

Devotions – December 18-24, 2016

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Sunday, December 18, 2016

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

“Joseph, being a righteous man ... planned to dismiss Mary quietly ...”

When I was a child, I planned to be a veterinarian. I love animals. Math and science were among my better subjects in school. I enjoyed challenges and solving mysteries based on the evidence at hand. There were many reasons that this career was appealing to me. My senior year of high school, I applied to and was accepted at Michigan State – a great school for veterinary medicine. God, however, had a different plan, and in the fall of my senior year, I applied to Luther Northwestern Seminary – in the track for becoming an ordained pastor.

Unlike Joseph, I did not have an angel visit me in a dream, but there was a sequence of events that led to this change of plans. Many would say that they were coincidences, but there were too many details in too many circumstances for me to dismiss them. It seemed clear that God was guiding me to become a pastor.

Joseph had his plan all laid out. He was a gentle and kind man. He could have made a spectacle due to the outrage that his fiancée was pregnant with someone else’s child. Mary could have been stoned to death for her presumed indiscretion. But Joseph was a righteous man. He was not a person who would cause harm to another, even if that person had sinned against him ... as it seemed Mary had. Joseph had his plan all figured out. God, however, had a different plan, and in the night God sent an angel to tell Joseph all about this other plan.

Besides being gentle, kind and righteous, Joseph was a faithful man, and he obeyed the angel’s instructions. I can imagine that he had his doubts along the way. “Did I *really* see an angel? Is this *really* God’s child and not the child of some other man? Am I going crazy?” And yet, Joseph did his best to live out his Jewish faith – living the teachings with integrity ... teachings like “love your neighbor as yourself” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” And he treated this child of Mary as if he were his very own flesh and blood.

What plans do you have for your life? How are you envisioning your future? What would it take for God to get you to change those plans? I’m not necessarily saying that God wants you to change your plans. However, I’m wondering how well we listen to God’s messages for us when they mean we have to change our plans. Consider how easy it is to say, “Look how God has validated my plans!” when something works out exactly how we wanted it to; and how much harder it is to say, “Look how God has other ideas for my life!” when things seem to be nudging us in a new direction. It can be scary to move in a new direction, even when we are convinced that God is guiding us there.

Let us pray: *Jesus, we know that you are with us to guide us along the way. Help us to hear your voice in whatever form it comes to us. Bless us with the courage to follow wherever you are calling us. Amen*



Monday, December 19, 2016

Read: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

“There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.”

I love to make jewelry. I started with stringing beads, and recently have learned how to wrap a loose stone with wire to create a pendant or a ring. I am discovering all sorts of new stones – what they look like when they are polished and what I can do with them, some wire, and a little bit of creativity.

We all know that the diamond is the hardest of all jewel-type stones. With proper techniques, however, even a diamond can be cut. Proper cutting creates the brilliant jewels that we see in rings and pendants – jewels that reflect and refract light in such a way that they sparkle beautifully.

After Hannah has given birth to Samuel, she says that God is a rock beyond comparison with any other rock. Hannah probably did not have diamond jewelry in mind, but rather was thinking about the foundations and stones out of which homes and palaces were built. God is a foundation that cannot be shaken. For Hannah, that foundation was her faith and trust in God. God is a fortress that protects us in times of trouble. For Hannah, that fortress was her husband Elkanah, who stood by her throughout her time of infertility. And I would add, God is the finest jewel that brings beauty and sparkle into our lives. For Hannah, that beauty and sparkle was her children. Samuel was the first, but she would also give birth to other children.

What beauty and sparkle has God brought into your life? Where has God been a foundation that could not be shaken? Where has God been a fortress protecting you in times of trouble?

Let us pray: *Jesus, you have promised to be with us always. We thank you for being our foundation and fortress in times of trouble. We rejoice in the great beauty and many sparkles you have brought into our lives. Amen*



Tuesday, December 20, 2016

Read: Genesis 21:1-21

“Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... playing with her son Isaac ...”

With many family gatherings for the holidays, we often see children playing together. It’s a wonderful thing to see older children playing with younger children and treating them as equals. In my family, those games are generally ones that require a certain amount of intellectual skill – Cribbage which requires some math skills and a lot of strategy, Bananagrams which requires spelling skills and quick thinking, and so on. And so, we even see the oldest children helping the youngest children as they play such games.

When we think of Abraham’s children Ishmael and Isaac, we don’t often think of them as growing up together. Ishmael was roughly 13 years older than Isaac, and until Isaac was weaned they lived in the same household. Apparently, Ishmael was a good big brother and he played with his little brother during that portion of their childhood. It also seems that Isaac and Ishmael kept in touch over the years. We hear in Genesis 25:9 that, when Abraham died, his sons Ishmael and Isaac buried him in the cave where Sarah was buried. We don’t hear much else about Hagar and Sarah or their continued relationship (or lack thereof). Apparently, the rivalry between their mothers was not passed down to these half-brothers.

Here we have Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac. And we are preparing to celebrate the birth of yet another son, descended from Abraham – Jesus, son of Mary. In our modern world, we can see “siblings” descended from these ancestors: Muslims trace their ancestry to Ishmael, Jews trace theirs to Isaac, Christians trace their heritage to Jesus – all descendants of Abraham. There have been rivalries over the years pitting these sibling-faiths against one another. I believe we can and should follow the example of Ishmael and Isaac. Even though there have been fights among our “parents” in faith, I believe we can continue to be caring and gentle with one another in our modern world. After all, as God told Abraham that Ishmael would also be blessed and would become a great nation, so we have all received blessings from our one God.

Let us pray: Jesus, you have seen turmoil in your world and you know what it is like to have family members pitted against one another. Help us to create peace within our families and among our families of faith throughout the world. Amen



Wednesday, December 21, 2016

Read: Genesis 37:2-11

“Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.”

Why is it that siblings so frequently compare themselves to one another and compete for their parents’ attention and approval? It seems that young people don’t understand that parents can love all of their children; they don’t need to dislike one child in order to love another. Yesterday’s devotion spoke of sibling rivalry and how Ishmael and Isaac overcame the potential for a terrible rivalry between them. Due to the favoritism of their father, however, Joseph and

his brothers fell into the trap of jealousy and bitterness. The amazing part of the story is that, with God's help, Joseph managed to turn the situation around and to create a positive outcome.

Joseph's brothers became so jealous of him that they were ready to kill him. Opportunity led them to sell Joseph into slavery instead. It could have been a death sentence, but Joseph used his God-given talents to rise above the terrible turn of events. Rather than wallowing in anger or self-pity, he used his skills to help the people around him and he was rewarded for his efforts. Eventually, he rose to the position of assistant to the Pharaoh himself. When the opportunity to repay his brothers for their actions arose, Joseph initially did so – treating them miserably. Compassion for his father and love for his little brother eventually broke down his resolve, and Joseph welcomed his brothers back into his good graces. The result, of course, was that his entire extended family was saved from starvation in the midst of the famine in Canaan. And, fortunately, Joseph has learned that it is not his own importance but the power of God that brought about the happy ending.

When you look at your family, where are the tensions that come from competing with one another? Perhaps it is among siblings who feel that their parents favor one child over another. Perhaps it is the result of financial inequities or success in the world of work or education. Where is God working through your gifts and talents to bring a positive result out of what could be a terrible situation?

Let us pray: Jesus, you watched as your disciples competed for your good graces and you know the pain of seeing jealousy arise among them. Help us to overcome the desire for superiority so that we are able to use our gifts for the good of all. Amen



Thursday, December 22, 2016

Read: Luke 1:46b-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...”

Holden Evening Prayer – a beautiful worship setting written by Marty Haugen – lays out Mary's song of praise with the words, “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you. You have looked with love on your servant here and blessed me all my life through.” Have you ever been so happy that your heart and soul broke out into song?

What is perhaps unusual about Mary's song is that it happens shortly after she has found out that she's facing a rather tough challenge. She has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she will bear a child that is not her husband's. She could face the scorn of her community. She could face the wrath of her husband. As a very young woman, she probably knew that the pregnancy would not be easy on her own body. There was a great potential for disaster in her immediate future, and yet she sings a song of praise to God. She praises God because she knows that God is with her and that God will bless others through her. It is interesting that she praises God not only

for the blessings that she has received but also for the blessings that others will receive through her.

We are often encouraged to consider and give thanks for the blessings that we have received from God. Have you ever explored what blessings others have received from God through you? Spend a moment thinking about the blessings you have received from God through others in your life. Take the time to reflect on the lives you may have touched with your own – just as others have touched yours.

Let us pray: Jesus, we thank you for the many blessings we have received. We thank you for the faithful people through whom you have blessed us. Help us to see more clearly the situations in which you have blessed others through us so that we can also thank you for those blessings. Amen



Friday, December 23, 2016

Read: Galatians 3:6-14

“The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

A footnote in my Bible says that this sentence can also be translated, “The one who is righteous through faith will live.” What difference does that make to the meaning? The first version says that the person is already righteous and is living through the power of faith; the second says that the person is made righteous through faith and then begins to live. Unfortunately, we may have a “chicken and egg” question as to which came first – the righteousness or the faith, thus resulting in life. Fortunately, we don’t have to figure out which came first. We can read the sentence both ways, because God is providing the righteousness, the faith, and the life.

Okay, *that* was a mouthful! So let me unpack it a little bit. God has made us righteous. God has forgiven our sins and THAT is what makes us righteous. Period. We can’t make ourselves righteous; it isn’t possible. Only God can do that. We recognize this righteousness through faith. We trust that God has done what God has promised to do, namely, forgive our sins and our sinfulness. God has given us life – both in the sense that God has created us and in the sense that God has set us free from the bondage of sin. We live freely because God has set us free and because God has given us the faith to trust that this freedom is true and real. We live because God has made us righteous, and we live because God has given us the faith we need to trust in the promised righteousness.

When I served in a congregation in South Dakota, we had a winter fun day out at a member’s farm. Their pond had frozen when the weather was clear and calm, so that the ice was clear as crystal. We could see through the 1-2 feet of ice to the water below where weeds were swaying in the water’s currents. It was a bit eerie to walk out on ice that we could not see. The ice is like the righteousness – because it was there we could play on the pond. The power of God in nature created the ice; we didn’t create it. The trust that the ice would hold us is like faith – because we

trusted the ice we could play freely on the pond. The power of God shown in our intellect allowed us to trust in something we could not see; we didn't create that intellect, any more than we created the ice on the pond. The ice and the trust in the ice gave us a really fun day of playing games; the combination gave us life for that day.

Let us pray: *Jesus, help us to trust in your promise of forgiveness and in the righteousness that you have given to us. Give us faith to live fully the life you have given to us. Amen*



Saturday, December 24, 2016

Read: Luke 2:1-20

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

I confess that I cannot hear these words without picturing Linus on the stage with his trusty blanket ... the house lights dimmed, a spotlight shining on him as he speaks. Watching the Peanuts Gang as they prepare for their Christmas pageant has been an annual tradition for as long as I can remember. Charlie Brown's question “Doesn't anyone know what Christmas is all about?” and Linus' answer which quotes Luke 2 have defined Christmas for many of us. The child born in Bethlehem, proclaimed by an angel, worshiped by shepherds, named as Messiah – this is what Christmas is all about.

Of course, Christmas begins tomorrow and the season lasts for twelve days, but many of us will celebrate this evening with grand worships and candlelight and Christmas carols. Many of us will open presents tonight, many will wait until tomorrow morning for gift opening, and some of us will find Christmas trees put out on the curb by tomorrow afternoon. Is that the end of the celebration? Is that all Christmas has to offer?

If you recall, the Peanuts' Christmas Special ends with the gang standing around a Christmas tree singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. Consider the words of this song ... “glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinner reconciled” ... Peace on earth – peace among and between people ... God and sinner reconciled – peace between God and people. That, too, is what Christmas is all about.

We have not seen all of the promises of Christmas fulfilled yet. Even though God has reconciled with sinners, we still deal with a terrible lack of peace on earth. And still, we have hope that God's promises will be fulfilled. We can work together with those who worship with us today so that the proclamation of the Good News of great joy will be fulfilled and peace will come.

Let us pray: *Jesus, as you have reconciled us with God, give us what we need to be reconciled with one another. Give us peace so that we can bring peace into our world. Amen*

