

Devotions – December 6-12, 2015
By Jill Fries
Messiah Lutheran Church, Marquette, MI

Sunday, December 6, 2015

Text: Luke 1:68-79 (NIV)

Zechariah's Song: ⁶⁸"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ⁶⁹He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – ⁷²to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

The first time I remember either reading this passage or hearing it from the lectern it was the late 60's and the height of the Vietnam War and much unrest both abroad and on the home front. I remember thinking that John the Baptist became this wild desert prophet and was this what Zechariah had envisioned? Did they fight about how John saw his mission to fulfill God's command or did they see eye to eye? I suspect given Zechariah's age when John was born that he was not around when John began his desert ministry.

I envisioned John the Baptist as symbolic of my own time that I was experiencing; that is following what God has commanded us to do and not knowing what that was supposed to look like. In my young mind, the only thing I remember contemplating was: Did Zechariah know in advance how John would carry out God's mission and prepare the "Way of the Lord"? Did Zechariah know that John's life would be cut short with his head served on a platter as a victory trophy?

I have come to believe several decades later that it is best that I do not know what the future holds and much better to leave the future in God's hands.

Having said that, I have also come to believe that we are all called to "prepare the way of the Lord" in our own unique way. Advent is by definition the season of preparing and waiting. Preparing the way of the Lord and waiting for the arrival. Take a moment to contemplate the gifts that God has given you and how they may be used to prepare the way. Sometimes it is simply being present for another person. Maybe it is making a gift of food for a neighbor that is overwhelmed by current life events. Maybe it is taking time out to walk on one of our many trails and feeling grateful for this place that we call home. Whatever it may be for you, embrace it, live it and prepare the way of the Lord.

Let us pray: *Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming give to all the people of the world knowledge of your salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Prayer from ELCA Lectionary Year C)*



Monday, December 7, 2015

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

¹*Comfort, Comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." ⁹You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Comfort, comfort my people. I do not know anyone who has not felt at some point like withered grass and wilted flowers whose beauty is past and fallen away. Comfort, comfort my people.*

Everyone at some point has traversed the rough ground - wishing it were more level and yet finally reaching the summit. Taking in the glory that surrounds at the summit and feeling gratitude for making it thus far. Trying not to contemplate that staying at the summit is not possible - knowing full well the trail below is rough and obscured by foliage. Comfort, comfort my people.

What indeed shall I cry? Shall I mourn the rough ground? Skinned knees? Twisted ankles? Or will I take a moment to be still and quiet? Even stumbling along on the rough road, the shepherd is watching. When I take the time to be still and quiet, I indeed feel God's presence. I need to be still and quiet long enough to hear God's voice. If I am crying out wallowing in my own self-pity, there is too much noise to hear the soft whispers of divine guidance. Comfort, comfort my people.

If today is rough ground, take a moment to be still to feel the comfort of God's presence and do not be afraid. If today is the summit, embrace the glory and joy that is there. Do not fear the journey below. The Shepherd will not abandon you.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Maker of all there is: Bring comfort and guidance to those traveling on rough ground today. Be present for those embracing and celebrating the summit reached. Thank you. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Tuesday, December 8, 2015

Text: 2 Peter 1:2-15

² ... ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ ... ¹⁵And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

Knowledge, perseverance, godliness, kindness and love. If you possess these qualities in increasing measure – they will keep you effective and productive. Wow – doesn't that sound like a basic recipe to be a decent human being?

I did not choose this scripture because I felt drawn to it – no, I chose it because the “flowery” language utilized prior to and after the scripture quoted here I found to be excessive and overdone. I know people who speak like this and I usually pretend to listen politely while in fact I am actually tuning them out completely. This self-realization caught me by surprise – where did this form of judgment come from? Certainly NOT a demonstration of brotherly kindness and love.

Upon reflection, I have come to believe that it comes from this sense of place of not “quite” fitting in with the “Christian Club.” The irony is that when I have had an extraordinary experience and shared, I now realize people “like me” also tuned me out. Therefore, I stopped sharing.

I return again to God's love as demonstrated through the redeeming power of Jesus the Christ. I will continue to increase my knowledge through discipline and persevere even when I feel defeated. I will demonstrate God's love through thought, word and deed. I wonder how many other blind spots I possess that keep me from being the person that God wants me to be. I have my lifetime to continue to grow, make mistakes, turn around again and once again be a witness.

Let us pray: *May the Creator of all there is continue to send me those life lessons that will create in me a clean heart. Assist me in my quest for knowledge and assist me as I work toward being an example of kindness and love. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Wednesday, December 9, 2015

Text: Luke 7:18-30 (NIV)

¹⁸John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" ²⁰When the men came to Jesus, they said "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" ²¹At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²²So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ²³Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." ²⁴After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" ²⁸I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." ²⁹(All the people even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

This is what I have observed in some communities – either physical or virtual, a lack of ability to discern on one's own cognitive abilities as to what is real and what is false. It is relevant today just as it was over 2000 years ago. I find this passage particularly compelling in that Jesus is telling them – 'Don't take my word for it – look around you. What do YOU personally see and observe. Does it ring true with what you know of the God of your understanding? Tell John only of your experience. Make your judgment based on your own experience and cognitive abilities.'

What if we heeded this same advice today in all kinds of circumstances? What if we chose to not listen to gossip or if we do hear gossip and know it to be false – that we correct the misinformed. What if we chose to not engage in political or religious discourse unless we have educated ourselves on all the facts? That is apparently the common denominator. Educate yourself. Are the words that are spoken coinciding with the actions of the hands? Do the actions of the hands coincide with scripture? Is there consistency?

The passage in its entirety is about judgment. Utilizing discernment to judge what is God's intent (whether it be a person or action). Being cognizant of your own biases when you judge other's. The second part of the passage is once again about judgment of others. Utilize discernment of a person's actions. Are a person's words manifest in their actions? Are they consistent? Are your actions consistent with your words and what is in your heart, mind and soul?

Let us pray: *Dear God the Creator, help me to be cognizant of my own cultural bias – whether it be of people or events. Help me to hear your wisdom in order to discern the right course of action. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Thursday, December 10, 2015

Text: Isaiah 12:2-6 (NIV)

²*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.* ³*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.* ⁴*In that day you will say: "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.* ⁵*Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.* ⁶*Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."*

I did not choose this scripture because I was feeling fearless or particularly enamored in God's salvation. No, I chose this because today, I am feeling fear. I am afraid of our culture of violence and apathy. I ask myself, what is my part in that? Where, indeed, do I draw my strength from?

I have come to realize the moments in my life when I have felt God's strength has been when I am at my weakest. When I have felt fear, anxiety and uncertainty – that is when I have learned to let go of my preconceived notions of what I think should be – or when I feel absolutely no trust in the powers that "be".

Today, I challenge myself to step out fearlessly. Not because I, myself, am feeling fearless – no, indeed! I challenge myself to trust in the faith relationship that God has forged within me. I am going to draw from the well of salvation and ask God for the kind of spiritual strength that only God can give. The strength to forge ahead and believe that there are other ways to resolve conflict.

Today, I will give thanks and remember where my strength is sourced. I will give thanks and sing for joy and remember that God is in command and has done glorious things even in the face of insurmountable odds.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Creator of all that there is, I ask for strength today, the kind of strength that only you can offer. Strength for guidance and perseverance. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Friday, December 11, 2015

Text: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15 (NIV)

¹*There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints.* ²*For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, tell them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.* ³*But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be.* ⁴*For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we – not to say anything about you – would be ashamed of having been so confident.* ⁵*So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a*

generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. ⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written: “He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

God loves a cheerful giver! Are you a **cheerful** giver? I confess I was not always a cheerful giver – in fact, I was frequently a very resentful giver. I have been in debt my entire adult life. School debt, mortgage, astronomical medical bills, and now assisting my adult children with their advanced education. There have been times in my life that I have resented being asked to give more – give out of my need. Well excuse me – I am ALREADY giving out of my need as I have absolutely no discretionary funds.

A few years ago after stressing about paying for car repairs and ending up charging the repair bill, I cried. I cried out my frustration and resentment. I know there are people who are worse off than I and I know there are folks who are better off than I, but at that moment, I did not care about either! I wanted to not feel resentment or needy. I wanted to be at peace with my financial situation and not feel financially desperate.

It took some time, but through prayer and meditation, I came to develop some financial serenity. I still carefully budget my funds as I always have, but what is different now is when I am asked to give – I can cheerfully respond with an affirmative with what I have budgeted and if I do not have the funds, I say no, not this time. Before, I would have given resentfully – even if I did not have the funds. Now, on occasion I do give even when I do not have the funds to offer but I trust that the funds I need will be there. God is not asking us to do impoverish ourselves in our giving, but I have come to believe that God is asking us to be mindful that all that we have has been given to us by the Creator. God is asking us to be mindful of our possessions – so that they do not become idols in our presence.

Let us pray: *Thank you for all the gifts that have been bestowed upon me. Help me to be a cheerful giver today and develop financial serenity. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Saturday, December 12, 2015

Text: Luke 1:57-66 (NIV)

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

I had to have a medical procedure done recently and I was asked if I was pregnant to which I responded with all seriousness, “Not unless my name is Elizabeth or Sarah!” The medical staff did not get the little joke and I replied, “No, I am not pregnant – it would be a medical miracle.”

Whenever, I am asked that question at my age – it does give me pause to wonder about Sarah of the Old Testament or Elizabeth in the New. I am a practical person by nature and putting aside all the miraculous “happenings” – I wonder what it would be like at MY AGE to conceive and bear a child and my conclusion is NO, I would not like it. Yes, I totally understand that Elizabeth HAD truly wanted a child – when she was YOUNGER. Key word there is younger, but frankly given my frequently achy joints, general fatigue with need for mid-day naps – I just cannot fathom it. Then it strikes me – that is precisely the point. Many of the miraculous stories have to do with God intervening in such a manner that there is NO doubt that there is indeed God’s involvement in this event. God wanted to have their attention! Not just Elizabeth and Zechariah, but their entire community.

I have to wonder – what is God doing today in our midst to grab our attention? What is it that God wants us to acknowledge and possibly revisit and “see” with new eyes? What activity may be occurring today that demonstrates God’s presence in our midst?

Maybe it is less about what another may or may not be doing and more about removing the scales from my eyes? Or identifying a personal bias that keeps me from fully engaging with my neighbors? Just some thoughts.

Let us pray: *Dear Lord, help me to be open to your presence today. Help me to pay attention to the world around me and remove any hurdles that keep me from experiencing your presence. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*

