

2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



Greendale Ecumenical Group
Worcester, MA

“Justice Please”
Sunday, November 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Advent is upon us, and we don't need to be schooled in waiting and longing for we have been waiting and longing for healing, restoration, and better days for close to two years.

The key phrase in this brief passage from the prophet is “justice and righteousness”. Biblically, the phrase can be tied to what we call social justice, or a concern to establish equitable social and economic conditions for the well-being of all in society.

I believe that America has already received and will be receiving a wonderful gift in the coming weeks and months ahead. The numbers change regularly but initially 37,000 Afghan refugees will be resettled across the country. Here in Massachusetts perhaps upward to 600 will settle in the Commonwealth. Rev Dr William Barber II states in his book, “We Are Called to be a Movement” that he believes that those who have been rejected in life will be key to our salvation. Psalm 118 states that the “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Those who have known the realities of rejection in this life always make the best cornerstones. May we all experience real justice and righteousness as we welcome and are schooled in hospitality as we open our hearts and doors to our Afghan families.

“First Candle in Advent: Prophesy/Hope” Psalm 90; Num 17:1-11, 2 Peter 3:1-18
Monday, November 29, 2021 Pam Sutton, Grace Ministries Bethel Campus

Numbers 17:8 KJV⁸ And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.

Psalm 90:1&2 KJV Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.² Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

2 Peter 3:9 KJV ⁹The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Behold, the Candle of Hope has been lit as it has been year after year, after year. Hope must be kept alive and Our Gracious and long-suffering Godhead has eon after eon opened our eyes through the Prophets and Anointed Ones to Behold signs of God's

Presence ever with us and through us when we answer God's Call. In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan", we sing. Yes, to our eye natural eyes, our world can manifest darkness and trouble, pain and suffering. Yet, when our spiritual eyes and hearts are opened to the Truth of the Grace and Love that are ever Present with all Creation including us, the Coming of Christ is no longer dim. The Anointed One is here, but not yet.

Prayer: Good and Gracious Divine Love, we come before You with a longing deep within our hearts to be in relationship with You. Thank you for your Promises and for Your patient pursuit of our reconciliation through the finished work of Jesus, One God, now and forever. Amen

"God's Entry"

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

Revelation 22:12-16; Psalm 90:11-12

Jackie Walsh, Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Revelation 22:12-16

" ...I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star."

Psalm 90:11-12

"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

TIME: years, yesterday, tomorrow, weeks, kronos, kairos. "To make a day, it takes an evening and a morning" says Abbie Graham author of Ceremonials of a Common Day. So, what do we do with our days? Do we grumble and complain? Psalm 90 verse 12 asks God to teach us to "number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom". The Psalm emphasizes the shortness of human life and

contrasts that with God's Eternity. Jesus, the root and descendant of David, is the bright morning star!

How much can we affect the quality of our days? Sometimes, days that are expected to be wonderful turn out to be so. During this Advent season, let us look to the East each morning and give God thanks for the gift of this day.

“A Place to Dwell”

Psalm 90

Wednesday, December 1, 2021 Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.” (Psalm 90:1)

It has been a year to say the least. So much has changed. Many of us enter the holiday season with thoughts of those we've lost this year and in previous seasons. The air can hang thick with grief and longing. And yet, this season is about the anticipation of new life and opportunities. It is a season of hope. To turn to the prospect of continuing life sometimes takes an act of faithful will; an act of pause in the midst of all that must be done and the hard memories of those we miss and thoughts of times when life was somehow easier.

The Psalmist knew this environment, echoing the words of Moses as he prayed for his people. Moses' words bespeak a double consciousness: the reality of hardship and the faithful knowledge that we dwell on holy ground and in holy space: a place that preceded our arrival and yet was also made for us because of the steadfast relationship we keep with the Divine.

Moses' words bespeak both the reality of suffering and the need to remain steadfast in our vision of holy living. Might we, like Moses, find the time to pause during this season, speak from our hearts to the God of our own understanding, and remember from whence we come and where we truly abide.

Luke 1 – God’s Word Translation

67 [John the Baptist’s] father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

68 “Praise the Lord God of Israel, [who] has come to take care of [the] people and to set them free.

69 [The Lord] has raised up a mighty Savior for us in the family of his [the] servant David.

70 [The Lord] made this promise through [the] holy prophets long ago, 71 [and] promised to save us from our enemies and from the power of all who hate us.

72 [Our God] has shown mercy to our ancestors and remembered [the] holy promise, 73 the oath [sworn] to our ancestor Abraham. 74 {the Lord} promised to rescue us from our enemies’ power

so that we could serve without fear 75 by being holy and honorable as long as we live.

76 “You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his way. 77 You will make his people know that they can be saved through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 A new day will dawn on us from above because our God is loving and merciful

79 [who] will give light to those who live in the dark and in death’s shadow. [Our God] will guide us into the way of peace.”

On morning walks during the winter, I sometimes find tracks in the snow from earlier that I am up and about.

Since the snow can sometimes be deep, I try to fit in the tracks already laid down to keep from slipping and falling. And, it can save me energy in pressing down the snow-pack to make my own way.

Zechariah tells us that John’s role is in making a way for people to follow in finding our Lord; his work was in pressing down the pack of religious mis-interpretation

to allow us easier access to the Mercy giving light to all living “in the dark and death’s shadow”.

Each Advent season our opportunity is in following the tracks laid down in loving guidance by our Lord, so that we benefit from Love and can then also be track-makers along the WAY of our Lord!

The history for this is long and deep, yet our responsibility through the inheritance of Grace.

“There is No Escape”

Philippians 1:18-26

Friday, December 3, 2021

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

“I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 1:23)

The phrase the grass is always greener on the other side is a modern translation of a Latin proverb cited by Erasmus of Rotterdam and translated in to English in 1545 “The corne in an other mans ground semeth euer more fertyll and plentifull then doth oure own” (The corn in another man’s ground seems ever more fertile and plentiful than our own does.)

It is a truism about the human psyche. Anywhere but here would be better. And how often have each of us considered this sentiment, especially during the holiday season. So much do to do, so much to get and give, often midst throngs of people whose behavior is more fitting a wrestling ring then a public space. In such times I’m mindful of the adage from one Star Trek fan “Beam me up Scotty. There’s no intelligent life down here.”

The desire to go to a place that seems more just, loving and peaceful is a human desire and one that has been in existence for as long as human beings discovered their own desiring. This is at the heart of the passage from Philippians this day. Faithful folk, aware of the hardships they face because of their holy commitments, desiring to be with Christ, some place else, than where they are in the moment.

And yet the answer, while compassionate and understanding, is that the most faithful response to our holy commitment is to reflect this where we are, not where we want to be. A necessary and important reminder as we stand in lines this season, or enter crowded places. How we are to others speaks volumes about whose we are.

“What’s in a Name”

Luke 1:67-79

Saturday, December 4, 2021

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Name’s matter.

If you walk down 5th Avenue in New York City, every block will have peddlers of goods, everything from T-shirts, watches, jewelry, to CD’s, postcards, and paintings. You can buy Gucci handbags, and Rolex watches, and Montblanc pens for incredibly good prices! In fact, I’m using a Montblanc right now. Before you start inquiring about what salary a pastor at Salem Covenant makes, just know it’s a “knock-off”. Looks just like the “Meisterstück Gold-Coated Ballpoint Pen” that starts at \$425... except that it’s not. It’s a fake.

Go back a handful of verses from Zechariah’s sung praise and you’ll hear the story about a little “hub-bub” that happened around the naming of Zech and Betty’s miracle child. According to tradition, the child should have been named Zechariah after his father. But this child was special, claimed as one who would announce the savior of the world. The Spirit told Elizabeth that the name was to be John. He was not to be any “knock off” of Zechariah but a called man of the God Most High. People were amazed at the hutzpah of Zechariah and Elizabeth to name the child John, but John was the only name that would fit the man and the mission.

“Preparing the Way”

Luke 3:1-6

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester

One of the lasting insights that remain from Seminary for me is the idea that in the Bible, prophecy comes from three different places: the wilderness, the city

gate and the town square. In the third chapter of Luke we are introduced to the first of these places with the onset of the public proclamations of John the Baptist.

“. . . the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. . .” (Luke 3:2b-3a)

Nephew of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' cousin, John was not one for social grace and niceties. He was gruff in his condemnation of the airs people put on to maintain their social status. He was frank, almost to a fault about the way of the world.

I think about John each time I encounter someone whose words seem blunt and sharp in their condemnation of the way things are, especially has they are spoken in times of injustice. Where it not for my seminary experience, I might be inclined to simply ignore such behavior and walk away from such experiences. Instead, what I have learned and practiced over the years is to take a step closer, especially if I'm inclined first to walk away, and ask myself “What truth is there in this for me to hear?”

What I have found in most instances is that the gruff measure which initially repels me is an invitation to wisdom begotten by immense pain. And if I can relate past my own initial revulsion, past my own social niceties, I am often called to affirm and abide with those whose truths come in such ways.

Something I think worth remembering during this era of social unrest. Beyond our need for niceties is a cry for justice, a baptism by fire and the ultimate forgiveness for our own incompleteness.

“Hope In God’s Answer”

Romans 8:22-25

Monday, December 6, 2021 Marie Sturdevant, Grace Ministries – Bethel Campus

Romans 8:22-25 (ESV)

²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the

redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

I have never experienced the loss of a child, and while I can imagine, I cannot fully comprehend the depth of pain and hopelessness one feels in burying their child. I did however witness the deep despair my Mom experienced when my brother died at the age of thirteen. There were no words to comfort or console her. Here I learned that time does not heal such deep wounds, but God gives us the gift of time to begin to move forward and rediscover hope while longing to feel comfort in the presence of God. When I think about the lessons my Mom taught me and the words she shared during times of trouble, I remember these statements; “pull yourself up by the bootstraps,” “when you are lost, head for the horizon,” and “let go and let God.” The first two statements are our attempt to pick ourselves up, but we cannot do either on our own. When we let go and let God be our strength, guiding us through the valleys and towards the horizon, we find the way to keep going, moving with assurance and with hope that will sustain us. Hope is what gives us the strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other as we journey through life, despite what trials and tragedies may befall us. It was my Mom’s faith, hope and deep trust in God’s promises that got her through each day. Years later, when my Mom became terminally ill, and was hours from passing, I echoed back to her the words she taught me, “let go and let God.” Within a few hours she passed peacefully and I sensed joy in her final moments when all that she had hoped for was realized.

May we, with all creation, as we struggle in this life, eagerly await the coming of our Lord. Stay awake for the time of the revealing of God’s eternal purpose is drawing near. Be filled with joyful expectation in the hope of God’s answer that comes in the birth of the Holy One, Emmanuel, “God with us.” Come Lord, Jesus, come. Amen.

“Prayers Inspired by the Eastern Star”
Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Psalm 126, Isaiah 19:18-25
Scott Olson, Salem Covenant

Oh God, you who are the Creator of the universe and all things, you set your Star in the East to announce the birth of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.
Today, in this season of Advent, we, your elect sons and daughters, pray that the Christ Child will be born in our hearts as we await His coming to us.
May we love one another as He loved us, and cherish our days and times spent with our loved ones and friends. May we be ever grateful for all of the good and pleasant things that you, oh God, have given us. For you are Wonder-Counselor, and all Creation is touched by your amazing beauty, and the vast and infinite manifestations of your Wisdom and Grace. May you, oh God, be always with us in these challenging times, and as Christmas swiftly approaches this year, may you truly show your love for us as we prepare for it.
AMEN.

“Second Advent Candle: LOVE”
Wednesday, December 8, 2021

Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:3-7; Luke 7:18-30
Pam Sutton, Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Psalm 126:5 KJV 5 They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

Isaiah 35:3-7 KJV 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.6 Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

Luke 7: 18-30 KJV 26 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.27 This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Love begets Love. Where there is Love, there is joy, even in the midst of trouble. Love is Light that quells the darkness, raises hopes and reduces fear to meaningless shadows. By confirming our Baptisms we accept our surrender into the arms of Love and with ensuing joyful obedience proclaim to all with the John, “Behold the Lamb of God” and with Philip, “Come and see”!

Prayer: God whose very Nature is pure and Perfect Love, sustain and empower us to shout or whisper with intention, that Love is worth the waiting and preparing for! Thanks be to God. Amen.

“The Grace of Giving”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Thursday, December 9, 2021

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

“But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you[a]—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” (2 Corinthians 8:7)

What does it mean to give? In Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth, he outlines two qualities of giving: 1) that giving is voluntary which means that to truly give, the gift must come from the depths of the self to another. The second is that come from a spirit of abundance, meaning out of what one has and not from of a spirit scarcity, meaning out of what one does not have.

So many churches operate out of a scarcity mindset. Budgets are crafted in order to preserve as much as possible to uphold the bottom line of what the world suggests is proper. And yet, the divine bottom line is the presence of equity and justice not the maintenance of wealth.

For me, another important caveat about giving is that one should give with no strings attached and no expectation regarding that which is given. We give as an act of love not as a test of loyalty or with the expectation that what is given will be used in a particular way. Just like we give voluntarily, we ought not expect that our gift be received for a particular purpose, but only that in receiving what is given, that others experience a measure of our love and devotion.

This season, might we strive to give in the spirit that Paul encourages of the people in Corinth, and with that which is given, express the love and devotion we have to manifest the equity of the spirit and all that which is symbolic of it in the lives of those we cherish.

Isaiah 1 – God’s Word Translation

2 Look! God is my Savior. I am confident and unafraid, because the LORD is my strength, my song [and] my Savior.”
3 With joy you will draw water from the springs of salvation.
4 At that time you will say,
“Praise the LORD. Call on [the Lord’s] name. Make [Lord’s] deeds known among the nations. Make them remember that [the Lord’s] name is highly honored.
5 Make music to praise the LORD [who] has done wonderful things. Let this be known throughout the earth.
6 Shout loudly, and sing with joy, people of Zion! The Holy One of Israel is great [and] among you.”

As I drive along Route 190, I am reminded of the work contractors toiled at in removing rock formations to lay the roadway down.

At various times of the year the stone sentinels are rife with evidence of interrupted streams tracking down their surfaces as groundwater fed by rains enhance their flow.

Water is an ever-present metaphor for the Life-Source that is God through faith each of us needs to be spiritually hydrated.

Advent points our attention towards the breaking-in of this Life-Source in ancient Palestine to fulfill our creaturely need for connection and highlight this Benevolence seeking our wholeness and hope in every moment.

May we connect, shout loudly and sing, recognizing the Holy always amongst us, seeking our spiritual hydration!

It is a long custom, especially by Middle Eastern Standards to name children for those cherished in one's family, especially those whose lives have gone before. And yet, we find in the first chapter of Luke an instance when birth begets a name which bespeaks the unique qualities of the child and not that of an ancestor. What could this mean?

To begin, John, as the name is declared by his mother Elizabeth, means "God has favored." In the larger story which we know about John, his is a special ministry foretelling the coming of the Messiah. The story reflects his role from the very beginning. But there is also something else.

When the name is announced, while the people wondered about the choice, the baby is said to open his mouth, "and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God."

This is the power of naming, or recognizing one's true name, it is a moment of liberation, of the springing forth of a truth which is larger than ourselves, reflective of our larger purpose and being. How many times have any of us witnessed this in our own lives. When we have struggled to name that which has somehow bound us, or found the courage to name something hard or ultimately true in our lives, and by doing so, are filled with the energy and potency of that truth. These are moments which are hard to contain; moments often filled with raw emotion, with deep clarity, and ultimate truth.

Here is the power that was present in that moment when a baby began to praise God. Might we all be blessed with such moments in our lives.

"Christ Close By"

Sunday, December 12, 2021

Philippians 4:4-7

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Author and speaker Rob Bell asks us to create two white boards. On one board you are to write down all the sufferings you have endured, all those times that were particularly painful and challenging. On the other board, you are to write all of the good times, times in which you felt particularly successful and in the zone. He then asked what have been the events that caused you the most growth. If you are like many, we see that those times of suffering and challenge were often

the times that spurred us to new growth much more than the days of ease and success.

Paul writes from prison. His community Philippi long for him to be released and to be back with them ministering to them in the flesh. They have sacrificed much. The community has even sent one of them to check on Paul. In doing so he has risked his life. Now, the future seems incredibly dire and yet the words Paul writes are that of joy. He is upbeat and stirs on his community to keep the faith and to move deeper into the mystery of Christ's care for us in our sufferings. Do not worry. Worry seems only to drain us of energy and power. Know that the Lord is near.

“Gaining Inner Strength Through God’s Grace” Hebrews 13:7-17
Monday, December 13, 2021 Roberta Briggs, Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Hebrews 13: 7-17

7 Remember your leaders who have spoken God’s word to you. Think about how their lives turned out, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. 10 We have an alter from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. 11 The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. 12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. 13 Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. 14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. 15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. 16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. 17 Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

There are many people who have come into my life and helped to lead me in God's Way. I don't remember either of my parents showing any of the five of us anything but their love for each other and for each of us. I was almost four when my Dad died, but I can remember them holding hands walking back and forth facing each other and talking. They did not yell at us or each other, but even that young I sensed something was wrong and finally figured out this is the way they argued! Hard to argue when you are holding hands and looking into each other's eyes especially when you love each other. What wonderful examples of God's love for each of us.

God Our Heavenly Father, loves each and everyone of us, We learn so much through "talking" things over with God. Making important decisions after talking with God, makes those decisions so much easier especially when we are not afraid of what others think of us when we "let go and let God take over our lives." When making decisions, and before we speak, if we ask ourselves the following questions, asking God to help us is much more simple. Is it something good? Is it something kind? Is it something helpful? What would Jesus have me say or do?

"Standing at the Gates of Hope"

Acts 28:23-31

Tuesday, December 14, 2021

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

My colleague Victoria Safford writes in "The Gates of Hope, Part One":

I have a friend who traffics in words. She is not a minister, but a psychiatrist in the health clinic at a prestigious women's college. We were sitting once not long after a student she had known, and counseled, committed suicide in the dormitory there. My friend, the doctor, the healer, held the loss very closely in those first few days, not unprofessionally, but deeply, fully — as you or I would have, had this been someone in our care.

At one point (with tears streaming down her face), she looked up in defiance (this is the only word for it) and spoke explicitly of her vocation, as if out of the ashes of that day she were renewing a vow or making a new covenant (and I think she was). She spoke explicitly of her vocation, and of yours and mine. She said, "You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do — what I am called to do — is to plant myself at the gates of Hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by. But I stand there every

day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward beautiful life and love...

There's something for all of us there, I think. Whatever our vocation, we stand, beckoning and calling, singing and shouting, planted at the gates of Hope. This world and our people are beautiful and broken, and we are called to raise that up — to bear witness to the possibility of living with the dignity, bravery, and gladness that befits a human being. That may be what it is to "live our mission."

As I read Acts 28:23-31 again, it is these words from Victoria Safford that come into my consciousness. In the passage from Acts we find Paul doing his best to compel people towards the deep truth as he has come to know and live it. Some are persuaded, others not. He even goes so far as to quote the prophet Isaiah in order to put a final exclamation on his teaching. Some were convinced. Others not.

What do we do with such experiences? Are we failing to live up to our calling if, out of the integrity of our own experience and wisdom, others are not persuaded to follow? I think not, nor does the author of Luke, or my colleague. This is a story of perseverance and commitment, not of control and winning.

I'm mindful here of the words I once penned to a friend who was feeling dejected for similar reasons. "What I know is that you can be a candle in the darkness but can not force people to follow the light and their choice does not diminish the brightness of your flame." May this be so with you as well.

"Recognition"

Luke 7:31-35

Wednesday, December 15, 2021

Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

Luke 7 – God's Word Translation

31 "How can I describe the people who are living now? What are they like? 32 They are like children who sit in the marketplace and shout to each other, 'We played music for you, but you didn't dance. We sang a funeral song, but you didn't cry.'

33 John the Baptizer has come neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'There's a demon in him!' 34 The Son of Man has come eating and drinking,

and you say, ‘Look at him! He’s a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

35 “Yet, wisdom is proved right by all its results.”

Pastors have a view from the chancel of everyone coming to worship. We keep an eye on people’s reactions to preaching so that we don’t put people to sleep; at least the attentive pastors do.

We also notice when people are just biding their time in worship, to get to the end and social time. This is what I think of when I hear the reference to childlike interactions from the gospel passage: people who appear “present” but are far-away.

If any of us aren’t present to the Word and movement of the Spirit amongst us each day, we don’t grow and mature so that we are engaged in positive ways with each other, society, creation and God.

Jesus’ words go on to identify immature responses to his cousin, John, and his ministry; non-spiritually engaged people seeing in them demonic or slovenly inspired action. In other words, when the world has control of people, then it’s more difficult for Wisdom to break through and be recognized as a positive influence.

Advent reminds us of the patient, determined Love “come down at Christmas” to help corral and reform our many-times errant human race towards the blessedness that life is intended to be.

May we recognize Wisdom and give thanks to its embodiment in the Incarnation for the sake of us all.

Hebrews 10: 10-18

10 We have been set apart as holy because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do by sacrificing his body once and for all. **11** Every day each priest performed his religious duty. He offered the same type of sacrifice again and again. Yet, these sacrifices could never take away sins. **12** However, this chief priest made one sacrifice for sins, and this sacrifice last forever. Now he holds the honored position—the one next to God the Father on the heavenly throne. **13** Since that time, he has been waiting for his enemies to be made his footstool. **14** With one sacrifice he accomplished the work of setting them apart for God forever. **15** The Holy Spirit tells us the same thing: **16** "This is the promise ("Covenant") that I will make to them after those days, says the Lord: "I will put my teachings in their hearts and write them in their minds!" **17** Then he adds, "I will no longer hold their sins and their disobedience against them." **18** When sins are forgiven, there is no longer any need to sacrifice for sins.

Jesus died sacrificing his human body that we may be made holy and worthy of Eternal Life as all our sins are forgiven. That does not mean we can keep making the same sins over and over again. God expects us to do our best to make a habit of working hard to put our trust in God. God has put his teachings in our hearts and minds so that we know right from wrong, that we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and minds, and our neighbor as ourselves. We are expected to take care of our neighbors. We are all God's children; therefore, sisters and brothers through Christ. We are charged with taking care of all the earth and it's wonderful resources.

Because we are human, not a single one of us is perfect. But God Loves each and everyone of us anyway. God also gives us choices to follow his commands or not. If we follow God's WAY, to the best of our ability, we are promised God's Forgiveness, Love, Grace, Peace, Hope, and Eternal life with all the Saints.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this Christmas, and every day, may we remember to take care of each other and all living creatures who inhabit this earth. We pray for those who have not yet come to know Jesus as God's son and our Redeemer. Amen!

“Don’t Ruffle Your Feathers”

Friday, December 17, 2021

Hebrews 10:32-39

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

“But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.” (Hebrews 10:39)

Have you ever been to the beach on a blustery day? One of the lasting visions I have of such experiences is watching a seagull standing at the water’s edge. It was a lasting lesson in perseverance for me. I watched as the wind howled and I tightened the hood of my sweatshirt as the gull carefully turned, face into the wind, wings tucked tightly to its sides and planted its feet firmly in the sand. Had it decided to face away from the wind, which was my inclination in the moment, it would not have survived the experience well. Had it made that choice its feathers would have been shredded in a matter of minutes and its ability to fly hampered greatly.

In the turbulent times of my life, I think about the lesson of the gull with its face to the wind. And I think too this is the lesson in Hebrews 10, to remind the faithful that turbulence is often the indication that we are in the midst of life in all its messiness. And, that we are there with a sense of purpose and meaning. We stand alone or with those others who must also plant themselves there. Our presence is demonstrative of our faith, our calling, and our willingness to stay the course for love and justice. These are holy places. And it would be well for us to give thanks for the opportunity to be there, where God put us.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”

Saturday, December 18, 2021

Luke 13:31-35

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

If you have been to the Holy Land and take the many tours of the surrounding area, most likely you have been to many spots in which you are given a panoramic view of the city of Jerusalem. It is an amazing experience to look over that old city as Jesus once did and to ponder everything that happened within and just outside of those walls.

These verses are often taken up in Lent. When we read “today and tomorrow, and on the third day” we think of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday as being part of the triduum of the Easter celebration, Jesus’ death and resurrection. But why here in Advent?

Even in the anticipation of an innocent child, we can never separate or understand Jesus apart from his mission.” Today and tomorrow, and the third day” emphasizes that every day of Jesus’ life led up to his liberating work through his death and resurrection. Christmas is about the birth of a child, but it must also be seen as the birth of a savior and liberator. Does the resurrection have room in your Advent thoughts and reflections?

“Giants of the Advent”

Luke 1:39-45

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Mary and Elizabeth. They are the giants of Advent observation.

Who am I (a man) to be commenting on this narrative? This is a private meeting of two women intimately employed in the story of God’s salvation of the world. In their meeting their bodies respond to one another, Elizabeth feels her child leap within her. Mary must have felt the same as the Christ child responds to the one who will lead the way and introduce him to his people.

I think of so much theology that is studied and written by men. Our understanding of the holy has been stunted from studies that have presented only a masculine reading of the story. Mary and Elizabeth’s take must have been so much deeper, so much informed by the intimate experience of birth and childrearing.

Use this text to open up a feminine perspective of the Advent story.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

- Colossians 1:15-20 (ESV)

Today’s Scripture passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians echoes the prologue of the Gospel of John, for Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, was in the beginning and by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth. He is the image of the invisible God. From the beginning, it was God’s purpose that all creation would be reconciled to Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Today is the eve of the winter solstice, the shortest and darkest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. And in just a few days we will celebrate the light that came into the world, breaking into the darkness; Christ the true light has overcome the darkness. Let us pause and reflect on the Word made flesh, who came to live among us, the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Being the firstborn of all creation, and the firstborn from the dead, and being first in everything, He is preeminent from the beginning and for all eternity. Let us then look to Christ, who came that we may have peace, having reconciled us to God. May we rest in that assurance that we are children of God through Christ. Blessed be His Holy name now and forever. Amen.

2 Blessed be the name of the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore!

3 From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the Lord is to be praised! - Psalm 113:2-3 (ESV)

“A Hope-Filled Life”

Genesis 30:1-24; Romans 8:18-30

Tuesday, December 21, 2021

Jackie Walsh, Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

The Genesis story for today’s Bible reading reminds me of one of my favorite novels by Anita Diamant, The Red Tent. It is a modern classic interpretation of the biblical story of Dinah, mentioned only once in the Bible in the book of Genesis. Dinah is overshadowed by her brothers-and their mothers, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilah-the 4 wives of Jacob. Dinah’s brief appearance in the Bible victimizes and forgets her.

Sadly, in today’s society there are also many who are victimized and then seemingly forgotten. Only parents and family keep the memory alive of a missing loved one...searching for closure. Individuals who have been wrongly convicted of a crime sit for years in prison... forgotten. Fortunately, today, with DNA testing and criminal justice reform, we are able to solve some of these cases and with justice reform we are able to prevent future injustice.

But we of faith also have hope! Romans 8 gives us the assurance of Christian hope. “For in this hope we were saved”. And for this we all say AMEN!

“What Can Be”

Luke 1:46-55

Wednesday, December 22, 2021

Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

Luke 1 – God’s Word Translation

⁶ Mary said,

“My soul praises the Lord’s greatness! ⁴⁷ My spirit finds its joy in God, my Savior,

⁴⁸ because [the Lord] has looked favorably on me, [a] humble servant. From now on, all people will call me blessed

⁴⁹ because the Almighty has done great things to me, [whose] name is holy.

⁵⁰ For those who [hold our Lord in awe], mercy lasts throughout every generation.

⁵¹ “[The Lord has] displayed mighty power, scattered those who think too highly of themselves ⁵² [and] pulled strong rulers from their thrones. [The Lord] honors humble people.

⁵³ [The Lord has] fed hungry people with good food [and] sent rich people away with nothing.

⁵⁴ [The Lord] remembered to help servant Israel forever.

⁵⁵ This is the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants."

I was taught to be humble, not to thrust myself upon the scene and grab attention. Rather, to freely share of who I am and if called upon to participate.

Kind of easy for me, as not every one wants a spot-light upon themselves that could highlight defects.

Mary did not go looking for attention. Rather the opposite, as we get a sense for her likely trying to "go with the flow" of family life in her village that meant being promised to the son of a family as bride at an early age since she her family had limited resources and the dowry for her was much needed.

In trying to follow the steps she thought were necessary, her life was interrupted, as life can be. Her trajectory was changed, as she bowed to God's intervention; gave herself over to the Holy, the Divine obviously in a better position to know what is best for any of us.

Yet we get mired in nostalgia for what "has been" to the detriment of what can or should be; to permit new-growth there must be trust.

Mary models trust in that which is bigger than any of us, in our Creator God who has demonstrated knowing what is best for any of us; the promise to remember each and provide for our spiritual feeding to be well, whole and complete.

So, we look to the humble place in which Incarnation emerged to freely share with us Grace and Mercy, and the example of the Virgin Mary in allowing God to be God for us!

"While We Were with Him"

Thursday, December 23, 2021

Peter 1:16-21

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

We are ever so close now, just a few more hours till the birth.

In reading Peter's letters, we are not getting the message third, fourth, or fifth hand. We are hearing it from one who was with Jesus and experienced the life of Christ as a friend and follower. Peter did not need to create his love, enthusiasm, and devotion to Jesus because he experienced it first-hand. The whole letter is peppered with eyewitness references. In our own passage, Peter references that

event on the Mount of Transfiguration when James and John were invited along with himself to witness Jesus' affirmation by God (You are my Son, the Beloved).

Now Peter writes at the close of his life. He anticipates his death to occur at any moment. How does the fact that one of the few eyewitnesses to Jesus' life is the true author of this letter? Does it change your reading of this passage? Do you hear it differently? Does it carry more weight? Does its instruction come with greater urgency?

We are Oh so close now, just a few more hours till the birth and arrival of Jesus. Get ready!

“In Those Days”

Luke 2:1-14

Friday, December 24, 2021

Aaron Payson, Unitarian Universalist Church of
Worcester

I have always wished I had my father’s penchant for languages. He was both a scholar of Greek and Hebrew. On Christmas eve every year he would begin the adult service with an “Ancient Reading” of the beginning of the Gospel of Luke in the original Biblical Greek.

1 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἔξηλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος
Αύγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην 2 αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ
πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου 3 καὶ ἐπορεύοντο
πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι ἔκαστος εἰς τὴν ἐαυτοῦ πόλιν 4 Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσὴφ
ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρὲθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ
ἥτις καλεῖται Βηθλεέμ διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ 5
ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ οὕσῃ ἐγκύῳ 6 Ἐγένετο
δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτὴν 7 καὶ
ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ
ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι

Though I didn’t understand a word of it, his voice, and the words gave the familiar verses a musical quality. And though I did not comprehend words, there was in the reading a deep sense of the familiar. Perhaps it was because I loved my father’s voice; perhaps it was that deep down in my genes, I had heard these words in another lifetime; or maybe it was the quiet reverence that came over

the sanctuary in this moment. Whatever it was, it was holy, and beautiful, and I miss the sound of my father's voice. Each year on Christmas eve, though I don't speak Greek, I return to this reading and share it the best I can and I listen for my father's voice in mine. Might we all have time to pause and listen for those words and stories and presence that gives us peace and joy on this Holy Night.

"Another Take on Santa"
Saturday, December 25, 2021

G.K. Chesterton
Merry Christmas!

"What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life until he fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way.

"As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good — far from it.

"And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me...What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea.

"Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void.

"Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dollars and crackers. Now, I thank him for stars and street faces, and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill."