



SAINT CORNELIUS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH PRESENT ADVENT PROGRAM YEAR "A"

Advent studies open with collect for week review/reflect on Advent Calendar bible study: readings and questions for Sunday lectionary readings.

ADVENT 1. NOVEMBER 30. 2022.GOD'S PROMISE, OUR HOPE

Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Calendar for Advent 1

Reflections on Readings Brian B. Pinter, 2013

Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah in this passage paints with the colors of peace and pilgrimage a visionary portrait for the future of all peoples. All nations, he prophesies, will live in peace because they recognize Israel's God as the true God. This passage makes it clear that strife, hostility and fighting thwart God's plan for peace. The course of enmity and conflict leads to a way of living that is inauthentic in light of God's hope for humankind. When God's law finds a permanent home in the human heart, war and violence are renounced.

The prophet recognizes that his people – and all people – are far from realizing this vision. The image of pilgrimage (vv. 2-3) subtly instills the truth that all humanity must struggle to overcome tendencies of violence, but that this journey will find peace at its end. The pilgrimage to Zion will be a long walk toward a change of heart that accepts the wisdom of God's vision. At the journey's end, the prophet foresees abundance regarding both temporal and spiritual needs.

Despite these divine promises – that walking in the way of the Lord will bring peace to all humanity – most of us are afraid to trust God completely in God's vision for peace. Rather, the quick resolution that comes with winning, defeating, besting, etc., often proves irresistible. Isaiah's prophecy we hear today summons us to hear God's vision for us again.

- What are the obstacles, personal and societal, which impede us from walking "in the light of the Lord" toward the age of peace on earth?
- What must you change about your own life in order to fully respond and live the vision for peace the prophet presents?

Romans 13:11-14

Paul's words in this passage present an interpretive challenge to modern readers. The apostle speaks in apocalyptic terms, anticipating the immediate return of Jesus and the total transformation of the world. The church (for the most part) no longer shares Paul's expectation of imminent apocalypse, so what are we to make of his exhortation?

Continuing our theme of pilgrimage, the traveler on the spiritual journey gradually grows in relationship with Jesus, ultimately experiencing a total metamorphosis. The disciple becomes Jesus through a transformation of will, desire and action. Notice that Paul calls the hearer to express this metamorphosis through a change in one's way of living – renewed integrity,

authenticity (verse 13) and above all, peace. Paul, without saying so directly, is calling us to die to self (i.e., die to the self-centered but ultimately small desires that so often define us as we seek our own security and personal fulfillment). When we die to self, we are now free to assume the larger mind of Christ-consciousness – that way of seeing and living in the world that is characterized by compassion and love. This is the ultimate destination for the heart of every Christian wanderer.

- Spend some time in quiet prayer with Paul's teaching to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." How is the Spirit moving you to interpret that for your own life?
- If Paul were writing to us today, how might he recast verse 13 for our times? What issues would he enumerate?

Matthew 24:36-44

This gospel text affirms that Jesus will indeed return, but that no one, not even Jesus himself, knows the day or hour. Such knowledge has been reserved to God alone. Some Christians, however, have interpreted the exhortation to "be ready" to mean that one must be physically prepared for the events that will accompany the Second Coming. Others attempt to calculate when this event will occur. Interestingly, such predictions and calculations often attract widespread public attention and curiosity.

While mainstream Christians usually don't get caught up in the hype and anxiety that surround apocalyptic predictions, such incidents, as well as today's gospel text, invite us to reflect on a few significant issues. Often, spiritually and emotionally, we distract ourselves from what is essential by focusing our attention and energy on that which is tangential and often beyond our control. But in the end these are pseudo concerns that draw us away from responding with maturity and wholeness to the Christian call for transformation of heart and mind.

- In what ways do you succumb to the temptation to excessively focus on peripheral issues over which you have little control?
- How might you apply Jesus exhortation to "keep awake" (verse 42) to your own life and circumstances?

ADVENT 2. DECEMBER 7, 2022.THE WAY, PREPARATION.

Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Calendar for Advent 2: Dec 4-10

Reflections on Readings Sunshine Dulnuan Dec. 9, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

It is interesting that the text offers a telltale expansive view of justice that includes all creation. The prophecy describes the peaceful cohabitation of the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, humans and snakes. Life against life is pacified. The language is rich with the promise of the extent of God's justice in creation. If one could read the prophet Isaiah's tree imagery beyond the usual lens of monarchic lineage from David, the new branch that grows from the root of Jesse takes a whole new meaning; the branch of Jesse can symbolize the extent of God's harmony with creation, its leaves spread over the earth, enlivening all. God's knowledge encompasses like "the waters cover the sea," allowing us to recognize the integrity of creation and draw as toward worship and stewardship.

· Is justice anthropocentric?

- In an age of gross neglect of creation and the suffering of ecosystems, how does our faith encourage us to be effective stewards of creation?

Romans 15:4-13

The universality of Jesus Christ draws all people to him. Therefore, the text emphasizes the inclusive nature of our hope in Christ. Paul urges his readers to "welcome one another" and join with one voice to glorify God. In the context of diversity, he stresses the need for mutual humility, just as Christ has become a servant for the sake of all people. He proclaims the prophet Isaiah's words that, in Christ, "the Gentiles shall hope." This is a compelling undoing of exclusive salvation, formerly reserved for a particular race or group of people, now open to humankind. It is a marvelous declaration of Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. As peoples gather toward him, the Scriptures testify on Christ's behalf.

- How did Jesus Christ fulfill Old Testament prophecy?
- In an age when boundaries and borders are drawn, how does the inclusive nature of our faith transform our idea of mission?

Matthew 3:1-12

Baptism in the wilderness is a curious thing. In the wilderness, where the vagabonds and outcasts dwell, a furious John the Baptist rejects a group of priests coming for baptism and

admonishes them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance”—an obvious refusal to be convinced by the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ display of righteousness, even though they are considered to be the holiest groups in society during that period. He knew their intention to find fault in his actions. By describing the perfection of God’s judgment as an ax poised at the roots of an unfruitful tree, and as a winnowing fork separating wheat from the chaff, John does not give

them the opportunity to see baptism as an empty ritual. More than the outward displays of piety, baptism calls for a repentant heart. More than an obligatory adherence to temple law and order, baptism is an act of offering and surrender unto God. Thus, the rejection of the Pharisees and Sadducees can be understood in light of the baptism of Jesus. By his willful act to be baptized by John later in the text, a new and holy priesthood is realized.

The text also teaches us that the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus Christ can be ours, too. In the Philippines, a festive Filipino fiesta requires clear roads. Since the procession goes through neighborhoods, people “prepare the way” by cleaning their front yards, usually a part of the main road. Each family and the whole barangay then wait in eager expectation for the procession to pass by their houses. Delicacies are served, loved ones gather, and the sound of pomp and laughter fill the air. I wonder if the season of Advent can be a fiesta for the coming of Christ, wherein the community of faith gathers in eager anticipation of him.

- How do we “bear fruit worthy of repentance”?
- John the Baptist is considered to be the forerunner of Jesus Christ. How does the season of Advent challenge us to “prepare the way” for him?

ADVENT 3. DECEMBER 14, 2022 JOY.

Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Calendar for Advent 3, Dec. 11-17

Reflections on Readings Joy Amanda Payne, December 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened." These will be not only familiar words to many but also a familiar tune. Isaiah 35 is featured in the popular alto recitative in Handel's Messiah. As we come to the text today, we pray for fresh eyes. We look upon a scene that describes that which seems unimaginable. The lame walk? The blind see? A highway in the desert? How can this be?

If we look closely, we can see a carefully constructed poetic structure that gives this text immense meaning. The concentric structure reveals the great care in which these verses were sewn together. Verses 1-7 start and conclude with an emphasis on creation. The desert and wilderness are being transformed. Desert blossoms turned as fertile as the watered lands of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon (vv. 1-2); the arid sands become an immense garden (vv. 6b-7). We see transformation abound as a dry wasteland turns into a lush playground.

Transformation continues in the next layer of the passage. Not only nature is being transformed but also humankind. Hands, knees, and hearts are made strong (vv. 3-4a); eyes, ears, limbs, and tongue are healed and restored (vv. 5-6a).

These bookends of the restoration are beautiful but, much like America's favorite cookie, the really good stuff comes in the middle. At the center of these restorative texts, which highlight the restoration of creation and humanity, is God. God is coming with power to overthrow disease, disorder, and the wickedness that stands in the way of the breathtaking transformation that will be ushered in.

This text announces that God is in our midst. God is showing up. Sit back and watch the most extreme cosmic makeover imaginable. We live in realities that sometimes feel like desert land; we battle sickness and watch those we love do the same. What if we believed that in Christ, God were in our midst, in the center of our lives and our world, just as God stands centered in our text? What if we believed that God were at work here and is the business of transformation? Wouldn't this be a great cause for a grand "Hallelujah" chorus in our lives?

- How does this text help us understand what it means "to be saved" as something that not only pertains to individual souls but also the transformation of humanity and creation?

- When our lives seemed to be bookended by dry wasteland and disease and disorder, how can we keep watch for God showing up in the middle of the text of our lives?

Psalm 146:4-9

In Advent, we draw near to the way that God manifested salvation in the birth of Christ. We are invited by the psalmist, in the verses preceding today's text, to live out our lives with the knowledge that God gives us the gift of salvation every day: "I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being." (v. 1b).

The Magnificat, another of the options from today's lectionary, also proclaims praise to God for our salvation. Mary sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary extols the God whose promise of salvation will ultimately be fulfilled in the birth of the child in her womb.

There is majesty in both of these texts, psalms of praise and an underlying relationship to the promises God now brings to fulfillment in this season of Advent. The Lord of the psalmist and Mary is a God of justice among all people. He is the God who sets those in bondage free, restores sight to the blind, lifts up the downtrodden, loves righteousness, and holds great care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.

The texts for the third Sunday of Advent proclaim that our hope is the almighty God who gives hope to all and is not only present in these promises but also in the very midst of our daily lives. In the season of the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we hang onto these words of hope and life and proclaim the praises of the psalmist and Mary and sing a new song. In the words of this Sunday's collect, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us."

- In what ways does Mary's Magnificat echo the same refrain as the Psalmist in regard to the nature of who God is?
- As we anticipate God's fulfillment of promises, what does the psalmist have to say about false hope (Psalm 146:3-4)? What does false hope look like in our lives today?

Matthew 11: 2-11

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" These are the words on the lips of John the Baptist from the confines of a prison cell. At first, these words seem unsettling. John knew Jesus – how could he ask this?

In prison now, John is no longer baptizing in the River Jordan or having people come to him. John finds himself in a new desert. After living a life of freedom, he has now entered confinement. From the open wilderness to captivity and with a drastic change of circumstances also comes a drastic change of perspective. Does his question come from true curiosity or disappointment? Is it from doubt or speculation, or could it be asked as a question of trust? We may never know his motive, but the question remains significant for all of us today.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" is the question at the heart of Advent, as we live in a season of anticipation. We, too, find ourselves in the confinement of our limited imaginations about God. We long and hope dearly, but sometimes wonder if the promises

given to us by God could really ever come. When the odds are stacked against us and we are up against the wall, this is a question that rings true to us. When we ponder this question in whatever circumstance we are in, we must recognize that it is rooted in a deep longing for the things to come. In this longing, we maintain hope, the hope of what could be and the faith that God is in the businesses of keeping his promises.

- How can circumstances change your perspective and the questions you ask? How have you preserved hope?
- When was a time in your life when you could relate to John's question? How can we use this question during Advent to re-center ourselves on the hope of God's promises?

ADVENT 4. DECEMBER 18-24. PEACE.

Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Calendar for Advent 4

Reflections on Readings Amanda Payne, December 2019

Isaiah 7: 10-16

I grew up in a family that didn't believe in making multiple trips when transporting things. We learned young that you could weave six or seven grocery bags like bangles on your wrists; yes, you waddled and struggled to fit through the doorway, but there was also a sense of pride that, like a seasoned ironman, you got all the groceries in one trip by yourself. In college, I lived on the third floor. One day, I was carrying an armchair, a 25 lb. bag of dog food, three textbooks, and under my chin, my mail. As I climbed the stairs, a neighbor stopped me to ask if I needed help. I returned their kind offer with a snarky expression. Of course I don't need help, I can do it on my own – in one trip.

In today's passage in Isaiah, I can't help but think that King Ahaz is probably the type of guy that gets everything out of his chariot in one trip. We find King Ahaz in the eighth century B.C. Syria and Israel have an alliance against Judah and Judah's King, Ahaz, is scared. He is stubborn and refuses to turn to God for protection, instead trying to make alliances with Assyria, which – spoiler alert! – ends very badly for them.

King Ahaz is carrying a heavy load of a kingdom in conflict and grasping desperately to hang onto control. The Lord spoke to Ahaz and actually invited him to test him for a sign. Ahaz is presented not only with the promise of divine help, but a divine test drive to prove the Lord's trustworthiness. King Ahaz turns down the offer. He has already made up his mind, and right or wrong, he has committed himself to it – like a fool on a staircase carrying way more than they could handle, refusing help and waiting for a disaster.

- King Ahaz had more faith in himself and his crafty plans than in God. It's easy to judge him, but we all have areas of our lives where we trust our plans more than God's promises. Where is it the hardest to let go and trust in God? Kids? Marriage? Finances? Health?
- We see in this text that sometimes we don't want a real savior; we want a savior on our own terms. Do you see that played out in your daily life?

Psalms 80: 5-10

There is a beautiful intertwining of words of lament and praise found in Psalm 80. The three sections of the psalm are punctuated with the refrain: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved" (vv. 3, 7, and 18).

The three sections can be defined as a cry to God for salvation (vv. 1-3), a description of the plight of the Northern kingdom (vv. 4-7), and images of Israel as a vine planted by God (v. 8-18). It is clear that this psalm is a desperate cry in response to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

This psalm gives us an all-too-familiar story of people falling away from the salvation of God, relying on humans rather than the divine. The plea to God to save is heart-wrenching. The agony of these words and the hope of returning to the safety of God's promises is something we dwell on in this penitential season of Advent. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we pray that our ears and hearts would be open to hearing these scriptures – the promise of Isaiah, the hope of the psalmist and the word of fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

- The psalmist prays, remembering God's mighty acts of deliverance, but seems to wonder where those acts are in their time of need. Have you ever found yourself in a season of life where you felt like the psalmist?
- For a lot of people, the holidays are a hard season because of personal loss and grief. How can we recognize and walk alongside others who are in a season of lament?

Romans 1:10-16

Paul does much in such a short text. His offering of the concept of calling is not to be missed. Paul tells these Christians that he has been "called" to be an apostle and that they are "called" to belong to Christ and be holy (vv. 6-7). There is a double call between Paul and his audience that bookmarks this text.

From this text, we can see that the key to discovering our call isn't finding something we are good at or something that thrills us, but instead, is knowing the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit for holy living. The call to holy living is a call to offer oneself up and love others in humility, just as Christ did. The fourth candle of the Advent wreath represents love. Jesus showed his love for us in his life and death. Just like the Romans to whom Paul wrote, we are called to Christ and to holy living.

- What would life look like if we all took our call to love as seriously as we take other vocations?
- What does this text tell us about our responsibility to the gospel?

Matthew 1: 18-25

We begin with the genesis of Jesus in this gospel. We read this scene as an Advent text, but Matthew tells us here that it is Jesus' birth narrative. It ends up working, because Matthew isn't focused on the birth itself, but rather the identity of the one being born. Matthew's focus is Christological.

Another unique feature of Matthew's text is his focus on the role of Joseph. In Luke's gospel, the focus is on Mary as the active parent and the one in dialogue with the angel of the Lord; in Matthew, we get a glimpse of Joseph's side of the story. Matthew emphasizes the faithfulness of Joseph in the role of Jesus' birth and presents him as a righteous man.

Matthew tells of Joseph's journey as he finds out Mary is pregnant and tries to dismiss her quietly. Matthew records the angel of the Lord visiting Joseph to reveal the divine predicament in which they found themselves. Matthews's gospel gives us a rare glimpse into the life and faithfulness of Joseph as he, in faith, takes Mary as his wife and serves Jesus as his earthly father and even accepts responsibility for naming him according to God's command. We don't see or know much of this man from the gospels. This week, it is worth slowing down and really paying attention to how Matthew portrays Joseph and what we can learn from him about faithfulness and obedience.

- What do you think it was like for Joseph raising Jesus, knowing that he was not his biological child?
- Why do you think Joseph is overlooked in scripture? From what we read in Matthew, what can we learn from him?