

Waiting on the Savior...

***Considering Christ's second
coming in light of His first.***

2019 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

CORNERSTONE ASSEMBLY OF
GOD CHURCH,
CHESTER VIRGINIA

*"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.."*

— Isaiah 9:2 (ESV)

ADVENT 2019 – CORNERSTONE ASSEMBLY OF GOD

"Waiting on the Savior: Considering Christ's second coming in light of His first."

Introduction

Denise Armstrong

Week	Date	Theme: Now Is the Time	Contributor
<i>First Week of Advent (12/1 – 12/8): Thanking those who have shown you the way</i>			
	Sunday, December 1	Luke 21:5-19	Denise Armstrong
	Monday, December 2	Matthew 21:1-11	Kelly McGaha
	Tuesday, December 3	Matthew 21:12-22	Carolyn Ogrosky
	Wednesday, December 4	Matthew 21:23-32	Claude Armstrong
	Thursday, December 5	Matthew 21:33-46	Sharon Burton
	Friday, December 6	Matthew 22:1-14	Denise Armstrong
	Saturday, December 7	Matthew 22:15-22	Kelly McGaha
<i>Second Week of Advent (12/8 – 12/14): Loving those who need encouragement along the way</i>			
	Sunday, December 8	Luke 1:57-68	Melissa Ray
	Monday, December 9	Matthew 22:23-33	Brad Hamaker
	Tuesday, December 10	Matthew 22:34-46	Linda Chase
	Wednesday, December 11	Matthew 23:1-12	Erika Taylor
	Thursday, December 12	Matthew 23:13-26	Lynn Murphy
	Friday, December 13	Matthew 23:27-39	Timothy Armstrong
	Saturday, December 14	Matthew 24:1-14	Claude Armstrong
<i>Third Week of Advent (12/15 – 12/21): Giving to those who need to know the way</i>			
	Sunday, December 15	John 5:30-47	Melissa Ray
	Monday, December 16	Matthew 24:15-31	Lesley Donelson
	Tuesday, December 17	Matthew 24:32-44	Eichelle Hamaker
	Wednesday, December 18	Matthew 24:45-51	Mark Taylor
	Thursday, December 19	Matthew 25:1-13.	Grace Burton
	Friday, December 20	Matthew 25:14-30	Lynn Murphy
	Saturday, December 21	Matthew 25:31-46	Ellie Schumacher
<i>Fourth Week of Advent (12/22 – 12/25): Worshiping the one who is the way</i>			
	Sunday, December 22	John 3:16-21; Luke 1:1-25	Denise Armstrong
	Monday, December 23	Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:39-48a	Melissa Ray
<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Tuesday, December 24	Luke 1:57-66; Luke 1:67	Kelly McGaha
<i>Christmas Day</i>	Wednesday, December 25	John 3:31-36	Pastor Shawn Franco

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Introduction

By this time, in many tropical lands, including the northern parts of South America, the islands of the Caribbean, Central America, as well as the Southern USA, the Trade Winds have picked up, blowing what's called in my Island home of Jamaica, 'Christmas breeze'. Additionally, the naturally growing poinsettia have likely turned blood red at heart, forming those resplendent 'flowers' which are now a common feature in Christmas decorating. Their gradual transformation was a simple sign, to us children back home, that the joyous time called Christmas was on the way!

Our prayer is that this devotional will spark as much and even more joy and anticipation in your heart this Advent. As you read and meditate on these reflections and the Scriptures that inspired them, may they also stir in you a longing for the pending re-appearance of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and zeal to reach the lost with the good news of both His Advents. This response will fill both our hearts and that of Our Heavenly Father with exceeding great Joy!

Background

Advent—the twenty-four days before Christmas, which like Lent, was originally forty days— marks the beginning of the Church year in the Western World. Originating as a pre-Christmas fast, formally so by the late 5th century into the second half of the 6th century, it lives on as a season of waiting, penitence and preparation for the celebration of Christ’s nativity, the Incarnation.

Advent is also a time to ponder and prepare for Christ’s second coming. Commemorating Jesus’ first Advent helps us anticipate His second. The penitential aspect of Advent is reflected in the traditional color of the season, purple, which is the color of repentance. Some churches have shifted this to blue, the color of hope, to emphasize Christ’s promise that He would come again, reminding us that we are not simply waiting for the coming of Christmas but ultimately waiting for Jesus’ second coming.

Consistent with Cornerstone’s current emphasis, Advent is an opportunity to examine our priorities and to realign our lives with God’s desires for us in every area—our family, our church and our community. Each of the 4 Sundays of advent has a watchword and Biblical figure associated with the progressive lighting of a related colored candle. The colors and meanings of the candles vary.

1st Sunday— ‘Wait’, the prophet Isaiah 7:14 (first purple or blue candle’s light “the light of the hope of the prophecies”)

2nd Sunday—‘Prepare’, John the Baptizer, Luke 3:4 (applied, it calls us to watchfulness as we wait for Christ’s return, Lk.21:34, & 1Thess. 5:2-3,6; second purple or blue candle — the peace brought to Mary & Joseph by the light and warmth of the “stable” in Bethlehem)

3rd Sunday—‘Rejoice’, Mary, whose soul magnified the Lord, Luke 1:46-49; third candle, colored pink,—(reminds us that our preparation and waiting are joy filled even in the midst of fasting and penitence, as, like Mary, we are aware that God has done great things for us; representing the light and the joy which accompanied the angels’ appearance to Mary and later the Shepherds.)

4th Sunday—‘Love’, Joseph, who, having been told in a dream not to be afraid to marry Mary, lovingly takes her as his wife despite raised eyebrows etc, and later loves Jesus, her son as his own.; John 3:16. Also the love and support displayed in the relationship between Elizabeth & Mary; they affirm God’s work in each other and thus exemplify Christian community at its best. We thus participate in the saving work of God in proclaiming Christ. Last purple or blue candle — its light represents the light of the bright star that led the faithful to the Christ child.

Some traditions finally light, on Christmas Eve, a white candle called the Christ Candle. Its color represents the purity of Christ in His sinlessness, and reminds us that those who receive Christ are washed clean of their sins.

*Details for this background taken from, *Circle of the Seasons*; Kimberlee Conway-Ireton

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December 1, 2019

Possessing Our Souls in Patience at Advent

Scripture Reading: *Luke 21:5-19*

Believers in Jesus Christ have had several centuries to touch, taste and handle the glorious reality and ultimate Truth of Jesus' first Advent; but not so much His Second. In fact, the proclamation of His imminent return has fallen on hard times as church's shy away from a focus on what has been known throughout the ages as "The Believers' Glorious Hope".

I love the Christmas cards and nativity scenery artistically portraying the shining face of the Christ-Child in the manger, and that light reflecting from those gathered around the Holy family to adore Him. Yet, the historical facts and events, soon to follow that scene, record a brutal, ugly, God-hating world, in the not so distant backdrop. Yet those who gazed and received His Light were forever transformed; and going out from that space, proclaimed, preserved and stewarded the Best News the World has ever received and ever will.

Jesus, in Luke 21: 5-19, sought to prepare His followers for the unpleasant circumstances that would also attend His second advent—the destruction of Jerusalem, wars at home and abroad, worldwide cataclysmic events, chaos and disruptions in society and the created order, cosmic phenomena and, in it all, persecution of believers in Him. His admonition to them in verse 19 is to 'possess their souls in patience', promising that they would be imbued with supernaturally supplied responses and powerful testimonies of Him for their persecutors and captors, and that not a hair on their heads would be lost.

In this 'now and not yet' prophetic passage we, today, can testify that the disciples, just like the faithful shepherds and the holy family, did 'possess their souls in patience', in their time. The light of the Glory of God in the Face of Christ had burst forth from a Middle-Eastern tomb, and they had beheld His Glory, even of the only begotten of the Eternal Father! They waited in prayer and worship till the Spirit fell and filled them, then they faithfully delivered the Gospel to successive generations, sustained even up until our day.

How will we do in our time?

– Denise Armstrong

Prayer:

"Father, as our quaking world holds the prospect of Christ's second Advent in derision, help us choose to 'look up' in joyful anticipation of His appearing, as Jesus told us to, while working the works of Him who sent us while it is still day; knowing that He who promised us supernatural testimony of You, by His Spirit, will also supply the joyful vision to sustain and enable us to 'possess our souls in patience' till that Day of days."

December 2, 2019

Anticipation Meets Preparation

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 21:1-11*

Anticipation of the holiday season meets preparation full throttle in the traditional flurry of activity from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Endless baking and making, decorating and shopping in an attempt to make this “the best Christmas ever”!

So, as I read today’s passage, my heart pondered what Jesus told the disciples — “Go to the village. Bring Me the donkey and her colt. If anyone asks, say that the Lord needs them.” Pretty straightforward right? Now you might be wondering what this passage has to do with Christmas. I was asking myself that very question.

As I sat and listened, the Lord kept whispering two words: Anticipation and Preparation. Each Christmas season, while we gather to remember Christ’s divine incarnation into our very human world, take note: this isn’t intended to be a one-time event. He calls His people to incarnate His presence every day, in our very human world.

Advent offers us a chance to slow down and connect with God in a way that enables us to do this. The days leading to the celebration of His birth provide an opportunity to anticipate with joy the Light of the World. And what do we do while we wait? Sit around admiring tree trimmings and lights? Not according to the example set in this passage. The disciples made preparations for Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem according to His instructions. It isn’t enough to know He’s King. Preparation is the key when it comes to welcoming and ushering in a new work of God into our world and into our lives.

– Kelly McGaha

Challenge:

“What might this look like for you and me this Advent? Perhaps taking cookies to that neighbor we wave to each day, and finally getting to know their name; perhaps serving at a shelter or local school; how about spending an extra five minutes in prayer, listening – just listening to God.

“Will you allow Him to prepare your heart? To send you? Be careful, God may want you to ask someone for their donkey! Seriously, though, how might your obedience to some unusual direction from God, help prepare the way for the entrance of the King this Christmas?”

December 3, 2019

The Work and Wonder of the Wait

Scripture Reading: Matthew 21:12-22

Growing up, my only real understanding of the word Advent was undeniably linked to chocolate. Each year, around Thanksgiving, we'd get one of those little cardboard calendars with all the windows in it. Then, each morning until Christmas, we'd open up one little window and start the day with a piece of, to be quite honest, pretty poor-quality chocolate. The taste didn't matter, though. It was all about the anticipation, the countdown, the wondering and waiting until that Christmas morning celebration.

Those years, though, were never about the mystery in the waiting. They were always about what was to come. Never about the process, but always about the outcome. Jesus, though, was always about the process.

In the scriptures, we see a Jesus who is not impatient for what's to come at the end: He has this deep longing for people to see what's right in front of them; to uncomplicate their view of God; to understand the simplicity of loving God and loving others. A Jesus who drives from His temple, those who complicate and pollute that simple love, and reminds those looking for rules and regulations to guide them, that faith is actually about reckless trust and audacious risk.

Lucy Shaw says that *"During the waiting times God is vibrantly at work within us. And if through the Spirit of God, we have been united with the Father in dynamic relationship, if God has sown His gospel seed in us, then Jesus is being formed within us, little by little, day by day. But we have to wait if the Word is to become flesh in us. And that kind of waiting feels like work."*

So, it is with advent. It's a time to be reminded that as we live in this in-between time, the time between the Savior's birth and his second coming, the wait should create a deep longing and expectation, not just that God will answer our own selfish prayers, but that we would know the Christ child. That we would expect God's movement in our world. That we would desire more than that which our own eyes can see and our own dreams can hope for.

Waiting on things we cannot see for a God to do something we don't expect is the hard and good work of faith.

– Carolyn Ogrosky

Prayer:

"Father of hope, meet us in these places of waiting. Remind us that we aren't just biding time until Christmas Day or a specific answer or event in our life, but that each day we wake up is a chance to know You better. A chance to learn anew the holiness in the wait, the hope in the unexpected, the joy in the mystery. As we live one step closer to the day, we will celebrate the birth of Your Son, let us come to You in honesty and expectation."

December 4, 2019

Take a Stand!

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 21:23-32*

“*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” (John 1:46). Sitting under a fig tree, like the learned but with humble intentions, Nathaniel considers the Messiah’s coming. What would it mean for Israel, for him and for the world? Could this be a Prophet? ...the Messiah? ...in Israel? ...NOW?

“We are surrounded by Gentiles both within and without!” he thought. “Are we adequate to ride with Messiah to cast off Rome? Israel is mixed in with the world, not knowing how to resist its press against our identity and our heritage. Our religious and national leaders are interested in us for our “fleece” more than in “leading us to green pastures”. My land, Galilee of the nations; Galilee of the GENTILES, they call us! How can we be set apart, with the nations of the world in our midst? Would the Messiah come to us now? Are we ready?”

I would imagine the Israelites must have felt the same as Nathaniel, prior to the birth of the Babe in Bethlehem, 30 years earlier – small, insignificant, without power or impact in a foreign world that was surrounding them. Was this a problem or an opportunity? That depends on who they were looking for. It all sounds a lot like Christians in the world today, as we await, with great anticipation, Christ’s second coming. *Matthew 21:23-32* portrays a scene in which Jesus challenges the Pharisees to declare their beliefs about John and his message; they played it safe, which revealed their dubious allegiance. Christ went on to highlight their disloyalty through a parable, calling them to... Take a stand! Repent from renegeing on allegiance to their God! If God Be God, serve Him and do what they said they would do.

– Claude Armstrong

Challenge:

If we look closely into the light of the Hope of the Prophets, we see a similar call to the Church in our day, especially as we prepare with great expectation for Christ’s second coming.

Am I staying at home when I promised to go to others?

Have I made excuses for not going out or for going half way?

Did I say I would follow & serve Christ only to renege on that promise in some way?

Today, let’s examine our hearts and look to our soon-coming King as we Glorify Him with our lives.

December 5, 2019

The Gospel in Advent

Scripture Reading: *Mathew 21:33-46*

Jesus uses parables throughout the Bible to teach us, guide us, and to prepare us for His second coming. In Matthew 21:33-46, He tells the story of a landowner, a vineyard, tenants, servants and the landowner's son. The story details how people often relate, choosing to live their lives driven by greed, jealousy, selfishness, pride and rebellion, rather than by desire to serve God.

At His first Advent, God sent His Son, Jesus, to give us an example of how to live our lives daily, so that we may be prepared for His second coming. We should receive and spread the good news of the Gospel—loving as he did, sacrificing our wants and needs. As we follow Him, we can be fruitful now and not ashamed at the time of His second coming and the judgment. Jesus was beaten and rejected by many, suffering for all of our sins. However, the Father accepted His sacrifice on our behalf and raised Him from the dead! This saves us and gives us hope, for by His example, He has become our CORNERSTONE!!

Matthew 21:42 says,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes”

With that said, Jesus is our cornerstone, church!!!

Let's be the example and live today as He has—building each other up and not to tearing down, forgiving and being merciful to one another—this empowers us to spread His love and the good news of the Gospel. He is a Good Good Father!

– Sharon Burton

Prayer:

“Father God, I pray for my sisters and brothers, that we will not be crushed by the righteous Cornerstone through disobedience to You and Your Word. Help us Father to be the like Jesus the true Cornerstone—the building block of a strong foundation, for generations to come. In Jesus' name, amen!”

December 6, 2019

The Festivities of Advent

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 22:1-14*

God clearly loves feasts and the celebrations surrounding them and has built similar delight into the hearts of us humans. No other creature has behavior that compares to the uniquely human practice of festive celebration. God's instructions to Moses for His ancient people, Israel, organized their year around major feasts, with smaller ones regularly attending other aspects of their daily life, such as the sabbath. So, it's not surprising that Jesus often taught of the advancing entry of the Kingdom of God in terms of preparation for a Great Feast.

As the Advent season approached this year, I found myself wondering, for the first time, what preparations on the heaven side of things may have looked like that first Advent. My fertile imagination pictured angel-feathers flying everywhere, as the heavenly messengers delivered missives via dreams and annunciations to the relevant characters of the Christmas story, seeing to the fulfillment of prophecies and keeping demon spirits at bay. Was there a send-off feast? I know I run the risk of venturing into anthropomorphism—bringing God down to human form, yet isn't that exactly what the Incarnation was all about? God becoming Man! I wonder what the feast in heaven may have looked like if there was one? I believe Jesus gave us a hint in the parable from today's passage.

Here, in Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus draws on the practices of these ancient cultures familiar to His hearers, but with a twist that would delight the 'poor in spirit' of His audience and anger the proud and self-righteous of the religious elite. It would have been clear to the crowd who the bad players in the parable represented and who the humble folk, dragged in from the highways and byways, needing to be issued appropriate clothing.

But lest we mistakenly assume that Jesus was playing into 'classism'—elevating the 'poor in pocket' over the wealthy, His parable makes clear that no one in attendance at the feast of His coming Kingdom will do so on his or her own merit. We must all come as the 'poor in spirit'—the same fury which the King displayed against the initial guests, who esteemed their own business above the King's, and killed His messengers, is also dished out to the latter guests of humble means, who declined the covering provided in Grace. The response of the King, representative of the Heavenly Father, is completely understandable when you consider that Jesus' parable is of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, at His second Advent, and the covering graciously provided, nothing less than the priceless blood of the Son of God Himself!

— *Denise Armstrong*

Prayer:

"Thank You, gracious King and Lord, for Your amazing invitation to feast in Your glorious Kingdom. As we approach the celebration of Your incarnation, may we all make ourselves ready, robed in Your righteousness alone."

December 7, 2019

Gifts to God

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 22:15-22*

Some of my favorite memories are enveloped in gift-giving. When our children were little (and their gift-lists simple!) Christmas wasn't complicated—a bike or doll, roller blades or new train set. However, with each passing Christmas as the lists grew shorter, giving a gift that would spark our children's inner joy became more challenging. But thankfully, over the years I have also come to realize that giving is simple if I adhere to two guidelines:

Know the person (after all the gift isn't for me!)

Know what will bring them joy

Of course, the person to whom we should ultimately be concerned about giving to at Christmas is the Lord Himself, since it is His birth that we are commemorating. And I think we all know what He wants. Do you struggle with giving your life to God? I do. Honestly, what else do we have to give to the Creator of the universe?

In today's passage Jesus answers a question the Pharisees posed in trying to trap Him and Scripture tells us they were "amazed" with His reply;

"So, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (v. 21)

Clearly, Jesus wasn't going to be fooled. Turning their question to His own end, He describes giving, not as a means to get something, but as an act of preference, of honor. I know it might sound like a leap—to honor Caesar by paying taxes—but stick with me...

In His infinite mind, God no doubt had a myriad of scenarios from which to choose when He considered how to deal with our fallen world. What was His perfect choice? To reconcile Man by giving Himself! The King of Kings chose to humble Himself and live in a way to which all people could relate. In this way, from the beginning, God set the standard for giving.

– Kelly McGaha

Exhortation:

With this in mind, how do we give to the King this Christmas? The answer is:

Whatever we lay our hands to should reflect the joy of giving, as a gift to God. In everything, our Worship, obedience, service, prayer, and gratitude; with our whole heart.

Give your employer more than 100% as an act of service to God. Pray for, better still, WITH the unlovable person in your life, since God loves them too. Give God honor by praising Him for the blessing of each new day. Worship Him, in obedience following the laws of the land, but keeping God as King at the center of your heart. In this way we show that we know Him and what brings joy to His heart.

December 8, 2019

Elizabeth's Heart

Scripture Reading: *Luke 1: 57-68*

She sits on her cushion beneath rays of sunlight
A golden white aura surrounding her head.
The Spirit had quickened and placed John within her;
Elizabeth thought herself barren and dead.

Her glad heart is full of sweet anticipation.
What manner of child will this favored son be?
She sits on her cushion beneath rays of sunlight
while pondering mysteries greater than she.

Her husband saw visions and spoke with the angels,
but could not converse with her of this great thing.
She sits on her cushion beneath rays of sunlight
and wonders what changes this small child will bring.

She feels the sharp spasms spread all the way through her
and knows that her time of deliv'rance is near.
She sits on her cushion beneath rays of sunlight
awaiting this miracle yet to appear.

She sits on her cushion beneath rays of sunlight
her infant son snugly held safe to her heart.
Aware there are others that whisper of greatness,
yet savors the sweetness her newborn imparts.

– *Melissa Ray*

Prayer:

“Lord, as we fulfill each of our places in the body of Christ, may we always be aware of your greatness! Also, may we pause to enjoy each of the blessings that you give and the sweetness they bring. Amen.”

December 9, 2019

Sustain the Weary with Our Words

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 22:23-33*

I've always had a heart for those who are discouraged, feel defeated, alone, weary, ashamed or just worn out with it all and ready to give up. I have a friend who calls me Barnabas, (after Joseph the Levite in Acts 4:36), which means *Son of Encouragement*. The Jewish leaders Jesus encountered, the Sadducees, were the opposite of compassion and encouragement. They sought to justify their importance by strictly keeping the law, both of God and of their own making. But they often missed the Spirit and message behind the law. Trying to justify their *lack* of belief in a resurrection, they tried to trap Jesus in his doctrine. Jesus answered their veiled question by demonstrating that God is the God of both the living *and* the dead.

Rather than trying to poke holes in others, let's work to fill the holes left by sin. Jesus wants us to stoop down and lift up men and women who carry the weight of the world on their backs. Instead, we too often, like Sadducees, try to convince those who don't care about dogma we don't live out consistently.

I've often joked about the oft quoted phrase "*GOD will never give you more than you can handle*", with the response of "...*I'm not sure I really want to see just how much I can handle*". Proverbs 12:25 states, "*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but a good word cheers it up.*" Whether we are at home or work or among friends; whether relating to our spouse, our sons or our daughters, consider this: that these very people, and many more around us, are likely the ones who need encouragement from us the most.

Isaiah 50:4 says "*The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of those who are instructed, to know how to sustain the weary with a word.*" The next time you see someone who needs a "*good word*", stop and "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (Lev 19:18); Ask GOD for the good word they need and the opening to deliver it.

– Brad Hamaker & Claude Armstrong

Prayer:

"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of those who are instructed, to know how to sustain the weary with a word." (Isaiah 50:4) Give me a "good word" today that will lift someone's spirit and deeds that lighten someone's load. Truly make me a Son of Encouragement to all around me."

December 10, 2019

Waiting...With Right Heart Motives

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 22:34-46*

(The following piece written by Linda, the wife of our most senior elder, Bill Chase, reflects the heart of worship and sincere pursuit of God the Advent season demands. May we refuse the argumentative, self-seeking agenda of the proud, religious elite of Jesus' day, demonstrated in the passage from today's reading and instead, bow before Him in humbleness).

In this advent season as we prepare our hearts for the soon coming of Jesus birth, we are overwhelmed with the joy and anticipation.

We can imagine the excitement of the angels as they looked forward to announcing to the shepherds the good news of the initiation of God's redemption plan:

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Our hearts also rejoice to know that His coming was to save us from our sins, that God became man so we could gain access to the very throne of God. And know that this plan existed from the foundation of the earth. How very deep is God's love for us.

– Linda Chase

Prayer:

"Forgive us Lord for making it about gifts, decorations and celebrations without you. May it truly be about you and you alone as a gift to us. May we joyously celebrate the gift you are.

"May the star at the top of the tree in our home be a reminder of the wise men who sought to see this Great King foretold in prophecy so long ago. May we remember Your Holy Spirit who breathes joy into our lives.

"Each night, this Advent season, before going to sleep; may we express gratitude for the great light and joy that was brought to us through the gift of Your Son, our Lord, and soon coming King, Jesus."

December 11, 2019

Pharisaism!

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 23:1-12*

– Erika Taylor

Pharisaism!

A term most reviled,
A people much despised.
Whitewashed tombs,
beautiful on the outside;
dead on the inside.

Proud and entitled by the Law with zeal.
Yet, empty and divorced from the love that heals.

– *Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*

They cried out on that atrocious day.

– How dare they? How could they?

Some of us might say.

But who among us is without sin?

Have we not ourselves, at one point or another,
crucified Him?

Let him with no sin, the first stone cast.

Is that you? Is that me?

Would any of us stand the test?

Or could we somehow, apathetically,
also have become
a modern-day Pharisee

No. May it not be!

Let it not be, Lord!

For today, Lord,
Every day, God,
Christ be born unto us again!

A child, a lad,
the Word made flesh,
fully God, fully man.

Who for me and for you
into the world came,
As a sheep to the slaughter,
who would endure much pain,
to impute unto us
righteousness and grace,
not by works,
but through faith.

So, today, Lord,
Every day, God,
Help us lower our guard, open up our eyes,
set aside our agenda,
to prepare our lives
for Your glorious day.

No more heavy loads on man's shoulders;
No more places of honor, public displays,
wide phylacteries, long tassels...
May we simply become like You, Lord –
humble vessels,
filled with the Spirit
as we welcome you, King!

A child, a lad,
The Word made flesh –
fully God, fully man.
First laid in a manger,
Later killed on a cross,
To give hope, love, joy, peace,
and abundant life
to a world that was lost.

Lost in the lies of darkness and hopelessness,
In pursuit of a day when a light would shine;
Where pain is no longer, all tears are gone,
where death is defeated,
and humankind,
made right.

So today, Lord,
Every day, God,
Please, be born unto us again!
As we ready our hearts
and surrender our lives,
in celebration of your First Advent!

Help us all by the Spirit,
with fear and trembling,
our own salvation to work out.
Looking not to the right or the left,
hypocritically,
doing works of the flesh,
for the sake of renown.

But, instead,
humbly seeking Your will to do,
helps us put our hands to the plow –
mending lives, building bridges,
healing sickness,
calling all who would come right now;
for the fields are ripe,
yet the laborers, few...

So today, Lord,
Every day, God,
Please, be born unto us again!
As we humble ourselves and exalt Your Name,
until our eyes may see
the most glorious day
of Your Second Advent!

Maranatha!

December 12, 2019

But Woe to You...

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 23:13-26*

I become concerned when I read these “woes” to the Pharisees and religious leaders. Why? I am not sure if I resemble them. They believed knowing the Scriptures were critical to living a righteous life. They wanted to obey God, but in the midst of their pursuit, they were missing Jesus. God was speaking to them, but their ears were dull and their hearts were hardened. Jesus, the only Righteous One was with them, yet they still tried to prove they were good enough by their outward actions of good deeds, prayer and giving. That is what I fear – self-righteousness – to believe I can serve or give enough to please God. It is a subtle trap that the religious leaders of Jesus’ day fell into. Can I be that blind?

Perhaps today Jesus would say to those of us who call ourselves Christians and feel spiritually mature...

Woe to you who diligently tithe, yet minimize the importance of justice and faithfulness.

Woe to you who pray with eloquence, yet spew anger to those you encounter.

Woe to you who appear so respectable, yet view evil in the privacy of your home.

Woe to you who speak the words of the gospel with your lips, yet deny the Lord by the way you live.

No, these words of woe do not seem like what we would expect from Jesus, but then again, the world did not expect God to appear as a helpless, newborn baby in an obscure village. During this advent season of reflection and repentance, instead of reading quickly over these woes deciding they are not relevant to me, I want to re-examine my heart.

For when I come into the presence of the exalted King, I recognize my desperate need for a righteousness I cannot produce. And in Jesus, I graciously find provision not only for removing my sin, but for imparting His perfect righteousness to me.

– Lynn Murphy

Prayer:

“Lord, I do not want to be like the Pharisees who missed the very presence of Jesus in their lives. Search my heart and reveal my hidden sins that would keep me from fully experiencing who you are.”

December 13, 2019

Out of the Casket this Advent

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 23:27-39*

What is wrong with hypocrisy? Regardless of how we feel about the word, it ought to be sufficient that Jesus does not like it.

Throughout most of chapter 23 of Matthew, Christ uses the phrase “*Woe upon you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*” Matthew 23:27 (KJV). At first the statement seemed harsh and accusatory. However, as I read it further, I detected Jesus’ sorrow for those who believed their actions were what saved them. The scribes and Pharisees seemed to believe that it was only through human effort—the proverbial “white knuckling”, that makes us right in God’s eyes. In the passage, Christ describes them as nothing more than “bedazzled coffins” or, more accurately, “white washed sepulchres”. Matthew 23:27 (KJV).

We too are acting as hypocrites if we only seek to make ourselves outwardly acceptable. At the end of verse seven of 1Samuel 16 (KJV) it is said “... *The Lord sees not as men see; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*” Verse 28 of today’s reading tells us that we fall into hypocrisy when we are seeking man’s approval over God’s, when we outwardly look one way to the world but are inwardly another way. When we chase man’s accolades, we make approval our idol which then makes even ‘following the law’ a sin! How can we escape! Suddenly, the need of a savior becomes crystal clear.

God mercifully sent deliverance in the form of little baby Jesus. And, as He grew, He showed us how to live in the freedom of God, not by our hypocrisy. Verse 37 of today’s reading shows us the nature of the relationship Christians should have with Christ. We are now part of God’s chosen people. The law is not something believers are to beat each other over the head with, as many of the religious leaders did, but it is a list of reasons as to why we require Christ’s aid in His Advent.

– Timothy F. Armstrong

Prayer:

*“Father, take us under Your wings.
Help us not to fall into hypocritical
thinking. Let us seek to follow your
law through the constant seeking of
Your Son. Let us listen to each other
as You so often speak to us through
other brothers and sisters. Let us not
be pretty caskets but filled, useful,
living beings ready to do your work.”
Amen.*

Wayfaring

*Teeth tight pressed together
We turn to no one to confide
Feet tattered as leather
We pull sin up the mountain side
Hands stressed by The Tethers
We ask What force could turn the
tide*

*Mankind was soiled
Mankind must toil
But Jesus is royal
Devil’s plans are foiled
Devil’s grip recoils*

*Back down the hill
My sin is killed
My heart I still
My soul is filled
Good soil is tilled
God’s love revealed.*

December 14, 2019

The Sign of His Coming

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 24:1-14*

Like the disciples, signs and events characterizing the *end of the age* (v. 3) can be daunting or down-right scary, generating many questions. The problem might be that we separate the “*end of the age*” from the other aspect of the disciple’s questions, *His coming*. The signs and events point to Christ’s return! Our glorious hope.

It’s *His return* that draws us forward when difficulty and tribulations attend our Christian life. Christ said tribulations would come until the time of the end when we hear that last trump and He splits the sky. But how do we access this hope? How do we appropriate the power, love and sound mind to overcome through difficult times? Christ’s first coming offers us encouragement...

As prophetic signs of Christ’s advent approached, hopeful Jews under Roman occupation provide answers to the fears of those who await His return. The faith-filled responses of characters from the Christmas Story offer poignant examples of joyful expectation in the midst of hostility, persecutions and danger...

*Simeon, **waiting** patiently for the “Consolation of Israel”. (Luke 2:25)*

*Anna, continuing daily in **fasting** and **prayer** for Messiah’s coming... (Luke 2:37)*

*Zacharias and Elizabeth, **faithfully cooperated** with God in His grand plan... (Luke 1:63-79)*

*Joseph, bowing his head in **humble submission** to what only God could orchestrate... (Matt. 1:19-24)*
*and Mary, as she **yielded** saying “...be it unto me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)*

“...what will be the sign of Your coming... (v. 3)?” The greatest sign of Christ’s coming will be His Church walking together in unity, standing together against *the birth pains* (v. 8) of a world resisting its Creator.

– Claude Armstrong

Prayer:

“Father enable us, your children, to wait, fast, pray, cooperate in faith, submit and yield to your sovereign hand, as you orchestrate the affairs of this world and our lives. Let the hope and joy of your coming fill our heart with anticipation till... ‘the end of the age’.”

December 15, 2019

They Believed

Scripture Reading: *John 5:30-47*

Across the deep blue velvet sky,
spun shards of glass were hung on high,
and nestled there for all to see,
a single star's intensity.

Three sages from an Eastern land
with legions under their command,
believed the readings of the Word,
and bowed their heads as they conferred.

An eagerness dwelt in their hearts,
impatiently their group departs,
they sought the presence of a King,
to offer gifts and homage bring.

They did not question who, how far,
but faithfully pursued the star.
They knew the truth that faith bestowed,
part of their gift, the rugged road.

Throughout the miles, across the sand,
these strangers, grouped into a band,
discovered Him beneath the light,
the Holy One, his true birthright.

They knelt without pomposity,
and bowed in true humility,
they'd found the One the scrolls foretold,
the One worth more than merest gold.

– Melissa Ray

Exhortation:

May the Spirit lead you into true believing as you listen to His voice with a humble heart.

December 16, 2019

Study While You Wait

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 24:15-31*

How prepared are you for Christ's second Advent? The Apostle Matthew lays out an examination of this very concern that the disciples expressed, as Jesus talked with them about the future of the church, before His death, resurrection and ascension. In Matthew 24:3b KJV, they ask, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and the end of the world?" Jesus' answer demonstrates that He wants His followers to be neither ill-informed nor unprepared.

Jesus questions and warns us, as He did them, to be vigilant and watchful of signals for the end times in today's reading from Matthew 24:15-25. Here are some conclusions I drew from His teaching here:

- (1) v. 15 - When the time comes the readers of scriptures will know (whoso readeth, let him understand)
- (2) v. 16 – The people of Judea will flee into the mountains (the Abomination of Desolation.)
- (3) v. 17 – Those sitting on their rooftop in Palestinians homes (porch or balcony), will not have time to come down to take anything out of their house
- (4) v. 18 – Workers in the field, should not return to pick up your clothes
- (5) v. 19 – There will be a great population explosion during the tribulation; and for to those giving birth to children, this will be a very difficult time.
- (6) vs. 23-25 – There will be false prophets, and even some of the elect, and those of Israel, will be naive in following a false prophet.

– Lesley Donelson

Exhortation:

"Are you vigilant and knowledgeable about what Jesus has revealed as the birthing pains of His return? Do you know your scriptures? Are they planted in your heart? You will not have time to "ask Siri" or "Google"; social media will be untrustworthy. Your heart and soul will be the true test of revealing if you are prepared. Be convicted to be prepared today. As stated in 2 timothy 2:15 KJV, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. Amen."

December 17, 2019

Secure and Ready for Advent

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 24:32-44*

The Christmas season invites us to take in many different activities— watching children’s plays, going to holiday parties, seeing Christmas lights, shopping for gifts, baking cookies, enjoying great food, especially desserts, spending time with family and friends and often even traveling. All this makes for a sometimes-hecktic time of year in which it can be a challenge to find moments of peace. For many, the anticipation and activities leading up to Christmas day is what makes the season great.

In the Bible, there were specific events mentioned, occurring before the birth of Christ, that were very important to God’s purpose in sending His son. Today’s reading from Matthew 24:34, finds Jesus instructing His disciples saying, “Truly I tell you; this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Understandably, this wasn’t meant for Jesus’ birth but for the day of His return. We are to be aware and understand that there are specific events, both in the past and in the coming days, that must happen before Jesus returns. He further tells His disciples to be watchful, as we do not know the day or hour when He will return, but to be prepared nonetheless (Matt 24:36).

Can you imagine how devastating it would be to wake up Christmas morning to find all the gifts under the tree snatched by a thief in the night? The shock and disappointment of that however will be nothing compared to how shocked those who are unprepared will be at Jesus’s second coming. Jesus alludes to this in His comment — “But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.” (Matt 24:43).

As important as the gifts are, I believe this passage reminds us to not only be ready as believers, in that we receive salvation, but to be aware of how we are living day to day. If we are already believers, are we sharing the gospel? Are we loving others as God would want us to? Are we forgiving others as he requires us? Are we walking out our calling? Perhaps, how we conduct our lives is part of those events that must happen. Is it possible that we have a role in those events to fulfill His plan? God’s purpose for us is important and even if it is to affect one person or ten thousand, we still must walk out our journey with Him and be watchful at all times. That way we will be ready for His second Advent, when our beautiful Savior comes and we are taken away to the place He is preparing for us.

– Eichel Hamaker

Prayer:

“Lord, I pray during this season, that we recognize Your timing and events as steps drawing us closer to Jesus’ return. I pray we reach toward our purpose, and follow through on the promptings of Your Spirit, that we would be a witness to others while being mindful of our daily walk with You. Lord, help us take quiet moments, even in the midst of this season’s events, to gaze on Your beauty and goodness, so we may truly celebrate Jesus’ birth and look to His soon return. Amen.”

December 18, 2019

The Faithful Servants

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 24:45-51*

*"...but you ignore the more important aspects of the law - justice, mercy, and faithfulness." Matt 23:23
NLT*

In looking at the message of Jesus, who is soon to encounter the cross, we are given a somber teaching that is a warning to Christian men or women of any place or time. Jesus is loud and clear – be faithful, have expectancy of His return, and live in such a way that serves the Father well. In the surrounding passages of today's reading, Pharisees and religious leaders of the temple are the representation of what unfaithful and wicked servants are like. They are abusive toward the people, lording over them without mercy, loving themselves and their authority. Yet Jesus is clear in Matthew 24:45– authority is given by the Master so that God's servants would serve others, making sure to keep good care of fellow servants. It is critical to not be like the Pharisees, who gained at the expense of others. It is at this moment that Jesus tells the disciples that this manner of religious leadership—that has killed the prophets and misled Israel—has been judged by God and is coming to an end!

Now, the focus is to be a servant-leader who is life-giving and serving in a righteous spirit. How critical is it for Christian leaders to heed the words of Micah 6:8, to walk humbly with our God as we offer care and mercy to others. We must give attention to putting off any form of injustice, remembering the grace God has given to us, as we measure out His grace in generous amounts. We have a work to do, yes, but what comes first is to remember the charge or calling given to us about how to do it. This charge helps form our identity and informs all that we do. To forget our calling and to forget our Lord, as if He may never come again, is to get lost with the drunkards. Lost identity and lost purpose can lead to lost living, a wandering about in life. So, let us be attentive this Advent, as we wait, and let us not grow weary.

—Mark Taylor

Exhortation:

May God find us endeavoring to serve in acts of charity with a grace that flows from the heart of our Lord Himself. Faithfulness to the charge God has given us will not go unnoticed by Our Lord on His return. Have expectancy, and know that even in the midst of troubling days, all things will be made new at His Second Advent.

December 19, 2019

Keeping Up With God

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 25: 1-13*

God's timing is always in our best interest. Our Heavenly Father has planned our individual schedules second by second, so that we will be blessed and enabled to bless others. It is not known to us when certain things will happen, and God has it that way for a reason. But when we rely on God, He takes us by our right hand and leads us down the path that He has paved for us. He shows us where to look, and despite the obstacles we face head on, God's timing is always best. Our father has planned our individual timeline and promises that He will never let us fail. In our life, God invites these specific challenges at a set time for His own perfect reasons.

We know, through this scripture from today's reading, that the Bridegroom is arriving soon, but there isn't an exact time yet. So, the wise and foolish virgins take a nap, but when the foolish awake to realize that they didn't bring enough oil to keep their lamps lit, they are forced to go and buy more oil at that late hour. This is opposite of the wise, as they came prepared, and did not have to fear because they were ready for whatever would come next, that the bridegroom had in store. This story is so relevant to us, as we should compare to see which character we fit. We don't know when the second coming of God will occur, but we can't afford to be distracted with the temptations this world brings us. We must choose to be like the wise virgins in their readiness for the Bridegroom.

It is our responsibility to prepare for our Father's second coming. Centering our focus on the slightest distraction of this world causes chaos in our mind, when all God really wants is for us to focus solely on him. Don't lose your faith in God, He will never lose faith in you due to His determination to finish His good work in us. He will never give up on you no matter the amount of wrong turns you make. Our Father is the strongest force, making anything possible. He will help us to be ready for His coming.

– Grace Ann Burton

Prayer:

"Heavenly Father, I invite you into this devotional. Help everyone reading to perceive with their own understanding how its message fits their own circumstances. We thank you Lord for all you have done for us, for being there for us even when we fall, and most of all, for what you will continue to do to bring us to perfection. I pray that you will lead our minds away from inattention, away from the distractions of this world, and from the obstacles that we will face today and tomorrow. Let everything that takes our eyes off You forever be disregarded. Let us focus solely on you. Let us find your purpose for us and pursue it. In Jesus' name we all pray, Amen"

December 20, 2019

The Parable of the Talents

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 25:14-30*

The Baby in the manger grew and became strong, increasing in wisdom and strength; and the grace of God was upon Him. Jesus amazed the crowds as one having authority frequently using parables to explain truths of God's Kingdom.

When I read this parable, I wonder what am I supposed to understand?

The master entrusted talents to the servants to invest, not to keep.
Although the amounts varied, each servant received an abundant amount of money.
One talent was equivalent to 15- 20 years wages.
The servants were not to use the talents for their own personal gain.
The master's words of approval were the same for the one who gained five talents and the one who gained two talents.
The master did not reward the one who played it safe.
The master will return.
The fearful servant ended up in a place of darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

What are talents in the life of a believer today? In the parable, a talent was an enormous sum of money. Today, in modern language, a talent is a gift or ability. But could the word "talent" symbolize anything of value our Lord has entrusted to us including our children, ministry or career? Could the talent represent the lavish grace He has bestowed on us as His beloved children?

We have each been offered the gift of grace through Jesus, but additionally, we have also received "talents" unique to each of us. Am I engaged in activities which enable His grace to multiply or am I hoarding or hiding His talents?

– Lynn Murphy

Prayer:

"Heavenly Father, thank you for your generosity. Show me how to live as a wise steward of the talents and the extravagant grace you have entrusted to me. Enable me to generously invest all you have poured into my life since I know you will return. I desire to hear your words of approval, "Well done good and faithful servant. You were faithful...enter into the joy of your master."

December 21, 2019

Ego Balloon

Scripture Reading: *Matthew 25:31-46*

My spiritual ego balloon can blow up so easily. I don't have to strive. I don't have to make an effort about this. All I have to do is, for just a few moments, turn my head away from reality and it all happens quite naturally: I am swept up into the illusion that I am a really good person.

Here in Advent, I am yearning to prepare my heart for the Christ Child. And for such Holiness, Innocence and Purity to enter within me, there's a lot of cleaning for me to do! This is a time for repentance. This is a time for sorrow for my sins.

But sometimes I don't see any sins in myself. After all, I haven't forgotten to do my morning Bible study, have I? I haven't been mean to anyone (today.) I haven't committed murder (even if I have thought about it.) I haven't, have I? Oh, I'm a good person all right.

Really?

No; that's not true. I know it. You know it. Pretty much the whole world knows it. I don't deserve to have the Christ Child enter my heart. I don't even deserve to have one broken straw from His manger to nibble on.

But then all I have to do to free myself from the illusory fog of my inherent "goodness" and slap myself in the face with crystal-clear spiritual reality is to read these words of Jesus in this passage from Matthew 22.

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depends all the Law and the Prophets."

—*Matthew 22: 34-40, ESV*

I don't think there has been even one hour of my life when I have loved God with all my heart, or one minute when I have loved God with all my soul, or one millisecond when I have loved God with all my mind. To have loved God in this thorough way, and to (for even a passing moment) have loved any or all of my neighbors for even one smidgen as much as I love myself? Nope. It hasn't happened.

Before this great God of ours, who Himself is Love, I am as nothing.

But there is this miracle—that to Him, I am everything! And my grasp of that all starts with Christmas. God loves me so much that he came into this troubled world of ours, walked through its perils, and then finally died—all to prove it.

Jesus is born! Hallelujah!

[NOTE: Ellie & Bill Schumacher (in-laws to Lynn & Mike Murphy) have been faithful members of CWC, though not members of Cornerstone.]

December 22, 2019

Believing and Accepting His Invitation

Scripture Reading: *John 3:16; Luke 1:1-25*

I have often pictured, though not too originally, the purposes of God, in the history of the world, as a massive weaver's loom on which threads—brilliant, nondescript and dark-shaded—appear, inter-act and disappear again in God's inimitable timing. Age to age, and generation to generation He weaves and plots the eternal story of His Glory, in humanity's journey on the planet and hereafter. As with all weaving illustrations, the climax or punchline is that point at which the threads are all pulled together, the frame flipped over and the glorious tapestry of the weaver's design revealed; all in the timing desired by the Weaver. Luke, in today's reading, almost amusingly, captures the exasperation of the mighty messenger Angel from heaven, as the doubting though faithful Zachariah, hovers in unbelief, hesitant to accept with appropriate jubilation, the major plot movement in God's story into which he was being welcomed.

"...You will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." Luke 1:20 NKJV

God is often accused by agnostics and others too careless, too deceived or too distracted to look, of hiding Himself and concealing His good intentions. Yet all of the created order declares His nature, His ways and His unfathomable sovereignty over all things. Meanwhile the prophetic Scriptures – the Bible, and the prophetic people – the People of Israel and the Church, have made and corroborated God's self-revelation and bold declarations throughout the ages.

Additionally, In John 3:16, God is abundantly clear about His heart, His intentions and His plans towards Mankind, the highest of His creations. Physician, Luke—disciple of Jesus and travel companion of the Apostle Paul—faithfully records, as he put it in today's reading, *"...an orderly account that we may know with certainty the things we have been taught (about the faith)."* Luke 1:3-4.

How amazing a journey, he takes us on in this story at the head of his gospel, of an ordinary, faithful couple, with their own painful narrative of infertility, but which, when joined to God's, in His timing on His Great Weaver's loom, pulls it into a storyline like no other. Physically barren and spiritually numb, they yet receive miraculous grace to bring forth the forerunner of our Lord, John the baptizer, in God's timing, just as God, the Great Weaver said.

– Denise Armstrong

Exhortation:

May we all choose in this Kairos season to step out of the dark, and hidden limitations of a doubt-filled, 'safe' and selfish life, such as Zachariah was living, and in the light of fellowship with Christ and each other, accept the invitation to join the grand Story of our God and His dear Son to save the world He so dearly loves.

December 23, 20019

Zachariah, the Priest

Scripture Reading: *Luke 1: 26-28, and 39-48*

“Since I can’t speak, I thought I would write all of this down for you. I know you heard about my encounter with the angel Gabriel in the temple. He had said, ‘Elizabeth will give birth to a son’, and six months into the pregnancy, she’s doing great! We did have a scare though when her cousin, Mary, came to visit. When Mary walked in, I saw John nearly explode from my dear wife’s womb! But as usual Elizabeth wasn’t worried; later, she told me it was more of a leap. I worry for Elizabeth at times in all of this; at our age, you can’t be too careful.

“So many strangely wonderful things are happening! When Mary walked in, a joy came over Elizabeth and she began heaping blessings onto Mary, then Mary burst into song, singing praises to the Lord God! What fresh anointing is this?

“The prophecy over John amazed me, I did not see it coming; but it seems that Mary’s child will bring something even greater. How great could it be? What more could the Lord possibly do for His people?”

Prayer:

“Lord God, I would stay mute a thousand years to know more of Your plan. Until then, I will celebrate with my family and praise your name as we anticipate what is to come.”

– Cpt. Thornton Ray

[NOTE: Cpt. Thornton Ray is serving in the United States Army as an officer with the 1st Area Medical Laboratories stationed at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. He is currently in South Korea while participating in Strategic Exercises. Thornton grew up at Cornerstone, then attended William and Mary on a ROTC scholarship. He and his wife, Rachel, will be joining their family (Roy, Melissa and Andrew Ray) for the holidays.]

December 24, 2019

New Names at His Coming

Scripture Reading: *Luke 1:57-67*

I didn't like my name growing up. It felt ordinary—the last name in a list. Let me explain. I'm the youngest of four whose parents, before it was posh, opted to begin all of their children's first name with the letter K. So the story goes, my parents had chosen the name Kelly for a girl but hadn't yet settled on one for a boy. Eventually they decided Kelly would work for either a girl or boy. But when you're eight and Mom's calling for you requires her to go through all your brothers' names before she gets to you, well...you can understand why I didn't think it was anything special.

When it came time to name our own children, my husband and I agonized over each one. The birth of our children provided the opportunity to pass down a family name—an invisible thread connecting generation to generation, so to speak. This is where we find ourselves joining John the Baptist's story in scripture today.

Zechariah had been silent for months, muted because he did not believe Gabriel. No late night “what shall we name him” discussions with Elizabeth. The day arrives. His name given. Can you hear the collective gasp when Elizabeth announces his name? Thinking Elizabeth is suffering in a post-partum fog, relatives turn to Zechariah. Surely he would be more reasonable. Confidently Zechariah writes, “His name is John.” What a common name. No relatives with that name, so the people didn't understand why it was chosen. Naming a child in biblical times often had significant meanings: stating the solidarity of family ties, recording an aspect of the birth, expressing the parents' reaction to the birth, communicating a message from God, or indicating new beginning or direction in a person's life.

At the first Christmas Eve, the world awaited the birth of another child, but this one has a name which is above every name. Jesus. Immanuel. Alpha and Omega. Prince of Peace. Light of the world. The birth that radically changed the course of history and the lives of everyone who accepts Him also issues us new names, as Sons and Daughters of God, names we will know when He comes the second time in His Glory.

– *Kelly McGaha*

December 25, 2019

Looking for a Gift, Finding a Treasure – Now is the Time!

Scripture Reading: *John 3:31-36(NIV)*

³¹ "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony.³³ Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.³⁴ For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

In our family Christmas morning begins with yarn – lots of yarn. You see at our house; each child's first Christmas gift is hidden somewhere on the first floor of our house and there is only one way to find it – follow the yarn! Each child's first gift has the end of an entire roll of yarn attached to it. The beginning of that roll of yarn starts downstairs in the basement where the kids have had a sleepover that night. When the kids wake up, they find their name attached to a uniquely colored roll of yarn that begins quite an adventure. Each child has to follow their yarn through a maze (and I mean a maze) of ups and downs, behind the couch, over the blinds, in the cupboards, through the garage, into the bathroom, around the office, back into the entryway, and beyond. As each of our kids roll up their ball of yarn, they have to get around everybody else's maze of yarn and undo knots, twists and lots of turns. When they finally roll up the entire ball of yarn, they discover where their first gift is. It may be in the refrigerator, behind a couch, on top of some cabinets, in the car of the garage, or in a closet. The ups and downs, the highs and lows, and the temporary cold as they walk outside the house in their pajamas has been worth it all because at the end of the journey is their first gift of Christmas. Once everyone has found their gift, we gather together, say a prayer of thanks to God for Jesus, and let the festivities begin.

On the first Christmas day so long ago, God gave us His first and greatest gift, Jesus, The One who in John 3:31-36 is:

- (v31) above all
- (v34) speaks the words of God
- (v34) gives the Spirit of God without limit
- (v35) has everything in his hands
- (v36) and is the source of eternal life and peace with God

Your life may feel like a maze of ups and downs, twists and turns, times of cold, unending searching and hidden promises, but finding God's first and greatest gift is worth it. Once you have Jesus, you have The One who will give you peace above all your circumstances, remind you that you are never alone, and fill you with His Spirit and power to see victory in every area of life; and all that won't end with you, this gift is given to you so you can share it with those around you and a larger community that needs Him. So, don't give up on the search and don't let the clutter and busyness of this world tire you out, because when you have Jesus, you will see what true life is all about!

– Pastor Shawn Franco

Exhortation:

"Now is the time to renew your joy and worship in following Jesus! Take some time to give thanks for the gift of Jesus before the other gifts begin today. Ask God to keep each loved one following His leading in life.

"Glory to God in the highest on this day that we celebrate our Savior's birth . . . and may peace and God's favor be upon you and your loved ones this morning. As your pastor and friend, Sara and I want to wish you and yours a very Merry Christmas and hearts filled with the love of Jesus, the greatest gift of all."



"My heart is composing a goodly matter; I speak of the verses which I have made concerning the King; my tongue is the pen of a ready writer." (Psa. 45:1 KJ21)

What is the CWC Small Group?

Christian Writers of Chesterfield (CWC) is a mix of aspiring and accomplished writers who meet to encourage and equip each other. As writers, we seek to glorify God, reflect His heart and present His nature through God-honoring written works for the common good.

We endeavor to accomplish this in ways that honor Biblical truths, principles, and values through:

1. A supportive community.
2. Praying for inspiration.
3. Equipping each other.
4. Writing and sharing content.

Contact Us: To participate in the Christian Writers of Chesterfield Small Group email: **mail@cornerstone.ag** for email updates and meeting reminders.