

Both Mary and Elizabeth's sons changed the world. Knowing that God had blessed them both with these children, did they think that these children were destined to achieve mighty and wondrous things? Did they pray for good health? A strong body? A compassionate mind? As a parent, I can only imagine the conversations had by these two expectant mothers. It seems to me that the dreams and hopes of the mothers would be the same dreams and hopes that we have for our children today: healthy, happy, kind, compassionate children.

The great news is that Jesus has come into the world during the Advent

season. God often calls on us in a way that is unexpected. When this happens, we think of Mary and Elizabeth, who best understand the confusion that life hands us. Be patient and trust in God. Eventually, the confusion will turn to joy!

Jennifer Bock

Advent IV

Friday, December 23, 2022

Luke 1: 57-66

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection:

If Zechariah had listened to Gabriel when God sent the angel we would not have this lesson. Zechariah was silenced for nine months for rebuking Gabriel when the angel told him he was to become a father. Perhaps Zechariah was questioning the possibility of that but also wondering if it could happen because of Elizabeth's age. "How can I be sure my wife will indeed have a baby?" He was made mute instantly for rebuking the words told to him and his unbelief. I am sure that Zechariah questioned his disbelief for nine months and learned many lessons regarding his questioning of the word of God. Zechariah learned to deal with solitude with peace and righteousness after God afflicted him.

Many miracles happen in this passage written by Luke. A son was born and had to be named on the eighth day as he was circumcised. In verse 58 neighbors are mentioned before relatives, and they asked for his name as they assumed he would be called Zechariah. Elizabeth said, "No, he is to be called John." Zechariah using his tablet, wrote, "His name is John," and that is precisely the words that Gabriel had shared with him about his

son to come. Then the neighbors became fearful and began to share the news of Zechariah's healing. The miracle was shared throughout the land of Judea, perhaps as some foreshadowing of another son to come that was true with the hand of the Lord.

Dave Hensley

Advent IV Saturday, December 24, 2022

Luke 1: 67-80

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his child David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all
who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us

⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
in his presence all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Reflection:

By the time you read this you may be in one of several states, either in frantic activity trying to complete preparations for your Christmas celebration, or possibly finished with all the rushing around and with a little time to spare and focus on the people and purpose of the Christmas celebration. Or, you might find yourself in a state where it is difficult to

feel much joy if you are experiencing challenges or losses in your life. The high spirits of the season even serve to accentuate the contrast in how you may be feeling. At various times in my life I have experienced all of these, as I suspect most of us have. Whatever state you find yourself in this day and year, I pray that you will find a blessing in the message of hope that is at the heart of this celebration. For we stand on the very brink of celebrating the birth of Jesus, the One whom we call Emmanuel, God with us.

Luke's Gospel tells us about Zechariah, a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, and his joy over the pregnancy of his wife, Elizabeth, a cousin of Mary, who, up to that point, was seen as barren.

Luke also tells us that the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy was announced by an angel as Zechariah carried out his priestly duties in the Temple. We therefore understand that the child to be born, John, would have a special role to play.

In today's reading Luke tells us the joyful words that were spoken by Zechariah as he prayerfully expresses what he believes John's birth and life will mean for the future of God's people. In this poetic song of hopefulness and joy, Zechariah describes John's birth as evidence of God's continuing favorable acts on behalf of God's people, bearing witness to the fulfilling of God's promises. Zechariah proclaims that John would be the herald of great things to come, preparing the way for the One from God who would usher in healing, and hope in the face of despair, release from fear, light in the midst of darkness, and a renewed and more profound relationship with God. John would announce the coming of the One whose ministry would confer God's grace and love to all who would receive it.

This Christmas Eve, whatever else we may be feeling, may the blessed Lord grant you grace and peace. And I pray we can all give thanks for the birth of Jesus, the One who brought and continues to bring God's grace, mercy, healing, light, and love to our lives and to the world.

O Come let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.

Dennis Fotinos



artist: Miriam Lechner

This year's artists...



Jake Harvey
Second Grade



Miriam Lechner
Second Grade