

..... Daily Devotions
December 16-22, 2018
Pastor Maxine Gray
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Sunday, December 16, 2018

Text: Matthew 2:7-11 (NRSV)

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There are many exciting aspects to the events that are encompassed within this Christmas story. On one of our cold crisp nights with stars popping into view all across the panorama of the heavens it is hard not to consider the wise men. The appearance of THE Star must truly have been a riveting sight, fraught with sublime meaning. You may not be able to match it, yet perhaps you have known a similarly moving and inspiring sight from your own experience. It may have been a natural beauty so stunning it stopped you in your tracks; a sunrise or sunset signaling the start or close of another day, the Northern Lights waving their colorful greeting, a coral reef teeming with vibrant fish painting their own video performance under the sea.

For those foreign travelers the most amazing of sights came when that Star stopped. When their destination was pointed out to them, they realized that their dream was about to find its culmination, that all their effort was going to be worth their while. Then, they were nearly overwhelmed by their joy. It was almost too much to bear, too much to take in. They bowed low before the child and His mother showing their deep respect and honor, offering the gifts appropriate for a monarch.

How can we participate with them? How do we come to appreciate those emotions, that joy, which they came to know? Where do we search for such joy? The Star was a one-time deal, but we do have a light to follow; the Light that Christ is for the world. May those rays of bright joy find you, remove the shadows and illumine your way.

Let us Pray: *Lord, God, bring me into your light that I may pay attention to the glorious wonder of life that surrounds me. Show me how to pay you due respect and thereby recognize the honor you offer humankind by sharing with me this life and your promise of more. Show me how to reflect that Light so others, too, can see the Way you are leading. Amen*



Monday, December 17, 2018

Text: Psalm 88:1-7

**¹O LORD, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
²let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
³For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
⁴I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
⁵like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
⁶You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah***

In this season of constant activity and joy; not all of us are catching its spirit. Extended family and those pastimes of by-gone years may seem far away. There is no way to recapture those fond times and there may be no one with whom to reminisce. Many, perhaps you, are alone during these days before Christmas. This year you might not be able to generate any enthusiasm for what should be a fun and light-hearted season, full of hope. So this psalm could very well express your mood and detail your own despondency.

Look again at those first two verses. In spite of not checking-in to the expected gaiety of the holidays, you are offered an outlet. Take it to the Lord in prayer (as the old hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* says). God has ears attuned to your voice even when it is crying out in disappointment, loneliness or loss. God is there in the dark, God is your saving help. God is your constant companion. So the witness of this psalmist is true, for it has been true for the one who writes to you today. A hand to hold yours is there, reach out for it. Our Lord is prepared to pull you up into His embrace of love.

Let us Pray: Ever attentive Lord, hear me now as I pray. Come into my heart, come into my world, as flesh and blood, as You have done before. Let this life, my life, find its renewal in your promise. You know what lies heavy on my heart so that it feels that you, O God, must be turning away in anger. It hurts! Bring your soothing and healing touch, reassure me of your constant loving, kindness, and steadfast mercy. Let me be taken by surprise again by your tender peace. Amen

Tuesday, December 18, 2018



Text: Luke 1:8-16

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

With only seven days until Christmas Eve it may feel as if there is virtually no more time in which to complete all your list of tasks. You know that famous poem, “On the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring?” Nothing could be further from the truth! Kids don’t want to sleep for they are too excited. Parents and grandparents are often up late constructing, wrapping, baking and fussing. For those involved with church events and worship preparations, the tension may be cranked up higher than usual.

Perhaps you can empathize with Zechariah. When he entered the holy place, secluded and fraught with portent, having a truly sacred task to complete, he encounters an angel! The poor priest was overwhelmed with fear, an angel visit was way beyond what even a priest expected to find in the temple. He learns that a son will be his, a son with advent tasks to perform for God. This little one will grow up to take on Elijah’s power and spirit which will guide him. Appointed as father to such a one would have been daunting indeed. His lack of trust in the angel’s message, that his son could be one with such a future, causes Zechariah to be speechless, literally. Consequently, he was given plenty of time for silence in which to contemplate his own actions, priorities, and attend to his prayer life. In the midst of your own innumerable tasks, you may want to remember Zechariah, trust that God will take care of the truly overwhelming tasks and then come to appreciate the silence as a gift.

Let us Pray: *Lord God, your plan is to bring a spiritual renewal to your church and thereby to me; and instill a trust that enables us all to speak with confidence of the advent of the Christ. If I fall into speechlessness due to fear, guide me through the silence into a new faith and a resolve to do your will. Even in the quiet may I show my faith is in You. Amen*



Wednesday, December

19, 2018

Text: Isaiah 43:1-3a

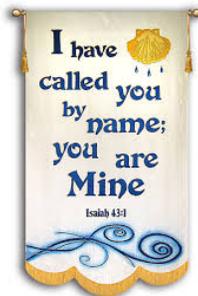
**But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:**

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
²When 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.
³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.**

You can take God's Word for it! You do not need to fear, you have been called by your own name and bought back into God's graces by His own actions on your behalf. What a message of comfort you have been given here. In this neck of the woods lakes abound, great and small. It can be hard to avoid water. Wood stoves, fireplaces and campfires are also a common sight. For some of us those bodies of water and those fire sources signal pleasure and wellbeing. They signal out-of-doors recreation, cabin life; it says home. Yet, if you don't swim, it may be that water scares you. If you've been burned, even small fires can bring up memories of a frightened self, former hurts and terror.

God has a way of using our fear and our weaknesses to teach us to depend upon Him. So we have even been given a drowning in water to bring about a new birth, in our own Baptism. We have been given the flames of the Spirit to spark faith within us. It is in those very aspects of our fear that God steps in and utilizes what we would never choose in order to demonstrate how God intends for us to grow in reliance upon Him. So it is not on our own but by God's strength where we can become strong. God takes away that which hinders and defeats progress and enables us to achieve the challenges put before us.

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, attune my ears and my heart to hear You when You call my name. Show me how to let loose of the grip on my own abilities and the reliance on my pride to get me through. Instead relax me into trusting You to provide strength for me to use, wisdom to guide my decisions, and Your love to show mercy to others. Then perhaps I will not be so easily overwhelmed and stymied in moving forward. Come to me this day with Your reassurance, in Jesus. Amen



Thursday, December 20, 2018

Text: Romans 5:1-2

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Very soon there will be the traditional opening of presents. Hopefully you can get in on some of that, catching the sheer excitement of a child, along with the sincere thankfulness of an adult. With maturity comes the recognition that this holiday of Christmas is not dependent upon those

wrapped and beribboned boxes under a tree. Still, we can and should get excited about this time when Jesus comes to us and seeks to renew our child-like joy and trust.

So what is exhilarating and worth our expectation? In Jesus the Christ we are provided access to grace, to that love we can neither earn nor purchase. It is always a gift. It comes to us freely, just because God wants us to have it. So we can boast, as Paul says, in our certain hope of receiving that love and sharing in God's glory. We will be bathed in that same light of glory which comes to Jesus because we are in the very presence of the Almighty. So the real present we are given this Christmas is the presence of the One who surrounds us in love. Not only is this a Christmas reality but it is available all-year round; we need only open ourselves up to it. Enjoy the unwrapping and savor the sharing of the gift of grace.

Let us Pray: Lord above, You have come down from heaven to visit us and make known to us Your great love. Help me to find many ways to pass Your gifts along to others. Let us all be overwhelmed by Your generosity and find a child-like faith. May I know that you indeed are always present with each of us. In joy, bring us comfort and peace. Amen



Friday, December 21, 2018

Text: Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

To what entertainments are you treating yourself? Have you attended Christmas concerts, or have you only heard the music at the shopping center? Do football games, parades, school plays, TV sitcoms, school programs, movies, and parties take up your time? Are there too many things to fill the day? Have you considered what your choices provide for you, what your selections say about you? You may think since it is just entertainment it doesn't matter; it is just for fun after all. You just need to be distracted for a while, have a means of releasing some tension. Who cares?

As you answer that question, look again at the passage from Romans. Faith comes by means of what you hear. What you allow to enter your ears and your mind, feeds you. Faith comes by means of what is heard. To what you expose yourself will influence how you see yourself, how you understand this world and how you relate to others. If you believe faith in Jesus is needed,

you may want to avail yourself of opportunities to hear Jesus speak. He speaks most clearly by His Word. That Word can also be proclaimed live, by your own voice. Paul exclaims that those who share that good news of Christ are beautiful indeed. Think of ways you can bring good news this week, today. You can be the messenger that makes another's day a happy one.

Let us Pray: *Lord Above, come to me this day. Fill me with purpose. Help me to hear as your Word is meant to speak. Guide my choosing for time is precious. Let me find understanding so I can be more patient with those who need You, Lord. In all I do and in all I say, make me mindful of how others will hear my words and perceive my actions. Amen*



Saturday, December 22, 2018

Text: Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

That very first Christmas involved traveling and relatives. Joseph took Mary with him to Bethlehem for it was the home of his ancestors, the family of David. Taking to the roadways seems to have been a popular notion ever since. Of course, Joseph went in response to the order of the Emperor. They had to go all the way to Bethlehem, the town whose name means "house of bread." It was there that Mary gave birth to the One who would one day call himself the Bread of Life.

Consider that bread is a primary staple of life, something upon which we depend to fill us up and give us strength. Every people, of every culture, have some sort of bread upon which they feed. It is this Son of Mary's that becomes the life-giver for each of us. There is nothing more basic than our requirement for food, even as it is also the source of great joy, creativity, fellowship and comfort to us. The notion of comfort food is one that fits well in this context. May Jesus be the food, that very bread of life, to which you go to discover comfort, so you feel relaxed and cared for. Enjoy those with whom you share meals in the Christmas gatherings that take place over the week ahead.

Let us Pray: *Jesus, I remember that little town of Bethlehem this day. It was the home that nourished and sustained you as a baby, so it holds a special place in my heart. Guide me to the house of bread and to those people who give me the basics which provide what I really need in order to grow and mature in the faith. If the struggle is long and the road slow, show me how to appreciate every mile. Let me always reach for the new life that awaits and reveals itself in You. Amen*

