

**Devotions – January 10-16, 2016**

By Susan Anderson

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Rhinelander, WI

**Sunday, January 10, 2016**

Text: *Luke 3:15-16a*

*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...”*

What expectations do we have for calendar year 2016? Since there will be a presidential election, candidates will make promises, tell us about their credentials, and of their power to achieve goals. Our expectations are raised unrealistically. We may be tempted to think that one of them will save our community, our country, or even the world; stated another way, that one of them is our political Messiah.

Candidates who are elected discover the limitations of themselves and of the office they hold. They find out they are not as powerful as we, or they, thought. We become disappointed as promises are unfulfilled.

There is One Candidate who does make promises and will not disappoint us. That is the One Who Is More Powerful than candidates and than John the Baptist. That One will fulfill promises, will not disappoint us. God’s promise to “be with you (us) always” began as a dependent baby in a feed trough. God’s campaign announcement came in Jesus’ baptism: “This is my beloved son”. God’s promise is that we, too, are His beloved children. There is nothing we or anyone else can do to modify, amend, change, destroy, or void that promise.

Paul eloquently speaks to the fulfillment of God’s love for us in Romans 8:38-9, saying, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers [holders of public office], nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

God’s promise of Life in Christ exceeds our expectations; it has no term limits — it is eternal.

Let us pray: *Thank you, God, for naming us Your children and for being with us now and forever. Amen*



**Monday, January 11, 2016**

Text: *Psalms 106:1-3*

*Praise the Lord!*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

*Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,  
or declare his Praise?*

*Happy are those who observe justice,  
who do righteousness at all times.*

After Jesus' baptism by John and his temptation, He begins his teaching by telling us how to do justice and be right with God (Matthew, chapters 5-7). Not only are we not to kill or murder, but we are not to have unresolved anger against our brothers and sisters; nor are we to speak or think any insults. We are to be at peace with others in God's world.

Not only are we to be faithful to our spouses, we are not even to think about being intimate with someone else physically or emotionally. Not only are we not to strike back, we are to turn the other cheek. We are to avoid violence against others. We are to quietly share what we have; there are no naming rights or lists of contributors in heaven. We are not to judge, to find fault, to try to fix someone else. We are to examine only ourselves. We are not to practice our piety before others. (Should I stop writing, now?) We are to pray sincerely from the heart.

These are tall orders! Can we do all this all the time? Of course not. We are imperfect beings, not God. We harbor resentments, we give people labels, we strike out at those who hurt us, we seek recognition, we criticize others, we keep what we have for ourselves, we put up a front. The Old Testament requirement to "...observe justice...do righteousness **at all times**" — to be perfect — gives way to the New Testament's Good News: In Christ, we are forgiven our human imperfections, we are a new creation. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sin, God, who is faithful and just, forgives our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). Nothing we do or do not do can keep God from loving us. I

Let us pray: *Accepting God, thank you for loving us as we are, giving us guidance to be the people you want us to be, forgiving us our human imperfections, and being present in our lives. Amen.*



**Tuesday, January 12, 2016**

Text: *Luke 2:41-44*

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.*

Anyone who loves a child knows the sense of panic Mary and Joseph experienced at not knowing where Jesus was. As parents, grandparents, teachers, aunts, uncles, youth or Scout leaders, mentors to confirmands, our fervent desire for those entrusted in our care is that they are safe and healthy in body, mind, and soul.

God has these same desires for us. Our Lord wants to know what we think and feel, our joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, our accomplishments, and our failures. When we separate ourselves from God with good works, skewed priorities, or sheer willfulness that excludes time with God, God longs to know where we are. God grieves at our lostness, our divorce from Jesus, our distance from the Holy Spirit within us.

God looks for us just as Mary and Joseph searched for Jesus, or the widow for the lost coin, or a shepherd for a lost sheep. God rejoices like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (or Merciful Father) when we return.

Let us pray: *God, when we go away from You, give us the desire to return, the will to turn to You, and the humility to accept your welcoming embrace and celebration. Amen.*



**Wednesday, January 13, 2016**

Text: *John 4:1-45* (Woman at the well)

In this story, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink when she comes to get water from Jacob's well. Surprised because Jews did not share with Samaritans, she questions why he made his request. Jesus tells her that if she knew who he was, she would ask for living water. Taking him literally, she notes that he has no bucket, so where would he get such water? Jesus tells her that the water he would give would become a spring of eternal life. Still taking him literally, she asks for this water so she will never need to come back to the well.

Jesus takes another approach, asking her to bring her husband. She admits she has no husband. After Jesus recounts her marital history, she recognizes him as a prophet, saying that Samaritans worship on a mountain, Jews in Jerusalem. Jesus tells her that someday people will worship in spirit and truth, pleasing God. She recalls that when the Messiah comes, he will answer their questions. Then the bombshell comes: Jesus tells her that He is the Messiah.

The woman returns to town without her bucket, telling others about her encounter with Jesus, and questioning if he could be the Messiah. Many believe because of what she says. They seek Jesus out, and he stays two days, teaching them, and many more believe.

The woman at the well is a very brave, a very spiritual woman. She engages in conversation with a stranger when they are alone. She continues the conversation even though he reveals

startling information about her marital history. Such surprising knowledge might have frightened her. But if it did, she stayed with Jesus, letting him know she recognizes him as a prophet.

She asks him a central religious question: Where is God? Where does one go to find God? She has enough religious background to know the conflicting views of Jews and Samaritans. When Jesus speaks to her of worshipping in spirit and in truth, she makes the connection with the anticipated Messiah. She has engaged with him in spirit and in truth throughout their conversation. Then comes a most holy moment. Jesus says to her alone, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Energized, she returns to town and witnesses to others even though she does not have all the answers, is not certain herself, and does not have a perfectly developed script. She was on a spiritual search, questioning, wondering, exploring the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah. This brave, spiritual, energized woman didn't let her uncertainty stop her from sharing her thoughts with her community. She invited others to "Come and see"; she led others to faith, to find God in Jesus. Let's be excited as she was!

Let us pray: *Thank you Jesus, for the Samaritan women in our lives who have led us to You. Give us the desire and will to share our faith with others. In Your Name, we say: Amen.*



**Thursday, January 14, 2016**

Text: *Luke 16:13*

*"No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."*

Here are two questions we can ask ourselves about money: 1) Where does it go? and 2) What does it do to us?

In our family, my husband likes to track where our money goes. He has categories such as housing, utilities, food, church, charity, taxes, clothing, transportation, gifts, etc. At the end of the year, he computes totals for each category.

This system helps us be accountable for what God has given us. We can see if where our money went reflects what we say we value. Do the amounts in each category fit with serving God? Does our stewardship comport with our values, with God's values, or is it a mixture?

I like to cook, and I like to eat tasty dishes, so groceries are one of our larger categories. In the store this week, I met a woman in the jello aisle, looking intently at the many little boxes. She turned to me, saying, "Jello is so expensive. I will wait for a sale." I asked her what kind she liked. Her reply: "My husband is diabetic, and he likes sugar free lemon and lime." Then she went to the check-out line with the few groceries she had in her cart. Jello was 87 cents a box. I picked up a box, took a dollar out of my wallet, then put them on the conveyor belt with her

other items. She looked at me so surprised, commenting, “You didn’t have to do that.” I was very touched by her gratitude, and her desire to take care of her husband.

As I walked away feeling generous, I asked myself why I didn’t just pay for all her groceries. I could easily have reduced my own grocery spending to accommodate the small amount of supplies she needed. I was embarrassed — and rightly so— at how I was indulging myself while someone right in front of me was being such a good steward of what she had. The impact of having enough to turn me into a foodie has made me careless of the wants and needs of others. My behavior is not consistent with what I say I value: feeding the hungry.

It’s time for me to stop serving the food mammon rather than God. It’s time for me to be more frugal in the food aisles, eating more simply, and giving more to others in need. It’s time to make a monthly donation to the ELCA Hunger Appeal, donate canned goods, volunteer at the food pantry.... Ouch! Resistance is rising within me...time to pray.

Let us pray: *Thank you, God, for showing us how to serve You. Help us to love you by feeding your sheep. Amen.*



**Friday, January 15, 2016**

Text: *Luke 16:19-26 - “...have mercy on me...v. 24*

*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’”*

Jesus tells us the story of the rich man who feasted sumptuously and the poor man, Lazarus, at his gate who longed for the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Both died. Angels took Lazarus to Abraham. The rich man went to Hades. Being tormented, he asked for mercy, specifically for Abraham to send Lazarus for cool water to ease his agony. Abraham refused, noting the chasm between the two places.

Loving others is closely related to having mercy on them. We do this by putting ourselves in their place, looking at the world from their point of view, from what is happening to them.

The rich man ignored Lazarus, the man in wretched condition in front of his home. The lesson of this parable is summarized well at [www.enterthebible.org](http://www.enterthebible.org) , a service of Luther Seminary in these words:

“Jesus never explicitly states why the rich man receives his torment, but the story makes some clear suggestions. The man has disregarded the poor, even poor Lazarus who lived so nearby. This was done not out of ignorance but out of willful neglect. (It appears from v. 24, where the rich man knows Lazarus’s name, that they are not strangers to each other.) The man also is presumptuous, perhaps assuming that he deserves good things in life because of his wealth or status. His request to Abraham, to have Lazarus come and cool his tongue, is audacious, for it suggests that Lazarus should do his bidding, even now in the afterlife.”

It can be hard to identify with either character in this story as most of us are not as rich as the rich man or as poor as Lazarus. The rich man clearly has an entitlement mentality. As Americans, it can be hard not to have that same view as we are accustomed to having so much compared with the rest of the world. The average worker in India must work more than a day to buy a gallon of gas. The average Ethiopian makes \$550 a year yet pays \$.70 for a 1 lb. loaf of white bread and \$1.91 for a dozen eggs. More and more in our own country, life is hard. The average home value in the town we moved from was \$45,000; more than half the housing where we live now is rentals as folks cannot afford to buy a home. Even though we have less than the opulent rich man, Christ calls us in this parable to see how our sisters and brothers around the world and in our neighborhood struggle.

Let us pray: *Lord, open our eyes to the needy we do not see, open our hearts to the ones we do. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.*



**Saturday, January 16, 2016**

Text: *Luke 15:11-32*

The parable of the Prodigal Son/Merciful Father is a familiar one to many. A son wants what he would inherit upon his father’s death—NOW! The father gives it to him; the son leaves, burns through the money, finds a job feeding pigs—and would be glad to have the corn cobs he is feeding them. Then the Holy Spirit intervenes, and the son thinks about what his father’s employees eat, returns home, and apologizes to his father. Recognizing that he does not deserve to be treated like a son, he asks to be treated like one of the hired help.

The father calls for a big party to celebrate the son’s return home. Meanwhile, the elder son who stayed home, worked the farm, and fulfilled his father’s expectations, gets really mad when he comes in from the fields to the sounds of music and dancing. You never had a celebration for me, he cries, proceeding to castigate “This son of yours” for his profligate living. And it is a cry, indeed, for love and appreciation from the father.

The father tells that the elder son that he has always been with him, that “All I have is yours.” He continues, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Perhaps there is some of both sons in all of us. We can admire the son who was responsible, faithful, and worked hard for the family business. We have all done that in some way. We too, can feel unappreciated when someone else gets what we crave: the love and affirmation of those to whom we have given so much. But note that the elder son does not refer to the younger one as his brother. He says, “This son of yours”, thereby disowning his relationship with his brother, yet tying the younger son and father together. With that, the elder son takes himself out of the family and leaves home, albeit in a different way than the younger son.

The father is merciful to the elder son as he was to the younger, telling him “All that I have is yours.” Jesus does not tell us what effect this explanation had on the elder son. Nor does Jesus tell us whether the younger son became his father’s servant after the party was over. We do not know how this family saga ends.

What we do know is that God’s arms are always open to welcome us home. Wherever we have been, whatever we feel, whoever we are, God embraces us, and wants to celebrate life with us.

Let us pray: Joyous God, You are our delight and our salvation. How wondrous that You take us into Your Heart and are always ready to welcome us home. Amen.

