

ADVENT REFLECTIONS



2018

December 2, 2018

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.*

Psalm 111:10

An old proverb says the wise are always learning from other's mistakes. It is of course easier said than done. Fear is a very powerful teacher. Teachers, organizations, superiors, sometimes parents, bullies and even governments use fear as power. However, as FDR said in his inaugural address, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". Fearing God is not the same kind of fear. The meaning of the word – many times repeated in the Scriptures – is more basic than terror. This fear is more the sense of reverence, respect, and awe. If you listen to God – you will learn how to avoid the mistakes others have made, and that is the beginning of your wisdom. How can you learn from God? You need to listen. Listen with your ears, have your eyes wide open, feel the presence of him with all your senses. You need to create a time and space for this especially at times of sorrow, despair, and search, but also times of joy and happiness; if possible every day. Advent is the right time for this to start. It is the time of expectation, hope, waiting for the miracle with awe, so Jesus will come and bring the good news of God to the people on earth and we can praise him eternally.

December 3, 2018

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

Matthew 20: 1-2

Are we not called to "love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our souls and with all our minds"? Each day as we work in the vineyard, the knowledge of God's love is all we need.

December 4, 2018

*Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
Do not punish me in your wrath.
Have pity on me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are racked.
My spirit shakes with terror,
How long, O Lord, how long?*

Psalm 6:1-3

All of us, at one time or another, feel as though we have reached a breaking point. We get angry at ourselves, at others, and very often at God. In this Psalm, David knows he has sinned and is overcome with mental anguish at what he has done. He knows God is listening to him and asks God to please heal him. By praying to God he enters into a direct relationship with Him. God is here with us always. Open up your heart to him and listen.

December 5, 2018

*But he looked at them and said,
“What then does this text mean:
‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?’”*

Luke 20:17

What precedes this verse is Jesus, addressing the people, using a parable about vineyard tenants who killed the son of the proprietor. The owner of the vineyard asks: ‘what have you done? ‘Do you not understand that you have removed the very link that perpetuates this vineyard?’ Jesus was alluding to himself as the heir, born to earthly life - who was to maintain the relationship between the owner (God), and the tenants (the people). Jesus goes on to chide the religious leaders for not recognizing that He was the Messiah, the cornerstone (head) of the church. In essence, Jesus, whose presence on earth was to be the sustainer between our Father in Heaven and the peoples of the earth was predicting his own forthcoming arrest, death and crucifixion. The use of this verse comes directly from Psalm 118:22. Jesus communicates that what appears unworthy will end up as the chief cornerstone.

December 6, 2018

*You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
You are my God, I will extol you.*

Psalm 118:28

It is easy to give thanks and give high praise to God when things are going well. Especially in these days when we see so much darkness around us, it is easy to fall into despair and worry. Perhaps in your life you are struggling with illness, financial difficulties, marital strife or any of the many things that cause deep distress. Remember: God is walking with you, a constant presence whether you feel God or not. So give thanks for God's steadfastness; praise God because God's faithfulness does not rely on how good you are but how good God is!

December 7, 2018

*I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Show me your marvelous loving kindness,
O Savior of those who seek refuge
at your right hand from those who rise up against them.
Keep me as the apple of the eye;
hide me under the shadow of your wings.*

Psalm 17:6-8

Tis the season to LISTEN:
God has surrounded us with wonders and care.
We've been too busy to notice.
Be still. Be quiet. Listen deeply.

December 8, 2018

And he said, "Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!,' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them."

Luke 21:8

Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for the time when He will be gone and they will be looking for His return. He is telling them to be discerning in deciding who they will follow. Jesus Himself was the model by which to judge those who seek leadership. Jesus claimed only to have come to do His Father's will. After a teaching or a miracle, it is often noted that people gave glory to God. Jesus came, not as a King of glory, which was certainly in His grasp, but as a servant, to show us that our role, too, is to serve.....to serve God and our fellow humans.

Ask yourself today: Who am I really serving in what I do? Do people praise God after having been with me?

December 9, 2018

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

Luke 7:33-35

How often do we assume we know what a person is like or judge them according to their outward appearance or even their behavior? Our trend watching and judging creates uncertainty in us. We lose our focus on Christ and reach for the wrong answers – we lose our connection to God.

Are fickleness and succumbing to peer mentality part of the human condition? I don't know for sure. I do know that we can safeguard against such behavior by being mindful of one another, paying attention, and not rushing to judgment. Children, in their innocence, take people at face value. They have a pure perception not yet tainted by trends or fickle judgments of others. They see through a clear lens.

December 10, 2018

*Show me your ways, O Lord
and teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you I wait all day long.*

Psalms 25:4-5

We hear such wonderful words and phrases during Advent – “Wait upon the LORD,” “Joy,” “Peace and Goodwill to all,” among them. I am so thankful for the reminder of “Hope” in this passage. “Hope” - a beautiful word that is mentioned many times in the Holy Bible. “Hope” – listed as one of the Spirit's most virtuous graces, along with Faith and Love. Indeed! Our hope is in God, our Savior!

December 11, 2018

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that the day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Luke 21:34-35

Remember who you love.
Remember what is sacred.
Remember that you will die, and that this day is a gift.
And then remember how you wish to live.

These are among the last words we hear at the end of each service Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, but I wonder how often they are lost in the happy hullabaloo of a Paper Bag sermon and the lip-smacking desire to see what's to eat at coffee hour...at least after the 10 o'clock service! Yet they are essential to understanding what these two short verses, lifted out of their larger context in Luke's gospel, mean. Standing alone they are kind of depressing, but what they mean is beautifully expressed in the words above. The words of scripture interpreted through this final Sunday blessing, are intended to shift remembering our mortality, the certainty that we will one day die, from a melancholy preoccupation into a faithful and ultimately life-giving discipline. Disciples of Christ are called to be ever-vigilant witnesses to the love and mercy of God. The truest and most effective way to become this kind of witness is to remember that each and every day may be our last, and we better be conscious...and conscientious about how we use it. The wonderful surprise is that, over time, this somewhat gruesome sounding task of remembering is transformed into the joyful and freeing habit of living each day to its fullest.

December 12, 2018

*Make me understand the way of your commandments,
that I may meditate on your marvelous works.
My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
Take from me the way of lying;
let me find grace through your law.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness
I have set your judgments before me.
I hold fast to your decrees;
O Lord, let me not be put to shame.
I will run the way of your commandments,
for you have set my heart at liberty.*

Psalm 119:27-32

Advent is a time of waiting. Waiting can be a time of anxiety: What will happen next? What will the future bring? Our fears can derail us from the path mentioned in this psalm. Waiting also can be wearying: frustration and worry are heavy burdens. The Psalmist in this passage is asking for a better understanding of God's will that we may remain faithful during times like this. What are we waiting for this Advent? How can we broaden our understanding of God's will that we may delight in God's will and walk in God's ways?

Holy One,

Guide us to meditate on your great deeds. Keep us focused on your will and commands that we may remain faithful to you during this period of anticipation. Help us to joyfully anticipate your coming on Christmas Day. In your name, we pray. Amen.

December 13, 2018

*Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper,
the one who succeeds in evil schemes.*

Psalm 37:7

BE STILL BEFORE THE LORD is the start of this verse. How hard is it for us to really “be still”... work, preparing dinner, household chores, caring for our family members, and other daily tasks squeeze out every inch of our day. Try, even if it is for just 10 minutes, to be still before the Lord. Give Him your day and your attention, what a perfect Christmas gift.

December 14, 2018

*Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said,
“Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that
from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the
kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread,
and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them,
saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in
remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup
after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you
is the new covenant in my blood.*

Luke 22:17-20

‘Tis the season – for mailboxes full of glossy catalogs, inboxes full of deals that can’t be missed and complete holiday overload in general. I admit to getting taken in by – and even enjoying – most of it. But in this passage I am reminded of the holiness of the mundane, the sustenance of a simple supper. A cup of wine, divided and shared. A loaf of bread, broken and shared. Thanks given for each. In the sharing of these most basic and holy gifts, enough to sustain us all.

December 15, 2018

*As the deer longs for the water brooks,
So longs my soul for you, O God.
My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God;
When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?*

Psalm 42:1-2

This Psalm speaks to me. Often, when I need to clear my head and talk to God I head to nature. For me, that is where I can hear the calm, still voice. Many of us have those places where we can calm the hamster wheel of thoughts in our heads. The challenge in today's world is finding the time in the chaos of everyday life. Maybe today we need to challenge ourselves to learn to see God in the everyday around us. We need to learn to see God in the things that both restore our soul and the things that frustrate us. Just as we are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves (whether we like them or not) perhaps we should try to find God in what would normally cause us stress. For example, maybe that slow driver in front of you is there to prevent you from being in an accident or getting a speeding ticket - you could try saying a prayer of thanks for them. Maybe that person at work who annoys you to no end is there to teach you patience and show you how incredible different personalities can be.

The Season of Advent is of waiting and patience. Perhaps this year we can all try to look for God not only in the beauty of the season but in the annoyances and frustrations around us and see how much calmer we can be.

December 16, 2018

*O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.
Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place,
that I might behold your power and your glory.
For your loving kindness is better than life itself;
my lips shall give you praise.
So will I bless you as long as I live
and lift up my hands in your Name.*

Psalm 63:1-4

This is a Psalm of David written when he was in the wilderness of Judah fleeing Absalom, his son and those who sought his life. He did not leave off his singing just because his son had betrayed him and he found himself uncomfortable in the wilderness. He was a king after all.

“There was no desert in his heart”

When we are in hard times or in sad places should we not mirror David and remember that God abides with us and bless his name. And like David sing his praises in prayer. Remember that Christ is with you on your life journey.

December 17, 2017

Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Luke 22:41-42

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus didn't have social anxiety. I can relate to a guy like this. When things get a little too intense, sometimes I just want to get away from everyone for a few minutes to re-center, to calm myself back down. How about you? As far as Jesus' life goes, this is one of the more intense moments. He knows that pretty

soon, he's going to be arrested and crucified. Everything is coming to a head. So, naturally, the Mount of Olives, his normal prayer spot, is where he wants to go. I have my favorite spots to retreat to, and I'm sure you do too. These moments of fear and anxiety in our lives are opportunities to find strength and hope. In Jesus' case, he is filled with fear, but an angel is sent to him--even to Jesus!--to strengthen him in his time of need. If even Jesus needs some gentle reinforcement here and there, why are we so afraid to need help, or to know we need to re-center?

Advent is a time of renewal, of hope, of things coming to fruition. Take today and the time forward to not run from what scares you, but pray more earnestly about where you need to be strengthened and filled with hope. You might find that a quick retreat and a re-centering might be all you need to find God in the midst of all this tumult.

December 18, 2018

*Your praise, like your Name, O God,
Reaches to the world's end;
Your right hand is full of justice.
Let Mount Zion be glad
and the cities of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments.
Psalm 48:9-10*

God's voice, God's name and God's work in my life have sometimes been inaudible, unheard, invisible, unseen. It's just when I wonder what's been happening, I see it. I hear it. God's work, God's name, God's praise, is everywhere.

I rejoice in it. I lift my voice in thanks. I lift my voice in praise. I hear the voices around me and am one among many. Rejoicing. In unison. In harmony. A chorus of thanks. A chorus of praise.

December 19, 2018

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'*

Mark 1:2-3

Mark begins his gospel with this concise and direct introduction of John the Baptist. We find John not in the temples nor in a position of political power but 'in the wilderness,' a word that conjures images of untamed nature and perhaps even invokes a sense of fear. Yet it is here that we find John calling for us to 'prepare the way of the Lord' and it is here that we meet Jesus and witness his baptism. The relationship between Jesus and John is one of beautiful humility as Jesus seeks out this man who "ate locusts and wild honey" to mark the beginning of his ministry through baptism. In turn, John acknowledges to his followers that "he baptizes [only] with water" while Jesus will "baptize with the Holy Spirit". Each has approached the other with love and respect, a symbol for the mutual relationship we are all invited to participate in with God and Christ. In this advent season may we celebrate that Jesus has shown how God will find us in our own wilderness and bring us into a relationship of

unlimited love. Like John we can “prepare the way” simply by knowing that God will meet us with respect and openness wherever we are.

December 20, 2018

*Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in him,
indeed, our heart rejoices in him,
for in his holy Name we put our trust.
Let your loving kindness, o Lord, be upon us,
as we have put our trust in you.*

Psalm 33:20-22

I don't always 'wait' very well. I am impatient on the way to somewhere. Waiting feels like passivity. I can get restless in the waiting. But wait.... maybe the waiting is a sign to listen carefully for God's voice and evidence of the divine movement in my life and the world around me. When you are at the end of a long line in the grocery store, when you are in a traffic jam, or you find yourself standing in that long, endless line to get on your plane, stop for a moment and ask, “Lord, what am I to learn right now, right here, in this waiting” and then pray - pray for patience, pray for the guy who cut you off in traffic, and for the mother with crying children. Re-focus - and God's steadfast love will surely be upon you.

December 21, 2018

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.
*Psalm 51:1- 4**

The Prophet Nathan revealed David's sin through storytelling. When David realized his own culpability before God, his eyes were opened. Nathan healed David of his spiritual blindness. These words, spoken from David, resonate with us when we regret our own failures before God. The Psalm speaks to our heartfelt desire to be made right with God, confessing our faults in honesty. Each of us has failed but we are forgiven with mercy and grace and given the chance to begin again - new life. What a gift.

December 22, 2018

*...as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Luke 3:4-6

I imagine a bulldozer barreling ahead - making roads straight, leveling hills and filling in valleys, smoothing the way. Does your life smooth the way for others? Do your actions help others see Jesus more clearly? Is the transforming power of God evident in you? How might you make the road toward Jesus more even in the midst of this up and down season of Advent?

December 23, 2018

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16

God loves the world.
God loves each of us.
God loves you.
When we trust the truth of those statements,
by God's great mercy,
We are free to love the world.
We are free to love each other.
We are free to love ourselves.

December 24, 2018

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.

John 3:31-35

Today is Christmas Eve. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done. Let it be. Find a few quiet moments to sit back and take a view of your life from the balcony. Sit above the fray of earthly concerns and remember that Christ our Savior is born; new life is given. New life is given to us each and every moment. Let us rejoice, give thanks for all circumstances we find ourselves - because new life is here - it may be messy and chaotic and confusing - but we live in and through Christ - that's where our hope lies. A blessed and holy Christmas season to you and yours. Amen.

A heartfelt thanks to all who wrote devotions:

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