

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT



REFLECTIONS ON THE GOSPELS OF ADVENT

2021

This past year and a half feels like we have been caught in a long, dark winter. It wasn't long ago that we were separated from one another at work, at home, in our shopping and dining out, in almost every aspect of life. We retreated, in fear of one another, to our square spaces and waited for the specter to pass. It has been a dark time. Weddings and funerals were postponed, and the cruelest act of all was to separate us in our sickness and our dying. Where is the light at the end of this darkness?

We have been brought to our knees by the in-fighting, the violence, economic fears, distrust of one another, world conflict, and a crisis of faith in systems. Like one caught in a blizzard, we search for a beacon of hope to guide us home. We need a light to show us the way.

This past February Texas experienced days of unprecedented snow storms, even by Midwestern standards. In white out conditions it can be difficult to determine what is up or down, right or left. The only thing you can do is look for the light. Fix your eyes on the light and you will find your way out of the darkness.

With hope we begin to emerge from our dim confines, blinking in the bright, warm sunshine. We reach out to embrace one another again, remembering and renewing the healing power of the human touch. The world and her inhabitants did not cease to exist, it all just slowed down a little bit, and that is not entirely a bad thing. During the time we felt in the dark, we realized some valuable lessons; we missed being with one another laughing, dancing, eating, shopping. We found out that being close to someone renews us, validates us, reminds us we are human, after all. We also discovered that it is OK to stay home with the kids and play games, bake cookies, put puzzles together, and read out loud with one another. Being on the go all the time can sap our energy and our patience. We also found out that we worry a lot, maybe too much. Research studies suggest that anxiety is the new exhaustion, and we are tired. We have run out of energy by running all the time.

The term 'Advent' means 'arrival.' In Latin, *advenio*, translates as 'to come to.' In this age of confusion and stress we need 'to come to' the light. A lighted path in the darkness is the only way we can see clearly. The light is our hope, our salvation, and our redemption. Jesus the Christ's arrival brings light to a weary world. His light reveals the hope of the world. The *advent* that began two thousand years ago in a stable, in the desert, to a dispossessed couple from Judea, has illuminated the darkness for all who believe.

Look for the light that is the hope of the world in Christ Jesus.

NOVEMBER 21, 2021

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS
CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN 18: 33b-37

*Pilate said to Jesus,
"Are you the King of the Jews?"
Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own
or have others told you about me?"
Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I?
Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me.
What have you done?"
Jesus answered, "+My kingdom does not belong to this world.
If my kingdom did belong to this world,
my attendants would be fighting
to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.
But as it is, my kingdom is not here."
So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?"
Jesus answered, "You say I am a king.
For this I was born and for this I came into the world,
to testify to the truth.
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

In this reading from the Gospel of John we might wonder who is interrogating whom? Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king and Jesus wants to know where or how Pilate came to the question. Finally, Jesus refers to his 'kingdom' and Pilate asserts, "Then you are a king?" If Jesus has a kingdom, he must be a king, but he gives a surprising answer. His 'kingdom' is not of this world; "my kingdom is not here." Pilate might have wondered silently, 'so, where is your kingdom and who are your subjects?'

In these troubled times, we might be wondering, too, 'where is your kingdom?' In the following verse (John 18: 38) Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Of all questions asked in all of the Bible, this one might be the most difficult to answer, yet Jesus seems to refer to the singular *truth* that he both testifies to, and that those who follow him will recognize.

What is truth? These days truth is relative depending on who you listen to and who you believe. Newspapers, television commentators, and social media sites all claim to have their own version of the truth. Truth changes over time. Consider the Middle Ages belief that the earth was flat, or the 15th century acceptance of 'evil spirits' that inhabited water. Some today even doubt the landing of a man on the moon, or the extent of the Holocaust. Truth can be manipulated. But the truth Jesus

was born to reveal and testify to is everlasting. It is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is a truth that defies easy explanation, and the fullness of that truth can only be heard by those who *listen* for the voice that leads them, Jesus.

Earlier in the Gospel of John Jesus proclaims, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus doesn’t say he *knows* the truth, he says he *IS* the embodiment of the truth. If this is a difficult concept to comprehend (and it certainly can be) then consider that Jesus is giving us a roadmap of sorts.

In this Advent season consider the truth you seek, the truth you trust, and the truth you follow. Does this truth lead you to a deeper relationship to the kingdom? Is your truth rooted in love? Love for your neighbor? Love for all those in the kingdom? Love for creation itself? Is your TRUTH of this world, or the one for which Jesus came to live among us and give his life for the truth he embodied?

Your hope is in the light of truth, and the truth is in Christ.

NOVEMBER 28, 2021

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 21: 25-28, 34-36

Jesus said to his disciples:

*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,
and on earth nations will be in dismay,
perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves.*

*People will die of fright
in anticipation of what is coming upon the world,
for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

*And then they will see the Son of Man
coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*

*But when these signs begin to happen,
stand erect and raise your heads
because your redemption is at hand.*

*“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy
from carousing and drunkenness
and the anxieties of daily life,
and that day catch you by surprise like a trap.*

*For that day will assault everyone
who lives on the face of the earth.*

*Be vigilant at all times
and pray that you have the strength
to escape the tribulations that are imminent
and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

Each age has had the feeling that ‘the end is near,’ and that ‘tribulations...are imminent.’ Each age has experienced fear and dread whether it be because of war, famine, disease, or natural disaster. What do you imagine kept those people living ages ago from losing hope? Life must have seemed terrifying. Looking at history there have been a steady succession of wars, followed by famine and disease. Life expectancy was rarely beyond 30 or 40 years of age. Life was chaotic. Death was random. Suffering was ever-present. Yet, they persisted. Some of the greatest inventions, works of art, and philosophical tenets came from a time in Europe when life was most challenging. Was their faith stronger than ours is today? Were the spiritual and theological questions they asked simpler?

It is hard to say. Certainly, their lives were not easier. Most people toiled from sun-to-sun whether in the fields, or in service to someone who had the power to control almost all aspects of their lives. Most could not read, and leisure time was all but

nonexistent. They had their ‘...anxieties of daily life.’ But, history shows, their faith remained strong. They had hope. They did not become ‘drowsy’ and so, remained ‘vigilant,’ and when the signs of distress appeared, as certainly they did, they knew their ‘redemption’ was at hand whether it be in their own time or in the age to come.

Do you know what you do to sustain your faith? When you are in distress, the kind that stretches you to the point that you wonder if you can continue, to what do you turn? Is it prayer? The comfort of someone who supports and comforts you? is it a deep and abiding trust that ‘redemption’ is at hand? And if you understand what keeps your faith alive and strong, how do you nurture or cultivate that faith?

In the verses omitted from this reading (Luke 29-33) Jesus uses the fig tree as a symbol encouraging people to be aware of the signs present in nature and in their lives. ‘Watch,’ he suggests. ‘Be aware,’ he advises. Make time in your day, or evening prayer to open your eyes, ears, and heart to the signs of His love, His action in your life, and the signs of the times. ‘Beware,’ He admonishes, for the signs will be apparent, and those who do not heed the signs will be left unprepared. Do not lose hope. Do not be afraid.

Each day there are subtle signs of answered prayer, of human compassion, and of God’s great love for us.

Once I came to the Lord in great distress and prayed for guidance. When the answer came quickly, I was surprised, even doubtful. I heard myself say to the Lord, “Why would you do this for me?” and the response that touched my heart was, “Because I love you.”

Our hope is in the light of His love.

NOVEMBER 29, 2021

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 8: 5-11

*When Jesus entered Capernaum,
a centurion approached him and appealed to him, saying,
“Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully.”
He said to him, “I will come and cure him.”*

*The centurion said in reply,
“Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof;
only say the word and my servant will be healed.*

*For I too am a man subject to authority,
with soldiers subject to me.*

*And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes;
and to another, ‘Come here,’ and he comes;
and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

*When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him,
“Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.*

*I say to you, many will come from the east and the west,
and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
at the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven.”*

How many times have we come to the Lord in prayer asking for healing, for deliverance, for guidance or escape from a terrible situation? Yet, how many of us have said our prayers with such faith as this centurion? It is as though the centurion said to himself, ‘I have given my prayer to this man and that is all I need do. I believe he will answer my need. Jesus is impressed by his faith.

The centurion’s military background taught him to seek out the person most qualified to assist him. You don’t go to someone of low rank to get advice on big decisions. You follow ‘the chain of command,’ and he knew that ingrained order well. In this circumstance, in a time of great distress the centurion knew to come to the One he had heard about. People must have been talking all over the province of the great deeds, even miracles that were occurring at the hands of this itinerant preacher, this carpenter from Galilee. It must have taken great faith, but also great courage to approach Jesus with his request. Surely Jesus and his followers were on the radar of the Roman military, as well as the Jewish Sanhedrin. So, what drew him to Jesus? What made him go against the ruling opinion and seek out Jesus as someone who could, and would heal his devoted servant?

What did the centurion recognize in Jesus that told him, ‘This is the man? This is the one who can help you?’ What do we recognize? What brings us to Him when we need to be heard? When we need an answer to our prayer? How do we know Him?

Do we recognize Him because that is what we have been told or taught? Or is it because we have gone to Him before and received an answer? Perhaps some are just hedging their bets and decide they have to believe in something or someone. Maybe it is because we know that we Know that we KNOW. I hope we recognize Him because of a personal encounter, and not necessarily because we have received the answer, we prayed for. I hope we know Him by faith and not by acts. I hope we know Him because, like the centurion, we have nowhere else to go. We have exhausted all our options. We have run out of answers on our own and Jesus is the only place that gives us hope, hope in something that we cannot always understand or know or describe, hope that there is something bigger and more magnificent than us and our little, puny dreams. The hope the Jesus gives is all consuming and all encompassing. And like many things in life, it must be sought out and experienced, nurtured and matured before fully understood. But when you see it, you know it. There is no mistake. When the centurion first encounters Jesus he has no idea where his request will take him. He hopes for the healing of his servant, but he is about to begin a long journey. His journey might be dangerous, perhaps frightening. But he is on the path and he cannot stray. He has been in the presence of the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and he will never be the same.

This is what happens to us when we approach the Christ and recognize Him. His authority is unmistakable. We acknowledge our unworthiness, but in the presence of One so magnificent we only have to say, 'Yes.'

Let us find the hope in the light of the One who listens to our needs.

NOVEMBER 30, 2021

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 4: 18-22

*As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers,
Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew,
casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen.*

He said to them,

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

At once they left their nets and followed him.

*He walked along from there and saw two other brothers,
James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.*

*They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets.
He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father
and followed him.*

The Gospel of John records that Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist and as Jesus was walking by Andrew heard John exclaim, “Look, the Lamb of God.” Later in John’s gospel Andrew tells his brother, Peter that ‘we have found the Messiah.’ Now in the Gospel of Matthew we find Peter and Andrew casting their nets into the sea as Jesus approaches. “Come after me,” Jesus invites, and they drop their nets and followed him. Just like that!

The Advent readings are filled with people, ordinary people of extraordinary faith. Mary believes and accepts. Elizabeth does likewise. The centurion acknowledges the authority of Jesus, and now Andrew and Peter are willing to leave their jobs, their families, their entire way of life for someone they have only heard about, someone they do not know. That same day, James and John do the same. Let’s assume, for we cannot be sure that none of these fishermen had heard Jesus preach. They had not witnessed any miracles or healings. Only Andrew had word on good advice that Jesus was ‘the Lamb of God.’ Why did these men follow him so immediately? And why did Jesus choose these men? They were fishermen, after all. They were not pillars of their society, leaders in their villages. Each had little money, and none had any education beyond that of a poor, rural, Jew living in a Roman dominated land. Why these men?

The only thing that Jesus says to them, according to this passage from Matthew, is that they will become ‘fishers of men.’ What does that even mean? But none of these first disciples asks ‘how’ or ‘why’ or ‘for how long?’ What kind of a job description is a ‘fisher of men?’

Have you ever felt like Jesus was calling you to something you didn’t understand? Have you ever wondered why you were called to do something that you

didn't want to do, or felt like you couldn't do? 'Who am I,' you might have said. Or 'Why me?'

No doubt in the days following their call from Jesus, the disciples might have asked themselves the same questions. But as they spent more time with Jesus and after witnessing his encounters with all sorts of people in need, their trust, respect and love for him grew. They began to understand who He was, and why they were with him. Their journey throughout Judea became a calling, a mission, one they could not deny. We know from scripture there were hardships, fear, betrayal, infighting, and jealousy. There also was amazement, wonder, astonishment, and divine reckoning, especially on Peter's part.

Haven't we 'modern day' disciples (apostles) experienced this, too? Hardships? Yes. Fear? Most certainly. Wonder? Of course. We heard a call, and whether we followed immediately, or with some reservation, or like Andrew, with excitement and zeal, we have heard the call. It is an age-old invitation. Abraham, Moses, all the Old Testament prophets, Mary and Joseph, all heard a voice calling them to be 'fishers of men.' Many followed. Some remained at home, still in awe at what they had seen and heard, but sharing the 'good news' and professing that they, too had seen the 'Lamb of God,' and 'found the Messiah.'

Find hope in your call and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd.

DECEMBER 1, 2021

WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 15: 29-37

At that time:

*Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee,
went up on the mountain, and sat down there.*

*Great crowds came to him,
having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute,
and many others.*

*They placed them at his feet, and he cured them.
The crowds were amazed when they saw the mute speaking,
the deformed made whole,
the lame walking,
and the blind able to see,
and they glorified the God of Israel.*

*Jesus summoned his disciples and said,
“My heart is moved with pity for the crowd,
for they have been with me now for three days
and have nothing to eat.*

*I do not want to send them away hungry,
for fear they may collapse on the way.”*

*The disciples said to him,
“Where could we ever get enough bread in this deserted place
to satisfy such a crowd?”*

Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?”

“Seven,” they replied, “and a few fish.”

He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground.

*Then he took the seven loaves and the fish,
gave thanks, broke the loaves,
and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.*

They all ate and were satisfied.

They picked up the fragments left over—seven baskets full.

They were satisfied. They were satisfied with so little. Just some fish and bread, but they were satisfied beyond their infirmities, their exhaustion, their disabilities. They were made whole from a bit of food, a blessing, compassion, and Jesus.

What more do we need? What more can we give than food to share, a blessing of peace, compassion and humanity, and Jesus? This is communion. This is the

everyday eucharist. The people gathered that day, on that mountain by the Sea of Galilee were us; they were tired and crippled (in mind, body or spirit), they were blind (in mind, body or spirit), and deformed (in mind, body, or spirit). They were 'mute,' and had not found their voice. They were lame and could not navigate the journey of life. Does that sound like you, or someone you know?

This encounter with Jesus and the loaves and fishes is a metaphor for our lives. We come in need, all kinds of need. We are tired and even lonely. We don't know what we need and we don't know where to find it. So, we climb up a mountain, sit down because we are too exhausted to go on and we wait. We wait for someone to come and bless us, give us hope, show us the way, cure our infirmities. Matthew describes the people being 'placed at his feet,' and being made whole. And the people were amazed. Did they come to him one by one, kneeling before him, crawling their way to him, on the shoulders of a family member? We do not know. Mostly we are told that Jesus cured them and had pity for them. He was moved by *them* and he understood the depth of their hardship.

Life can be hard, and messy and tragic and disappointing and unfair. Jesus understood this. Earlier in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 11: 28-30) Jesus says, 'come to me, you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' This crowd by the sea needed rest. Their burdens were heavy.

What mountain do you climb to find the comfort of Jesus? Is it a journey you ascend each day, or is it a sometimes climb? Do you feel sometimes you may never reach the top and find your comfort, or are you always sure Jesus is there, waiting for you with a morsel of food to get you going, a blessing of grace, and his strong hand? You are not alone. At one time or another, for whatever reason; a divorce, a bad diagnosis, a job loss, a wayward child, a struggle in someone you love, a loss of faith, we come to the mountain in search of Him and His simple gifts of hope.

Find your hope in the Light of Christ.

DECEMBER 2, 2021

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 7: 21, 24-27

Jesus said to his disciples:

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’
will enter the Kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

*“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them
will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.*

*The rain fell, the floods came,
and the winds blew and buffeted the house.*

But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock.

*And everyone who listens to these words of mine
but does not act on them*

will be like a fool who built his house on sand.

*The rain fell, the floods came,
and the winds blew and buffeted the house.*

And it collapsed and was completely ruined.”

Last February many throughout the American South, and especially in Texas experienced one of the worst winter events in decades, shattering records, leaving thousands without power or water, and causing the deaths of more than 200 people in Texas. Many were completely unprepared for the winter blast and so, were forced to go to shelters, use their cars as a heat source, or find warmth by the fireplace, if they were lucky enough to have one. Roads were closed. Businesses could not open. In one day, life returned to a nineteenth century way of life.

Like many, I had no power, no water, no heat, and no phone service. To complicate matters, I live on a small farm with livestock and pets who couldn't survive on their own. So, each day I made a fire in the fireplace to try to get the house to 60 degrees. Each night I let the fire go out to conserve firewood and the temperature in the house dipped to the low 40s. Foolishly, I hadn't purchased much ready-to-eat food. Instead, I imagined I would be making hearty soups and roast chicken for the cold snap that I was sure wouldn't last for more than a day or two. By day five I was eating dry cereal, running out of firewood, worried that the livestock had no liquid water to drink, and losing hope that I would survive.

Yet, each day unfolded into a story of grace, abundance, sharing, and miracles hidden in the everyday acts of kindness. My neighbors who live a few acres away brought me food each day; nuts, pretzels, string cheese, snack applesauce and pudding, whatever they had to share. And when I was sure I would run out of wood, I always seemed to find a few logs buried in the snow and forgotten along the fence that

bordered the pasture. The wood became my Hannukah miracle. In the 3rd century Jews only had enough oil to keep the menorah in the temple burning for one day but miraculously the flames remained for eight days. Each day I found enough wood to keep the fire going for six days. There was the shivering dove I found on my doorstep that I warmed in a towel-lined box overnight and released the next morning. Someone from my veterinarian's office brought me 15 gallons of water so my horses could finally drink, and a stranger who heard of my plight came to repair my water lines after the power was restored.

The snow and ice came. The frigid winds blew. The cupboard was bare but I did not collapse. During the unusually quiet days I had time to pray and meditate. This became the 'rock' of faith that strengthened me. The kindness of friends and neighbors sustained me. My 'house' withstood the storm. I emerged after nearly a week with renewed faith and deep gratitude for the people who reached out to help a neighbor. There are good people in the world. There are acts of kindness each day, and most go unrewarded, even unacknowledged. We need to build our lives on the strong foundation of faith, compassion, kindness, and lending a helping hand. If we do, we can weather any storm.

Let us find the light of hope in one another.

DECEMBER 3, 2021

FRIDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 9: 27-31

*As Jesus passed by, two blind men followed him, crying out,
“Son of David, have pity on us!”
When he entered the house,
the blind men approached him and Jesus said to them,
“Do you believe that I can do this?”
“Yes, Lord,” they said to him.
Then he touched their eyes and said,
“Let it be done for you according to your faith.”
And their eyes were opened.
Jesus warned them sternly,
“See that no one knows about this.”
But they went out and spread word of him through all that land.*

Has God ever done something for you that was so wondrous, so uplifting, that you wanted to run and shout to everyone of the great blessing? Why not? Wouldn't you want to share the news of God's grace?

But with Jesus, and consequently with us, timing is everything. Jesus refrains from spreading the news of his miracles at this point in his ministry perhaps because he knows the news certainly would restrict his moments within Galilee. He was at risk of becoming known as a side-show, one who does healings and even raises the dead as a trick, or magic. The news of his great works was not a secret, but Jesus wanted the emphasis to be on His word, rather than the numerous healing wonders. He wanted the people to know him as the Good Shepherd as well as the healer, the Son of the Living God, and not someone who could fix things in the short term. Jesus brought the gift of eternal life. He *was* the Word of God. He understood that the time to reveal these things was not at hand. He asked for patience, but those who were healed could not contain their joy. In almost each case, they 'went out and spread the word.'

What does this say to us today? Should we keep our gratitude to God private? Perhaps Jesus is asking us to be prudent, to be wise in sharing an answer to prayer; a sudden and miraculous healing, a restored relationship, a job offered, some solution to a problem found. Be wise in the ways and to whom you share your news. Know that some may doubt your account. Some may be jealous and spread the story as gossip. Be sensible in the time and who you confide in, trusting that they will see this occurrence as a sign of God's grace, and a testament of your faith.

This reminds me of a time when I was a child and someone told me of a surprise birthday party they were planning for an older friend of mine. I was so excited. This

was to be my first surprise party and I could not contain my eagerness. The next time I saw my friend, I teased her saying, “I know something about you. I know something that you don’t know.” Of course, at her urging I spilled the beans and when everyone knew the secret was out, I cried and hid under the bed. I was embarrassed and humiliated that I had ruined the secret surprise. But I was young and didn’t understand the consequences of my actions. Who can blame the blind men, the leper, or others who, like an excited child, wanted everyone to know their wholeness had been restored?

Let us find hope in the light of all that Jesus has to give, especially the gift of Himself.

DECEMBER 4, 2021
SATURDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 9: 35-10: 1, 5a, 6-8

*Jesus went around to all the towns and villages,
teaching in their synagogues,
proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom,
and curing every disease and illness.*

*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them
because they were troubled and abandoned,
like sheep without a shepherd.*

*Then he said to his disciples,
“The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few;
so ask the master of the harvest
to send out laborers for his harvest.”*

*Then he summoned his Twelve disciples
and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out
and to cure every disease and every illness.*

*Jesus sent out these Twelve after instructing them thus,
“Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’
Cure the sick, raise the dead,
cleanse lepers, drive out demons.*

Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.”

When Jesus calls Andrew and Peter, he tells them they will be fishers of men. In this reading Jesus tells all his disciples they will be ‘laborers for his harvest.’ In fact, we are all called to be laborers for the harvest of the Good News. We are the ‘lost sheep’ and the shepherd is here to tell us, “The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

A job description doesn’t necessarily give details regarding the actual labor required. There is always a subtext. A car salesman sells cars. A lawyer represents a client. A realtor markets a house. A parent raises a child. A teacher educates a student. But we all know there is much more to it than that.

The car salesman, if he is a good one, is promoting safety, economic feasibility, and an honest description of the car’s features, that fit the needs of the individual customer. A realtor matches a physical house with a buyer’s desire for a home, a place of security and family dynamics. A parent’s job is all-encompassing; teaching, nurturing, role modeling, nursing, disciplining, and of course, loving. The Twelve

were called to do so much more than cure, raise, cleanse, and deliver. They spread the Good News, they brought hope to the hopeless, light to the darkness, even to the point of martyrdom.

During this Advent season consider your job, not the occupation you are contracted to do. Rather, what is your *job* in the Kingdom? Whether you package groceries, direct city traffic, man a lighthouse, or insert widgets in an assembly line, you have a role. You have a place in the Kingdom. You have a destiny. Some are called to heal the sick. Others are called to make the world a lovelier place with music or art or theatre. Some sweep the streets and clean our bathrooms. All. All are needed in the Kingdom of Heaven. Without cost we have received our gifts. Without cost or repayment, we must serve one another.

Find hope in your unique gift and share your light openly with others.

DECEMBER 5, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 3: 1- 6

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee,
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region
of Ituraea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,
the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.
John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,
as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:*

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.*

*Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.
The winding roads shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

The Christmas season is a time of preparation. We prepare for visitors, family and friends: we prepare for cooking and baking, often lavish meals that we serve only this one time a year, and we prepare our Christmas shopping list, toys, ugly ties and sweaters, the latest gadget, and for some, extravagant gifts of expensive jewelry, even cars or vacations. We are so very busy. We have so many important things to accomplish, and in such a short time.

But what if we took the time and effort to prepare in a different way? Do we have the courage to break our holiday routine and prepare our lives and hearts for the coming of the Lord?

John the Baptist heard the call. For him it was a voice ‘crying out in the desert.’ And it told him clearly that all things would be different, all things would be new. He prepared by sharing the call he heard in the desert. “Make straight.” “Prepare.”

So, I ask again, ‘how do you prepare for this holy season?’ What if you shared half of what you bake and consume with someone else? Even a stranger? What if you gave half (or even a tenth) of what you plan to buy to some needy organization, or to help someone you know in need? Is this too much to ask? Won’t the people you love be disappointed? What if you had no food to share, and no means to buy gifts? What could you give?

These questions are not to make you feel guilty. Of course, you bring happiness and love to others whenever you share a meal, give a wanted gift, or surprise someone with a long overdue visit. These are important ways of sharing God's love. These acts convey compassion, empathy, and commitment.

But consider the Advent season as a time of going deeper. A time when the hours of darkness take over the hours of light. All of nature responds to this call, going deeper, in preparation for the light, and for spring. Changes are happening deep within. And so it is with the human heart...if we give it a chance.

As you 'prepare the way of the Lord,' go deeper (in your prayer life), go into the darkness, not as a place of fear or loneliness, but rather as a place of quiet and solitude so that you may better hear the Lord's voice and see His path. Wait for the light! Wait in expectation and do all that you can to make a '*place*' in your life, in your heart, for Him to dwell.

Advent is not a time for 'hustle and bustle,' nor is it a time to rush and spend, though these distractions may well occupy much of our time and thoughts. Instead, *be patient* in traffic and with the long lines. *Be kind* to every stranger you meet. You never know what burden someone may be carrying. *Be grateful* for all that has been given to you and acknowledge the source of all good things. *Be open* to the needs of others, and to the still silent voice that speaks gently to you. It may well be the voice of God standing nearby. *Be hopeful*, for we have the promise of God's love, and there is much goodness in the world.

Find hope in the light of the season.

DECEMBER 6, 2021

MONDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 5: 17-26

*One day as Jesus was teaching,
Pharisees and teachers of the law,
who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem,
were sitting there,
and the power of the Lord was with him for healing.
And some men brought on a stretcher a man who was paralyzed;
they were trying to bring him in and set him in his presence.
But not finding a way to bring him in because of the crowd,
they went up on the roof
and lowered him on the stretcher through the tiles
into the middle in front of Jesus.
When Jesus saw their faith, he said,
“As for you, your sins are forgiven.”*

*Then the scribes and Pharisees began to ask themselves,
“Who is this who speaks blasphemies?
Who but God alone can forgive sins?”
Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them in reply,
“What are you thinking in your hearts?
Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’
or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?
But that you may know
that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—
he said to the one who was paralyzed,
“I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home.”*

*He stood up immediately before them,
picked up what he had been lying on,
and went home, glorifying God.
Then astonishment seized them all and they glorified God,
and, struck with awe, they said,
“We have seen incredible things today.”*

The resounding question in this reading is, “What are you thinking in your hearts?” This question should be printed on a huge banner and placed in the houses of Congress, in every classroom, courtroom, hospital, office building, and home for

all to see and contemplate several times a day! 'What are you thinking in your heart?' Are you thinking at all?

Most of us have a moral compass, whether we are hard-wired to know the difference in right and wrong, good and bad, or if we were taught the Golden Rule or Ten Commandments. We know. But there are times we fall into a 'relative' morality. I stole bread because my child was starving. I lied to protect someone who is innocent. I drove over the speed limit because my wife was in labor. This reasoning is quite different from the, 'I stole it because I didn't think I would get caught.' Or the 'I punched you in the face because I was mad at you.' What were you thinking in your heart? If everyone stopped for a moment and asked themselves that crucial question, the world might be a better and safer place. Which is easier? To say your sins are forgiven, or to heal the paralytic? Which is easier? For a company to lose profits for the sake of the safety of consumers? For politicians and governments to tell the truth or to upset the populace and lose an election? For prices to be hiked during a natural disaster or for victims be given a helping hand to get back on their feet? What are we thinking in our hearts? How forgiving are our hearts? Have we become hard-hearted?

Jesus demonstrates his authority, the compassion of his heart, and forgives sins AND sends the paralyzed man home on his own two feet. Can we do no less? Can we forgive the errors done to us and heal the wounds that afflict us? Can we heal the world by the truest part of our heart and then be astonished and glorify God, and say, 'I have seen incredible things today'? Jesus is our authority in heaven but he has given us the authority to change the world.

Let us find hope in the light of truth that lives in our hearts and share it with all the world.

DECEMBER 7, 2021

TUESDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 18: 12-14

Jesus said to his disciples:

“What is your opinion?

*If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray,
will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills
and go in search of the stray?*

*And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it
than over the ninety-nine that did not stray.*

*In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father
that one of these little ones be lost.”*

If you are a parent, was there ever a time when you lost one of your children? Perhaps your toddler strayed into the next aisle at the grocery store. Or your little one decided to play hide-and-seek in the clothing racks at the retail store and you couldn't find him. Remember your panic? The only one more frightened than you was your lost child. When you are a small child, you live in a world of giants and trying to look up over the heads of strangers to see a familiar face can be daunting. Getting lost was no fun.

We like to know where we are. We like to know that the map leads us to our destination. And above all, if we get lost, we want to know that someone will come to look for us.

Whether it is Nemo or ET desperate to find their way home, we all rejoice when they are safe and in the arms of those who love and miss them. In 1987 the world watched for three days as desperate firemen struggled to rescue Baby Jessica from an abandoned well in Texas. Thirty-three Chilean miners were finally brought to the surface after being trapped in a copper mine for sixty-nine days in 2010. Thanks to round-the-clock television coverage the world heaved an audible sigh when all were safe and in the arms of their loved ones. Not one was lost. Yet in those cases in which the outcome is not so successful we grieve the loss. During the aftermath of 9/11 when it became clear that there were so few survivors, the heartache was palatable. ‘...it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.’ If God knows each hair on our head, if He knows us before we are born, He certainly grieves with us at the loss of one of His ‘little ones.’

Take hope that you are precious in His sight.

DECEMBER 8, 2021

**SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE
CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN
MARY**

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 26-38

*The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.*

*And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

*Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.*

*He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his Kingdom there will be no end."*

*But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

*Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.*

*May it be done to me according to your word.”
Then the angel departed from her.*

Imagine Mary’s predicament. An angel comes to her, presumably in or near her home. He greets her, but she is described as troubled. Who wouldn’t be? Even a good Hebrew girl of the First Century might worry that the presence of an angel might not be good news. And so, the angel intuits Mary’s fear and says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary.” The angel probably again intuits Mary’s question, one that scripture does not mention, but in her innocent mind she, no doubt was wondering, ‘why me?’ Gabriel explains to her that she is favored, and that she will conceive a son who will rule over the house of Jacob forever. Gabriel has hardly even taken a breath in the excitement of his message before Mary interrupts him with her second, and most noted question, “How can this be?” In essence, Gabriel doesn’t give her the details, rather he explains that her child will be the ‘Son of God,’ and not only that, but her aged relative, Elizabeth will also bear a son. ‘OK,’ Mary accepts in faith. “I am the handmaid of the Lord,” and she willingly accepts the word. What a wonder! What a testament of faith!

Most of us when asked to do something that we don’t understand, or don’t really want to do, even if it is by someone we respect, admire, or trust would ask a few questions, or at least say, ‘wait a minute while I think this out.’ Most of us want an explanation, or an answer to, ‘what is in it for me.’ Mary, on the other hand surrenders to her faith. She gives in to the obedience to an authority she accepts and does not question.

Mary’s faith was not new. God’s favor rests on her because of her faith, and we have much to learn from her. Conceived without sin, Mary is part of the great plan to make the ‘pathways straight for the coming of the Lord.’ She is one of a long line of players in the Great Mystery that makes way for Jesus, the Christ to live among us and work through us.

How wondrous that God chose this simple girl to be the mother of Jesus! How fitting that she accepted the role of mother of Him, and as our spiritual mother. “May it be done to me according to your word.” She needs no further explanation, no further instructions. Her response is one of total trust and complete obedience. She says in so many words, ‘I need nothing more. I trust in *your word.*’

Let us find the faith and grace of Mary’s response to God’s call.

DECEMBER 9, 2021

THURSDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 11: 11-15

Jesus said to the crowds:

“Amen, I say to you,

among those born of women

*there has been none greater than John the Baptist;
yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

*From the days of John the Baptist until now,
the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence,
and the violent are taking it by force.*

All the prophets and the law prophesied up to the time of John.

*And if you are willing to accept it,
he is Elijah, the one who is to come.*

Whoever has ears ought to hear.”

John the Baptist came to announce the Good News. That was his mission and that was his gift. And even though Jesus proclaims that ‘...there has been none greater than John the Baptist,’ there have been many during Jesus’ lifetime and before, who also proclaimed the Good News. There were many prophets and others who determined to make the ‘path straight...and the mountains low.’

Abraham, Moses, and Joshua followed God’s Word and His law and led the Israelites into the land God promised them. In the New Testament there is a long list of those, who in their own way, prophesied God’s plan. But few were willing to announce so boldly that the Day of Judgement was at hand, or that ‘the Lamb of God’ was in our presence.

John had courage, even audacity. What an odd character he must have seemed, standing out by living in the desert, eating insects, and shunning that acceptable, if ordinary way of life. He made waves. He stood out. He rubbed the faces of the Roman hierarchy in the dirt of their own sin, and never held back. We can all take a lesson from his great fearlessness.

What are you fearless about? What would you proclaim on a mountain top? What would you be willing to risk for the sake of the gospel? In the face of ‘violence...’ and ‘...force’ what would you be willing to stand for? These days it sometimes feels like we are all cowards in some respects. These days standing for truth, justice, right, or honor feel like a price too high. There is the private truth pitted against the public truth, the one that is easy to sell. There is justice for me, and sometimes a different justice for you, especially if you are in the minority and are different. There is the right that benefits me and my group, but it often doesn’t extend to include what is right for everyone. There are those beliefs I honor, but so often I can’t find a way to honor what you believe in or respect. Where is John’s courage in all this?

In contemporary language we might say that John the Baptist spoke *truth to power*. In today's culture John might be the standard bearer for all sorts of radical or national groups. He was admirable. 'Whoever has ears ought to hear' John speaking the one truth, the one gospel. '...if you are willing to accept it...' John came to pave the way for the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and all that He proclaimed.

Let us find hope in the courage of John the Baptist so that it strengthens us in times of need.

DECEMBER 10, 2021

FRIDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 11: 16-19

Jesus said to the crowds:

“To what shall I compare this generation?

It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another,

*‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance,
we sang a dirge but you did not mourn.’*

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said,

‘He is possessed by a demon.’

The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said,

*‘Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard,
a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’*

But wisdom is vindicated by her works.”

Such a troubling message from Matthew. And, I fear, it is as true today as it was 2000 years ago. That is the message of Advent, isn't it? To see the truth and name it. To acknowledge the reality and live it. To witness the authenticity and follow it. But it isn't easy or widely popular.

Remember the *Sesame Street* character, Oscar the Grouch? He wasn't very appealing and according to his creators, he 'didn't like anyone or anything, except children.' And he was based on an actual human described as 'magnificently rude.' The children in today's gospel who sit in the marketplace and complain and grouse remind me of Oscar. Nothing pleases them. They can fault with everything and everyone. They are suspicious, offensive, nay-sayers. In modern psychological terms we might describe them as, 'passive aggressive,' and 'abusive.' I prefer to think of them as mere bullies. 'Look at you,' they chanted at John, 'you must be possessed to look and act as you do.' They did likewise to the Son of Man, sneering because he dared to eat with tax collectors and sinners. My grandmother would chide at them, "Look who is calling the kettle black!"

Jesus asks us to trust in *wisdom*. 'Don't be too harsh on these blind folk,' he might have wished, 'for they are lost.'

Do you know these individuals? Do you live or work among them? Do you ever wonder how they came to have such an attitude toward life? What made them like this? Perhaps they have lost all hope in goodness and sincerity. Maybe they never experienced it in their lives. Fr. Richard Rohr, head of the Center for Contemplative Action points out that some people have never been told (or shown) by anyone in their lives, that they are *beloved*. Can you imagine that? Or is that you? Was there ever someone in your life who expressed to you, in word or action that you were beloved? Beloved by God?

In her poem, CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE, Dorothy Law Nolte writes;

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.

If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.

If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence.

If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.

If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice.

If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.

If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself.

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.

Let us find hope in the message of the gospels to change attitudes and lives.

DECEMBER 11, 2021

SATURDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 17: 9a, 10-13

*As they were coming down from the mountain,
the disciples asked Jesus,
“Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”
He said in reply, “Elijah will indeed come and restore all things;
but I tell you that Elijah has already come,
and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased.
So also will the Son of Man suffer at their hands.”
Then the disciples understood
that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.*

Elijah, considered one of the greatest prophets by the Hebrews, suffered for his prophecy, lost hope while sitting exhausted under a broom tree, and called out to God, ‘I want to die.’ He, like many of the Old Testament prophets endured rejection, physical violence, starvation, isolation, rejection, and banishment. No wonder he lost hope. Ultimately, he died and was swept up into heaven by a whirlwind.

This was well known in Jesus’ time, and he even says in Luke 11: 49 that, ‘I will send the prophets...and some will be killed...persecuted.’ Bringing God’s word to the people has always been risky business.

As the disciples walked with Jesus that day, they understood that John the Baptist, like the prophets before him, had accepted the danger and paid the price. But they were still in the dark about Jesus. Was he a prophet? Could he be the Messiah? Just moments before they had seen Jesus standing in the presence of Moses and Elijah. Peter offers to build a tent for the three. Their minds must have been reeling. Events were speeding up and Jesus was alluding more and more to ‘His suffering.’

“But NO,” they might have said to one another. “Nothing bad can happen to Jesus. Certainly not to Jesus. Or us.”

It has been said that, ‘with great wisdom, comes great suffering.’ Suffering is a part of the human condition, and we all know suffering can come in different forms. The last week of Jesus’ life, what we refer to as Holy Week, the disciples bore distress, torment, anguish, and betrayal. Had they forgotten what Jesus foretold? Were they listening? Were they in denial? Even Peter professes he would NEVER deny Jesus. But he does. Three times.

“Elijah has already come,” Jesus says. But *they* did not recognize him. Jesus has already come. *Some* have not recognized him, or denied him. It can be remarkably easy to turn your back on goodness when it suits you. In a moment of weakness. In an instant of selfishness. When you are bullied or feel trapped. Haven’t we all regretted a word, an action, a moment of indifference? Our profession is: *We*

proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again. He is here now. He is present yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We don't have to wait.

Let us find hope in the present Christ.

DECEMBER 12, 2021

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 3: 10-18

The crowds asked John the Baptist,

“What should we do?”

He said to them in reply,

“Whoever has two cloaks

should share with the person who has none.

And whoever has food should do likewise.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him,

“Teacher, what should we do?”

He answered them,

“Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.”

Soldiers also asked him,

“And what is it that we should do?”

He told them,

“Do not practice extortion,

do not falsely accuse anyone,

and be satisfied with your wages.”

Now the people were filled with expectation,

and all were asking in their hearts

whether John might be the Christ.

John answered them all, saying,

“I am baptizing you with water,

but one mightier than I is coming.

I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor

and to gather the wheat into his barn,

but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Exhorting them in many other ways,

he preached good news to the people.

We can hardly imagine a world in which everything is shared; food, clothing, resources, income, possessions. It could be done, with great difficulty, but a world of equity could exist. John the Baptist called for it. Jesus proclaimed it. Could we make such a world in this time of the greatest disparity ever known? Could I share all those

‘things’ I have worked so hard for with others, some of whom I don’t even know? Could you?

I read a report recently that said that clutter produced anxiety in the owner. So much stuff. And so much stuff to manage. When asked, ‘What should we do?’ John answers, ‘Stop collecting more...’ But today we live in an age of more, new, newer. We are coerced to want the next model, the bigger version, the item that everybody else has, and to what end? More and more stuff.

Perhaps John is asking us the questions, ‘what do you need’, what is really important to you, or what can you let go of in order to share with someone else?’ “Be satisfied,” he says.

“Be satisfied,” because one mightier than me is coming. That is all that really matters to us. The rest is just stuff. Luke says that the ‘people were filled with expectation.’ Perhaps they who lived so long ago were just like us, wondering what was truly important, what was the truth? They, and we today, were and are filled with wonder, looking for the answer in our hearts. Is this the Christ? Is this our savior? Is this the answer we have been looking and waiting for all our lives? The answer is not in things and it isn’t in possessions, awards, titles, accomplishments, or wealth. Those things are fleeting and fickle. The ‘good news’ that John preached and encouraged them to believe is in Jesus, the Christ. He comes to baptize you in the Holy Spirit. He comes to fill your life with goodness and grace.

Find your hope in the Christ, the Beloved Son of the Most High.

DECEMBER 13, 2021

MONDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 21: 23-27

*When Jesus had come into the temple area,
the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him
as he was teaching and said,*

*“By what authority are you doing these things?
And who gave you this authority?”*

*Jesus said to them in reply,
“I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me,
then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things.*

Where was John’s baptism from?

Was it of heavenly or of human origin?”

*They discussed this among themselves and said,
“If we say ‘Of heavenly origin,’ he will say to us,
‘Then why did you not believe him?’*

*But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we fear the crowd,
for they all regard John as a prophet.”*

So they said to Jesus in reply, “We do not know.”

He himself said to them,

“Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

My mother used to have a saying that described what the chief priests and elders were doing to Jesus in this reading. ‘They are speaking out of both sides of their mouths,’ she would say, ‘And they cannot be trusted.’

They didn’t want to get pinned down with their words, or be judged one way or the other, so they claimed ignorance. Whatever happened to the other saying, ‘Your word is your vow?’ Jesus isn’t having any of their word games. Immediately after this exchange Jesus presents the priests and elders with the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21: 28). One son tells the truth, unwanted as it was, and the other son lies outright.

If we are truthful with ourselves (and others) we will admit that we, too, have spoken out of both sides of our mouths. Was it to keep the peace and not upset anyone? Was it to get out of doing something you really didn’t want to do in the first place? Or was it an outright, conscious lie? Accept it and don’t be too hard on yourself. We are all broken. What matters is that we repent, acknowledge our slippery way with words and work so that our transgression is not repeated.

It is like the child who was told not to eat the cupcake, but was found with crumbs on his face and all down his shirt. When confronted with 'Did you eat it?' he has two options. Lie and be found out by the evidence, or fess up, ask for forgiveness, and take the consequences. Telling the truth is always the best course of action. With parents and with God.

Let us find hope in the light of truth.

DECEMBER 14, 2021

TUESDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 21: 28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people:

“What is your opinion?

A man had two sons.

He came to the first and said,

‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’

The son said in reply, ‘I will not,’

but afterwards he changed his mind and went.

The man came to the other son and gave the same order.

He said in reply, ‘Yes, sir,’ but did not go.

Which of the two did his father’s will?”

They answered, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you,

tax collectors and prostitutes

are entering the Kingdom of God before you.

When John came to you in the way of righteousness,

you did not believe him;

but tax collectors and prostitutes did.

Yet even when you saw that,

you did not later change your minds and believe him.”

In the gospels of this third week of Advent Jesus doesn't pull any punches. He tells it like it is. He holds our feet to the fire, and those of the haughty, the so-called mighty, and the powerful.

Who is part of God's kingdom? Who are the worthy? It makes us uncomfortable when the question is asked another way. 'Would you rather be grouped with the tax collectors and prostitutes, or the rich and successful?'

First there is the son who says, 'No,' when asked by his father go to out and work. The second son, seemingly the respectful son, answers, 'OK.' Can't you imagine the first son sitting there in front of the TV with his I-phone in his hand, and a bowl of chips answering his father's request smugly, 'no, I don't want to.' And the second son, maybe with a book in his hand, looks up at his father and answers politely, 'Yes, sir.' Who seems like the good son to you?

In the meantime, the first son, let's call him Harold, has a change of heart. He tires of the videogame on his phone. He has watched that re-run of *Seinfeld* a hundred times, so he thinks better of his initial answer and decides to help his father out and work in the fields for the day. Stewart, the second son may have had good intentions to obey his father's request, but something more important comes up. Who knows what it is? Does it even matter? He reneges on his father's order.

It is easy to say, yes, but difficult to follow through. We find all kinds of reasons to change our minds, and all manner of ways to rationalize the reversal. A promise is a promise, until I don't have time, or something better comes along, or I decide there is nothing in it for me.

We profess our faith on Sunday, but the follow through challenges our weaknesses. This reminds me of one of the admonitions from my mother, "trust what people do, and not what they say." Actions speak louder than words. Don let your promises go empty.

Who is part of God's kingdom? Maybe those who look like the unlikeliest candidates. In Jesus' time it was the poor, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the desperate who followed him and believed in him. Herod and his wife never gave Jesus a chance. The high priests were suspicious of him, seeing him and his authority as a threat. Even Pilate, with all his earthly power couldn't see what was right in front of him. The blind, lame, dying, and sick, even the thief who was crucified beside him recognized him immediately.

Let us see the light of hope and follow Him in word and deed.

DECEMBER 15, 2021

WEDNESDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 7: 18b-23

At that time,

*John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask,
“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”*

When the men came to the Lord, they said,

“John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask,

‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?’”

*At that time Jesus cured many of their diseases, sufferings, and evil
spirits;*

he also granted sight to many who were blind.

And Jesus said to them in reply,

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:

the blind regain their sight,

the lame walk, lepers are cleansed,

*the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news
proclaimed to them.*

And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

Does it seem strange that John the Baptist would be asking the questions, “Are you the one who is to come...?” Why John of all people? John must have been told by his mother Elizabeth of Mary’s miraculous conception. After all, the unborn John ‘leapt in his mother’s womb’ at Mary’s visitation. Why should she ask, “...or should we look for another?” The question evokes sadness, desperation even.

But remember that John is in jail, and he is innocent of the crimes for which he is accused. Still, he must have been terrified. He knew the odds of him getting out alive were slim to none. He had faith, but he was human. So, he wonders out loud to two of his disciples, ‘did I get it wrong? Can I trust what I saw that day in the waters of the Jordan River?’

It is OK to have doubts. It is common to have last minute questions, especially when we are in despair. Jesus’ response is gentle and benevolent. He relays his compassion to John with the reassurance that he was not wrong. Jesus is who John thought he was all along. ‘Go and remind him of what you have seen, of all those who have been healed,’ he says. ‘It is OK. The Good News is and will be proclaimed,’ Jesus replies to the disciples. John will lose his life, but he will gain a place in the kingdom.

John the Baptist did not live to see the acts of the New Testament unfold. He wasn't allowed to see the story play out. Like Moses, he wasn't able to enter the 'promised land.' He could only imagine by faith.

We have seen it. We know the whole story. We have it recorded for us, chapter and verse. We were not with Him in His time on earth, but we *know* Him. In that way we are blessed.

During this Advent season consider your doubts. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed. John had doubts. Joseph the Carpenter had doubts. Everyone has doubts. Jesus understands. He is as empathetic with us as he was with John the Baptist.

Let us find hope in our fears and doubts, for we are not alone and Jesus gives us His hand.

DECEMBER 16, 2021

THURSDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 7: 24-30

*When the messengers of John the Baptist had left,
Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John.*

“What did you go out to the desert to see a reed swayed by the wind?

Then what did you go out to see?

Someone dressed in fine garments?

*Those who dress luxuriously and live sumptuously
are found in royal palaces.*

Then what did you go out to see?

A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom Scripture says:

Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
he will prepare your way before you.

I tell you,

among those born of women, no one is greater than John;
yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he.”

(All the people who listened, including the tax collectors,
who were baptized with the baptism of John,
acknowledged the righteousness of God;
but the Pharisees and scholars of the law,
who were not baptized by him,
rejected the plan of God for themselves.)

Jesus’ anger is palpable in this scene. He knows John is in prison and will die. And he knows who is responsible for John’s imprisonment. Jesus is sick at heart that his cousin, his predecessor is forced to suffer the indignities and pain of an unjust power system. His heart is breaking and you can hear it in his outpouring of grief and pity. ‘...what did you go out to see?’ His voice breaks. He asks the question again. Impassioned. Imploring. Then he explains. ‘No one is better than John.’ We will not see his like again.

Some turned their heads and hearts away. They did not understand Jesus’ words. Or did they, deciding to follow their own selfish needs? Some ‘rejected the plan...’

We have today, in our presence some of the same mind as the Pharisees and scholars of the law, who reject the truth of the gospels. Jesus says to beware of these ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing.’

We who live today have been given the benefit of insight into the gospels and the Good News. We have seen the acts of the disciples of old, and new ones come to fruition. Miracles are not limited to ancient times. God bestows gifts on many from every age. Scripture reminds us that some have the gift of healing, others of prophecy, and many others. Those who listen and answer their baptismal call 'acknowledge the righteousness of God...'

Let us live in the light of the Good News.

DECEMBER 17TH, 2021
FRIDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 1: 1-17

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,
the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

*Abraham became the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.
Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah,
whose mother was Tamar.*

*Perez became the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab.
Amminadab became the father of Nahshon,
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
Salmon the father of Boaz,
whose mother was Rahab.*

*Boaz became the father of Obed,
whose mother was Ruth.*

*Obed became the father of Jesse,
Jesse the father of David the king.*

*David became the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.
Solomon became the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
Abijah the father of Asaph.*

*Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat the father of Joram,
Joram the father of Uzziah.*

*Uzziah became the father of Jotham,
Jotham the father of Ahaz,
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah.*

*Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amos,
Amos the father of Josiah.*

*Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers
at the time of the Babylonian exile.*

*After the Babylonian exile,
Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel,
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel the father of Abiud.
Abiud became the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,
Azor the father of Zadok.
Zadok became the father of Achim,
Achim the father of Eliud,
Eliud the father of Eleazar.
Eleazar became the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary.
Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ.*

*Thus the total number of generations
from Abraham to David
is fourteen generations;
from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations;
from the Babylonian exile to the Christ,
fourteen generations.*

You might wonder why the Gospel of Matthew begins with a rather intricate genealogy of Jesus. For some readers this might be as exciting as watching someone's summer vacation video. So, why begin 'the greatest story ever told' with a long, long list of names, most of which we hardly even know?

The genealogy of Jesus offers several perspectives on his life and mission. We know, from the beginning, the real beginning that Jesus had a specific purpose in the history of salvation. Although Adam is not mentioned specifically, we can infer that 'in the beginning' Adam was the first, then Abraham, David, and Jesus. These are the most significant names in the biblical ancestry of the savior, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, Jesus, the Christ.

Jesus comes from a specific 'house,' just as some today come from a long line of doctors, craftsmen, designers, and so forth. If you and your family have been in the grocery business, for example, for generations people will naturally associate your name with that business. Sears & Roebuck. Johnson & Johnson. Fuller & Sons. Jesus and his ancestors were in the prophesy business, and the Kingdom of God Inc.

These names, however minor they may appear to us, are significant. This total of fourteen generations prove to us that Jesus came from a real family; one that had some misfits, some introverts, and probably some real characters. They represent a summary of the entire Bible.

If you have had a chance to sample your DNA for a genealogy search, you probably have been excited to learn that you have some royalty in your back ground. Perhaps there is a DAR connection, or a WWII hero. If you are like most of us, there is also someone who you mention in whispers because of a shady background or an account of a bank heist, or illicit affair. We all have that. Kings and paupers. Heroes and cowards. There are bits of DNA floating around in our veins that tell a wondrous story. A story of YOU.

Let us find joyful hope in the interconnectedness of our lives.

DECEMBER 18, 2021
SATURDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 1: 18-25

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived together,
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,
yet unwilling to expose her to shame,
decided to divorce her quietly.
Such was his intention when, behold,
the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
“Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit
that this child has been conceived in her.
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins.”
All this took place to fulfill
what the Lord had said through the prophet:
Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means “God is with us.”
When Joseph awoke,
he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him
and took his wife into his home.
He had no relations with her until she bore a son,
and he named him Jesus.*

This is the way it happened. We are given the exact details as though listening to an ancient broadcast. You can almost hear Walter Cronkite's trusted voice.

Joseph was an honorable man. He trusted the social order, but he trusted God more. His first instinct was to separate himself from Mary, but do everything he could to protect her reputation. He was honorable, and compassionate. It was common in Joseph's day to accept that God spoke to His people in dreams. When the angel spoke to him, assuring him the Holy Spirit was at work, he believed. He heard the Old Testament words read aloud in the synagogue, and the voice of the prophet, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' must have filled him with wonder.

Joseph doesn't hesitate. He did as the angel commanded. He took Mary into his home to care for her and do his part to fulfill the prophecy.

Their early life together was fraught with danger, insecurity, and threats of death. Together they supported one another throughout the trials; along the journey to Bethlehem, into Egypt, and finally, back in Joseph's homeland where they 'took up housekeeping' as a happy and blessed family. In many ways their story sounds so common, not unlike the marriages of immigrants, migrants, itinerant workers, or Depression-era couples in this country. On the outside nothing appeared unusual, except for that dream Joseph had. That dream he must have revisited often during the ensuing years. As he watched the young Jesus grow, first as a toddler, then as an adolescent struggling to learn his father's craft, and as a young man, he must have wondered to himself, or with Mary, 'is this the child the angel told me about? Is this Emmanuel? Can this child of ours be the one who will save his people?'

As he grew older, Joseph continued to trust the dream. He watched it unfold every day.

Almost every parent has a wish for their child's future; usually that they have a better life, have success, a family, and children of their own. These parental hopes are hard-wired into role of father and mother, but few are inspired by angelic prophecies and promises. Most parents have to trust by faith, believing the future will unfold for their child in the best way possible. But all parents have a task to insure the future as best they can. Joseph did his part.

What can we learn from Joseph, as a man and a parent? What can we hope to emulate? Patience. Faith. Steadfast love. Compassion. Spiritual knowledge. Honor.

Let us find hope and strength in the one God chose to be Mary's spouse, and Jesus' father.

DECEMBER 19, 2021

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 39-45

*Mary set out
and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,
"Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled."*

We understand from the gospels that Elizabeth was of advanced years. Not unlike Sarah generations before her, the idea of conceiving a child was not only a surprise, it was miraculous. Elizabeth never lost faith. She trusted in the Lord and she opened herself to the Holy Spirit. 'Look what the Lord can do,' she must have proclaimed, certain of her pregnancy. The Lord can do wondrous things.

Elizabeth perceives the Lord has accomplished even greater things in her relative, Mary. For Elizabeth, everything is a blessing. She has been blessed. Mary is blessed among women. The infant in her womb is blessed. She speaks through the ages to us with her words, 'Blessed are you who believed...' Elizabeth is sending a blessing to *us*. What an inspirational woman she must have been!

We who believe are blessed. We believe the Word of the Lord will be fulfilled. Indeed, it has been fulfilled.

Let us find our hope in the fulfillment of the great promise.

DECEMBER 20, 2021

MONDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 26-38

*In the sixth month,
the angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.*

*And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

*Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.*

*He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his Kingdom there will be no end."*

*But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

*Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."*

*Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.*

‘Nothing will be impossible for God.’ How many times have we heard that promise? How many times have we said it to ourselves in a moment of trial or distress? We don’t believe in a small God. We believe in a God who accomplishes great things; the creation of the universe, the Lord of land and sea, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. But we also must believe in a great God who can do small things. The God of small things ‘knows the hairs on our head,’ knows even the sparrow who falls, sees the rain fall on barren land, and brings music to our ears with the summer breeze. Sometimes we look for the miraculous acts in this God for which ‘nothing is impossible.’ We pray for instant healing, an end to war, the storm to cease, but we might take for granted the rose that blooms, the night bird that calls to his mate, the smile of a child. An answer to prayer can be subtle, often overlooked.

Mary shows us that when we gladly accept the will of the Lord all manner of wonderful things unfolds. She has found a good man in Joseph. She is favored of God. She will bear a son and he will shepherd his people. AND her relative, Elizabeth has found favor with God, as well. Count the blessings!

Our lives can be rich and full, as well, if we open ourselves to the goodness of the Lord. ‘What do you ask of me, Lord? What is your invitation to me today, Lord? How may I serve you and not my own will? How can I open myself to the grace You place before me?’

Let us find hope in the ordinary events and simple acts of God.

DECEMBER 21, 2021
TUESDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 39-45

*Mary set out in those days
and traveled to the hill country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice and said,
"Most blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.
Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the Lord
would be fulfilled."*

This fourth week of advent focuses almost exclusively on Mary. We are told each day of this week the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. The angel, the blessing, the pronouncement, the journey to Elizabeth, the acceptance of divine will. The central characters in this gospel; the angel, Joseph, Mary, and Elizabeth follow the will of God. They accept the authority of the One who sent them, without question. If any one of these four showed reluctance or weakness, the effect on the other three might have brought about a different ending to the story.

This demonstrates how dependent we are on the will and actions of those around us. What if Joseph did not believe his dream? Would he have disgraced Mary? What if Mary denied the angel, fearing she was too young or afraid to follow his instructions? What if Elizabeth had not been so welcoming? We can't imagine these outcomes. We have such faith in these people because God has such faith in them.

Think of the people who influence your life. Not everyone is a good influence. Who took your hand and led you on the path of your spiritual journey? Were they a good role model, or wise, or steadfast in their own faith? Did they listen to your questions without rebuke? Did they give you spiritual space so you could find your own way? If you had someone, or many who guided you, consider it a blessing. Let us see the light of hope in those who walk by faith before us.

DECEMBER 22, 2021
WEDNESDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF
ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 46-56

*Mary said: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior,
for he has looked upon his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever."*

*Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months
and then returned to her home.*

Mary proclaims the hope of the gospels for all who honor the Lord in this, the Magnificat. God has shown his mercy, his strength and compassion. The mighty are cast down and the lowly are lifted. Most of all He has remembered the promise He made generations ago. No wonder her soul proclaims 'the greatness of the Lord.'

This is a God on which you can depend. This is a God who follows through on His promise. Yet, even then people doubted God, or perhaps they doubted this or that event was OF God. Many living in the time of Jesus expected a Messiah with a sword in his hand, someone who would destroy the Romans and their harsh rule. They were disappointed in Jesus, and so doubted him.

It is like someone having a plan and then expecting God to 'fill in the gaps' making the plan come to fruition instead of accepting God's plan and working to satisfy His will. Are we like that sometimes? Do we often think we have the better idea? If only God would make it happen for us. If only God could see how marvelous

our idea is, if it works out. When we exercise in this kind of thinking we are like children not able to see the 'big picture.' We forget we are not the center of everything, and we are not in control of time. The famous phrase, 'it's not about you' clearly demonstrates that others have a part to play, as well, and like the domino effect, when one falls all, the others tumble in succession.

This is true in our everyday decisions and those of the most powerful businesses and governments. Everything affects everything. Seek the counsel of the Lord in all things. Trust in His watch over the 'big picture.'

Let us see the light of God's wisdom.

DECEMBER 23, 2021

THURSDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GODPEL OF LUKE 1: 57-66

*When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child
she gave birth to a son.*

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

*When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child,
they were going to call him Zechariah after his father,
but his mother said in reply,
“No. He will be called John.”*

But they answered her,

“There is no one among your relatives who has this name.”

So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.

*He asked for a tablet and wrote, “John is his name,”
and all were amazed.*

*Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed,
and he spoke blessing God.*

*Then fear came upon all their neighbors,
and all these matters were discussed
throughout the hill country of Judea.*

All who heard these things took them to heart, saying,

“What, then, will this child be?

For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.”

The neighbors were all a-buzz. Usually in ancient Hebrew households the father names the child. Poor Zachariah had recently been struck mute so he had to write out the name he intended for his son. Elizabeth stepped in and broke with tradition and announced his name would be John, not named after his father. All were amazed, and no doubt eager to share this tidbit of gossip around the village. Zechariah agreed. What else could he say, especially since he had no voice? Instantly, his voice returned and he praised God.

Zechariah proved wise to follow the will of God, and that of his wife, too! Sometimes we have to defer to the one closest in faith and knowledge. We know little of Zechariah from scripture. Was he an outspoken man prone to dominating the conversation? Probably not. But he loved his wife, acknowledged the blessing of a son from God, and knew when to keep his mouth closed. Don't get in the way of God's plan. Who cares what the neighbors will say? They will find something to talk

about anyway. Trust in the Lord (and your spouse). Be steadfast in your love of God.
Rejoice in all good things.

Let us find our hope in obedience to God's will.

DECEMBER 24, 2021

FRIDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 1: 67-79

Zechariah his father, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied, saying:

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;

for he has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty Savior,

born of the house of his servant David.

Through his prophets he promised of old

that he would save us from our enemies,

from the hands of all who hate us.

He promised to show mercy to our fathers

and to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

to set us free from the hand of our enemies,

free to worship him without fear,

holy and righteous in his sight

all the days of our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

to give his people knowledge of salvation

by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God

the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

When Zechariah finally found his voice, he had much to say. Filled with the Holy Spirit he blessed the Lord for his promise fulfilled. The dawn breaks and light shines on the earth. The light of God shines on all who are in darkness and even the darkness of death will be overcome. The light will ‘guide our feet into the way of peace.’ We have been saved by the light. Although John was not the light, he made way for the Light of Salvation.

Are there people in your life who have been a light for you, leading you out of the darkness? Have you been a light for someone? Perhaps you didn’t realize at the time that you were a beacon for someone lost in the blackness of despair. We don’t always take the time to tell someone they were a light for us. There is a song we used to sing at summer camp, ‘It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing; That’s how it is with God’s Love, once you’ve

experienced it, you spread the love to everyone. You want to pass it on.' That spark of light can change someone's life.

Let your light be a sign of hope for others.

DECEMBER 25, 2021

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS)
MASS AT DAWN

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 2: 15-20

*When the angels went away from them to heaven,
the shepherds said to one another,
“Let us go, then, to Bethlehem
to see this thing that has taken place,
which the Lord has made known to us.”
So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the infant lying in the manger.
When they saw this,
they made known the message
that had been told them about this child.
All who heard it were amazed
by what had been told them by the shepherds.
And Mary kept all these things,
reflecting on them in her heart.
Then the shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen,
just as it had been told to them.*

Did you ever find out about a party, after the fact, and wonder why you didn't get the message? It wasn't that you weren't invited. The message just never got through and you missed a really good time.

I wonder about those who didn't know what was about to happen in a stable near Bethlehem. Herod knew about it. The Magi heard the news. The shepherds in the nearby field saw the sign from the angel and after seeing the infant they shared the news and '...all were amazed.' Elizabeth anticipated the birth for many months. The people were weary and hungry for good news and most had no idea what had happened, that God had come to live among us. If there ever was a time for social media that was it. Get the word out! Go tell it on a mountain! Let everyone know that salvation has come! Ring the bells. Alleluia!

God's time is not our time. God is patient. God is in control of the message. The shepherds and villagers were Jesus' people, the poor, the low in status, the oppressed, the ordinary. God knew these people would believe the Heavenly Host, and the angels. Even the Magi trusted the sign of the star, and their dream. Herod, a symbol of all that Jesus came to change, believed for his own purpose, and for his

selfish devices. Mary reflected on all the events of the past months. For one so young, she had been through a lifetime of troubling, yet wondrous events. The account of the birth in Bethlehem spread slowly throughout the region, each one adding their own understanding to the story. All were amazed. All were in awe of the possibility, the prospect of what this could mean.

How do you spread the word of Jesus' birth? Do you glorify and praise God for this message? We send colorful cards with season's greetings, and newsletters with details of the past year, and a cheery "Merry Christmas" to the check-out lady at the grocery store. But how do we spread the word of Jesus's birth? How do we share the Good News to our friends and family, to strangers on the street, to our hundreds of Facebook friends? Glad tidings is not enough. We are called to follow the star to the Christ child, and upon seeing Him, be changed. We are called to go back to our ordinary, desperate, blessed lives in a different way, because we have *seen* Him. We are called to believe because it all happened '*just as it had been told.*' This is the greatest story ever told and it is a headliner.

Let us have hope in the light that is Jesus, born this day in Bethlehem.



JANUARY 2, 2022

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 2: 1-12

*When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
in the days of King Herod,
behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,
“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?*

*We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.”*

*When King Herod heard this,
he was greatly troubled,
and all Jerusalem with him.*

*Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people,
He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

*They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea,
for thus it has been written through the prophet:
And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”*

*Then Herod called the magi secretly
and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance.*

*He sent them to Bethlehem and said,
“Go and search diligently for the child.*

*When you have found him, bring me word,
that I too may go and do him homage.”*

After their audience with the king they set out.

*And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.*

*They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
and on entering the house*

they saw the child with Mary his mother.

They prostrated themselves and did him homage.

*Then they opened their treasures
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way.*

The Epiphany reading is one of the most profound in all of scripture, partly because its message is so clear. It speaks to us today as movingly as in days of old. The Magi ‘departed for their country by another way.’ They were so changed by what they witnessed they would never be the same. They changed their lives because of the Christ child. These three ‘wise men’ disobeyed Herod’s orders to disclose the location of the child. They could see through his promise to ‘pay homage.’ They followed the star and we are told they were overjoyed at seeing it. Seeing Mary and the infant, they recognized him and paid homage. They came, they saw, they were changed.

The Greek word, *metanoia* means ‘a healing, a transformative change of heart.’ The birth of Jesus brought a long-awaited fulfillment of God’s promise and so, the world was ‘healed.’

In what ways do we need to be healed? Can we be honest with ourselves and face our sins and short-comings? Are we courageous enough to allow for a ‘transformative change of heart?’ What do we need to let go of in order to be changed? Change can be scary, uncomfortable, challenging, even painful. At times it seems so much easier to go with the flow, to do things as we always have just because we have always done them that way before. Often, we resist change because we don’t know if things will be better. If we change will people recognize us? Accept us? Love us? These are questions to consider in the coming days, when all the wrappings have been discarded, the ill-fitting sweaters returned, and the new toy has lost its luster. As we move on into deep winter, followed by spring, summer, fall, and again into another Advent season, what will have been different? Is it the same old job with the same old complaints? The continuing argument regarding the same topic? The regular guys meeting at the same watering hole?

The Magi saw something new in the Christ child. They envisioned a new world in which everyone could be transformed by grace and love. Can’t we see the same hope in the Savior of the World? Poet Maya Angelou wrote, “This is a wonderful day. I have never seen this one before.”

In Christ all things are made new and we have a chance to be transformed by His grace into people of patience, compassion, honesty, empathy, unselfishness, and love. We have a chance to be amazed at all of creation, its beauty, fragility, complexity, and abundance.

Let us resemble the Magi and be joy-filled at the sight of the star, the sign of hope. The light has come. There is no more darkness that the Light cannot overcome. Be healed. Be changed.

Let us follow the star of hope and redemption each day of the year.

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