

Devotions – December 6-12, 2020
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Sunday, December 6, 2020

Text: John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The seasons are shifting with fall now sliding into winter. Here in our northern hemisphere, frequently blanketed by snows, as the earth rests, I am fascinated once again by the quiet that descends, a peaceful lullaby.

Not too long ago, I spent a lovely evening leisurely winding along a path through the woods behind the church building in Pelkie, MI. Fresh snow covered the ground, and large fluffy flakes – the kind that turn the whole scene white and laden with snow – were falling. Except for the sound of a sporadic passing car on the nearby highway and the crunching of autumn leaves beneath my boots, all the world seemed calm and peaceful, the cacophony of post-elections, rioting, protesting, COVID-19, social unrest, and the like drifted into the background, and I was reminded of that Robert Frost poem I like so much, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

As I rounded the bend and entered a pine grove, I was also reminded of the daily need for peace and rest in my life – time to step back from the busyness of life and ministry, to pause from “doing,” and to become fully present in the moment without the worries or concerns of life.

I stopped and stood in those woods and simply began to listen to the peace and serenity in which I had been surrounded. The stillness of twilight ebbed into nightfall in that wooded sanctuary. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The scent of pine danced in the air as snowflakes tickled my nose and eyelashes. In the whisper of the breeze, I could hear those words from John’s gospel, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.”

Let us pray: *Quiet the world, O God. Let the voices of anger, hatred, and violence be silenced and erased by justice, mercy, and love. Grant to all creation your peace, and be with each of us in the miles we have to go before we sleep. Amen.*

A song for your day: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NTVBm_VvLI&feature=emb_logo

Link to “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” - <https://poets.org/poem/stopping-woods-snowy-evening>



Monday, December 7,

2020

Text: Hebrews 13:8

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Dark, overcast days have now become more common than sunshine even if winter has not yet fully arrived. They often seem dull and bleak as I glance out my windows, and part of me longs for the return of summer, warmth, and the sounds of nature as I cocoon within a blanket and turn on the fireplace to hunker down for the evening. My dog, Cheza, snores at my feet, and my cats, Hoolu and Dazzle, slumber, one in my lap, the other at my side, all three oblivious to the greater goings on in the world around them. It is not as easy for me to find rest during these days.

The hope and news that the pandemic would resolve and immediately disappear post elections has proven to be a false narrative, and honestly, I never believed it in the first place. COVID 19 numbers have continued to rise. People have continued to suffer and die. The question remains, “Should we close the doors to stores, restaurants, schools, public gatherings, private homes, and houses of worship or not?” If we say “yes,” we say it in the name of loving our neighbors and protecting one another from the potential spread of disease. But there are still consequences, and they often impact the most vulnerable among us to greater extent. Closed doors mean loss of business. Loss of business can lead to loss of employment. Loss of employment can lead to loss of income, loss of means to provide for one’s self and/or family. If the loss is severe enough, it may also mean loss of home, vehicle, health insurance, groceries, and more, and all of this leads to a different kind of suffering and grief. If we say “no,” the potential for numbers and deaths to rise even higher stares us boldly in the face. Either way, there are no winners, only losers. What do we do? How do we find hope in situations like this? How do we find peace? How do we look past our own desires and wants to those of our neighbors? And not just look, but also act?

It would be so easy for me to say, “It’s not so bad.” My life really hasn’t been all that impacted. No one in my family has fallen ill. I have not faced financial hardship during this time. I am still able to do most of the things I would have done under “normal circumstances.” But I find no peace or hope in that sort of thinking. Instead, I am forced to acknowledge the privileged place in which I sit, curled up with my furry companions. We have shelter. We have food. The bills are paid, and we have money in the bank.

But for others, the crisis has come home to roost. It has hit, and it has hit hard. For far too many someones, it has claimed the lives and livelihoods of loved ones, friends, neighbors, classmates, or co-workers. It has forced us to change in ways we never wanted to change, shattered dreams, and destroyed senses of security and surety.

Yet in the midst of it all, I am reminded that there is one thing that never changes. One thing that is the same yesterday, today, and forever. One thing upon which we can fully rely. Jesus Christ! Emmanuel! God with us! Whatever else happens, God is with us in the thick of it – forgiving, healing, restoring, loving.

Offering peace and rest.

Nothing in this world, no global pandemic or anything else, can stop what God has begun and continues to accomplish.

And so, it is in God who was, who is, and who ever shall be that I am able to find peace and hope. It is to God who was, who is, and who ever shall be that I offer my heart.

Let us pray: *Lord of all creation and the changing seasons, may our “no” be proclaimed to the systems and forces that divide, conquer, oppress, and destroy, to the evils that harm, silence, marginalize, and diminish, to our own pride, greed, desire, and self-righteousness, and may our “yes” be to neighbors and you. Teach us to give and love freely, as you have given and loved, with our whole hearts. Amen.*

A song for your day: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0aL9rKJPr4&feature=emb_logo



Tuesday, December 8, 2020

Text: Luke 1:46-49

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

Once again has come your birthday.

Happy times, we're glad tis here.

Now a loving gift for Jesus,

He has kept you one more year.

This is the song I remember singing in Sunday School as a child to acknowledge one more year. One more candle upon the cake. One more penny in the birthday bank. One more trip around the sun.

One more reason to celebrate.

I know a lot of folks don't look forward to birthdays as they get older, and I can distinctly recall approaching a certain milestone birthday and hearing a friend say, "Just wait until it's your turn. It won't be great. You'll feel so old."

But here I am, several years later. Several years older and hopefully wiser, but from a certain perspective, birthdays are just another day for me. I don't "feel" older in spite of all the keepers of chronology which indicate I am. Most days still feel like twenty-something. Perhaps that's why so many people past the age of thirty will tell you their age is "twenty-nine and holding."

Regardless of the numbers of days and years told by the calendar or the growing number of candles on the cake, I can tell you that another year brings reasons to rejoice and give thanks. Because there was a time when the next birthday almost wasn't.

There was a time when death from disease stared me down and threatened to snuff any thoughts of birthdays, future, and dreams for life. A month shy of my eighteenth birthday, I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and told if my cancer had been discovered even a day later, I would not be here to tell you these things. It was a very aggressive form of the disease, and it nearly claimed my life.

There was also a time when a fifteen-year-old girl made the decision to give her unborn baby up for adoption. She could have chosen to terminate the life growing inside her. And while I am not here to argue matters of prolife or prochoice, I am here to say that I am here because my birth mother chose to give me life.

So on this day, December 8, my birthday, I am celebrating. My spirit rejoices and sings in and to God, my Savior. The mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God has kept me one more year.

What reasons do you have for rejoicing this day and giving thanks and praise to God? What reasons do you have to proclaim the greatness of God?

Let us pray: Creator, sustainer, comforter, be with us this day. Use us to proclaim your greatness throughout the world: your love for and to all of creation, your peace to troubled hearts, your freedom to the prisoners, your hope to the disheartened and hopeless. Bless us with the joy that is found only in you.

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkoKcAaH0do>



Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Text: Luke 2:15

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

When was the last time you received an invitation? A personal request to “come” and experience the joy of something significant taking place? A birthday, an anniversary, a wedding, a graduation, a retirement?

A birth?

One of my favorite Christmas songs to have been written in more recent years is “Noel.” It caught my attention with its simple, yet powerful, lyrics, particularly this line of invitation, “Come and see what God has done.”

It is an invitation the church has often extended to the world: come and see.

Come and experience.

Come and know.

Come and be known.

God has come into the world, the creation.

God, who is love, has taken on human form to dwell among us and show us this love.

God, who is the light of the world, has been given for us.

Come and see what God has done.

This invitation – God’s invitation – is for you!

Will you RSVP?

Let us pray: *Incaruate one, fully God and fully human, you extend the invitation of love to all your creation. Open our hearts to receive you and help us to celebrate the gift of your love by sharing this gift with the world. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Vwu-t7QRaE>



Thursday, December 10, 2020

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

Text: Colossians 1:18

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Today, I am thinking about the church. More specifically, I am thinking about how the church is not a building.

We talk about “going” to church, to attend worship, but even this language strikes me as odd.

Because, as I just mentioned a moment ago, the church is not a building.

We don't “go” to church; we “are” the church.

I think that's something, perhaps, we may have forgotten during this time when many of us have been unable to enter houses of worship.

I am also wondering if it is really our buildings for which we are longing. I hear buildings articulated with statements and questions such as: “I miss going to church. When can we go back to worshipping inside? We should be able to choose to be in the building when we can choose to go to Wal-Mart and the grocery store.”

Do we really miss being in our buildings, or perhaps, is our real yearning for the community – the people? The fellowship and opportunity to be with one another in the same physical space? To laugh and hug and sing?

I suspect it's not about the church as building at all, but rather the people of God together. The “true” church.

Scripture reminds us that God does not come to be confined in buildings. Jesus doesn't lock himself away behind a closed door. Instead, God enters the world and comes to us in the places we already are, into the everyday-ness of our lives, to be with us. Not a building. US!

The church does not go away because we may not be able to enter our communal, indoor worship spaces. It continues to exist in each of us. God does not cease to come and be present with us because the doors of our buildings may be closed. No building could ever confine or stop God from being and doing what God has always been and done and continues to be and do.

It is true that we may not be able to gather together physically for some time, but we are always gathered by God in spirit and in truth to “be” the church God has established in Christ Jesus. We are, not buildings, God's dwelling place.

Let us pray: *Jesus, you are the church's one foundation, and in us you have established your church. Free us from the confines and notions of our buildings as the center of our lives of faith, and instead turn us to you. Help us to live as your faithful people in all circumstances, giving you thanks and praise. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LADMDB4vzrc>



Friday, December 11, 2020

Text: Luke 2:16

So they [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

The night was cold and brisk, as December evenings often are. It was nearly the end of the semester, and we layered up in long johns, chooks, and mittens and caravanned the half-hour drive from the dorms at Northern Michigan University to the rural community of Skandia to a small farm and riding stable. There we were welcome by Sandy and Warren, our hosts, and led out to the horse barn.

The temperature inside the barn was little warmer than outside, so we huddled together in an empty stall that had been prepared for our time together. Christmas lights, bales of hay covered in blankets, and a small nativity set adorned the space.

Our small campus ministry group worshipped in that humble barn setting surrounded by horses, hay, and the chill of that December night, giving us a small glimpse into what it might have been like to be hunkered around the manger in which Jesus had been laid on the night of his birth. My friend Jason sang about the “strange” way in which God had chosen to come and reveal God’s love.

Later, we moved to the warmth of Sandy and Warren’s home and sat around a kitchen table sipped hot cocoa and nibbling Christmas cookies. The conversation and fellowship flowed as we pondered what it would have been like to travel like Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the shepherds from their fields to the place where Jesus was, to hear the angels’ song ring throughout the starry night, and to witness first-hand God incarnate.

The experience lingers in my memory as one of the most powerful encounters with the joy and hope of Christmas: God come near.

Let us pray: *Be near us, Lord Jesus, we ask thee to stay and continue to reveal your love for us in every-day ways as common as feeding place for animals and the arrival of a newborn baby. Amen.*

A song for the day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78fSxdOsqPw>



Saturday, December

12, 2020

Text: Psalm 46:10

***“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”***

Wintry evening
steeped in snow-covered silence,
star-shine company dancing overhead.
I wait. I breathe. I wait.
I listen.

... to the splendor of quiet

...

... pervading.

I wait. I breathe. I wait.
I drift like the down of fresh, new snow,
gentle and free,
to nestle among weighted bows bending low,
to kiss the blanketed earth slumbering below.

I wait. I breathe. I wait.
Creation cradled in the embrace of God, I sleep.
I wait. I breathe. I wait.

(Untitled poem by Kelly J. Ylitalo)

One of my favorite things about the winter months is the stillness. I have memories from childhood of laying down in the snow and simply listening to the quiet and marveling at how a bustling world can become so tranquil. I relish the days after a heavy snowfall, the kind that weigh all the world down and transform it into a white paradise. On these days, when I'm able, I love to don all my warm gear and trek, breaking fresh powder before the groomer, along the old railroad tracks and ORV trails near my family home. The deep snow forces me to slow down, to become more aware of my surroundings, to move with mindful steps.

There's something magical, and almost Narnian, about the experience. All the forest needs is a lamppost in its evergreen midst and Mr. Tumnus standing nearby. I could linger there for hours on end, or at least until the cold seeps past all the winter clothing and chills me to the bone. The air is wonderful and crisp. Clean. Refreshing. Mingled with cedar and pine. I breathe deeply and marvel at the majesty of it all. One cannot help but sense God's hand in the exquisite artistry of the scenery.

Out here is the opportunity to simply leave behind the worries and concerns of the day and simply “be.” To lose one’s self to the moment. To dwell with God.

Let us pray: *Speak over us, O God, and remind us to pause, to bask in the moment and space that has been prepared by you. Blanket us with your peace and help us to be still. Immerse us in all that is you. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpnGgXL5B3g>

