

Devotions – December 7-13, 2014
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Sunday, December 7

Text: John 1:1-5

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (v. 5)

At supper this evening, we begin lighting two of our Advent candles. Of the many Advent and Christmas traditions, the candles have stood the test of time in our home. An asthmatic child, reactive to all sorts of molds and mildews, put an early end to fresh Christmas trees. Hanging stockings now seems nothing more than a pretty decoration for a couple approaching their 70's. And even the holiday foods have retreated before the warnings of the doctor.

But the candles remain. Yes, they stand out well against the dwindling daylight of December. But there is more to it than that. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

One need not be morbid to acknowledge the darkness of life. Just open the newspaper or turn on the evening news. Think about all the missteps in our personal lives and relationships, the unwelcome changes in our circumstances, the disappointments and compromises. We know way too much about darkness.

Still we are bold to proclaim Christ in its midst. Sometimes with joy, sometimes with white-knuckled determination, we cling to and celebrate the light of Christ. All yet will be well.

So we light candles, one more each week. They count us down to Christmas. They express our defiance of all that weighs us down. They celebrate the light which no darkness shall overcome.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, shine in our hearts that your salvation may guide us through the darkness of this life. Amen.



Monday, December 8

Text: Hebrews 11:1-16

“These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” (v. 13)

This summer I visited the grave of Elder John Strong in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am one of his 14th generation descendants. He came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, spent some time in the Plymouth area, went on to Connecticut, and then joined a small party going up river to establish Northampton. John was also a devout Puritan, helped found First Church, and served for rest of his life as an elder. A few generations later, incidentally, First Church was the home congregation of Jonathan Edwards, the great revivalist.

I knew none of this growing up. Now, though, it helps me ground myself in a succession of American and church history. It helps me understand who I am. Perhaps your family history does the same for you.

In Advent, as we look forward once more to celebrating Christ’s birth, we remember and thank God for all the faithful generations of ancient Israel who received and treasured the promises of God that one day a Messiah would come to bring their faith to its fulfillment and salvation to the whole world. This 11th chapter of Hebrews is a kind of litany of the faithful whose patience was gloriously justified in the birth of Jesus.

Family history can be a treasure, but much more so the generations of the faithful in which we also are blessed to stand and take our deeper, more lasting identity.

Let us pray: Lord God, we thank you for all who have taken their places in your grand plan of salvation. Grant that we may honor and pass on the faith which we, too, have received. Amen.



Tuesday, December 9

Text: Mark 1:1-8

**“Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.” (v. 3b)**

We live a mile down the road from an active gravel pit. Except when snow covers the ground, big trucks roll past our house every day. October is the busiest month. Contractors are working overtime to finish projects, and the county is stockpiling sand for use on winter roads. So in October, seven days a week, starting at 6:00 am, the trucks roll.

I do much the same. I get ready for winter. Leaves need to be cleared, the chimney swept, wood stacked, the lawn mower put away and the snowblower made ready. It is a routine I follow every autumn.

Preparation for one thing or another may be such a routine matter, though, that we overlook our need for spiritual preparation. The season of Advent reminds us of that need to be ready. Parables of wise and foolish maidens, honest and corrupt servants, fig trees failing to bear fruit, and, most dramatically, the ministry of John the Baptist sound the call to preparation.

Be ready! Yes, of course, be ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. More importantly, though, be prepared again and again to welcome the adult Jesus into your life. John the Baptist prepared for the one coming after him with a call to repentance and an admission that he was not worthy to stoop down and even untie the sandals on Jesus' feet.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, amidst all the other preparations which we pursue, help us be ready to receive the salvation which you have so graciously prepared for us. Amen.



Wednesday, December 10

Text: Luke 1: 26-38

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” (v. 31)

One Sunday recently, one of our pastors concluded the opening announcements by congratulating three couples who had again become grandparents in the preceding week. My wife Grace and I have reached that age too and have been overjoyed to welcome a couple of grandkids ourselves in the last three years.

Our joy in happy, healthy births surely echoes in our celebrations of Christmas. We may get ahead of ourselves so much, however, that we forget that Advent is not the season of birth, but rather of pregnancy.

St Luke begins his gospel by telling us how Elizabeth carried John the Baptist and Mary was pregnant with Jesus. Each conception was marked by extraordinary circumstances: Zechariah's encounter with the angel at the temple, Elizabeth past childbearing age, and the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary. John and Jesus would be more than ordinary children. Elizabeth and Mary must have been filled with wonder, excitement, and anticipation.

But this is not just past history. Each Advent we look to three “comings” of our Lord: at Bethlehem centuries ago, in our hearts now, and finally at the end of time. How will Jesus take shape in our lives? How will we prepare for his birth in us? In a figurative sense, we Christians are always pregnant. We carry the promises and the gifts of Christ within us, longing for them to take new and more complete birth in us. In a way, it’s always Advent.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, be born in us anew. Bring us your grace and your salvation, and conform our lives to yours. Amen.



Thursday, December 11

Text: Colossians 3:12-22

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” (v. 16)

It is the season of catalogues. For a couple of months now, the holiday sales catalogues have been regularly arriving in the mail: L. L. Bean, J. Crew, Woolrich, Eddie Bauer, Vermont Country Store, Elderly Instruments, Patagonia, In the Company of Dogs, King Arthur, Williams Sonoma, Road Runner Sports, Duluth Trading Post, New Moon Ski Shop, and on, and on, and on.

It used to be more simple. Not so many years ago, it would pretty much just be the one from J. C. Penney, and it would be about an inch and a half thick. We looked through it from one end to the other. Now there are so many that we hardly look at the covers, much less at the contents. The competition for our eyes and our ears is fierce. Words and images scream at us from every direction.

In such an atmosphere, the word of God can too easily seem like just one other voice yelling for our attention. One simple and effective discipline of Advent, one way to recapture the meaning of this season, and one way to silence all those unwanted voices, is to be deliberate and intentional about reading a bit of scripture every day. It need not be burdensome or imposing. God’s word planted in us will take root and prosper, even starting from a small shoot.

Keeping all those words and the Word separate is essential. After all, the spring gardening catalogues will be here soon.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, help your word dwell in us richly, that we do not lose the blessings you have for us. Amen.



Friday, December 12

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

“Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God.” (v. 1)

There is an old, not very good joke that notes that this is the season of cookies. After all, each Prayer of the Day for the season for Advent, three years, all twelve of them, begins with the plea that God “Stir up....” Sorry! I warned you that it wasn’t very good.

It is, of course, the season of holiday cooking, and there is indeed a lot of stirring up going on. But these prayers use the phrase “stir up” to mean “disturb” or “unsettle.” We pray that God would stir things up in our lives and in our world.

That is a bold request, one not to be made lightly. In a lot of ways, I don’t want things stirred up at all. We are constantly confronted by so many changes in every aspect of our lives that stirring things up seems to be the normal order of things. Yet here we are in Advent asking God to make the changes that God sees fit.

It is a mixed message. We sing “Comfort, comfort now my people” (ELW #256) at the same time that we ask God to discomfort us. But of course, both are needed: the peace that only God gives and the difficult reshaping of our lives in God’s purposes. If it were only as simple a matter as a batch of cookies!

Let us pray: Stir up, O God, our hearts and minds in response to your love and grace for us and for the whole world. Amen.



Saturday, December 13

Text: Psalm 149

“Sing to the Lord a new song.” (v. 1)

I admit it. I have long since stopped smiling at Grandma being run over by a reindeer. Rudolph’s emotional isolation no longer moves me. A white Christmas requires no special longing for a Yooper. Santa can check his list as many times as he likes, as far as I care.

By Thanksgiving I’ve about had it with Christmas music! Perhaps you are like me. I am cursed with the inability to shut my ears. In the mall, stuck in an elevator, in the TV commercials, the Christmas songs have been playing since some time before Halloween. I listen to them all. I can’t help it. It drives me nuts.

We all decry the commercialization of Christmas. But worse than all the selling is the general debasing of the holiday. The ceaseless repetition of the music, so much of it done so poorly, is just one dimension of this. In so many ways I become numb to the whole business, including the spiritual, wondrously holy root of it all. Scrooge begins to look more and more like my kind of guy!

Yet somehow, each year, God breaks through to me with the message of the true Christmas. And often this happens through the same music that I have become so sick of. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Once in Royal David's City," "I Wonder as I Wander," "Silent Night"--as I can't help but listen, suddenly, unpredictably, one of these old carols will speak to me with clarity and freshness. It is a gift. And not so strange, God generally finds this opening for me when I am singing the carol with other believers, not when I hear it in the store.

Let us pray: Gracious God, despite all the distractions that come my way, help me lift my voice in true praise and wonder this Christmas. Amen.

