Crying in the Wilderness; Preparing the Way

An Advent Devotional

Epiphany United Church of Christ
2911 McNair Ave., St. Louis MO 63118
www.epiphanyucc.org
Dear Epiphany Friends,

Welcome to the Advent journey of 2021.

It is not a stretch to say that we live in interesting times. The kind of times that were the subject of ancient curse. Our political discourse has devolved to name calling and threats of violence (and some actual violence), and authoritarianism and white nationalism are on the rise. We are STILL living through a global pandemic – over five million people have died worldwide, 767 thousand in the U.S. as of this writing.

Increasingly it feels like we are crying out in the wilderness and the only one listening is God. But we are the resistance, it is right there in our baptism and membership vows… “Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ’s disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to RESIST oppression and evil, to show love and justice…” As the resistance, we hold the line against the powers of this world, including the arts of the church they have coopted. We are CALLED to cry out against injustice and to speak truth to power in the prophetic tradition. We are CALLED to prepare the way by smoothing out the rough and straightening the crooked. We do this through acts of love and justice; Jesus said to feed, clothe, house, liberate, minister to, and visit the poor, the queer, the disabled, the neurodivergent (meaning those whose brains are wired differently: those with autism and those who live with mental illness), the last and the least, the ones rejected and thrown away by the world.

This is how we arrived at our title for this devotional, “Crying in the Wilderness; Preparing the Way.”

Jesus also set the example of self-care and spiritual retreat, going off by himself or with a few close friends (sometimes just for a few minutes…) to rest, pray, and renew himself for the work ahead. We hope that this devotional will help you with that prayer and renewal as you journey through this season of waiting. Advent means coming, and we believe that the Christ is ALWAYS coming into the world (or into our hearts). However you conceptualize the coming, it is the hope we gain from knowing Emanuel – God is with us – that makes it possible to resist!

We are a diverse group of followers of Jesus who hold fast to liberty of conscience and so hold a wide array of beliefs. Each of us have written our portion of this book out of our own sincere faith. We invite you to take from this book what you can use and leave the rest. We the people of Epiphany United Church of Christ wish you a blessed Advent!

Pastor Krissy Avise-Rouse
November 2021
November 28

Luke 21:34-35a
Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap…

1 Thessalonians 3:10
Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Okay, first of all, before we try to prepare the way, it is important to name the wildernesses in which we find ourselves. I find myself wondering who has the time, energy, or money for both ‘dissipation & drunkenness’ AND the worries of this life? I barely have time to sleep sometimes. Between my ministry, the jobs that make the ministry possible, and family life; I haven't got time for dissipation nor energy for drunkenness! Crying out in this wilderness culture is exhausting. It’s no wonder people want the day of the Lord or a giant meteor to just put an end to the nonsense.

Paul wants to see the church folk face to face and, ‘restore whatever is lacking in their faith.’ Do you think he could do that over Zoom? When we were out of the building and in the Zoom wilderness it was our time together that kept my faith alive in spite of what was lacking. I suppose that is the whole point of community, holding each other up on the way.

Today we start our Advent journey knowing that Target had Christmas up the day before Halloween and Walmart was even earlier. We’re being intentional about looking at our faith and restoring what is lacking. Taking the time to see each other face to face and restore what is lacking in our community of faith. Deliberately getting ready for the coming of the Christ child into our hearts and into our world. Again and again the child comes and again and again the world is not ready. We are not drunk or dissipated, nor will the worries of life keep us from preparing the way of the Lord.

Lord help us be ready, restore whatever is lacking in our faith. Amen!

Krissy Avise-Rouse
Ps 90:1-2, 4 A Prayer of Moses

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
before the Mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
From everlasting to everlasting you are God.
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.

Yesterday, the first Sunday in Advent, we were invited to live in hope. Some days that is harder to do than others. There is still so much brokenness in the world to be healed or mended. There is so much apathy to be overcome. The earth is being ravaged by greed and privilege and short-sightedness. We have our own personal long-standing issues to overcome. The gospel writers expected to see Christ return and usher in the Kin-dom in their lifetimes. And here we are, 2000 years later, working and whining, exhausted and frustrated, wondering if there is reason to hope.

The Psalmist reminds us that there is good reason. God has always been our dwelling place, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. And the unfolding is in God's time. We don't have to like that, but the sooner we trust it, the sooner we remember that accomplishing the Kin-dom is not our responsibility alone, the sooner we can focus on drawing closer to God and resting in hope. To borrow from pastor Rob Bell:

God is God.
God is love.
Love wins.

Let us hope in God's love.

Dorothy M. Gannon
November 30
Psalm 90; 2 Samuel 7:18-29; Revelation 22:12-16

I'm a firm believer that words matter. Words have power. Words can heal, and they can hurt. And this is where I struggle with the Bible. Countless passages are used to justify hurting or oppressing “the other.” Conservative views of God are often terribly harmful to women, LGBTQ+ people, folks from other religious traditions, and many more.

And in the Bible, the words themselves can make me cringe.

We are consumed by your anger
   and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you,
   our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath;
   we finish our years with a moan.
Our days may come to seventy years,
   or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
   for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
If only we knew the power of your anger!
   Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.
   (Psalm 90: 9-11)

This is not how I experience God. I realize that taking snippets out of context can be misleading, but the language of doom and gloom is real throughout the Bible. How do I reconcile the wrath, anger, and fear with messages of love and hope? I have no idea. So, for now, I experience God outside of the Bible in music and art, in being in nature, and in helping others.

Amanda Verbeck
Psalm 90:13-16
Relent, Lord! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.

Do you have compassion for your fellow citizens? Sometimes that task is so difficult. Yet, somehow Jesus had compassion for us all. I think compassion is constantly a work in progress. We even teach it in school now. But, we all need a refresher. I know a teacher who has lost her patience for a student. She has given up and is just angry now. But we don’t know why the student is lacking excitement about his math homework. All I know is that he is a kid. We don’t know for sure what goes on at home. We have no idea what his support system looks like. Then we learn that his grandma died and she held the family together.

This is a simplistic example of compassion. Obviously there are many other examples out there right now...in all of our lives. Are you showing compassion to your neighbor each day? What about that friend of yours who angers you with their political views? When something happens to them are you compassionate? We need more compassion in the world right now. I urge you to try it even when you aren’t feeling it. A better world is on the other side if we work together, and this is one way to start.

Nicole Avise Rouse
December 2
Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:5-12; Philippians 1:12-18a

I am supposed to be writing an Advent devotional and I just…can’t.

What do we do when the wilderness shows up in the middle of our projects?

Lauren Verseman
“Crying out in the wilderness” seems to me to be a very appropriate theme given the times in which we live.

Too many times we hear about a disagreement ending with death. When some go out for the evening, they just stick a gun in their pocket, and any arguments end with taking the gun out and shooting.

Or an argument may end with taking a car and running over the person who sparked anger.

Or politicians go for anything that will give them favor to stay in office.

Or many wonder why a loved one has to wait for surgery for cancer.

My whole being aches many times because I don't understand all of this hatred and anger, power-grabbing and pain beyond my control, and I feel like I am wandering in the wilderness of darkness.

That is when Luke 1: 78-79 touches my soul and gives me hope:

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

That light for me many times takes the form of kindred spirits who are willing to travel this path with me.

Who are your kindred spirits?

Linda Paglusch
December 4

Take Nothing for Your Journey

Fortunately, our back pocket was big enough for a clean pair of undies...

All of us like to do some prep for a trip. But Jesus was telling the disciples that the house is on fire, and you need to go, now! Time is of the essence.

We all want to plan how we are going to tell the world about Jesus. But Jesus knew they had to hurry. No plans, just go.

Sometimes Jesus needs us to go cry out in the wilderness, tell the Good News with a fervor that can’t be quenched. Sometimes we need to rinse out our clothes on the fly when Jesus says go... Now! Prepare the way!

John Scott
This year I had not planned to write for the Advent devotional. There have been several things happening in my life that consume most of my attention. It didn't seem that I had enough mental energy left over to focus long enough on a topic that is not something I am immediately experiencing.

Then several of us were emailed about writing for specific days with the day’s specific scriptures. The scriptures for this day, December 5th, are rich with meaning and depth. What “luck”! After reading and rereading all the scriptures, it is Philippians 1:9 that really caught my attention.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight....

The writer of this prayer was amazingly astute in his request for the church at Philippi. It is only when having knowledge assisted by depth of insight that we can truly love someone or something. Without this clear sightedness, relationships, whether with people, organizations or communities, tend to become mundane and boring. The church (Church) is a community of people striving to develop God's realm to the here and now. What is God's realm? It is where people act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God (paraphrase of Micah 6:8b).

I call this, God’s realm, quaint. To many people, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “quaint” derisively means someone or thing is “strikingly old-fashioned or unfamiliar.” That is definition 1a. I prefer definition 1b: “unusual or different in character or appearance.” I really prefer definition 2a: “marked by skillful design.” I really, really prefer 2b: “marked by beauty or elegance”!

I don't know if God’s realm is derisively quaint. At 66 years old, I haven't lived long enough to know or think of God’s realm as old fashioned. I do know God’s realm is not the usual. For some people it is somewhat unusual. For others it would be, if they thought about it, radically unusual. It is, if you think about it; it is a part of God’s skillful design and completely beautiful and elegant. It's not mundane or boring. Think about it.

Anne Little
December 6
Psalm 126; Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:22-25

Seek Joy

It is a privilege to live in a society that imposes few restraints on our personal actions. But this freedom provides many challenges including the possibility of the abuse of power. Even after the best possible choice of action, there is no guarantee of what the outcome will be. Therefore, it is always a great joy when something planned actually works out for the good of all.

During the Sixth century BCE when the Jews were freed from their captivity in Babylon and encouraged to return to their homeland in Jerusalem, there was indescribable joy.

In recent years there has been a similar feeling of those Jews who have been persecuted in their country of birth to return to Israel, their spiritual home. This return has not been just for the Palestinians whose land they took over. But the joy of those who feel they have “come home” has been deep.

For those of us who struggle with the painful realities of injustice, of systemic racism, of gun violence, of environmental degradation, even in a free society, we don’t know what to do. Where is the joy? Can it be that our hearts are called to celebrate the small things that bring new possibility and renewed life: fair trials, increases in the minimum wage, improved health care, better prison conditions?

We’re not in control of the outcomes, but we have a choice as to our focus. We can sink in despair, or we can work for the good, trusting in the constant promise of God to finally bring joy out of every situation.

Prayer: God of infinite compassion, help us to keep faith in your deepest desire for the health and well-being of your people. Keep our eyes focused on your good will. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lois Yatzeck
December 7
Psalm 126; Isaiah 19:18-25; 2 Peter 1:2-15

Restoration

I love the Psalms; they “tell it like it is.” Despair, doubt, anger, fear and trembling, hope, assurance, joy - you name it, it’s all in there. Real life. Real faith.

The psalmist today remembers an earlier day of renewal. The psalmist pays homage to a time when laughter and rejoicing were restored, a time when the people proclaimed in celebration what the Lord had done. And Lord, the psalmist speaks in faith, if you did it before, do it again!

It seems we’ve been treading troubled waters for many long months. Yet remember, reminds our psalmist, what the Lord has done and will do again. There is hope in our Emanuel, God with Us. “Restore our fortunes, O Lord…”

Prayer:
Holy One, doer of great and wondrous things; even in times like these, we rejoice, for our hope is in you. Amen.

Fred Hudson
December 8
Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:3-7; Luke 7:18-30

Now is the Way

Now is the Time – a time of tears and desolation, destruction and uncertainty.
Fear hangs in the air like a fog.
Isaiah says, Buck Up!
The Psalmist says health will be restored to the people.
Health will be restored to the land.
“Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
Will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”
A Way of Holiness will blossom.

The Way of Holiness - Not a map, a path or a recipe.
Rather, a Way of being. Just being. Blossoming even.

A knowing, sensing, seeing the sacred, divine light in every being, every creation,
Every tax collector, fisherman, priest, and criminal.

A Way …
of holding that light sacred in the face of darkness…
Knowing too that you are also the sacred light… Be.
And holding your own light sacred – above defilement and protected
From abuse and that which would profane it. Yes, Do this, Dear Light House.

John, the Baptizer sends his people to ask Jesus, “Are you the One?”
Jesus said. “See how I heal, hold, and love all? See how death, sickness, and destruction submit?”
John recognizes the Way, the Way of Being Love, the Way of Holiness (and Jesus wasn’t even Christian). Later Jesus said, “I am the Way. So are you. Just the Way you are.”

The One. We are One. The Way.

Sacred friend, You too are the Way.
Most of all: Love big, Blossom.

Kat Logan Smith, human with multiple sclerosis
December 9
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

What an interesting offering of dissimilar views of two prophets, and then Paul has the gall to tag on a testimonial fundraiser. But nobody was wrong.

Amos started it, lambasting the comfortable and the indifferent in the name of justice. Old Amos never saw a righteous feast he couldn’t abhor.

About a half century later, here comes Isaiah simply calling for praise for the almighty and for people to be thankful. Neither of them were wrong at their time, nor is their message wrong in our time. There is still a mission, for resisting evil and avarice and also acclaiming and acknowledging we serve a noble, higher, and mysterious force. We may not fully understand it, yet it is there.

As to Paul’s stewardship call to the Corinthians, how can vital teachings and ministries continue without a foundation? There could be no purpose in praise for the Lord or righteous actions against evildoers without a union of mind and spirit from those who have heard the word and felt the spirit. Hope for sustaining all congregations lies in making known the spirit of Amos, Isaiah, and Paul, and also a few other saints. Perhaps even some we knew or even see every day.

Fred Tilinski
December 10
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 8:4-12; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Once you put it out into the universe it’s very hard to take it back.
Don’t panic.
Celebrate the gift, even if you don’t see it yet.

Lauren Verseman
December 11
Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 9:8-15; Luke 1:57-66

Let Us Sing

I once considered writing a reflection on the question “Why Did We Sing So Much?” I remember music and singing at every event, for every occasion, in every location. Even in times of loneliness, sadness, sorrow, despair, tragedy - we sang. At school, at church, in our homes - we sang. In times of celebration - we sang. Why did we sing so much?

The old “Negro Spirituals” provide a clue. No matter the content or context of the songs, they almost always ended with a proclamation of faith and hope and assurance. Perhaps it’s in the troubling, challenging times that our faith is strengthened and our hope is renewed.

In this Advent season, even in times like these - especially in times like these - now is the time to sing!

Prayer:
Holy One, in these days of waiting and watching, we sing and rejoice! Amen.

Fred Hudson
What, Me Worry?

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice
Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.
Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

People worry a lot. I can’t blame them. A lot of things are lousy and terrible in the world. If you’re a worrier, there’s no shortage of things to find to worry about. But this passage says “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

I’m glad this passage doesn’t end with “and God will magically make everything better,” because that’s an unrealistic way to go about prayer. But I think the value here is in thanksgiving. When you pray with a heart of thankfulness, it can very often bring the level of worry down a notch or two.

Give it a try if you’re stressed or worried about something. Say a short prayer to God, but start with a bunch of things you’re thankful for.

So take a page out of the prophet Alfred E. Newman’s book (well, it’s more of a magazine)—What, me worry?

Wes Buchek
On November 21, the last Sunday of the church year in 2021, I preached about some of the ways I have wrestled with the imagery of the feast day of the Church known as “Christ the King Sunday.” I changed the words of the gospel song “Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King” to express the change that I hope to see – “No more injustice there” and “No more violence there.”

Isaiah 11:1-9 is a description of a king very different from any the world has seen. The prophet says that a descendant of Jesse (King David’s father and an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth according to the genealogy in Gospel of Matthew 1) will govern with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, judging the needy with righteousness and providing justice to the poor.

“The Peaceable Kingdom” is vividly pictured by listing animals living safely, side by side, instead of in survival of the fittest mode. When we summarize this as “the lion shall lie down with the lamb”, we are scrambling the order of the animals listed in the verses, but the sense of it is right. (And, as Larry Gaines always reminds us, “the lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep” if the world stays as it is now.)

Best of all for me are the closing verses:

“They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.”

How I long for that kind of peace, for violence to disappear from our tired old, aching planet.

If I am to join in “Crying in the Wilderness” and “Preparing the Way”, how does this passage from Isaiah 11 speak to me? It reminds me to “Be the change I wish to see.” If I want peace, I must live peaceably myself.

Prayer: Make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred let me sow your love. Amen.

Jeanette Mott ("J-MO") Oxford
December 14
Isaiah 11:1-9; Numbers 16:20-35; Acts 28:23-31

The story of Paul preaching to the Jewish leaders in Rome gave expression to the story I want to tell. Many of the leaders accepted his words, but others left the gathering in disbelief. It's likely the disagreement altered longstanding relationships, much as our lives have changed because of our inability to see life the same way some of our family and friends do.

These damaged relationships have bothered me for a long time, but the events of this year have brought a different understanding. I know now the most positive response I can make is to set aside my biases in favor of showing love.

My brother and I had a contentious relationship. As we grew older it became clear that he blamed me for much of the unhappiness in his life. He was often hostile and bitter, telling me of the ways I had caused him pain. When I disagreed, he would break contact for a while.

When he was put in a nursing home, I was his only contact and staff depended on me for support regarding his treatment. My husband and I made every effort to provide for him, making sure he had his cell phone, sending warm clothing, and generally being available to listen and offer encouragement whenever he called. In one of our last conversations, he said, “I really appreciate all that you have done for me. You have been really good to me.”

Two days later he died.

He had let go of his anger and told me so. Instead of feeling hurt and rejection, I was given the freedom to grieve and remember him with love, a gift given only because he let go.

Beckie Tilinski
December 15

Isaiah 11:1-9; Micah 4:8-13; Luke 7:31-35

Luke 7:33-35
33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ 34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ 35 But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”

Do you ever just feel like you can't please people no matter what you do? Someone is always upset about the decisions you have made. They said John the Baptist had a demon because he fasted. They said Jesus was a drunkard and glutton because he ate with commoners and sinners. What have they said about you?

The work of Jesus continues no matter what. Praise God for that! If we caved to those who thought we were doing the wrong things, or wasting our time on others would we ever be doing the work of building the kingdom of God?

I spend most of my days with 7th graders. That awkward age of around 13, where you want to look cool and fit in. It is a rough time in life. It is, in essence, the beginning of not being able to please all people. May this generation learn faster than mine. May they see the important work of building the Kingdom instead of wasting time on fitting in.

Remember that it is OK to rock the boat. God has been waiting a long time for us to get our act together, and I’m sure God will continue to wait.

Nicole Avise-Rouse
I think that most of us believe that the covenant of God’s eternal love has been written in our hearts. The challenge is how to really live that reality.

Some of us have the habit of putting ourselves down and not believing God loves us when circumstances are clearly making life difficult. Often, we treat others as though they also are not loved by God.

Taking time each day to remind ourselves that, in spite of our feelings of inadequacy, God truly loves us is a helpful spiritual practice. Sometimes we need help in remembering to do this.

My Mom was not an overtly religious person, just a faithful, gentle, good person. The mantra she shared with me often was from Psalm 118: “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

I say it every day.

Prayer: Gracious God, help us to remember that you have put your love in our hearts. Help us to live that love today. Amen.

Lois Yatzeck
Singing to a Deaf Audience

Part of the story in the movie “Mr. Holland’s Opus” is the title character putting on a concert for his deaf son. Mr. Holland is a music teacher at a high school so it understandable that all forms of music are “his life”. Much of the movie reflects the challenges and emotions. Mr. Holland grows through trying to share his passion of a medium that cannot be understood in manner of the masses. His son, part of Mr. Holland’s global audience, cannot hear. Mr. Holland finds a way. Mr. Holland has the high school shop class build temporary risers above the school’s auditorium’s seats. He then places large amplifiers underneath those risers. The music of the concert is broadcast through those amplifiers so his son and all the students at the school of the deaf he attends can feel the music through the vibrations in the floor. Mr. Holland invited his target audience to “hear” him. Mr. Holland wanted his “music” to be heard. Even though Mr. Holland was ridiculed throughout his emotional journey with his son’s condition he persevered and enjoyed success.

The community of faith continues to live through an endless loop of this same story. Psalm 80 begins, “Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.” We want the message of God, which we have adopted, to be heard. Isaiah begins, “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth.” The very message we proclaim is of God’s universal love for ALL things (not just those that look and live like us). The first verse of our reading in Hebrews states, “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.” In today’s world of misinformation and hateful rhetoric it truly seems that God’s message is falling on deaf ears.

LESSON: The truth is that the main character of both stories is successful; Mr. Holland and God.

PRAYER: Gracious one of all. Encourage me to find ways for your message to be heard. Amen.

Doug Kaufman
December 18

Cherubims and Chickens

In one of Madeline LeEngle's books, she describes a Cherubim as this huge, many-eyed, many-winged creature - a terrifying Beast. A young girl met this creature at night in an open field, with no one around.

As the story unfolds, to be able to do the task assigned to her, she must let go of her fear of the Beast and go with this creature. She wasn't exactly “enthroned,” but she did let the Cherubim enfold her into its wings and leave home. Imagine the fear of going somewhere you don’t know and trusting yourself into the care of this creature...

Now we leave this story briefly and go to Luke 13:34. And Jesus begs the question, “Oh Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather you...”

There's a farm with an open field. A mother hen and her chicks are out enjoying the day. A lightning strike sets the field on fire and blocks the way to the chicken coop. The hen cries out to her little ones to come to her, and she folds them all under her wings. The farmer finds the hen burned to death, and when he reaches down to check on her all the chicks are safe.

It's easy to come when it's Mother's voice, and we run to safety - trust is already there. But sometimes, our help comes from a very unknown, scary Beast. Our faith and trust are tested greatly sometimes. Are we willing to let the scary Beast enfold us to accomplish our task at hand? Are you willing to ride a Cherubim to prepare the way of the Lord?

John Scott
Star Wars is my absolute favorite movie series. I have watched the nine various Star Wars movies released many, many times. Why are they so appealing to me? There is something about the epic battle between good and evil that intrigues me. I am especially drawn to the scenes where the good people win despite the overwhelming odds against them.

My very favorite scene is one is which Jedi Luke Skywalker (“good guy”) stands alone against the most feared First Order fighter Kylo Ren (“bad guy”) and a plethora of First Order storm troopers with the most powerful weapons and machinery. Without ruining the movie, let me say conventional wisdom did not dictate the outcome of this encounter.

It simply doesn’t make sense in our 21st century world for the smaller, or weaker, or less known, or poorer, uneducated, or less well connected to prosper. Yet, this is frequently the case in stories we find in scripture. The text from Micah 5:2 reads, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.” A ruler of Israel would likely be expected to come from the city of Jerusalem, not this small village on its periphery.

This counter-cultural message is also found in Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55. Beginning in verse 51 Mary states, “God’s mighty arm has done tremendous things! God has scattered the proud and haughty ones. God has brought down the princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. God has filled hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.”

God does not see as our world sees. Our culture values size, fame, celebrity, power, wealth, ability, and control. God values an openness to listen and a willingness to follow.

This Advent may we open our hearts and respond in faith believing God can do mighty things through us as God did through Mary. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Carol Trissell
December 20
Psalm 113; Genesis 25:19-28; Colossians 1:15-20

Breathe.
Feel held together.

Breathe.
Feel held, together.

Lauren Verseman
December 21
Psalm 113; Genesis 30:1-24; Romans 8:18-30

At the conclusion of our adult Sunday School class, Vickie Ingram sometimes volunteers to lead the closing prayer. More than once, I have heard this wonderful phrase in her prayer:

“Father, we know you sit high, but look low.”

I am fairly sure the origin of this image is verses 5 and 6 in Psalm 113:
Who is like the LORD our God,
   the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
   on the heavens and the earth?

Sitting high but looking low was not the usual job description of a deity in the places and time period in which Hebrew scripture came to be shaped. In the nations surrounding ancient Israel, the gods were aligned with earthly rulers in mythic tales that justified why those rulers held power. Some rulers even claimed to be gods. Thus, it was extremely radical for the I AM who spoke from the burning bush in Exodus 3 to care about the fate of the Hebrew slaves and to send Moses to liberate them from the mighty Pharaoh.

Psalm 113 further describes this very weird deity:
He raises the poor from the dust
   and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
   with the princes of his people.
He settles the childless woman in her home
   as a happy mother of children.

Lifting the poor from the dust and ashes. Pulling freaky reversals of fortune. Turning the barren ones into loving parents. These are all radical departures from the ways gods of the ancient Near East were supposed to behave.

Pastor Kris has reminded us in the introduction to this Advent booklet that we are called to be people of resistance to the modern Empire that crushes so many. May we be bold enough to change the social order in ways that match the image of God as described in Psalm 113, “the One who sits high and looks low.”

Jeanette Mott ("J-MO") Oxford
December 22
Luke 1:46-55; Micah 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:14-22

Peace in Christ

We can only be one and united in Jesus Christ our Lord. When we operate as one in unity, it is because we are in the family of God. Micah reminds us that peace and security comes through our obedience to Christ. As a result, we can be like the nations and people who shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks because we will study war no more and nations shall no longer be against nations. The commandments are for both macro and micro people as well as organizations and nations. We can only achieve this peace if we unite as one and walk in the name of the Lord our God. This is how we become one/united in the spirit of peace.

We must destroy the things that divide us. Paul in Ephesians remind us that as Gentiles, we are reconciled with the children of God through the blood of Jesus Christ. For Jesus is our peace and, in His flesh, He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us and created one group in the place of two through putting to death the hostility through the cross.

Yet when we think about this time of the year and pray for peace on Earth and cry out in the wilderness, peace and unity can only be realized if we all allow the phobias, isms, hatred, etc.… the dividing walls, to be placed under the blood of Jesus. May they be broken down and no longer stand in our lives.

Cry Out for Peace on Earth and Let It Begin with Me!!

Rev. Dr. Bella Winters
December 23
Luke 1:46-55; Micah 4:6-8; 2 Peter 1:16-21

...as to a light shining in a dark place...

Amanda Verbeck
December 24
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness,
a light has dawned.”
Isaiah 9:2

These words from reverberate in my heart and mind as I reflect upon this day I write. Upon arriving at the hospital this morning, I responded to a code blue for an elderly patient. The doctor told her family it was unlikely she would survive. An hour later, EMS brought in a patient who had swerved to miss a deer, lost control of the vehicle, and was not found for five hours.

After my lunch break, I went to see a patient who hoped surgery would remove all his cancer. The surgeon discovered his cancer had already metastasized so nothing could be done. Leaving there, I went to visit with a wife whose husband was dying of liver disease. Next, I prayed in the room of an intubated homeless patient who has a poor prognosis and no identified family.

Leaving work, I turned on the radio to hear that the jury had found Kyle Rittenhouse not guilty on all counts. I listened to the pain in the voices of commentators and interviewees who are People of Color. They wondered aloud if the verdict would have been different if Kyle were Black.

When I worked overnight, I frequently ended my shift by watching the sunrise. There was something in watching the morning light overtake the darkness of night that was uplifting. As the sun rose, I prayed over this city and the illness, disease, violence, racial injustice, and death I had witnessed during my shift.

Without a doubt, there is great darkness in our world. But the Light has dawned, and the darkness will never overcome it.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government
and peace there will be no end.”
Isaiah 9:6-7a

Rev. Dr. Carol Trissell
But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people…”

An announcement in the wilderness to shepherds (considered so unreliable that they weren’t allowed to testify in court) and sheep. A proclamation made by a terrifying heavenly messenger that begins with my favorite imperative “Do not be afraid,” and ends with a terrifying choir praising God… leaving no credible witnesses.

Good news of great joy for all the people announced in a way that nobody would believe, to people nobody would believe just doesn’t make sense. Wouldn’t you want to do this thing in the Temple courtyard or better still from the pinnacle of the temple so the whole city could hear it?!?

Jesus’ cousin John does his big announcement about the coming Messiah and the need for repentance and the forgiveness of debts, where? In the wilderness! This is starting to look like a pattern.

Makes you wonder what announcements we might be missing out here in our various wildernesses; what messengers we are too afraid of; what witnesses we write off as crazy or unreliable; and what our cynical or logical outlook says makes no sense.

Often those crying out in the wilderness or attempting to prepare the way are rejected as crazy, communist, queer, etc. The powers of this world have coopted the church, domesticated the Gospel, turned Jesus into a white conservative, and turned being poor into a personal moral failing. We who are the resistance must, therefore, continually queer the church by preaching and teaching brown skinned, socialist, murdered by the state Jesus in order to prepare the way for the coming kingdom.

But there will be time for that tomorrow, for THIS DAY we celebrate because “a child has been born for us, a son given to us,” and we who have “walked in darkness have seen a great light!” We are awed and amazed. We believe in the truth of this story and the promise of this child who is ALWAYS being born among us!

Krissy Avise Rouse