



**"Awesome Deeds
We Did Not Expect"**



**Advent Devotional
2011**

Lighting the Advent Wreath

Psalm 150

On each of the four Sundays in Advent, we will light the candles of the Advent Wreath. The fifth candle will be lit on Christmas Eve. The wreath's form, a circle, stands for God's eternal love. The evergreen limbs which cover this unbroken ring represent life, and hope for new life. The candles stand for the Light of the World, which came to earth as Jesus Christ. The three purple or blue candles signify the royalty of Christ and the penitence of the Christian. The one rose candle is a reminder of the joy of knowing Christ. The central candle is called "The Christ Candle." It is white, to indicate Christ's purity. Each week, another candle is added to those being lit; the light grows, as a symbol of the ever-increasing light in lives committed to Christ.

The first week is often called "Prophecy." It stands for the long expectation, the long wait, for both the first and the second coming of Christ. We remember the prophets, including John the Baptist, who pointed the way to the Messiah, and we look forward to the future fulfillment of all God's promises. The theme is often about "Hope."

The second week is named for "Bethlehem," and reminds us that Jesus Christ was wholly human, descendant of the earthly King David. We remember Mary and Joseph who made a home for the Christ child, and nurtured him in love, creating a place of peace in which to grow. We too are challenged to make ready, to prepare a place of peace for others to be nurtured by God's grace, to work to make the whole world a place of peace. The theme is often "Peace."

The third week is set aside for "Angels," to remember that Jesus was also wholly divine, son of the Heavenly Holy One. We remember those who announce Christ's birth, and we are called to proclaim that good news in our lives and in our world. The theme is often about "Joy."

The fourth week is set aside for "Shepherds," (and sometimes wisemen) reminding us of those for whom Christ came to the world - those ordinary people, like you and me - whom Christ came to love and teach and touch and save. We remember the love of God fully expressed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - love incarnate. And we remember our call to follow this Jesus in service to the world, sharing Christ's love wherever we go. The theme is often about "Love."

The devotions in this booklet were written by members and friends with thoughts to share and inspire during this season. We are not strictly following a theme, but know that hope, love, joy and peace interact with one another during every week of the season. As you share our devotions and celebrate this season at Grace Covenant. May you come to know the Hope, Love, Joy and Peace of Christ. And may you be blessed as you share these gifts of God with others.

Kimby Young

Sunday, November 27, 2011

**Isaiah 64:1-9
Tearing Open Heaven**

The lectionary scripture from the prophets for the first Sunday in Advent is the passage listed above from Isaiah. When I first read the scripture in preparation for preaching that Sunday, the first line leapt out of the page at me. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Isn't that exactly what God has done in the birth and life of Jesus Christ? God has torn open heaven and come down to us. That is how much God loves us and wants to be with us – that God set aside that great divide that separates divinity from humanity, and God came to be with us in flesh and blood. That's what Advent and Christmas is all about. God's love for us – coming to be with us.

The prophet Isaiah was calling the people who were in exile, to remember all that God had done – "awesome deeds we did not expect," and to imagine what magnificent things God had yet to do. Isaiah urged the people to live into those dreams, to live expecting God to intervene for them, and trusting in the power and presence of God with them.

All these years later, don't we have even more reason than Isaiah to trust in this God and live into that hope? We have seen all that God has done and can do. We know that indeed God has answered the prophet's prayer by tearing open heaven and coming down to be with us. In Jesus Christ, God has permanently closed that gap between heaven and earth. God has come to walk among us, that we might know Christ's presence here and now where ever we may be.

So this Advent season – accept the challenge of the prophet Isaiah. Remember God's awesome deeds we did not expect, and imagine what magnificent things God has yet to do through and for you. The God who has torn open heaven to show us great love, will indeed do so much more than we can ever ask or imagine. Believe it and live into that hope.

Kimby Young

Monday, November 28, 2011

Matthew 1:18ff

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. . .” And what follows is simply beyond our imagination today! One has only to note the unfolding, increasingly seedy drama of the recent Penn State scandal involving a football coach and young children, to realize how this story from Matthew’s Gospel should also seem scandalous. . . and it’s been significantly doctored by Matthew and others by the time he writes it!

Mary would have been maybe 13 – a traditional age in those days for a young woman [child!] to be married off and begin a family. Joseph was a journeyman from Bethlehem [probably the one in Galilee!] – a roofer, stone mason, and rough carpenter – and in all likelihood met Mary as he did some carpentry work for her parents. Their attraction must have been immediate for they broke with custom and were intimate before their engagement and marriage were made public. Matthew’s pretty clear – they weren’t living together yet when it becomes apparent she is ‘great with child!’

Though on this side of the story we know the Church and faithful have interpreted this birth narrative to be divine, rumors in Nazareth would have been nasty! Children like Jesus were called “mamzer” – a term referring specifically to a child born of a prohibited sexual union. The fundamental issue was not sex before marriage, but union with the wrong person [someone from outside the community or with whom there was no agreed relationship]!

Sobering to think that on any theory of the birth of Jesus, He belonged to the caste of the “mamzer.” From the beginning of His life Jesus negotiated the challenging gulf between belonging to the people of God...and being an outsider in His own community!

All the insults He would have endured make it easy to see why Jesus came to see God as His father...Abba in Aramaic. If Joseph’s fatherhood was in doubt, God’s was not! Jesus came from a tradition of seeing God’s immanence everywhere, in ways as simple and powerful as a mustard seed and yeast. As a rabbi, Jesus took the leap of seeing God’s kingdom in how we relate to each other....

As we re-read Matthew and Luke again this Advent, as we view the news on our TVs, how will we tie them together? How will the one speak to the other? How will we live out Christ’s advent in our midst?

Ky Weekley

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

I Corinthians 1:3-9

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Every sermon that Rev. Groennert preached to the congregation at St. Paul’s United Church of Christ in Columbia, Illinois, began with these words from the Apostle Paul. Rev. Groennert confirmed me (after one **year** of two hour lessons on Saturdays and sermon summaries turned in **every** week—in case any of our confirmands are reading this) and he married Kevin and me almost thirty years ago. I felt at home at St. Paul’s.

Twenty-nine years to the day after Kevin and I were married, our daughter Katie married Brandon Hearn here at Grace Covenant. We joined this church when Katie was two years old. It’s an understatement to say we feel at home here. We are among family here—as was evident the day of The Wedding. Lara Schesser was the wedding coordinator—and many years before had helped Katie through a troublesome night at Heartland camp. Molly McPheter did Katie’s hair and makeup, and Trey Bures was an usher while his parents video-taped the service. Donna Heer played violin, Darryl Prater played the trumpet and Emily Monrad, one of Katie’s former babysitting charges, shared her amazing vocal talents. And then there were the many, many friends who listened to both of us obsess about wedding details, celebrated the day with us and one truly brave friend who managed to get me to wear makeup!

So, just as Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, I give thanks to God for you, our church family that has nurtured and supported us. Paul goes on to list the ways in which the Corinth church is using their spiritual gifts as they wait for the revelation of God’s kingdom. He reminds them that God is faithful and that they have been called into fellowship by Jesus. His reminder gives the young church reason to hope and a reason to continue in their support of one another.

Just like the church at Corinth, our church family is blessed with many spiritual gifts. And, like the early Christians, we are charged with remembering that God is faithful and has a plan for our future, one that requires us to use our spiritual gifts to support each other as well as reaching out to others.

Cheryl Johnson

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

“Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” Colossians 3:15

Peace

Lord, in anticipation of your Coming, may we continue in our efforts to be a force for Peace, for the Son of Peace. May our efforts focus upon those honorable ways, in which we may seek peace.

Justice

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart” Zechariah 7:9-10,(ESV).

Lord, help us in our efforts to seek Justice for all of God’s Creatures, and in a way which will be favorable in your eyes.

The Environment

“You shall not pollute the land in which you live...you shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites.
Numbers 5:33-34.

It is our Prayer that we may continue to strive for Peace, Justice and care of the environment of “This Fragile Earth, Our Island Home.” Help us to remain mindful that this involves a wide variety of activities and efforts through our Blessed Church, Grace Covenant, and its steadfast members, and others in the Community with whom we have the opportunity to relate. Also, keep us mindful of the fact that Peace, Justice, and the Environment are inter-dependent, and impossible to obtain without being prayerfully mindful of that inter-relationship. May we strive to be Worthy of your Coming.

Respectfully and Prayerfully offered by C. J. Poirier, on behalf of the Grace Covenant Kairos Team.

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Isaiah 53
The Unexpected

God never really does do the "expected" thing. Just when you think you've got God all figured out – "Surprise!" something unexpected comes along. Choosing a wandering family of nomads like Abraham's family, instead of some royal family of kings; Selecting the youngest son – Jacob, Joseph, David – instead of the eldest born like the rest of the world; Children born to barren old women – Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth; Coming in "a still small voice" instead of the flash and power of fire and wind and earthquake; Freeing the captive; Healing the sick; Caring about the least of these, instead of only the rich and famous; And here again – the ultimate example in the birth of Jesus Christ.

The religious leaders expected a Messiah to rise in power – like the kings of old. They expected a political or military leader to gather the people and conquer the world. They expected an undeniable force and a reversal of fortune for the people of God. They expected a traditional king to lead them back to the age of glory in the world. But true to form, God did not do the expected thing. God came, not in power and might, but in vulnerability and frail humanity. God came in a baby born in a stable with no apparent wealth or worth. God came in humility to teach humility, to show the true power of love and grace, to turn our expectations upside down.

So what are your expectations? The people of Jesus' time expected something quite "other" than what God delivered. Perhaps their expectations of God were not quite high enough. Perhaps neither are ours. Just what do you expect of God? How do you expect God to transform your life and use your gifts? Don't be surprised if God can do much much more than you can ever imagine. Our invitation this season – let go of your expectations and be open to God's imagination. God can do even more "amazing deeds", even with and through you. Let God use you this season. Be surprised by God's magnificent grace alive in you.

Kimby Young

Friday, December 2, 2011

**“And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ” Isaiah 9:6**

One of my tasks over the years has been the evaluation of faculty. In higher education, faculty members update their curriculum vitae in preparation for the formal evaluation. A curriculum vitae is similar to a résumé except that the CV can be extensive as anything a faculty member might do is listed. The CV becomes an important documentation of an individual's contributions in research, teaching, and service.

A babe is about to be born. He will grow to become a model teacher and set the standard for service. However, his curriculum vitae can easily be reduced to one word: Savior. How different than those of us who need pages and pages to prove our worth. Prayer: Dear Lord, my Savior, we are nothing compared to you. Let us be your loving children. Amen.

Harold Frye

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Matthew 25:40

I was born into the House of Christmas. This may sound startling to those who don't know me well. My parents' name was Christmas and I was born into the house of George and Happy Christmas. Happy Thomas married George Christmas and became Happy Christmas!!

Living with "Christmas" every day, every month of the year, was phenomenal. As a child I was teased. As an adult having the name Christmas was a great joy! No one ever forgot my name. Even winning a college election was easy, for who would ever vote against Christmas?!

I love Christmas and the wonderful joy it brings to all. Our family always went overboard in celebrating Christmas. Christmas brings the greatest love in the world. Giving gifts, singing the wonderful old Carols, and always sharing with the poor were a normal part of my growing up. The sparkling lights, cards in the mail, snow, turkey dinners, and hanging stockings—all were events in that wonderful month of December. My most treasured memory is of the beautiful Christmas pageants at our church. But the greatest of all these was the unconditional love God gave to each of us on this special Christmas day.

God shows his love for us as we celebrate the birth of the beloved child. It has been a great blessing in my life to always be reminded of the truth, love and hope that has been given to us on Christmas. Joy and peace will last all year if you constantly remember that great day of Christmas and always keep it in your heart.

As the star guided the Shepherds and Wise Men, may it guide us through a whole year of Christmas every day. May Christmas always be with you as it has been with me.

Gail Christmas Harris

Sunday, December 4, 2011

**Comfort
Isaiah 40:1-11; 28-31**

I must admit - I love to be comfortable. From clothing, to conversation, to how I spend my time - I often choose comfort first. Now there's nothing "wrong" with that exactly, except if that comfort comes at the expense of something that might be better for me or for others. Maybe I don't "step out of my comfort zone" and take the risk as I should. Maybe I do the easier thing, rather than the thing that might be better though harder.

So I have to listen carefully to this passage. It appeals to me instantly. I want to be comforted. I want to comfort others and make them "feel better." And I find it reassuring that God does promise comfort to those who have been suffering, restoration to those who have lost.

This passage is written to the people of Israel in exile - homeless refugees, longing for return, who fear even worse will come. Here the words say, in effect, "It'll all be okay. God loves you and God will restore you." And the words ring out again to any who have experienced loss or suffering or pain or fear. The words say, "Comfort is for you. God's love is for you. God does have a plan. And God will give you what you need." The verses are full of reassurance and hope. Anyone longing for home will find it in God. A home, a place, a rest is prepared for you.

There is a second underlying message in these verses - beyond comfort, these words speak challenge. These words are a call to respond to God's love, to live God's love, and to be strengthened by these words in order to do God's will in the world. It's not about sitting quietly and letting comfort happen. There's a call to action in the verses that follow. God wants us to be active participants in the comfort that God brings to us and to the world. God wants us to make it happen. And God will give us what we need to know the assurance of God's love and to share that comfort with others.

The final verses of chapter forty of Isaiah are familiar words of hope and promise. They are also very active words - filled with the strength and power of God in which we are called to live. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." v.31. This season, may you hear these words of comfort and challenge, and live into these promises of God for yourself and all others.

Kimby Young

Monday, December 5, 2011

Psalm 100

It was a day off school in Blue Valley. Fewer moms are staying home, so my daughter was babysitting. I loaded us all up; me, Sam and his friend, Sara, and the two kids she was watching, and we headed for the Overland Park Arboretum. Believe it or not, the kids she was sitting had never been there before. We went on, for them, a long hike with no water. I'm pretty sure it was just more than 20 minutes. . . but 20 minutes without a juice box can be a long time to some. Mild whining commenced. As we crossed over a bridge and began to walk down a path I really like to take at the back of the arboretum, I put my arms out and stopped them. Everyone stood still.

"What are you looking at?" the third grade girl whispered. "This," I answered. It was an opening in the trees...a huge triangle 50 yards wide with a creek next to it where the trees had created walls surrounding us of green, yellow and orange and red. The wind was touching the leaves and the small ones were coming down right through the sunshine. No other sounds existed. No other people existed.

Right in front of us was one of "those" moments. We talk of experiencing God in nature, and here it was right in front of us. After a few moments of silence, I asked if they thought it was cool to experience what we'd just experienced. They admitted, yes, it was. Their mom, they said, doesn't really "like" nature. Maybe we were admiring nature. Maybe we were seeing something more. I've thought of that day many times since. I've seen perfect sunsets, and felt the wind on my face soaring down a tree-lined street on my bike.

Where do you sense God? And are you going there? Will you put your arms out and stop?

LeAnne Stowe

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

John 8:12

For many, 2011 has been a tough year!! And for some, it has tested their faith.

Continuing feelings of uncertainty, panic, fear, conflict, isolation, brokenness, illness, loss, unemployment, anxiety, rejection, doubt, and even despondency have been experienced. Darkness seems to have fallen over nearly everything in life, and despair is the result. We look for answers, but they elude us. Encouragement from those we love the most seems hollow and doesn't "make it better." The knot in our stomach just doesn't go away.

Those feelings and attitudes are especially hard to cope with at this time of Advent. Where is "the Christmas Spirit?" What is there to look forward to? Where does our faith come from?

To believers, Advent is the time in our church life when darkness is turned into light.

As we anticipate the celebration of the birth long, long ago, of a tiny baby...granted, a very special baby, come to save us...we look for comfort and solace from all the stresses of our worldly lives. His birth does not promise the absence of all the things that continually test our faith. But His birth does remind us that, when we believe, everlasting salvation can be ours.

Through our tears, His birth renews our Hope, and strengthens us to deal with whatever life throws at us. Then we know that God's love made flesh through the birth of Jesus Christ, has always been there for us, whatever our circumstances, and always will it be.

Gloria!

Gene Wilson

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Isaiah 43:1
The Gift

The gift of creation is a marvelous, awesome, sometimes incomprehensible thought. God created and God called all that was created good. How then can some say that God does not care about us – we are just left alone in the world to make our own way? Some say God is present but they don't feel the presence in their lives – or that God allows bad things to occur in the world, in our lives, that if God loves us wouldn't happen. I can't explain that, I only know that God came to us in a most identifying way. God came to us as an infant – a small child, a rebellious preteen (sneaking away from his parents to return to the temple), and God came to us in human form as a man. God came to dwell among us. This gift is mind blowing! (Not in the destroy sense, but in the mind expanding, heart expanding, faith expanding way that is so much love some cannot accept its awesomeness.)

God so loved the world, so loved us – before we were born, as we grow in spite of all our “sins” (yes, I said sins – the kind that keep us away from God) and God's love for us goes on and on until we are one with him.

Moses gave us the law, but Jesus came to show us the intent of the law. Jesus comes to show us how God loves us so much that it is hard for us to comprehend.

We are slow minded, stubborn people. God continues to seek us every moment of our earthly lives and on into eternity. God's love never ends.

“Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough to keep me (God) away from loving you.”

“I will seek you until I find you for you are mine,” said the Lord.

Prayer: You are so awesome God and I am but a speck in your creation. Come find me when I am lost and hold me tight when I am found. Amen.

Nancy Kalesz

Thursday, December 8, 2011

**John the Baptist
John 1:19-28**

I frequently have wondered if I met some of the people of the Bible, what would I think? What would they think? I'm pretty sure if John the Baptist walked up and introduced himself to me, I'd be frightened. He was a bit of a wild man. He was spirited, outspoken and had strong moral convictions which led John to extreme actions. He was a counter-cultural prophet for his times. And he had no hesitation about challenging people to more faithful living – even people of power and prestige, even people who thought of themselves as pretty good people. So I have occasionally wondered – what would John the Baptist say to me?

Every lectionary season of Advent – John the Baptist makes an appearance. So obviously those who chose the scriptures to highlight this season, believe that John's message is highly relevant for us today. His is a call to examine ourselves, our lives and our actions - to take seriously the opportunity God offers us for transformation and renewal. John foretells the coming of the Christ child, and in so doing challenges us all to "PREPARE!" Make ourselves and our lives ready for God's intimate presence with us. It's not that God has not been with us all along. Of course, God is always with us. It's that sometimes we seem to forget and we need to be reminded of God's presence with us and God's call to us. We need to be reminded to live lives in the presence of God, lives of promise and conviction, lives of justice and mercy, lives reflective of the one who has come to be with us in Emmanuel.

So, here, as this season rushes forward, pause and hear John the Baptist asking you to examine yourself. Pause and look within. Pause and make your heart ready to receive whatever gift God brings to you this day. By the grace of Jesus Christ.

Kimby Young

Friday, December 9, 2011

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” Luke 2:10

Advent: A Double-Decker Event

Sonya sat in her car, waiting behind the striped arm as a long, slow-moving train whistled and chugged. Her heart thumped, and she cried, realizing that the three stores from which she would have purchased her last five items for the family’s holiday meal were closing. She moaned, “This is chaos. Here I am at the last minute, without the possibility of achieving my goal.”

Each day, Sonya crammed twenty hours’ worth of activities into one day, and often became frustrated when she ran out of time. She thought her situation paralleled the chaotic world events—violence, poverty, hunger, disrupted family relationships, natural disasters, and world economic and military conflicts.

Suddenly, Sonya had an enlightened thought, and began to examine the slowly passing, double-stacked cars with a new vision. She recalled a train event in which Penn Central Railroad experienced the chaos of bankruptcy in 1970. After years of study, an appointed group examined ways to increase productivity, increase profits, and at the same time deliver products safely. In the 1980s, the double-decker train began running on the tracks.

Sonya planned to create her own double-decker plan, not only for use during Advent, but for use each day of the year, beginning as soon as the railroad arm lifted. On the bottom level, she would seek the comfort of God, and accept God’s unfailing love for her. Each day, she would take time for reflection about the day’s events, and especially remember God’s promise for a Savior who would bring great joy and make all things new.

On the top level, Sonya would add to her Christmas list gifts of prayer, love, mercy, compassion, patience, gentleness, listening, and understanding. She planned to share these gifts with others each day. She planned to reflect daily on the words of Kester Brewin in the book, *Other*: “...we must learn to take the clearing with us, to find that inner desert and take it out in search of the other. For it is in that pursuit that we will find fulfillment.”

Shirley Sampson

Saturday, December 10, 2011

John 1:22 & 23

²²Finally, they said, “Who are you then? We have to give an answer to the ones who sent us. Tell us who you are!” ²³John answered in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “I am only someone shouting in the desert, “Get the road ready for the Lord!” (SEEK FIND BIBLE: The Contemporary English Version)

A child is asked by Parents, what would you like for Christmas this year? The child hesitates and the Parents see perhaps a flash of distress in the child's eyes. The Parents don't understand that all the child wants is them. But the child will not give them the truth. The Parents are well able to give just about anything the child could want. And they are loving, kind Parents who do their best to make their children happy. But the opportunity is missed.

What is it we prepare when we are in preparation for Christmas? Of course we decorate our homes and invite friends and family and buy special gifts for the ones we love. We go to Bell & Choir rehearsals and drape the sanctuary and print special bulletins and plan exceptional worship services. We look forward to traditions we want to experience over and over again. Christmas Carols at midnight, “Merry Christmas”ing and glowing in the spirit that Christmas brings.

Busy-ness like this is a wonderful way to honor Christ and the love He brings into the world. Preparation for Christ's presence though is weighted with peculiar honorifics demanding that we risk a glance into our child's eyes. That we pause a moment noticing that flash of distress and stop the busy-ness to open the door (prepare the road) for the Love of Christ to enter and soothe and bless.

Kevin Johnson

Sunday, December 11, 2011

**The Word
John 1:1-18**

The first chapter of the gospel of John is a familiar and rich scripture passage. The first 18 verses consist of a poem with commentary commonly called "The Prologue." This prologue is a preview of the entire gospel - everything that is to come. It is also the lectionary reading for every year for Christmas Day. Verse 14 is "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." Oh, so much meaning packed into these few words. This is core to Christian theology - central to our faith. This verse says - all that is God, the essence of divinity was born in human form - in Jesus Christ. The God we worship and know in Jesus, loved us and all creation, and so wanted to be related to us, that this great and magnificent God, this Creator of all the world, this wisdom and power from before the beginning of time, this God was born in flesh and bone, blood and breath in human form.

This was an idea so foreign to the ancient mind. Divinity would not willingly make the sacrifice to be humanity. It was just unimaginable in that time. And yet the Word became flesh. We who are so accustomed to the verse miss its profound meaning.

Further the Word translated "dwelt among" reveals even more. For that phrase might better be translated "pitched a tent and lived among us." The former nomadic tribes would have understood the imagery of the tabernacle, the holy place where God dwells on earth, the center of worship and thus the center of life for the community. So this verse of scripture reminds us again of the full divinity of Christ in the temporary dwelling of Jesus' body. God came to live among humanity for a time - touching, teaching, sharing, loving.

That's what Christmas is all about. That's what our faith is all about; God came fully to be with humanity - God with us - out of love, in and through grace. It's a miracle. It's for every one of us. And for all the world. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thanks be to God.

Kimby Young

Monday, December 12, 2011

**“And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”
Luke 1: 39-45**

Leaping For Joy

Read the awesome and unexpected story of the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1: 5-23, 39-45, and 57-80.

Truthfully, there is no relationship as near or intimate as that of a mother and her unborn child. When I was expecting my baby, feeling him move within me was a precious experience. Elizabeth must have been overjoyed to feel the movement of her baby after so many years of waiting to conceive. She must have savored and memorized every movement. So, when she heard the voice the mother of Jesus, the leaping of the child within her must have been unforgettable.

As a Christian, I asked Jesus to live inside of my heart. That means that Jesus is in me. This is a very intimate relationship between Jesus and me. When I read the story of Elizabeth and her baby, I wonder if I am as sensitive to the movements of Jesus in me, as Elizabeth was to the movements of John. Does my heart leap for joy within me? Do I feel the movements of Jesus in my daily life? Do I savor and remember them?

A friend once asked me if I ever felt joy. At the time, I had to think about that question pretty hard. He suggested to me that as a Christian, joy was a choice. My redemption and state of being forgiven, gave me permission to find joy in each new day. He was right. I could find joy daily when I paid attention to the movements of Jesus in even the most simple and unexpected things of life.

Julie L. Powers

Tuesday, December 13, 2011
1 John 4:7-8

God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
God created and called all of creation good. God's love for us has no end.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
God loved the world so much that he sent his son to dwell among us. The son is the
light of the world perfect love.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
Jesus said he was about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to
the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
Jesus ate with the disenfranchised, healed the sick, invited a motley bunch of people to
follow him. He taught them how much God loves and cares for the world.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
Jesus spoke truth to power in ways that needed no explanation, telling the powerful
that they achieved their positions by putting down the poor, trodding on the weak, and
distorting the truth and justice to maintain their power.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
Jesus taught us to love God – and to love and care for one another in the way we
desire to be cared for. Jesus showed by example how much God cares for us by giving
us his son, Jesus, to die for us – because
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?
The world awaits – a child is born. God came and dwelled among us.
God is love
What about us,
Are we love?

Prayer: Everywhere I go the Lord is with me, If I call upon Him He will hear me.
Never will I fear for the Lord is near everywhere I go.

Nancy Kalesz

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Luke 2:1-7

I have started to get in the Christmas mood, so decided I would read the gospels. This time I would read them in The Message, and I would start with Luke, my favorite. Decided to start there for, sorry to say, I don't always (well probably very seldom!) stick with my good intentions!

I really liked what Petterson wrote in his introduction to Luke.

"Luke is the most vigorous champion of the outsider. An outsider himself, the only Gentile in an all-Jewish cast of New Testament writers, he shows how Jesus includes those who typically were treated as outsiders by the religious establishment of the day: women, common laborers (shepherders), the racially different (Samaritans), the poor. He will not countenance religion as a club.

As Luke tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?), now find the door wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus."

Now, isn't that what we the church are? Opening the door to all and saying, "Yes, come in. Worship, sing and pray with us-----JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME! LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING; LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM, AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING!"

Marilyn Graham

Thursday, December 15, 2011

**“And Jesus came and said to them, go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”
Matthew 28:17, 18**

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” Psalm 33:12

Today the theme “Christmas Around the World” is very popular. I can attest to that having celebrated six Advent/Christmas seasons from cold Alaska to hot Guam with Germany in between. My husband was a Presbyterian Air Force chaplain and I and our three sons treasure these experiences. Fortunately, all areas where we lived were Christian due to missionaries who had spread the Good News long ago. In Alaska we met Presbyterian Alice Green, today in her nineties. When young she travelled by dog sled to remote areas to spread the Good News. Today I also keep in touch with Christian workers in Guam, an island in the Pacific Ocean. When 120,000 Vietnamese refugees came to Guam in 1975, we learned many were Christian due to World Vision missionaries with them.

Our three years in Germany were the highlight. Here we learned of the Advent Wreath which is used so widely today in our churches and homes. Martin Luther brought the Christmas tree to the world. We visited German friends in their home and, yes, their tree had real candles burning on it!

So you see, Advent/Christmas is being celebrated the world over and it is due to Jesus giving the great commission in the verse listed above and faithful disciples following Him.

Prayer: God, thank you for our Advent journey. Come, Lord Jesus, and be a sign to all people and let the nations know of you. Amen.

Mary E. Johnson

Friday, December 16, 2011

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This scripture has at least three layers of meaning and inspiration. It was written by the prophet to a people in exile. Calling them to action as a nation – to rise up and become the people whom God had empowered them to be. Isaiah challenged the people, to be a nation of justice and mercy. The people of God were those who worked for God in the world, fighting injustice, caring for the poor, sharing their faith and introducing others to God by living as God would have them live.

Five hundred years later Jesus quoted this scripture from Isaiah to explain his mission and ministry on earth. Jesus rose to show that same light of justice and mercy to the world of his day. Jesus lived to proclaim liberty from sin and all that oppresses, to bring healing and good news to the poor and needy. Jesus fully lived the call of Isaiah to love and care for the least among us, and to challenge others to do the same. Every where Jesus walked he touched and comforted, fed and healed, laughed and loved, and showed us how to live fully in the presence and power of God. God's Spirit came to earth in flesh and blood in Jesus Christ – calling us to come to God where we belong.

Still two thousand years later, God's Spirit lives and moves among us – both individually and collectively as a called people of God. We are the ones who now serve in the world as God's hands and feet, God's comfort and healing, God's presence and wholeness – offered to all who will receive. We are the ones who must speak God's justice and offer Christ's freedom. We are those who are blessed and so share that blessing with every corner of the world. We too are anointed to share Christ's mission "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and to comfort all who mourn." Accept that challenge and be blessed. You are God's missionary servant today. Let us serve with joy.

Kimby Young

Saturday, December 17, 2011

Exodus 9:29

In Sunday school we meditated and talked about what God looks like to us. Some said he looks like fire or an old man. I was surprised that I was the only one that said "I think God looks like nature." In confirmation class we learned what birthday verses were and how to find them. This is one of the birthday verses that I found and it spoke to me. "Moses said to him, 'As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the lord; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lords.' " Exodus: 9:29 When I go on vacation to Utah or Colorado, my family always goes on beautiful hikes. Out where there are no people and no noise, I can feel God in my presence . I think that when God created the world, bright landscapes and beautiful rock formations is what he wanted us to see. When you are away from other people you can think without interruption and that is a very precious thing. Having a personal relationship with God is important, that is something that you have to do on your own. God made nature before he made people, he made it magnificent and for us to live in. This is why I see God in nature.

Sara Stowe Eskilson

Sunday, December 18, 2011

**“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Luke 1:47-55
Magnificat**

Mary’s song of praise is well known and often quoted this time of year. There are exquisite musical renditions of the response. We remember her strength and obedience as a young pregnant peasant girl, accepting God’s call for her, and promising to be a good mother to the Messiah - the Savior of the world. We think about what she might have been feeling, or experiencing. We wonder how she handled it. We hope that we could be so faithful.

The song itself is a fascinating piece of theology. It talks not only about the blessing of being chosen by God and the way a lowly servant has been lifted up. It also talks about “bringing down the powerful” and “scattering the proud.” It speaks of “filling the hungry” and “sending the rich away empty.” God has turned everything upside down. God will not do the expected thing. God will overturn the world, and change everyone’s understanding of what it means to be fortunate and blessed. Hmmm. For people like me who are very fortunate and blessed, who have a certain amount of power - in education and work, who may not be “rich” by American standards - but then again, by world standards - have more than enough. For people like me, like us - what does this “topsy-turvy” theology say?

I think it’s important that this song comes, not when Mary first hears about the pregnancy, but when Mary comes face to face (or belly to belly) with her relative Elizabeth who is also pregnant. Elizabeth was old and considered barren - for that day doubly cursed. The surprising reversal of her fortune - from cursed to blessed by the miracle of God - is mirrored in the reversal for Mary, and points forward to the promised reversal for all people, indeed, all the world. Can it be that God loves everyone, even all those who are lowly? Is it true that God will comfort all who are lost, bless all who have been cursed, restore all who have been forsaken? Is it possible that what seems like darkness is really light, what seems a burden is really a blessing, what seems impossible is truly possible with God? Indeed! “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

The song of Mary is an echo from one of the oldest songs of the scripture - the song of Hannah in I Samuel chapter 2. This song of another barren yet beloved wife, remembers God’s grace to all, even those who seem unimportant and forgotten. Mary echoes this ancient song, remembering all the ancient covenants and promises fulfilled by God, all the blessings of God’s grace down through the ages, and all the hopes and dreams yet to be honored and fulfilled by God in and thru her son Jesus. Oh the power of this song! Oh the grace of God! Oh the mystery of our faith! Thanks be to God.

Kimby Young

Monday, December 19, 2011

After reading all 17 Advent season Lectionary Scripture passages for the four weeks of Advent, I wondered whether I could connect dots into a relevant theme for my own understanding. Here is what I came up with:

WHAT WE THINK WE ARE: (Isaiah 64: 8&9) Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are your people.

WHAT WE SAY WE WANT: (Psalm 80:17-19) But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

WHAT GOD WANTS: (Isaiah 61: 8-11) For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, I will make an everlasting covenant with them...I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

WHAT GOD DIRECTS: (Isaiah 40: 1, 6&9) Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" Get you up to a high mountain...lift up your voice with strength,...lift it up, do not fear: say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God."

WHAT GOD PROVIDES: (1 Corinthians 1: 3&9) Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

CONCLUSION: (Romans 16:25-27) Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him----to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Keith Graham

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

“You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David, I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations””

Covenant

The Jewish tradition of the Chosen People has sustained them for centuries. No matter the persecutions that they faced, they have always believed that they were God’s Chosen Race. It has sustained them. That is why their traditions revolve around family and they are not compelled to proselytize. For Christians, the birth and sacrifice of Jesus changed all that. Our Covenant is the covenant that Jesus graced us with that all sins are forgiven in him. And if we believe in Him, eternal life awaits us. This Covenant is available to all who confess and believe and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This covenant is even more powerful than God’s covenant with the Jewish people because it promises everlasting life.

Advent reminds us of the gift of Eternal Life that awaits us. Although Jesus’ sacrifice for us is unwarranted and none of us truly feel worthy, I do believe that our side of the Covenant requires us to listen for God’s plan for our lives. I will never understand why bad things happen to innocent or good people, I do accept that God has a plan for each of us and will reveal that plan to us when we are listening.

So my prayer for you in the Advent season is that God’s plan for you will be revealed.

Micah 6:8 “and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

Dave Enslin

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Luke 1:26-38
Peace

While I was reading this passage I saw a study note for verse 34, "Mary did not ask in disbelief as Zechariah did." So, I looked back at Luke 1 to read about Zechariah's encounter with the angel of the Lord. Sure enough, after Gabriel tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard and his wife, Elizabeth will bear a son Zechariah's response is, "How can I be sure of this?" When the angel Gabriel told Mary her news, Mary simply asked, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" When given the answer she responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Here are two people who have received great news - but they process this news very differently. One questions the possibility and asks for a sign (study note 1:18). The other has a question but doesn't let that get in the way of embracing and accepting the news. For one there seems to be no inner peace, doubt and skepticism seem to have marred a full trust in God. For the other, there is an inner peace from a humble trust in God. We can have peace in our souls when we put our trust in God.

This scripture is from the lectionary for the fourth week of Advent, when we light the peace candle. Thinking of the very different responses of these two people to the angel's message, I see Mary with a heart of peace. She had peace because she was humble before God and completely trusted God which guided her thoughts and actions.

Zechariah was a priest. He and Elizabeth, his wife of many years, were from a priestly lineage that went back to Aaron, Moses' brother. "Both of them were upright in the sight of God." (Luke 1:6) "They were faithful and sincere in keeping God's commandments" (study note 1:4) Elizabeth was barren - "at that time generally considered to indicate divine disfavor and often brought social reproach." (study note Luke 1:25) So, Zechariah observed God's commandments and carried out his priestly duties faithfully but he had this "child-less" cloud hanging over him and Elizabeth. I don't think he had total peace of mind or trust in God because of his response to Gabriel's news about having a son "who would be great in the sight of God." (Luke 1:5) Gabriel reprimanded Zechariah for not believing his message from God and told Zechariah he would not be able to speak until after the birth of his son. Zechariah had 9 or so months of silence to learn to humbly trust God - to have trust in his heart. This peace is evident when Zechariah speaks at his son's circumcision ceremony. Zechariah praises God and filled with the Holy Spirit starts prophesying.

Mary had "peace like a river in her soul". Zechariah gained 'peace like a river in his soul' when he had long months of silence to learn to fully trust God. When we fully trust our lives to God we can have "peace like a river in our souls."

Dee Zak

Thursday, December 22, 2011

“But when God our Savior (Jesus) saved us, it was not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy. So, having been justified by His grace, we become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3: 4-7

Love

Boy! When I think about all of the “amazing deeds we did not expect” that can be found throughout the Old and New Testament Bible stories. To me none hits home quite so succinctly and powerfully as what is represented in this brief statement of faith. It was penned by the apostle Paul to his trusted friend and helper Titus, who was working with the early church on the island of Crete.

Reread the Bible passage. What *love* God must have for us! By our sinful nature, we know that we “fall short of the glory of God” and deserve His wrath, judgment and condemnation as defined through the Old Testament scriptures and prophets (the Law). But through the death and resurrection of Jesus, *and through no merits of our own*, God justifies the forgiveness of our sins and grants us the promise of eternal life! This is truly an “amazing deed” that reveals the depths of God’s grace, love and mercy for us over all else.

As we light and reflect on the 4th Advent candle – the “Love” candle – in our Advent wreaths this week, let us keep in mind this incredible act of love that God has done for us that we had no right to expect and certainly did not deserve. This love is recapped in another wonderful, well-known Bible verse: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16).

This is the story of salvation that comes through our faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us prepare ourselves this Advent Season for the coming of the Christ child from Nazareth. Shalom.

Joel Ilten

Friday, December 23, 2011

“O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.” Psalm 98: 1
Peace

I hope you're “singing” this Bible passage in your head, enjoying the wonderful melody as it bridges and crescendos over the word “marvelous”. It's one of my favorites, and the words and music have been running through my head all day.

If you're reading this entry in our Advent Book, then it's just about time for Christmas, and you've had the opportunity to read many of our members' stories and insights covering “amazing deeds we did not expect”, as well as their other thoughts and observations. As you reflect back on them, (go ahead, thumb back through the book), which ones touched you the most? Made you think, or laugh – or gave you new insights to your faith and your journey to Bethlehem to meet the Christ child?

We are all on a faith journey that – like the Advent wreath – has no real beginning or end. Our faith journeys are continuous, and are renewed and strengthened through the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit – the exact same Spirit that was with the patriarchs, prophets and apostles of our Biblical faith – those that did amazing deeds in the name of the Lord! And, like the candles of the Advent wreath, our faith journey is illuminated by the four tenets of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, as we have explored them anew this Advent Season.

Regarding Peace, we are all strengthened by the “Peace of God, *which surpasses all human understanding*, and keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). May His Peace be in abundance to you and your loved ones throughout this Advent and Christmas Season, and as you continue your individual, Spirit-lead faith journey through the months and years ahead.

In the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Shalom.

Joel Ilten

Saturday, December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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.

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

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When 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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sunday, December 25, 2011
Christmas Day

Matthew 1:18-2:1-12

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'* "

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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