

..... **Daily Devotions**
December 9-15, 2018
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Sunday, December 9, 2018

Text: Luke 3:1-6

Verse: **“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord.”**

I made a mental note after noticing a sign in the Kroger grocery store. Santa Claus was making three appearances on consecutive Saturdays. Certainly I don't wish to sit on Santa's knee. But near Santa's visitation area tables are set up offering hot chocolate, coffee, and a variety of bakery goodies. I look forward to Santa's visitation so I can make my way through the goodies line before shopping.

For today and next Sunday John the son of Zechariah, otherwise known as John the Baptist, will appear in the gospel readings from Luke. Luke's gospel gives us more bio on John. We know his father and mother, Zechariah and Elizabeth. While still in his mother's womb, he leaped for joy when he heard the greeting of Mary. At John's birth we heard his father speak a beautiful prophecy concerning the boy: “You will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways....to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.”

It is interesting that John is mentioned alongside the powerful of the time, the Roman Emperor, Governor Pilate, various regional rulers, and the High Priests in the Temple. Such rulers were mentioned by Luke to give a sense of calendar time. But John is mentioned without any title of power, but called a voice crying out in the wilderness. The appearance of John is not about calendar time, but God's time proclaiming salvation.

On the calendar we see December and during this time we hear about countdowns to Christmas as a reminder to get your shopping done. Advent provides a wonderful antidote to such consumer worries, the good news of the coming of God. Prepare for God's coming not with a shopping list but a list nevertheless, the list of your troubles and burdens. God has come in Jesus to

bear all burdens. God has come in Jesus with the blessed freedom of forgiveness. God will come again to fulfill our deepest longing and hope to make all things new where peace and righteousness dwell.

PRAYER: God of power and mercy, thank you for your word coming to John the Baptist in the wilderness. In this busy time, we can feel like we are in the wilderness. Thank you for meeting us in our need with your continual mercy, forgiveness and steadfast love. Bless our Advent time, thankful for you coming now, and in the future to fulfill our hope for peace on earth. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus, Amen.



Monday, December 10, 2018

Text: Malachi 3:1-4

Verse: **“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”**

The prophet Malachi sounds like a modern investigative reporter for CNN. He is on the religion beat, hearing what the people have to say about God. He heard a lot of questioning: “Where is the God of justice? It is vain to serve God...Now we count the arrogant happy; evil does not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.” With his nose for news Malachi has uncovered corruption among the clergy - their offerings are polluted and their instruction to the people was poor.

Do we not today hear people question God’s justice in a world where we see much suffering? On top of that the newspapers of late have reported clergy abusing their positions of trust.

For his time Malachi promised the coming of a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. The messenger would not be coming to pat people on their backs and fill their ears with praise. His mission will be purification and the prophet used two metaphors: fire and soap; impurities must be burned away and stains thoroughly scrubbed clean. Who is the coming messenger? Some have identified him with John the Baptist, or maybe the prophet and his word because the name ‘Malachi’ means “my messenger”.

Yes, we have our questions about God's justice, and the church can behave very badly. But Advent would have us examine ourselves and we will see that we need the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. Judgment from God is not a bad thing because it does not lead to condemnation but to repentance. Repentance is our preparation for the Lord's advent or coming. Repentance can get a bad rap, as if it is something to be feared. Luther teaches in the Catechism that repentance is the daily grace of baptism. Repentance is to return to the Lord daily and know the fire of his love and the cleansing power of his grace.

PRAYER: God of judgment, you are a consuming fire. Help us know that this fire is one of love, burning away sin and guilt, and purifying us to be your faithful Advent people. With your fire inspire us to do deeds of love and mercy helping people see your coming as one of renewal and compassion. We pray in the name of the Savior of infinite love, our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.



Tuesday, December 11, 2018

Text: Philippians 1:3-11

Verse: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

Our text today contains a wonderful prayer from the apostle Paul. He had a deep feeling of compassion for his fellow saints at Philippi. Writing from prison Paul was thankful for the sharing (koinonia) or fellowship in the gospel with them. It must have been a comfort; in the midst of anxious moments of his incarceration, he was confident of brothers and sisters in Christ caring for him and praying for him.

So Paul prayed for them, for their love to overflow in complete knowledge and full insight. I have used this prayer as a text for marriage, commenting that

love is more than sweetness and sentiment but it entails real effort and exertion. But for us today, it is a wonderful prayer for Advent. For Paul the Christian faith was not a casual endeavor because he called congregations to be at the top of their game, to be at their best. To be at their best involves an important Advent theme, what Paul termed the “Day of Christ”. What he meant was the coming or appearance of Christ in glory to make all things new. With this future assured, the church is to strive to be pure and blameless. The word “pure” literally could mean “tested by the sun”. For Christians, we want our lives to pass the test of the Son, Jesus, and shine his love before others. The word ‘blameless’ has the meaning of not ‘causing others to stumble’. We all know the church’s witness of the faith must not be in words only, but also by actions that reveal to others God’s active grace, God’s presence to support, guide, and strengthen.

The Church is to be anything but boring for it is our goal, inspired by the Advent theme of Jesus’ coming, to produce a “harvest of righteousness.” In a world where so much seems to be wrong, the church is about the good news and good work of righteousness. Let us not lose hope for Christ still comes in Word and Sacrament to “bring to completion” his work. It is Jesus within us who works his love through us to touch others. I have this Keurig coffee maker on my desk, and a particular brand of coffee which states boldly profits go 100% for charity. We could place a bold sign on the church as well, not profits but people 100% for charity.

PRAYER: Loving God, thank you for the message of the gospel, a message that just does not stop overflowing, the overflowing of your love and mercy for us. Thank you, too, for your gift of Advent hope, and may it inspire the church to be at its best, pure in witness, blameless and humble before others. We ask your Spirit to guide the good work of the church, looking forward to Jesus’ coming and his harvest of righteousness. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.



Wednesday December 12, 2018

Text: Isaiah 35:3-7

**Verse: “Say to those who are of fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear!’
Here is your God....”**

We all know what ‘platitudes’ are, empty words devoid of meaning and comfort. A recent example came after the tragedy of a mass shooting. A grieving mother said with both tears and anger, “I don’t want your thoughts and prayers.” That expression has become common as a response to people going through a painful time. The angry woman mentioned wanted something done about gun violence in the country, legislative action. In other times no words can bring comfort, but instead of platitudes we can provide our supportive presence.

Is our reading today just a platitude, so much hot air? To a people in exile the prophet Isaiah said to them, “Say to those who are of fearful heart, ‘Be strong. Do not fear.’” But Isaiah, like other prophets, did not peddle in empty words. The people in exile needed to hear: you are going back to your homeland. This will not be accomplished without help. For the good news of “do not fear” is backed by “Here is your God.” Poetically Isaiah described what God will do: provide a way through the desert, supply plenty of water, and if we read a little further there is a verse that is a personal favorite, “no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” There you have it. God’s Way is foolproof. I think of a wonderful expression from the African-American church, a real foundation of hope and faith, “God will find a way when there is no way.”

Is fear fidgeting around in your heart? Take the prophet Isaiah at his word, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God...God will come and save you.” The apostle Paul wrote in Romans, reminding his readers of the gift of the Holy Spirit, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit we are children of God.” (Romans 8: 13-16). When we cry out in frustration or fear, it is also a call out to God, God who will come through the Holy Spirit who ever reminds us whose we are, children of God, and God will find a way for his beloved children.

PRAYER: *God of grace and glory, on your people pour your power! Grant to those who are fearful the good news of your presence, the good news of your coming to save, and the good news of finding a way when there is no way. We thank you for Jesus who has come to us in humble mercy, who continues to come with Word and Sacrament, and will come again with the ultimate message of “no fear,” the gift of our final redemption. Amen.*



Thursday, December 13, 2018

Text: John 3:17-21

Verse: **“For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”**

On the church calendar St. Lucy, martyr, is remembered. She was born sometime at the end of the second century and martyred probably in 304 during a time of severe persecution of the church under the Emperor Diocletian. Because of such an early date, not much is known about her. In spite of intimidation, she remained true to her Christian faith and was put to death in Syracuse, Sicily. According to the *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations*, Lucy is a favorite saint in Sicily and southern Italy (St. Lucia). She is the patron saint of common labors and because her name means ‘light’ she is the protector against diseases of the eye.

Because her commemoration is near the time of the shortest day, there is a custom among Swedish Christians to have a young girl at home wear a crown of candles and serve the household coffee and cake. (Sounds very Lutheran, coffee and cake.)

The heavy cruiser Indianapolis was sunk in the Pacific Ocean during the closing days of World War II. Survivors clung to life on rafts and debris for four days and nights in shark-infested waters. When the fate of the ship was known, a destroyer was sent to pick up survivors. As the rescue ship neared the coordinates night fell. The captain issued an order that was against all the rules. He ordered the ship’s search lights to be put on and pointed to the sky. He was warned that such a move could make the ship a sitting duck to any enemy submarines lurking by. But the captain would not rescind his order explaining that the lights would be a signal to beleaguered survivors to hang on for just one more night for their rescue was drawing near. Indeed, when rescue ensued in the morning, dehydrated and sick survivors testified that the sight of the lights gave them the hope needed that revived them and actually saved their lives.

In the darkness of this world so bothered by sin and death, the light of Christ shines for us. Let us be drawn to the light: the light of our salvation from sin and the hope that overcomes death in Jesus Christ. May the light of Christ, inspiring hope, give us grace and courage to shine the light of God's love and rescue for others in danger of losing hope.

PRAYER FOR ST. LUCY'S DAY: *God of love and source of life, we pray that as we celebrate the entrance of your servant Lucy into eternal glory, you may so strengthen our witness to you in this world that we may at last share her blessedness in your kingdom of everlasting light; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



Friday December 14, 2018

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

Verse: **“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”**

Years ago I was on the board for the county Habitat for Humanity. I would try to help out with building projects. On one occasion help was called for with pouring concrete for the basement floor. With the job I was given, I did not show much skill but only awkwardness. Some guy commented, “I cans see why you are a preacher, you are not good at anything else.” Isn’t it wonderful how the world always has a steady and ready supply of critics? So I left hands-on construction and tried my hand at painting. After I painted a kitchen, I later heard that someone did not like the job I did and completely repainted the kitchen. All was not lost, however, for my painting duties were relegated to bedroom closets.

Today the church honors a Spanish-born saint, Juan Alvarez, better known as John of the Cross. John was not any good at the building or craft trades. As the *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations* states, “He showed a remarkable incapacity for manual labor.” He failed and was “fired” from several apprenticeship opportunities.

John desired to devote his life to prayer and meditation. He entered a monastery, studied theology, and was ordained a priest. He was an advocate of reform for his particular monastic order. Opponents of reform demanded that he renounce such reforms, but John refused. As a reward for his convictions, he was imprisoned for nine months and subjected to physical punishments. His time of confinement and suffering did not defeat him but instead inspired devotional writings of depth and spiritual power. From one of his writings, “The soul that longs for divine wisdom chooses first, and in truth, to enter the thicket of the cross.”

Parts of the life story of John of the Cross sound similar with that of Martin Luther. We know Luther entered a monastery, studied theology, was ordained a priest, and faced opposition for his call for reform. Like the apostle Paul the cross of Jesus was central to Luther’s preaching. The cross reveals the wisdom of God which is unknown in a world which glories in self-gratification. Jesus on the cross reveals knowledge of God found nowhere else. God is one who does not send suffering, but the One who sent his Son to assure us God will not forsake us in and through suffering. Luther often told his hearers that human searching for God in majesty will yield nothing but wrath. Rather seek God at the manger or at the cross and revealed there is the love of God for sinners, or as Luther would say, “Sinners are not loved by God because they are lovely; rather, they are lovely because they are loved by God.” Luther would find in Mary, the mother of our Lord, the wisdom of the cross in that, as she said, “God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” The apostle Paul said many find the cross foolishness and scandalous; John of the Cross said the cross was a “thicket”, and Luther would say the wisdom of the cross turns the values of the world upside-down. As we enjoy the festivities of the season, may we know the deeper joy of both the manger and cross of Jesus, love that meets our deepest need.

PRAYER FOR JOHN OF THE CROSS COMMEMORATION: *Almighty God, you taught John of the Cross to find you in trials and hardships, to adore you in the darkness, and to tell of your love in his writings. Grant that, when all is dark, we may wait patiently for the light, and in the silence listen for your voice, and in all things trust your promises in Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



Saturday, December 15, 2018

Text: Luke 1:57-66

Verse: **“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.”**

Often when a new mother-to-be is expecting a child, her relatives and friends will plan a baby-shower, to shower, so-to-speak the soon-to-be mom with encouragement and helpful gifts for baby. There was probably no first-century equivalent of a baby-shower for another first-time mother we read about in the Gospel of Luke. Elizabeth. Elizabeth was not expecting to be expecting. She and her husband heard no sounds of babies during their married life. With a cruel sounding word, Elizabeth was considered barren, and because of no children, she carried shame from her community.

As the story was told, Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah, was visited by the angel Gabriel while during his work as a priest. Gabriel has a “bulletin of blessing” right from the throne of God. At last, he and his wife were going to be parents. Although a priest who knew Israel’s history of miraculous births, he seemed to think a first-century version of “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn’t”. Zechariah was stricken mute for his unbelief. Speech or no speech, Elizabeth and Zechariah came together, and she conceived. Elizabeth secluded herself for five months perhaps unsure of community reaction. But when her pregnancy could not be hidden, she showed herself and maybe even flaunted her “baby-bump” saying, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

As you read today’s reading, there was great rejoicing when Elizabeth gave birth. Everyone thought the first-born son would be named Zechariah Jr. But both parents said his name would be “John,” the name provided for by Gabriel for their son.

Luke is the only gospel to give us the story of the birth of John, later to be known as the baptizer. In this Advent season we focus on another nativity before we get to the manger in Bethlehem. On a Sunday in Advent we will hear John’s powerful voice calling for the people to repent and prepare the way for the powerful one who is coming. John’s baptism with water at the Jordan will imitate a new crossing into the Promised Land; the people were to prepare for the Savior who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

But today we see the infant John and sense the awe of his parents who rejoice in their son's birth, and also in the mercy of God. Elizabeth said God took away her disgrace. Zechariah will soon have his piece to say after nine months of silence. Silent no more and filled with the Holy Spirit, John's dad will rejoice and praise God for the infant son he is holding in his arms, and praise the Lord for what his son will be: the one who will be a prophet and prepare people for the coming of Jesus, preaching the good news of the forgiveness of sins, and hope for people who have lost hope. So in Advent we can celebrate another birth, the nativity of John and rejoice in the tender mercy of God.

PRAYER: *Gracious God, you indeed work in unexpected and wondrous ways, bringing great joy to Zechariah and Elizabeth. The back story was one of unbelief and disgrace. But John's birth revealed you are greater than any unbelief, and your mercy a powerful remover of disgrace. As we noted John's birth today, may we also be confident of your mercy, grace, hope, and love reaching us in any need, for we are your beloved children. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

