



2019 Advent Devotions



St. John's Lutheran Church | Christmas Lutheran Church
Salisbury, North Carolina | Bethlehem

Introduction

If you've been around the church a while, a few words, images, and colors come to mind when we say the word Advent: hope, waiting, preparing, blue, darkness, candlelight, "O come, O come Emmanuel." For many, none of that makes sense, especially as stores, houses, and downtowns are transformed into a winter wonderland of Christmas lights and glitter. It makes for a wonderful time of year.

So how does Advent fit in?

Traditionally, Advent has been a season of prayer and preparation for the second coming of Christ. In a nutshell, if Christmas is the first incarnation of God, Advent prepares believers for God's *second* incarnation.

But if we're honest, Advent feels like the grandma who won't let you eat dessert before supper ... or the coach who won't let you play in the game if you haven't come to practice ... or the Lutheran pastor who won't let you sing Christmas carols until Christmas Eve! This sense of *waiting* can feel awfully legalistic if you're not careful.

... which is why we chose this year's Advent theme, "Yearning." Throughout these four weeks of Advent, we invite you into deeper reflection about what it is you're truly yearning for. As you think about your future or your hopes and dreams for your family, *what are you yearning for?* As we consider the world's great needs, *what are we yearning for?* As we think about God and God's great desire for this world, *what might God be yearning for?*

This Advent is particularly special as two congregations join together in preparing devotionals related to our common theme. In September 2019, Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem and St. John's Lutheran in Salisbury, North Carolina, entered into a formal partnership in which we agreed to accompany one another in our journey of faith, walk in solidarity in our struggle for mercy and justice, and learn from the other's experience and wisdom. This Advent Devotional gives us the opportunity to hear from members of both congregations, each writing from very different contexts, but yoked together as sisters and brothers in Christ.

I join Pastor Munther Isaac in celebrating this new partnership. We stand in great thanksgiving for what God has already done and in great anticipation of what God will continue to do through our common mission.

Advent blessings to you.

+Pastor Rhodes Woolly
St. John's Lutheran Church
Salisbury, North Carolina, USA

First Sunday of Advent

Encourage one another

Sunday, December 1, 2019

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

A credit card commercial asks, “What’s in your wallet?” An infinitely more important question is, “Who’s on your prayer list?”

When my husband Michael and I pray for relatives, friends, and even strangers, we lift up their yearnings to the Lord. A sample of these include:

Healing from cancer and other health issues. Finding an awesome Christian spouse, a home, a job, to be blessed to have a child. Integrity in leaders at every level of every country. Care for loved ones with dementia. Peace and comfort in the loss of a loved one. Relief from a toxic work environment or a loved one’s legal troubles. Navigating family relationships after a painful divorce. A family business to prosper. Balancing marriage, children, work outside the home, church – and sleep! We pray for the Pastors and the staff of St. John’s and Christmas Lutheran churches. Peaceful solutions to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether through one state or two. Relief from oppression and restrictions for our Palestinian brothers and sisters. We pray for healing from broken bones, broken promises, and broken relationships.

Sometimes when we pray about others’ yearnings, the Holy Spirit nudges us to encourage them by calling, visiting, sending a card, taking a meal, or writing a check. Sometimes we’re nudged to recommend books by Pastors Mitri Raheb and Munther Isaac, and others. The partnership between St. John’s and Christmas Lutheran is strengthened when we worship together via simulcast Saturday morning this Dec. 21.

We have universal yearnings to be known and loved, to have significance. We have the privilege of being daughters and sons of the King! Jesus came to give us abundant life here and now, but also to give us eternal life with Him. The Advent gospel message is, as a song says, not just good news – “It’s the best news ever.”

Lord, there are yearnings for which we don’t know the outcome. But we have a 100% guarantee from You that if we yearn for You “as a deer pants for water,” if we “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” we “will be filled.” Jesus, thank You for Your promise that if we believe in You, we “will live, even after dying.” Amen.

B.J. Connor

St. John’s Lutheran Church

Jesus is knocking

Monday, December 2, 2019

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Revelation 3:20

This verse in Revelation is significant. In the verse, Jesus knocks on the door and waits for our answer. The knock at the door is not just for some people, such as those who think and believe in the same things as you, but the knock on the door is for everyone. Jesus is giving us an invitation to grow in relationship and understanding with him. We are all saved by his grace and he knocks on the door because he loves us and strives to make the world a better place. By answering the knock at the door, we are letting the light of his love into our lives and bringing comfort and rest for our hearts. Jesus gives us joy, peace, hope, and love. Even when we face hardships or difficulties in our lives, Jesus stands with us, supporting us, and giving us peace of mind.

At Dar Al-Kalima School, where I serve as principal, we celebrate Jesus' love for us through our daily devotions. Our school values including belonging, peace, love, hope, and teamwork. We reinforce the importance of inviting Jesus in to be present in our daily lives. Above all, we want students to know that Jesus' most important value and our school's most important value is love. Jesus knocks on our door because he loves us. It's important to hear and feel the voice and love of Jesus Christ. Through his grace, he knocks on our door and asks us to follow him. Just like how God called Paul, and he answered, we can answer the door to see how we can further grow in relationship and understanding with Jesus.

Dear Jesus, thank you for knocking on our doors and bringing us hope, peace, and comfort. It's because of your grace and love that we can open the door and share your light with others. Thank you for taking our hands and walking and leading us through your life. It's in your holy name that we pray. Amen.

Anton Nassar
Christmas Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

Making room

Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling... Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them.

Matthew 21:12,14

As a child, I was quite impressed with *The Cleansing of the Temple* account. I imagined Jesus standing up to the bad guys very similar to the inevitable saloon fights depicted in old TV westerns. Even now, I still focus on Jesus banishing the bad elements from the temple and concluding with His scripture, "My house was designated a house of prayer; You have made it a hangout for thieves." We understand these merchants and money changers were personally profiting and thereby detracting from Temple's true purpose but their removal is not the end of the story. This bold action of Jesus makes room for those who were being excluded. At the time, blind and other individuals with disabilities were marginalized. Many believed that personal disabilities were a result of sin and were a sign of God's disfavor. The compassion of Jesus is radically counter cultural.

A St. John's friend recently encouraged me to consider how this scripture relates to us as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. What is taking up space in my life and impedes spiritual growth? I have to confess that I live a privileged life and would like it to stay that way. I also want this for loved ones. It is natural to desire good health and a problem free life but when I'm not careful this focus takes up too much space in my spiritual walk. I'm open to God's direction as long as it doesn't disturb my plans.

When I admit my brokenness and seek healing, I'm making more room for the Holy Spirit. These experiences occur in both personal contemplation and intimate fellowship with others. It's a true blessing to be in relationship with people of faith who are open about their brokenness. I've had the privilege to experience this with loved ones including Palestinians living in the West Bank. Jesus calls us to be selfless and compassionate but we need not consider it a command or something we "should do." Rather we find our true soul when we relinquish our selfish egos. We create space for the Holy Spirit to work both in ourselves and throughout our community.

Dear Lord, we thank you for your Son's compassion. We confess the many times we hold on to our selfish desires and block your Holy Spirit's creative power. Help us focus on selflessness so that we may grow in our relationship with you and further your kingdom. Amen.

Mike Connor
St. John's Lutheran Church

Endurance

Wednesday, December 4, 2019

But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:13

Jesus said these words when His disciples came to Him and asked Him what the sign of his second coming is? What does Jesus want from us in this verse when we read it today, at a time similar to what his disciples went through? How can we endure today as we live under pressure, difficult circumstances, occupation, injustice and tyranny? And how long will we be patient and endure the pain and difficulties, hardships, and distress?

These questions were asked before us, by the disciples to Jesus. Jesus wanted through these words to encourage His disciples and encourage us to walk under these difficult circumstances and to cross the valley of pain and tears without fear or fatigue. These words of Jesus comforts us and gives us the power of patience and endurance; to persevere, with diligence and continuity to the end. As the Bible says, "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).

Our great consolation in this verse is that we, as the disciples before us, are not alone to weaken or despair. Jesus encourages us to endure the pain, hardship, distress, fear and even threat or death. Jesus Christ is with us. He cares for us and will not forget us. As Palestinian Christians, we have to endure. We have to struggle to the end. The road is dark and long, full of barriers and obstacles, but the end of this dark tunnel is to come inevitably.

In order to achieve peace, freedom, justice and dignity--- patience and endurance are necessary to the end. Continuity is the key to success and steadfastness until the desired goal of freedom and to live in dignity and peace. For, if God is with us, then who shall be against us.

Lord, Strengthen us as we walk in the different "valleys of shadow of death". Give us courage and endurance, and the full assurance that you are with us. Amen.

Jihan Nassar

Christmas Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 5, 2019

Patience

We wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

2 Peter 3:13

Patience is a funny thing. There are moments in my life that I am more patient. Then, there are moments in my life that are not so pretty. It could be the same situation, but my response will be very different. Let's say I am waiting for a doctor (I can pick on them because my dad, sister, and brother-in-law are doctors) and the wait gets to be very long. If I am by myself and have my phone or a book, I am not so impatient. I would give them the benefit of the doubt that an emergency could have come up and my routine checkup isn't life or death. On the other hand, if I am with my kids or didn't budget enough time for the appointment and have somewhere else to be soon, I am incredibly impatient. I am not willing to give the benefit of the doubt. Same situation. Different attitude. If I plan correctly, have something to do to consume my time, and don't have a 3- or 1-year old child demanding my attention in a confined space, patience is easier.

Advent is a time of waiting and patience. Even with this season, there are some years it is easier for me to be patient in the waiting than others. Because this time of waiting is a pregnant pause waiting for the baby Jesus but we often forget it is also to take a step back and realize that we are waiting for God's kingdom come here on earth. 2 Peter 3:13 says, "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." This means that we are not only waiting but we are working to make that vision a reality, new heavens and new earth. When we are honest with ourselves, the waiting and working of Advent is actually all our lives on this side of heaven. Now that takes patience. Faith has a word for this waiting and patience... *hope*.

Hope is lived out when we wait and patiently work toward God's kingdom by living lives that are wrapped up in God's love, God's justice, and God's peace.

Waiting is hard. It takes patience. So in the meantime, let's get to work.

Dear Lord, you amaze me with your love. Be with each of us while our treasures are being formed inside of us and one day revealed for your glory. Amen.

Pastor Laura Henrik

Pastor, St. John's Lutheran Church

Give to God the things that are God's

Friday, December 6, 2019

"Give therefore to the emperor, the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Matthew 22:21

The Pharisees were constantly trying to plot against Jesus, but he was having none of it. This scene in Matthew brings us one of Jesus' most famous quotes. Indeed, it frames the way we give. Yes, we have to pay taxes, but we are also encouraged to give charitably. Jesus spells this out succinctly few chapters later, in Matthew 26:11 when he says, "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

We know that needs exist all over the world, but we can also see needs in our own county.

That's why we step outside the four walls of St. John's to deliver Meals on Wheels for seniors who are shut in; pack backpacks for Food For Thought for schoolchildren who are food insecure over the weekends; serve meals at Rowan Helping Ministries for our neighbors who do not have homes, and so much more. If we look around, there's never a need that doesn't need to be filled, and most of us have a yearning, as Christians, to help our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The verse from Matthew 22 is so appropriate and important to keep at the forefront this time of year. I spoke with Teen Aron, communications director for Community Care Clinic, which assists uninsured and underinsured adults in Rowan County. She said that many nonprofit agencies do rely on end-of-year giving to finish up their year in the black instead of the red. It's that final push to finish on a high note, she says. But her agency also sees more requests for help in December. Cold weather has arrived, as has flu season. People need assistance with utility payments. For some, it's a season of plenty and even excess, but for others, it's a season of want.

While people make charitable contributions out of a spirit of true giving, they have the added bonus of a benefit at tax time. So Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees still applies to us today.

During this season of Advent, let's remember to return to God what belongs to God by helping our fellow men and women.

Dear Lord, help me to be a cheerful giver. Amen.

Susan Shinn Turner
St. John's Lutheran Church

2nd Sunday in Advent

Walls, bridges and peace

Sunday, December 8, 2019

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Ephesians 2:14

While traveling in China, I was asked by a student: “What if Jesus was to be born today?” I replied: “If Jesus were to be born this year, he would not be born in Bethlehem. Maria and Joseph might not be allowed to enter from the wall or to cross the checkpoint, and so too the Magi, while the shepherds will be stuck inside the walls and can’t leave their little town. Jesus might have been born on the checkpoint like so many Palestinian children.”

While many Christians start in the Advent time a journey toward Bethlehem, the majority of them do not know that the little town today is made as little as 4 square miles surrounded from three sides by a mighty 25-foot-high wall disconnecting Bethlehem from neighboring city of Jerusalem.

No one understood what building walls means like St. Paul. A former Jewish hard liner, he committed himself to making sure that a wall of separation was built and kept between his community and the Gentiles. However, this same radical person was radically transformed on the road to Damascus. Now he understood the meaning of building bridges as a prerequisite to peace. His great discovery was that if God himself in Christ has broken the walls of hostility between the human and the divine, then there is no place for walls between peoples, tribes, cultures and nations. The Holy Land today is in urgent need of bridges, not walls.

Please join me in prayer: Lord of peace, born in Bethlehem, thank you for building this eternal bridge between us and the Father. Make us bridge builders so that your peace will be celebrated in our lives, in the Holy Land and in the World. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

President, Dar al-Kalima University College

The beginning and the end

Monday, December 9, 2019

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Revelation 8

In the past, I have had many troubles with subjects like those in this passage. That is, the mysteries of God that we, as humans, cannot understand. I yearned to have the ability to just grasp every concept presented to me. It took me a few years to realize there were some things that simply require faith because there is no way we can fully comprehend everything we are being told by way of the Bible, but I also came to learn that not understanding everything about the faith is okay. We're not meant to. We're only meant to have faith and trust in God.

In this passage, we are reminded of the complete and utter eternity that is God, and that nothing can triumph over Him, not even death. It even goes so far to call Christ "the firstborn from the dead" just to remind us of this. Just when all hope seemed lost to the disciples and Christ's friends and followers in the days following His death, He came back. He defeated the one thing that is inevitable for all humans to show us that while it may be inevitable, it is not stronger than Him. Verse 8 begins with "I am the Alpha and the Omega", which is the beginning and the end. This passage is telling us that God has always existed and always will, and that we can trust in that eternity as we strive to one day be part of it with Him, because nothing, not even death, can defeat Christ.

Lord, as we look forward to the day marking your birth, you, the Alpha and the Omega, you who conquered death for our sake, help us trust in you and your love as we yearn to join in your perfect eternity. Amen.

Claire Allen

St. John's Lutheran Church

A time of waiting through hope, faith, and action

Tuesday, December 10, 2019

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25:13

The ten virgins parable holds the notion of an important eschatological event of the second coming of Christ. An event which the Old Testament paved the way for, and Jesus himself taught about many times. Matthew describes the event as a glorious, cheerful wedding. Although weddings are festive occasions, they carry plenty of waiting time during the day. People wait to gather, they wait the bride's arrival, and they wait for the start of the celebration -- something most people generally hate or get bored of. Matthew here goes against what people traditionally feel of waiting in weddings and stresses the importance of waiting as an element of blessing, because all the ten virgins were expecting the arrival of a special bridegroom, who is Christ. This portrayal of the waiting time reflects the importance of our readiness and preparations to meet Christ in His *Parousia* (end of times). If we were invited to a special wedding, we surely care to appear wonderfully and well-prepared, but imagine if who invited us was Jesus himself, the King of kings and Lord of lords? How our readiness will be?

It is true that the kingdom of God has a futuristic manifestation but also the kingdom was established among us and in us on earth by the incarnation of Jesus, so the Advent is our opportunity to say "yes" to Jesus' request to dwell in our hearts as we are waiting and ready to meet Him. Unlike the five foolish virgins who acted upon the last minute and found their lamps run out of oil, in Advent the bridegroom Christ expects to return and find His church vigilant and waiting through hope and readiness, while maintaining faith in action. The church being vigilant is a faith lifestyle that empowers her in the face of temptations and evil. The portrayal of being vigilant means that the sons and daughter of the heavenly kingdom are called not only to be ready, but to witness to Christ by being lights for all nations, a light that its oil never ends. As Christ incarnated on earth and was a prophetic deliverance and freedom for humanity from its bondage, He also expect us, as we wait for Him, to be the prophetic voice representing the voiceless, standing firm in the face of oppression, to act as for justice, and to be peacemakers.

Lord, we pray that you will always find us ready to serve you and witness to your kingdom. May our lifestyle be a resounding "yes" to your request to dwell in our hearts and shine in our lives. Amen.

Bahjat

Christmas Lutheran Church

Light. Truth. Good news!

Wednesday, December 11, 2019

..... Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness Instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

John 3:19-21

Whatcha gonna believe? Who you gonna believe? Every day we are inundated with commercials that tell us how much better our lives could be if only we would invest in their product: “ You can be thin in three weeks if you call our clinic.” “If you use this product on your face your life lines will automatically be erased in just one month.” “ We will buy your house sight unseen and give you an offer immediately.” Never is there a mention of the cost involved with your choice. We are in an environment that is surrounded by people telling you that you can really get something without working for it. Now I’m not saying that products that take away your age don’t work; however, I have been enticed to try a few and have found that nothing really takes the place of having really good genes.

We hear every day of sad news that pulls at our hearts. News that makes you wonder how this could possibly be happening in our world? Sometimes we wonder what is real and what is fake and sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. Did this really happen? Can I believe what I’m reading? Is this report reputable? Is all news questionable?

Light. Truth. Good news! News that you don’t have to question; don’t have to doubt. News that has survived 2000 years and never gets old. News that someone loved us enough to come into our corrupt world and love us just as we are. Jesus came into the world in a form that we could understand. He came as a baby and grew up in our world to experience what we all have to face. This man suffered loss, pain and death. He was one of us but one with God. He died for us so that we might live. And what is our cost for this amazing sacrifice? Nothing. We don’t have to pay anything. By His grace we are saved. By His grace we can have everlasting life.

Now that to me is good news! This is something you can believe!

Lord Jesus, come. Come into our hearts. Shine your light into our corrupt world and let us once again know the peace that comes from knowing that you love us unconditionally. Knowing that there is no cost to us. You have already paid our price. Help us to share this good news and spread peace throughout your world. Amen.

Ann Bostian
St. John’s Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 12, 2019

Faceless and nameless

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Matthew 2:13

A while ago, I was visiting an olivewood handcrafts shop in Bethlehem, and the artist showed me a statue of the holy family as refugees. But it was like no other handcrafts. The characters were faceless. There were heads; but no faces. I thought then; how symbolic! I am not sure what the artist meant; but I saw a lot of meaning in this particular "faceless" holy family refugee portrait. For how many "faceless" and "nameless" people are there in our world today, people who are seeking refuge, safety, dignity and recognition? People who are only referred to as numbers and statistics; part of headlines; victims of oppression; people who have become tools serving the interest of the mighty and rich. "Faceless" and "nameless" people.

I think of the many refugees around our world today, and the many people displaced and besieged because of violence. I think of victims of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen; I think of the faceless and nameless of Gaza. As Palestinians; being faceless and nameless pretty much defines how most people around the world look at us. We are only viewed in reference to the "other" powerful side. Over history, empires occupied us; colonial powers promised and handed our land and homes to another; we were displaced; and displaced again; the powerful make declarations about our identity and rooted-heritages; they make discriminatory laws; for they saw an empty Palestine; a Jerusalem without Palestinians; even a Bethlehem without Christians. And for most Christians, our land is merely stones of antiquities. Old historic churches; but no people – unless you are on their side, of course. We are faceless and nameless.

In this Christmas season, we are reminded that Jesus is Immanuel; God with us; God as one of us. For he, too, became another victim of oppression. In his childhood, he had to survive a massacre. He then became just one more refugee among many other "faceless" and "nameless" refugees in our world. He was born into a simple normal family; in our little town; in a cave out of all places – as if to say: I recognize you! I know what you feel. I see your face; I know your name; I know your story; and I share your experience. As a Palestinian, and for millions of oppressed and neglected people around the world, this is good news.

This statue reminds me that we exist as a church today for the sake of the "faceless" and "nameless"; to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and defend, comfort, protect and give value and worth to the vulnerable and neglected. If we do not move towards them, then who will? And if we do not recognize them, then who will?

The Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

Pastor, Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem

Give careful thought to your ways

Friday, December 13, 2019

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.

Haggai 1:5-6

What is your focus this Christmas season? Is it finding the perfect gifts? Baking the most delicious goodies? Creating a Christmas card with the most dazzling message of your family's prosperous 2019? The harder we work to "create" the perfect Christmas the easier it is to lose sight of the true meaning. A clean heart and mind that is set on God allows us to not yearn for the materialistic aspects of Christmas. In having God's love and goodness we will find the joy of the Advent season.

God did not send his Son into a *Christmas card* perfect world, but a world filled with sin and chaos. When we allow God to be first in our lives, our deepest needs are met.

Each year we teach the children of St. John's Kindergarten the song, *Happy Birthday, Jesus*. A particular verse from this song is a true reminder of God's gift:

Happy birthday, Jesus
I'm so glad it's Christmas
All the tinsel and lights
And the presents are nice
But the real gift is You
Happy birthday, Jesus
Jesus, I love You

If you are shopping with the crowds at the mall, or browsing Amazon in the quiet of your home, remember the perfect gift, lies in the manger.

Teresa Stoner and Bonita Rowland
St. John's Kindergarten

3rd Sunday of Advent

Stand Tough

Sunday, December 15, 2019

Concerning the coming of our LORD Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the LORD has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the LORD, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our LORD Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our LORD Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

I find in these writings from Paul to the Thessalonians, especially in the second text, messages of tradition, recollection, peace, hope and trust. Paul seems to be saying that no matter what the world throws at us, we have the foundation through God and Jesus Christ to know we are not alone. I still think back to things my parents drilled into me as a kid. Don't swear — when you do it just shows you have a limited vocabulary. Clean your room — you're disrespecting your mother if you don't. Feed the dog — you have to be responsible. Get home by 10 — the door will be locked at 10:01. But I also knew my mom and dad would always be there for me in any of my toughest moments. When I struck out with the bases loaded. When I wrecked the car. When I lost a friend. I took my parents' love as a given, and it allowed me to stand firm and hang tough when I had to.

Likewise, God's love and grace give us strength beyond our own strength. We know this, as Paul says, by "the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." We trust that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and it gives us hope and peace. When Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," it was a calling, a request to stand firm on the things he taught us so we could be better people and make a better world. The last line of the today's text make for an appropriate prayer:

Dear God, encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. Amen.

Mark Wineka

St. John's Lutheran Church

Both wise and foolish

Monday, December 16, 2019

“Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your light appear; The evening is advancing, and darker night is near. The bridegroom is arising and soon is drawing nigh.
Up, pray and watch and wrestle; at midnight come the cry”

The Advent hymn verse (ELW 244) quoted above is based on Matthew 25:1-13.

In this parable Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to the story of a wedding feast that awaits the coming of the bridegroom. He would be accompanied by ten chosen virgins with their lamps and torches blazing to form a procession of light. As would have been tradition, the bridegroom would not arrive at the feast until all of the negotiations with the bride’s father had been finalized. This would delay the bridegroom’s arrival for quite some time. The delay caused the waiting virgins to fall asleep and their lamps to burn out. When the watchman announced that the bridegroom was on his way, five wise virgins made sure that they had extra oil to burn and five foolish virgins discovered they would not have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. The wise virgins refused to lend their extra oil to the foolish virgins who had to leave and buy more oil for the processional. Since it was about midnight it would be impossible to find a shop or a home that would be open to them.

While the foolish virgins were away looking for more oil the bridegroom arrived, the procession and the banquet began without them. Upon their return they knocked on the door of the house, but they were denied entrance to the feast because they missed the procession. They simply did not plan for the long dark time of waiting and as a result they were shut out of the banquet and rebuked by the bridegroom who said “truly I do not know you, but keep watch and be ready for you do not know the day or the hour.”

This parable is about the imminent return of Jesus and our readiness for his coming, but I also recognize that like the ten virgins, I’m both wise and foolish. I’m both ready and yet not ready for God who comes all the time. I’m ready and yet not ready for Jesus who returns each moment, and I yearn to be present for these moments. God’s arrival is constant because his kingdom is here and I yearn to be ready and living in vigilance to be open to the oil of the Spirit’s call each day in serving God, serving each other and in being a builder of God’s kingdom. This parable seems to call us to self-examination and to re-discover our common humanity instead of a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the wise and the foolish. My hope is that our priorities align with God’s priorities and that we don’t miss what is most important to us - that Jesus is in our midst! God is with us, our Emmanuel!

“Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear; arise, O Sun so longed for, o’er this benighted sphere. With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord too see the day of earth’s redemption that sets your people free.” Amen.

Rob Durocher

St. John’s Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 17, 2019

A typical day at the CDC

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the good man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore, be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

Matthew 24:42-44

The moment you enter the building you are faced with “when you get a moment can you...?”, “did you see the note about...?”, “is it ok if...?”, “there was a parent that...” The list goes on and on. St. John’s Child Development Center is a very BUSY PLACE. You enter the doors with a plan for your day, but in reality that plan will be put on the backburner as issues arise. Then there are the distractions! You walk down the hall to check on a child that bumped their head, but stopped by three teachers with three different questions. You could be working hard on important paperwork, but get a knock on the office door and asked “do you have a minute?” that minute turns into 30. The next thing you know you answer an email, return a phone call and say to yourself I’ll get to that paperwork tomorrow. Little do you know tomorrow you will have an unexpected state visit that takes up your whole entire day. While the state visit can add stress and necessary improvements, it is a reminder that you must be on your “A” game at all times.

This is the same reminder that we as Christians must “*be ye also ready.*” The different challenges of life happen that cause us to become distracted, but it is our duty to commit ourselves to prayer, studying God’s words and ministering to others. I am yearning for God to continually keep me focused on my purpose not only at St. John’s CDC, but on my Christian journey. During this Advent season, it is a time for us keep our focus on God, not giving into the distractions that will come. How can you better focus on God today?

Please join me in prayer: Dear God, your word says that we should be ye ready. Bring this to our remembrance as we go about our busy lives. Give us a focus on you that will carry us through each day. Amen.

Courtney Bost

Executive Director, St. John’s Child Development Center

O little town of Bethlehem

Wednesday, December 18, 2019

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Micah 5:2

There is a wonderful, profound and realistic lesson that helps us look at things from another perspective. It touches our hearts and brings us to a higher degree of intellectual and moral maturity: humility. The Lord chose to be born in one of the smallest towns in our land, which, to this day, is still small in comparison to other cities. This is the city of Bethlehem, where my family and I live.

Christ was born in a despicable manger, and had no place in a house or town, or even in a small room to contain him and his family. Imagine that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords chose the smallest places to be born. Consider if you were asked to travel abroad for a workshop or speaking engagement. Perhaps you would sit thinking and wondering: What kind of hotels will I be staying at, and how many stars is it? Does it have a swimming pool? Is the food good? I would have a lot of questions about the accommodation's comfortability and what kinds of amenities would be provided. However, at the same time, I wonder about Joseph and Mary. Were they thinking about the place of Jesus' birth rather than the fact that God had chosen them? They could have said to the Lord, "Lord, at least could you give us a simple room?" Nevertheless, God works things out differently than we anticipate.

Bethlehem, today, without Christ or the Church of the Nativity – where Jesus was born – is not noteworthy. It is very small, and the living and political conditions in it are very difficult. Geographically, Bethlehem is small in size, and its population is growing. I pondered the words of a Muslim merchant friend of mine when he said to me, "Believe me, my friend, Bethlehem without the name of Jesus is worth nothing." All existing hotels and tourist restaurants help raise household income and feed a large segment of Bethlehem society. Indeed, most of the economy of this small town is based on tourism and the arrival of visitors and pilgrims to visit the place where the Lord was born. Why are some people interested in coming from afar to such a small town? Because Jesus raised the status of Bethlehem.

In this small, humble town, the King of Kings decided he would come and enter into life with humanity. No greater example of humility exists. This model of a humble entry and existence is one that gives us pause.

We would do well not to try to raise ourselves or take any glory from anyone. The Lord knows all that we need, and he raises us up. Whoever raises himself is humbled, and he who humbles himself is raised. Just as he raised the small town of Bethlehem when he was born there, thus, he can lift you up when he is born into your heart and life.

Gabriel Hanna
Christmas Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 19, 2019

The prophet Isaiah writes:

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Preparing

Friday, December 20, 2019

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

Isaiah 9:2-3

For most us, the holiday season can be quite cumbersome. Between visiting relatives, buying presents, forgetting to buy presents, as well as cooking, cleaning, and preparing for your house to be taken over by the pillaging barbarians we refer to as, “family,” it is hard to take time to notice God’s presence in the midst of everything.

I will be married in a couple of weeks, and I am very much looking forward to entering a time of my life where we don’t have to plan for a wedding. As we enter less than 100 days before the big event, I am focusing a lot of my energy on helping my fiancé from getting too stressed. She has put in so much time and energy into planning this day, and even though most of the work is done, most of her anxieties come from knowing a day which she has dreamed of for her whole life is coming.

There was a time where this day was just a dream to both of us. There was a time when we *hoped* this day would come, but we didn’t even know the details. I’ve spent my whole life hoping, yearning for a partner who saw me *completely*, knows me *completely* and loves me *completely*.

It wasn’t until the anxieties of planning a wedding that I realized how hard it truly is to sit in the “waiting.” As my fiancé and I sit with bated breath for the big day to come, we are trying to appreciate the promised and precious moment that we are currently in.

The work that has been done (and is still to come) keeps us focused on the promise. As we all sit and prepare for our Christ to come and reign in our lives, let’s not forget those around us. We are preparing our hearts and minds, but we are also preparing a space where all are invited to come join us around the manger. Though we are waiting for our Savior, we stand in expectation that the our dreams WILL come to fruition... all we must do is prepare and wait for what is to come.

Bradley Chestnut
St. John’s Lutheran Church

4th Sunday in Advent

God's flock... are you a sheep or a goat?

Sunday, December 22, 2019

Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Matthew 25:45-46

This parable is not unlike others for me as I need to break the story down and study each section carefully. The title of this story in our study Bible is "The Judgement of the Nations" and has been no different in how I need to approach my study to learn its meaning. Why, I wondered, did Jesus choose to use the example of sheep and goats? In a Bible History encyclopedia, I read that flock owners kept both sheep and goats and obtained many of the necessities of life from them like food, material for clothing and tents, all of which could be bartered. Both animals were needed and can be herded together compatibly because they don't try to out eat each other.

So Jesus' example was comparing *us* as we live together communally, like those animals did. The passage begins by proclaiming that when God comes again, we will all stand before Him and He will separate us like when shepherds separate their herds. Jesus goes on to clarify what he meant. The sheep in the story represent true believers and the goats represent those who *claim* to believe, but do not. The goats show they are not true by their lack of action to love others. Jesus' parable shows us that followers of Christ are to serve others, as if they were Christ himself. We are reminded that Jesus was sent to earth to dwell among us, to *show* us how to serve. His life exemplified how to serve "the least of these."

We all yearn to see God one day. We yearn to be a sheep so that we will sit on His right side someday. We can serve our Lord when we do the simplest acts of service for one another. A meal, a call, a visit to the lonely... all these actions take mere minutes but reap lasting rewards. Our profession of faith is invalid if we don't engage in our own neighborhoods and communities. Our actions are how God will tell the sheep from the goats. The point of the parable is that we should show love for others, *all others*, as God shows love for us.

Dear Lord, hear our prayer: Thank you for your goodness and for the example that Jesus set for us to follow. We pray to remember always to seek those who have less than ourselves and treat them with love as you would have us to do. Amen.

Donna Groce
St. John's Lutheran Church

The Birth of Jesus

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20



"Kissing the face of God," by Morgan Weistling, who writes, "The painting was inspired by the phrase 'kissing the face of God,' which I heard in a song many years ago. I immediately thought of a composition with Mary and baby Jesus and how Mary had the privilege to hold God in the flesh in her arms. She cuddled and kissed him just as all mothers do with their babies. God chose to send his Son into this world in this amazing way — in pure humility."

The **Evangelical Christmas Lutheran Church** is the oldest Lutheran Church in Palestine, started in 1854 by German missionaries. Today it is one of six Lutheran churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. The sanctuary was built in 1893 and features 14 stunning stained glass windows and a tower of bells donated by the German emperor, Wilhelm II. Members of the congregation take seriously their call to “continue Christ’s ministry of preaching, teaching and healing in His birthplace,” especially in their active partnership with the Dar al-Kalima school for children and the Dar al-Kalima University College.



St. John’s Lutheran Church is a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Founded in 1747 by German immigrants, St. John’s was the first church founded in Salisbury, North Carolina, a city of 35,000 just north of Charlotte. The current sanctuary was built in 1927 and features a beautiful hand-painted triptych and one of the few sets of Deagan Tower Chimes, whose music can be heard throughout the city. The congregation’s many ministries include a school of 225 students (infant through kindergarten), a 35-voice Men’s Chorus, and an active youth ministry that draws students from throughout the county.

