



Watching
waiting
Preparing
praying



Our Savior's
Lutheran Church

Advent Devotional † 2013

Advent: The Beginning

John 1:27

He is the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

The word “Advent” means “Coming.” During the season of Advent, we prepare for the coming of Christ. We watch, wait, prepare, and pray. We prepare ourselves for something different. We prepare ourselves for something new.

Advent is the New Year’s Day of the Church Year. The first week of Advent, is the first week of the church liturgical calendar. The purpose of the liturgical calendar is not to mark the passage of time, but to celebrate and more fully understand the narrative of biblical story, the mysteries of God, and our own faith and relationship with Jesus Christ.

So as we enter this New Church Year we watch, wait, prepare, and pray!

Prayer: Loving God, as we enter this Advent season, we open all the dark places in our lives and memories to the healing light of Christ. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, That we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.

Preparation #1 The Word of God

Isaiah 40:11

A voice of one calling in the desert, “prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.”

Advent is a time for preparation. In thinking about preparation, I’d like to share with you a few of my favorite quotes about being well prepared:

- * “It’s not the will to win that matters—everyone has that. It’s the will to prepare to win that matters.” - “Bear” Bryant
- * “By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail.” - Benjamin Franklin
- * “If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six sharpening my axe.” - Abraham Lincoln

We know how to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. We hang the Christmas lights, decorate the tree, play the music, prepare the food, make the travel arrangements, and buy the gifts. But how do we prepare for the true Christmas? How do we prepare for the Coming of Christ?

How do we prepare for the Coming of Christ? Dwell in the Word of God! Read Scripture!

Here are a few more suggested Advent texts:

- * Week 1: Isaiah 11:1-10, Isaiah 7:10-14, Isaiah 11:1-5, Jeremiah 33:14-16
- * Week 2: Psalm 25:1-10, Psalm 27:1-7, 18-19, Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:1-12
- * Week 3: I Thessalonians 3:9-13, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38
- * Week 4: Matthew 3:1-12, Luke 21:25-36, Luke 2:8-20

Preparation #2 Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Another way we prepare for the coming of Christ is through prayer. Martin Luther emphasized the importance of prayer saying,

“I have so much to do today, that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”



As we journey through this season, let's make this journey a prayer journey. This prayer journey can include our worship prayers, confession and forgiveness, prayers at home, songs of the season, reading scripture, or silence.

Maybe your prayer journey includes a discipline such as writing a poem for each week of Advent or writing a song or journal. Or maybe it includes writing letters to people you care about. Maybe your prayer journey includes an art form of drawing, painting, or sculpture.

So as we prepare for the Coming of Christ... may we prepare in prayer!

Preparation #3 Service

Mark 13:32-37

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Another way we prepare for the Coming of Christ is through service. Our gospel teaches us to be awake. Be awake and watch for the coming of Christ. Be awake to the needs of the world. Be awake and serve. Be awake and feed the hungry. Be awake and tend the sick. Be awake and visit the imprisoned.

God has entrusted us with responsibilities. He has left the servants in charge, each with their own work. Be awake. God works through our service. GOD'S WORK... OUR HANDS!



Sunday, December 1

Advent Candles

John 8:12

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Candles have been used for centuries as a symbol of light. The Bible speaks of Christ as the true light coming into the world. In commemoration of that coming, we light candles for the four weeks leading to Christmas.

- * The first candle is the candle of HOPE.
- * The second candle is the candle of PEACE.
- * The third is the candle of JOY.
- * The fourth candle is the candle of LOVE.

Although the meanings of the candles have varied at different times and in different places, the significance of the Christ candle never alters. Jesus is the light of the world! May we follow him, and always walk in the light of life!

Monday, December 2

Light and Darkness

John 1:3-5

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.

One of our favorite things to do during the Christmas season is to drive around town and look at the Christmas lights. There is something incredibly peaceful about the light in the darkness.

Theologically, this is one of the most powerful images of Advent; the image of Light and Darkness.

We are all too often reminded that we live in a world of darkness. We live in a world with pain, grief, sorrow, and suffering. In the birth of Christ we receive a wonderful gift; the gift of light. The light of hope, the light of peace, the light of life!

At times, the power of darkness can seem overwhelming. This gospel lesson teaches us that the power of darkness is not nearly as powerful as the power of light! The power of pain, grief, sorrow, and suffering is not nearly as powerful as the hope we receive in the light of Christ!

Tuesday, December 3

John the Baptist Pointing Luke 3:15-16

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

The crowds of people came to John the Baptist. People were filled with expectation. All were questioning, was John the Baptist the messiah. The crowds pointed to John and said, "You, you are the one." But John simply points to Jesus and says, "The One, is coming more powerful than I, the messiah, is coming."

In our society of media and culture, where everyone seems to be pointing at themselves and saying, "look at me, look at me, I am the one." It's important to hear the words

of John the Baptist. When people are saying "you are the one," instead of pointing at himself, he simply points to Jesus. "The One more powerful than I, is coming."

I love the way John the Baptist is typically portrayed in artwork. Typically, the image of John the Baptist is always pointing to Jesus. This image epitomizes the meaning of Advent for me—pointing to the coming of Christ! He is coming! The One more powerful is coming!

Wednesday, December 4

Recognizing Jesus

John 1:10-11

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

What is God up to here? I truly believe that God is always at work in the world around us! God is active in our world and active in our lives. Oftentimes, however, I think we are so busy that we not only don't give

thanks and praise to God, we don't even recognize what God is doing. During the Christmas season, we often get so caught up in the lights, gifts, food, parties, and celebrations, that we overlook the true meaning of Christmas.

In this Advent season, let's ask the question, "What is God up to here?" Let's take the time to recognize what God is doing! Let's recognize how God is active in our lives! Let's recognize if God is active in our world! Let's ask each other at the end of the day, "How did you see God at work today?"

Let's recognize Jesus!

Thursday, December 5

Authenticity and Truth

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

When I was graduating from college, I had a conversation with a very successful C.E.O. of a major corporation. I asked him if he had any advice for somebody who was just entering the work force. He said, "I do. Always take responsibility for your own actions. As an employer, an employee can maybe fool me temporarily, but in the end, I can always recognize authenticity and truth."

This was a piece of advice I have filed

in my permanent memory. People can sense authenticity and truth.

I think we live in a world where people are hungry for the truth. We don't want to be lied to. We crave authenticity.

Living in the information age, we have so much information available to us, it becomes difficult to know what is true.

This is one of the gifts we receive in Christ. In Christ alone, we receive truth! If you are looking for something true, if you are looking for something authentic, I have good news! The Word has become flesh and lives among us, we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, and he is full of grace and truth!

Friday, December 6

God is Revealed

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

In the Son we see the father. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. Jesus reveals God's heart.

Jesus, as the Revealer of God, communicates to us the thoughts, feelings, and desires of God. Jesus, who is close to the Father's heart, has made the Father's heart



known. Jesus is the clear revelation of the Father.

Yet, he doesn't just talk about what goes on inside God. Jesus is more than just the revealer of God, He is God. Jesus is truly God, and truly human. This is the incarnation—God is incarnate in Christ—God becomes human. In the beginning was the Word, the Word was God, the Word became flesh. Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human!

The life of Jesus Christ reveals God. In order to know the Father, one needs to look to the Son.

In Christ...God is revealed!

Saturday, December 7

Waiting
Psalm 62:5-8

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

I remember as a child sitting in church watching the first Advent candle being lit. I could hardly wait for that center candle, the Christ candle, to be lit on Christmas Eve. When I was growing up, our family had a Christmas tradition that we

would go to church, come home and eat a nice meal, do the dishes, and then finally (what I had been waiting for) open gifts. When the first Advent candle was being lit, waiting for Christmas Eve seemed like it was going to take forever!

Now, as an adult, I can't believe how fast the season of Advent passes. We live such busy lives, that "waiting" takes on a whole different meaning. To set time aside for devotions, prayer, and service is difficult. Yet this is what Advent is all about!

As a child, when I was watching that Advent candle being lit, I could hardly wait for Christmas. I'm thankful that my parents brought me to church because something more profound was happening than just waiting to open presents. This exercise of waiting was building a foundation of theology of waiting for Christ!

This Advent season, may we set aside time to "wait" in the word, prayer, and service!

Sunday, December 8

Season of Joy (Maybe)
Jeremiah 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your good and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

The Christmas season is a time of joy. It can also be a season of pain. During the holidays we often grieve



and miss loved ones who have passed away. Christmas is a time of joy, but it can also be a time that we feel lonely.

I recently had a conversation with someone about the quote, "God won't give me more than I can handle." I don't know if this is true. I think we always have more than we can handle. This is our Christian theology...we can't do it alone!

When we grieve and miss loved ones, we are reminded of pain, but we are also reminded of why Christ is necessary. Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us that with God we have a future and a hope. God has a plan for you, and God's plan is a good plan!

In Christ we have something new, something good. In Christ we have hope, peace, joy, and love. In Christ we have life, and we have life abundantly!

It is God's intention that we have JOY.

During this Advent season, even in our grief and sorrow, may we turn to God and turn to each other, so

that we can have hope, peace, joy, love, and life abundantly!

Monday, December 9

Mary; "Do Not Be Afraid"
Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

An angel went from God, to a town called Nazareth, to a woman whose name was Mary. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid."

In scripture, every time that we hear the words "Do not be afraid," it is the proclamation of good news. Every time we read, "Do not be afraid," it is followed with good news"



The angel said, “Do not be afraid”, and proclaims good news.

- * Good news that “Mary will bear a son.”
- * Good news that “You will name him Jesus.”
- * Good news that “He will be great.”
- * Good news that “He will reign, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Do not be afraid! May we live in the Good News of Christ!

Tuesday, December 10

Confronting the Presence of God

Luke 1:28-29

And (the Angel) came to (Mary) and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Throughout the Bible, it’s fascinating to hear how people respond when confronted with the presence of God, when God calls upon people to

take action. For example when God confronts Moses, Moses says, “Not me, take my brother.” When God confronts Jonah and tells him to go to Ninivah, Jonah goes the opposite direction. When God confronts the disciples, they lay down their fishing nets and follow. Zachariah goes mute, Paul goes blind, the leper is healed, and the rich man is disgusted.

In these Biblical stories, it’s fascinating how people respond standing in the presence of God. Some believe. Some don’t. Some are offended. Others embrace the moment.

In the annunciation of Jesus, Mary was young. She was unwed. She didn’t have life experience. Mary was initially startled and confused. But following the initial reaction, Mary responds with faith! She says, “Here I am, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Today, in our own lives, our own experiences, it’s fascinating how people respond standing in the presence of God. Some believe.

Some don’t. Some are offended. Others embrace the moment.

During this Advent season, remember... You are in the presence of God!

- * God has promised to be where 2-3 are gathered in his name.
- * God has promised to be in the Word and Sacrament.
- * God has promised to be in the living word of God.
- * God is active and present in our lives!

Some will believe. Some won’t. Some will be offended. Others will embrace the moment.

My hope and prayer for each of us, is that when we are standing in the presence of God, and God calls us into action, we respond with the faithfulness of Mary. We respond by saying, “Here I am. A servant of the Lord, let me become what you have called me to be.”

Wednesday, December 11

ELW #243 Verse 1

*Lost in the night do the people yet languish,
longing for morning the darkness to vanquish,
Plaintively sighing with hearts full of anguish.
Will not day come soon? Will not day come soon?*

When you live this far north, images of darkness and light at Christmas have a special meaning. This verse

comes from a Nordic hymn, which makes sense. Around Christmas time those of us in the Northern part of the world see little light. It is the darkest time of the year. We talk about Christ being the light born in the darkness and we celebrate as the sun slowly but surely starts to reclaim the day. It happens every year.

But this is significant. The “darkness” is really real. Sometimes we wonder where God is, how God has “won” anything when depression, addiction, death, poverty, and war seem to perpetuate and overwhelm. For two thousand years we have watched the world ebb and flow in and out of darkness like the world tilting around the sun. Our own lives seem at times filled with darkness. We cry out to God “will not day come soon?”

Maybe part of Advent is being real. It’s admitting to ourselves that life is not perfect, we are not perfect, and God seems still a mystery. Maybe Advent is a time to look back on the year and be honest about the anguish, the cries for day. How can we recognize the light when it comes, if we ignore the reality of the darkness?

Thursday, December 12

ELW #272 Verse 1

*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming
from tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
as seers of old have sung,
it came, a flow'r so bright,
amid the cold of winter,
when half-spent was the night.*

This beautiful Christmas hymn sings of Jesus as the rose that blooms from the stump of Jesse. It makes no sense if you don't know some of the Biblical history. For instance, Jesse was King David's father. The Bible often talks about King David's lineage as a tree that was cut off in the 500 BCE timeframe. The Jewish people waited for a new king, a messiah, who would rise up and save them. They believed that messiah would be from King David's line. Thus, Jesus is the rose that blooms from the stump of Jesse.

The image of a rose blooming out



of a stump is rather poetic but also great imagery to use for God's work. After all, if you believe God planted the tree, how painful and earthshattering would it be to see that tree cut down? You might feel God's promises are over. You might feel there is no hope. Yet, God always had a new trick up His sleeve. Roses can bloom from stumps. Light can come in the darkness. Life can come out of death. A baby born can begin a brand new chapter in the world.

Friday, December 13

Isaiah 11:1-2

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

When we baptize babies (or anyone) we rest our hands on the baptized's head and pray for the Holy Spirit to come, using the words above. Once again, the prophet Isaiah was giving hope to the people that God will do something new in the face of total destruction. God would bring forth a leader from King David's family. A messiah. That messiah will have a mighty spirit. We believe this was Jesus.

How interesting that we now use such a blessing on the newly baptized. We are asking for the same spirit that was in Jesus to be in us. In many ways, we are little Christs to one another, offering love and forgiveness in a way we can touch and feel. Indeed, part of the Christmas message is that God has come to dwell with us. That means in the person of Jesus, but also in our everyday lives. The spirit that rested on Jesus hasn't left. It is still working among us, blessing us, changing us, and leading us through the gift of one another.

Saturday, December 14

Isaiah 43:18-19

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

What are the things of old? What does it look like when God is doing a new thing? We often think about how God works in our personal lives. For me, old things might be resentments or ideas of myself and the world that aren't working for me anymore. Maybe they never were, but I couldn't let go. God does a new thing by forcing my heart to forgive, move on, change.

But I think this happens in the world and in the church as well. Things of old can be ideas we have about how

God works or how the church is supposed to work. We can forget that God is always pushing us forward and that the new challenges we face in the church may not be because we have fallen away from good old traditional faith, but rather because God thinks we are ready for a new challenge. These new things are sometimes welcome, but sometimes they aren't.

This Advent, God may be doing a new thing in your life, your community, your church. God may be asking you to let go of things of old. What might they be? What is the new way God is putting before you?

Sunday, December 15

Luke 1:5-7

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

How interesting that Luke's Christmas story actually begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth—John the Baptist's parents. Mary, and especially Joseph, don't get in the picture for a while. It is also interesting that Zechariah and Elizabeth are considered faithful



impossible baby will be very important—he prepares the way for Jesus!

The Christmas story actually includes a lot of characters, many of whom we forget. Yet, they remind us that God is active in quiet ways all the time. We all play a part in God's story of salvation. As supporting roles we participate still today in God's unfolding story.

observers of God's teachings and in good standing. Yet Elizabeth is barren.

These facts may seem insignificant except for the fact that people often believed that if a woman couldn't have a child it was some punishment from God. Yet Elizabeth and Zechariah were blameless. Hmmm. Furthermore, who cares about an opening scene with two supporting actors. Let's get to the stable and the angels!

Luke loves to remind us that small, quiet, and forgotten characters are powerful in their own way. They offer small, quiet, and powerful testimonies to God's grace and love. Here are two old people who will defy people's expectations of God. God loves Elizabeth and Zechariah—with or without a baby. God can make the impossible happen for them. And this

Monday, December 16

[Luke 1:10-13](#)

Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

Do we actually expect God to show up? I'm sort of used to God being a subtle and quiet presence in my life. Sometimes we feel close to God, other times we don't. But I guess we live with that because most of us don't actually expect God to show up in fancy ways.

Except that God does. A journalist interviewed thousands of people to report that a whopping 30-percent of the population has had a profound enough experience of God showing up that it has affected them greatly. Sometimes it was a presence in the room, an angel, a voice speaking to them, a near death experience, or a dream so powerful it has changed their life. That means in a room full of ten people I should be able to find at least one person with such a story.

And I usually can. Over my life as a pastor I have found that when we get into these stories, people sheepishly start sharing. First one and then another. I have my own story and I confess, those of us who have had those powerful moments don't usually walk around telling everyone we know. Because they are personal and we know not everyone will believe us.

But God does show up. Yes, most of the time that is in little ways. But in paying attention to those little ways

every day we may look back and have better eyes to see how deeply God's presence really was with us every day of our lives.

Tuesday, December 17

[Luke 1:18-20](#)

Zechariah said to the angel, "how will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Lesson one: Don't mess with Gabriel.

All kidding aside, I don't blame Zechariah any more than I blame Thomas for doubting the resurrection of Jesus. Some things really seem impossible and we do need to see to believe at times. Gabriel's response to Zechariah's questioning actually seems a bit harsh. For the record, the Bible is full



of people questioning God and God seems to take it in stride. God isn't a jerk, God just refuses to be questioned and yells "because I said so!"

But this story makes me wonder about the power of our tongue, our speech. When do we remain silent and when do we speak? We often speak way too quickly in our culture. We don't always listen to someone finish what they have to say before we interject our own thoughts. When having a debate, we can't even articulate our opponent's position because we are trying so hard to defeat them. We are afraid of moments of silence so music or aimless chatter often fills our cars, workplaces, elevators, and stores. Often times when we see someone suffering we want to say something to fix it or make it all right. But what can we say?

This constant chatter, the need to speak, the need to fill space, to prove our worth is often not helpful.

Many people of all walks of faith will practice silent retreats where they can say nothing at all for 24 hours to a week. Many find that they are far more open to God and other people as a result.

Maybe Gabriel knew that Zechariah needed a nine month silent retreat to study the work of God. "You, priest, think you know how God works? Watch and see, buddy!" May we all be struck mute occasionally and not be afraid, but rather use it as a chance to watch what God is doing when we aren't talking.

Wednesday, December 18

Luke 1:24-25

After those days (Zechariah's) wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

How sad that Elizabeth felt disgraced her entire marriage because she couldn't have a child. I hope in our current culture we look back and see this judgment as unnecessarily cruel. Yet, even today we will disgrace people for no better reasons. I have heard stories of people whose communities rejected, ignored, or neglected them—essentially disgraced them—because their child committed suicide. Or their spouse had an affair. Or their child came out as gay. Or they were diagnosed with depression. Or they filed for bankruptcy.

We still have lots of stigmas today. We still disgrace people. It is not God but us who put these awful labels on people. Sometimes we don't know what to say, but sometimes we judge people and alienate them as if that will help anything at all.

The beauty of this verse is that Elizabeth's disgrace was taken away by God. That is what God does. In this case it was the gift of a baby, but what if it wasn't? What if Elizabeth's community had just embraced her as she was and called her beautiful and whole? God works in various ways. But I believe God works to bring us out of shame, fear, guilt, and disgrace. God works all the time to bring healing, wholeness, and forgiveness within ourselves and in our communities.

Thursday, December 19

Luke 1:26-29

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Gabriel is super busy in this first chapter. He has all sorts of announcing to do. And everywhere he shows up people are confused and afraid. What is an angel to do?

But this is a fantastic greeting. If an angel showed up and said this to me and this alone, I would be pleased. "Good to know, Gabriel. God is with me. Thanks!" Sometimes it is just nice to know that God is with us. God is with us when we doubt, when we believe, when we are angry, when we are sad. When we are suffering, God gets it. When we are shaking our fist to the heavens, God is taking it patiently. When we are laughing our heads off with our friends, God is happy with us.

In truth, you all hear this greeting every single Sunday you come to church. Your angelic pastors (har har) get up and say, "The Lord be with you" and you respond very kindly, "and also with you." We should all be



so pleased at the greeting! We should say thank you to each other and to God. This is super good news! Isn't it interesting that we can say such profound things to one another in worship and miss their powerful meanings?

Every Sunday we hear Gabriel's message; "Greetings, beloved of God. The Lord is with you." "And also with you." Good deal.

Friday, December 20

Luke 1:30-31

The angel said to her, "do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

"Good news, Joseph might break off the engagement! Good news, everyone will think I committed adultery! Good news, I might be

stoned to death! Thanks, Gabriel, this is fantastic news!" That is what a sarcastic Mary would have said in response. The news of having a baby means something quite different for Elizabeth and Mary. To Elizabeth her disgrace was removed. To Mary, she was a single, unwedded mother which would make her disgraced. What is God doing?

Something new! Many Bible readers have noticed that Elizabeth's old age pregnancy sounds quite familiar to our Old Testament friends Sarah and Abraham. They were the grandparents of the entire Jewish people. But now, we are beginning a New Testament in our faith life, we have God doing something new. An unwed girl is with child. Chew on that, people!

Although we as readers have the benefit of knowing that Mary's child was from God and that Elizabeth's

barren state was not a punishment from God, the communities did not. They didn't know what God was up to and they certainly had their opinions.

It makes me wonder how much we miss of what God is up to today in the lives of people whom we judge. God may be using them to do something new, to push us, to make us see the world in a different way.

And maybe in your own life you feel as if you are entering new frightening territory. People may be judging you, or at least you feel they are. Yet God is with you saying, "do not be afraid." God is doing something new with you—maybe not in the form of a baby, but in the form of new birth in your heart.

Saturday, December 21

Luke 1:38

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

I think there is a danger in making Mary too much of a saint. We read this story and picture an angelic glow around Mary. Our Catholic brothers and sisters even developed the idea that Mary herself was conceived immaculately, making her sinless. We read Mary's acceptance above and think that there was no other girl on the planet as wonderful as Mary. God chose her because she was so perfect and faithful.

Can I be a little Lutheran for a moment? Martin Luther believed that our faith was a gift from the Holy Spirit. Even Paul states in his New Testament letters to the churches that we cannot boast about how strong our faith is. It isn't up to us! God is the giver, we are the receiver. How can you boast about a present?

I much prefer to think of Mary as a normal Jewish girl. God chose her not because she was perfect but because God chose her. And God has chosen all sorts of people in the Bible who all proved imperfect and sinful but yet still showed great faith. Why is Mary different? I believe her ability to receive this message and calling from God was a gift from God. In the same way, I hope that gives us hope and courage that in our weakness, in our mistakes, in our doubting, we can still be like Mary. We can still receive a great commission and job from God because God doesn't just pick perfect people. In addition, God is the one who gives us the courage to accept such a job. God has always worked great things through ordinary people. That's what God does.

Sunday, December 22

Luke 1:46-47, 51-53

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior...he has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

When we actually read Mary's Magnificat, we realize this girl has some serious strength! She is not a little girl talking about diapers



and cribs, she is talking about God turning the world upside down. The images she uses are powerful and even frightening. What does she mean?

The Magnificat was actually banned from churches in Guatemala for a time because the powers that be thought people would hear this and take it seriously. They would realize that maybe the world is not as God wants it. Maybe God has visions for things to change. Maybe the poor shall rise up and the powerful be thrown down.

These images do not have to be violent, but they are powerful. We have seen many great leaders around the world use the power of non-violence to topple governments, feed the poor, and free people from oppression. Right now many people are watching in amazement as sixteen year old Pakistani Malala Yousafzai is speaking fearlessly around the world in favor of education for girls. She was shot in the head by the Taliban and survived. Yet, she has forgiven the shooter and actually feels pity for him. She wants the world to change for the better. I believe she is speaking in the spirit of Mary. When we hear her speak with might, think of another sixteen year old middle eastern girl who had no power compared to Caesar. And yet God did great things through her.

Monday, December 23

Luke 1:59-63a

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No, he is to be called John." They said to her, "none of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John."

So much is going on in this little paragraph! "They" were going to name the baby. Who are "they?" Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives. What business is it of theirs to name a baby over and against the mother of the child? When Elizabeth has the gall to speak up, they turn to Zechariah for confirmation. Elizabeth's word is apparently meaningless. (Also note how the people assume Zechariah is deaf as well as mute. Why didn't they just ask him to write on a tablet instead of motioning?)

Here is a great example, once again, of our human rituals and traditions and cultures refusing to change or let new things occur. A name that is outside the family? Preposterous! A woman naming her son? Impossible! It sounds silly to us, but in our own way we are faced with such situations, too.



Pastors love to share stories about churches that argue and struggle over change. Sometimes it is the principle of the matter; "it was good enough for us, it should be good enough for you." Sometimes we get emotionally tied to the way things used to look or be. Changing a room, knocking out a wall, building an extra handicap accessible bathroom—these change the way things feel and look and we react to that. Admit it, we all do!

And in our own lives we may ignore the Elizabeths speaking up because we feel they have no right to. It isn't their place to speak. It isn't their place to give new ideas. The old ways worked for us, what is the matter with you? But what if God wanted Elizabeth to speak? What if God wanted a new name? What if God thinks we are ready to let go of old conventions because they aren't working the same way the used to? What if people change and their needs change? What if God just likes to mess with us?

Tuesday, December 24

Luke 1:63-65

He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.

The minute Zechariah goes with God's plan by agreeing with Elizabeth's naming of John, his voice returns. His nine months of silence is broken and the first thing he does is praise God. There is something very poetic about that.

Yet, I am amazed with the fear that comes over the neighbors. Indeed, when we see something we cannot explain, we usually become afraid. When we meet someone who is really different from us, we tend to be afraid first. When we hear noises at night that are unfamiliar, we get afraid.

I'm not saying we should never be afraid but I find it fascinating that when we witness God's actions our reaction is often fear. That is why angels always have to say, "do not be afraid". There is something about God that makes us afraid. Maybe we shouldn't be, but we are. We like things to stay predictable. We often stay in bad situations because they are at least familiar. Life changes are often stressful and create great anxiety because we have lost control.

And maybe that is it. We cannot control God. Somewhere deep inside that makes us afraid. Maybe that is why we read the Bible frantically searching for definitive statements we can pound down on and say, "Thus says the Word of the Lord!" It feels good to know the mind of God, the ways of God. But if God should happen to be beyond our control, what then?

There is a sense in the Christmas story that we need to give up control. God is so beyond us in so many ways. God does new things. God changes things, too. God surprises us. We want to be afraid. But angels say over and over again, "do not be afraid." Because it is good. It is going to be okay.

Wednesday, December 25

Luke 1:67-69

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy, "Blessed be the God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David."

If you are thinking this first chapter of Luke is the longest ever, then you are right! All of this occurs before the beloved Chapter 2 Christmas story with shepherds and angels and baby Jesus. So much happened in chapter one. We have Gabriel showing up twice, a priest struck mute, an elderly woman with child, a young girl with child. Mary sings a powerful song about God's mighty acts, Elizabeth speaks up when no one wants her to, and Zechariah affirms his wife. Now, Zechariah sings a song about God's mighty acts in a sort of echo of what Mary just did.

I circled some of the key words in Zechariah's song that follows: redeemed, saved, mercy, without fear, remembered, salvation, forgiveness, tender mercy, light to those who sit in darkness, way of peace.

Great words!

This is all very intentional. Before we even meet Jesus, Luke wants us to know who this Messiah will be. This is God in flesh, the very God who

topples those in power and gives to those with nothing. This is a God who does new things and removes disgrace. This is a God who makes women and children important while silencing priests and men. This is a God who remembers, helps, saves, and shows tender mercy.

If you had never heard the story in your life, wouldn't you be curious to know what kind of child Mary is carrying? How will this God-child come into the world? Who will come to worship the child? Who will this child grow up to be? What will he teach the world about God?

The story is just beginning.



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