

Devotions – January 29 – February 4, 2017

By Susan Anderson

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Rhineland, WI

Sunday, January 29, 2017

Text: Isaiah 60:1

Arise, shine: for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Epiphany means 1) a natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible and 2) understanding of a problem or mystery (i.e. enlightenment). From January 7 to February 28, we are in the season of Epiphany in the church year. On the first Sunday, the Gospel tells of the baptism of Jesus and God's words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 4:17). At the end of Epiphany, the Gospel is about the transfiguration of Jesus and a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5b).

In between these declarations of God's relationship with Jesus, there are lessons about who we are—the salt of the earth, the light of the world, blessed (in the Beatitudes) and how to treat others—do not be angry with those around you, love your enemies, make peace with any adversaries, give twice what is asked of you.

So Epiphany is not just the time between the let-down after Christmas and before the somberness of Lent. It is an exciting time of growing, learning, discovering, and coming to new insights about the mystery of God made flesh; who we are as followers of Jesus, like Peter, Andrew, James, John; and how Jesus wants us to behave toward Him, ourselves, and others. It is a time of epiphanies!

As the calendar days become longer, may the mysteries of our faith grow brighter within us.

Let us pray: *Thank you, Jesus, for the lessons you offer us. Amen.*



Monday, January 30, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:13a.

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

When Jesus lived salt was the only preservative; it was scarce and therefore very valuable. Having salt meant the difference between life and death. The message is clear: We are precious and knowing that is the difference for us between life and death.

Recently my daughter turned 50. To help celebrate, I gave her a list of 50 things I loved about her. She is a loving, giving person, an accomplished dentist, appreciated by all who know her. This poised, capable, competent woman responded to the list by saying, "I will save this to read on days when I don't feel so good about myself." What a surprising answer! I never knew she had days like that. I did know that I did. Perhaps we could all benefit from a list of things we like about ourselves for those days when we have lost our saltiness.

There are other ways to restore our saltiness, things like gardening, hiking, winter sports, praying, doing Yoga, attending church, hunting or whatever it is that re-stores our souls. We can do our part to reach out to God, remembering that it is God who is the ultimate restorer and preserver of our lives. God sent Jesus so that we know that we are of extreme value; knowing that gives us life so that we can use the gifts God gave us to love ourselves and others.

Let us pray: *Thank you Jesus for giving us God's message telling us how valued and precious we are. Amen*



Tuesday, January 31, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:14-16

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Ohio Caverns is an underground cave filled with stalactites and stalagmites, crystals of pure white and many colors protruding from the ceiling and floor. On a tour, the guide had us turn off our flashlights and put our hand in front of our faces. In the total darkness, we could not see our hands. Only with light can we see.

Only with the light of the Gospel can we see spiritually. The author of "Amazing Grace," John Newton, became a rich man as the captain of a slave ship. After his conversion, he wrote the hymn that has become a favorite of many Christians. He chronicles his blind, wretched life, seeing his life as it was, then changed by God's grace. Our lives, too, can be changed by God's grace. When we see ourselves as we are, we confess our sin, and God, who is gracious and just, forgives us and cleanses us from **all** unrighteousness.

Let us pray: *Dear Lord, let the God within us, the light of Holy Spirit, open the eyes of our hearts that You may shine in us and others may see your glory. Amen.*



Wednesday, February 1, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:21-22b

You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, “You shall not murder” and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council.

The majority of us have never killed someone, so we might be tempted to think well of ourselves until we continue reading what else Jesus has to say to us. Here Jesus takes the prohibition against murder and lightens the scale of judgment. If we are irritated with someone, if we disparage another, if we have a dispute with a person we know, we are to mend the breach, repair the relationship, become supportive. In Cherokee words, “Don’t judge another until you have walked a mile in their shoes.” Yet who hasn’t gotten irritated on occasion? How do we become empathetic?

Beverly, a friend of mine, has the ability to quickly connect with people, the clerk in the grocery store, the server in a restaurant, the ticket taker at an event, all people she is meeting for the first time. I asked her how she came to be so friendly and engaging with others. Her reply: “I always try to see from their point of view. If I can make someone laugh, I have had a good day.” She is the epitome of acceptance kindness, compassion, and empathy.

Let us pray: *O Compassionate One, thank you for Jesus’ words and the people you give us to know, who live them in word and deed. Amen.*



Thursday, February 2, 2017

Text: Zephaniah 3:17

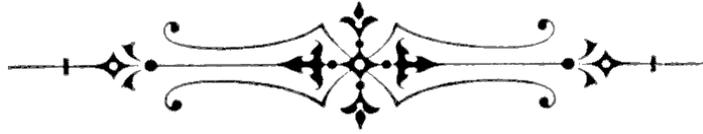
The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

This is the Old Testament wording of the Christmas message: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...” or of that most famous and most quoted verse: John 3:16, “For God so loved the world...” The author of Zephaniah wrote either during Israel’s captivity in Babylon or shortly after their return to Jerusalem. After 2 1/2 chapters of stern judgment come the encouraging words above, an unexpected surprise, the way God often enters our lives.

On a recent trip to enjoy some family time, I was eating a sandwich while waiting for a light to change. A thin, disheveled man approached the other side of the car holding a cup. I asked my companion about giving him something as I stuffed the remaining food into my mouth. The beggar was already turning away to the next car, but not before I saw the pain in his eyes.

Often we think we will find God with family, friends, in worship, by serving at a food pantry or on a mission trip, and we are often not disappointed. Yet God also appears in surprising ways, in a pregnant teenager named Mary, in the longing faces of refugees fleeing from their terrorized, war-torn homes, or in the painful eyes of a disheveled man at a traffic light.

Let us pray: *Lord, open our eyes that we may see you in unexpected places. Open our hearts that we may welcome you into our lives. In the name of the One whose family fled with him to Egypt, we say Amen!*



Friday, February 3, 2017

Text: Psalm 139:9-10

If I rise on the wings of dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide; your right hand will hold me fast.

These verses tell us of God's power and presence. They have become some of my favorite Bible passages. I picture being lifted up on the wind as the sun, tossing pink and orange shadows through the leafless trees, comes over the horizon. I picture walking along the seashore, the warm, damp sand under my feet, gazing upon the ocean as the waves break endlessly on the beach.

There is such a sense of safety, solidity, and serenity in these verses. No matter where we are, God is also there. Even when we are in strange and frightful circumstances, God will keep us close, will whisper wise words in our ear, will stay with us, and never leave. We are held fast; nothing on earth can take us from God's presence.

Let us pray: *Lord of the world and all the universes beyond our ken, we praise you for your constant, enduring presence. Amen.*



Saturday, February 4, 2017

Text: Isaiah 43:1-3b

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

What's in a name? Our names are the ultimate symbol of who we are. When we hear a name we can picture what the person looks like, personality traits come to mind, we remember experiences we had with them. A family name tells to whom we are related, to whom we belong.

Here Isaiah tells us God knows our name, calls us by name, and relates to us intimately. We are part of God's family; we belong to God. Our earthly name may change. We may have had a nickname as a child, we may have married, or we may have acquired a title. We may shorten the name of someone we love as a token of affection, Merle becomes Mer, Polly becomes Pol. No need for extra letters to separate them!

And there is no need for us to be separated from God. The angel's message to Mary and to the shepherds, "Do not fear," is for us, too. God formed us, knew us from the beginning, loves us, redeems us, watches over us. God walks with us through the floods and fires of life, through all the things that consume hope. Upon our final name change to Saint in heaven, God is there to welcome us to our eternal home.

Let us pray: *O God, our hope, in ages, past; our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home, we embrace our name as your cherished children. Amen.*

