

The Lord is Always with Us

2021



“And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Matthew 28:20

Dear Congregation,

Another wonderful Advent season is upon us! A time to celebrate the coming of the baby Jesus! It is also a reminder that the Lord is with us! He will never leave or forsake us!

Once again we are combining the old devotionals with new devotionals. It's always amazing how even the older devotionals speak to us today. God's word never changes!

This Christmas season:

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace." Numbers 6:24-26

Love,

Worship Ministry Team

The 2021 Devotional Book is dedicated to the memory of:

Margie Williams

Susan Wolpin

Bill Cantrell

Sunday, November 28, 2021

Revelation 22:12-21

Reflections by Pastor John



Read Revelation 22:12-21

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” – Revelation 22:13.

Three different times in the Book of Revelation Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.”¹ These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so it would be like Jesus saying, “I am the A and Z” for us English-speaking folks.

It is interesting that Jesus would compare himself to the rudiments of human language. We cannot speak to each other without the letters A and Z and all the others in-between. Words cannot be formed without learning the alphabet, which we most likely learned when we were very young. Jesus comes to us as very young during this time of year, and according to John, He is known as the Word (cf. John 1:1, 14). He is the way God is able to speak to us, showing us without a doubt who God is and what God is all about.

Alpha and Omega, A and Z, words, Word... all of these images float around our minds, images we may never have put together. We come across them in separate books of the Bible, but to join them during our Advent celebration makes the birth of Jesus even more real.

We cannot understand who God is without God’s Word (Jesus) communicating to us. We won’t come to faith in God unless God uses our words to speak about relationship, healing, grace, love, and everlasting life. God does more than use our language to talk to us – God becomes our language through Jesus the Word. We learn a new way to live that goes beyond the letters. Language turns into thought: believing new things about God and growing in a deeper appreciation for God. Language and thought turn into action: consciously choosing to act a certain way for the benefit of others, worshipping and enjoying the life God gives.

Jesus as Word defines how we communicate our lives to the world. He defines how we will use our words to reveal God to others and work for the good of all. He defines how we listen to God’s Communication (Jesus himself), growing ever deeper in faith, so that we may know God as thoroughly and intimately as possible.

“I am the Alpha and Omega,” Jesus says three times in Revelation, maybe to get a point across. We may repeat the words, “Come, Jesus, come,” and we expect the New Language to enter and transform us forever.

PRAYER: There is so much going on as we say, “You are Alpha and Omega, *the* Word.” Open the holy images to us. Help us to understand what it means to have God’s Word living in us. We glorify You for being God’s Language, so that we may live. In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13.

Monday, November 29, 2021

Isaiah 49:1-6

from Advent 1993

Reflections by Cathe McKinnon (former member)

“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

How wonderful that we are all included in God’s plan and that His light and His salvation is offered to each of us. This certainly isn’t happening because we are so deserving; it happens because it is what God wants. It is in this passage that God promises to use His servant not just for the redemption of the Israelites, but for the redemption of all mankind. But that means that we must give some thought to God’s plan for us, for just as the servant in this passage from Isaiah was called by God for a certain purpose, so are we called by God for a certain purpose – His purpose.

At some point we must recognize that if we lose sight of God’s purpose for us, like the servant in this passage, we “labor in vain.” We ourselves may accomplish little in our lifetime; God working through us may accomplish a great deal. What we must do is strive earnestly to be attuned with God, open to His purpose in our lives so that we may be a part of the light in this world.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, You have taught us to pray “Thy will be done,” but I wonder sometimes if we really understand what that means. Jesus understood; it meant the sacrificing of His life. As we celebrate the beginning of His life during this Advent season, let us not forget the end of His life and what that means to us today and always. We truly belong to Him, for He has paid the price and has claimed us as His own. What comfort that provides. Amen.

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

from Advent 1993

Isaiah 7:10-14

Reflections by Barbara Lester (former member)

Immanuel – God with us!

Prophecy fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

A virgin bringing forth a son!

Immanuel – God with us – Jesus Christ.

Jesus promised to never leave us nor forsake us. “Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the world.” Matthew 28:20 Jesus Christ with us every minute, every hour, every day – closer than our very breath. Jesus born to die, to live forever.

God with us.

Jesus in the cradle, hanging from the cross, ascending to heaven, coming again.

Our Immanuel. Our God with us forever.

PRAYER:

Dear Father, Thank You for Your sign of Your great love for us – Jesus Christ. Thank You for filling us with Your Spirit and leading and guiding us. Thank You for Your Word and feeding us upon it. Thank You for Your presence within us and around us. Thank You for Your creation, the beauty of this world. Help us to know we are never alone, never without help or never unloved. You are always with us and You love us with an everlasting love. You created us for Your pleasure. We are so loved by You. Our Immanuel, our God with us – we lift our prayers to You through Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

from Advent 1994

Amos 4:1-3; 5:21-27; 6:4-8

Reflections by Courtney Wall

I remember when I first studied about the prophet Amos. My teacher told me that he was considered a “minor” prophet, but he sure stirred up a lot of trouble to be considered “minor.” You see, Amos was the “social justice” prophet, and he was always stepping on someone’s toes.

But what do these passages have to do with Christmas? They don’t tell of a baby to be born to a virgin; they don’t even mention the name Christ. All these passages do is remind us to be generous to the poor and not place too much worth in material things. Does that have anything to do with Christmas?

These scriptures remind me of last January when I and the youth spent the night in the homeless shelter. I’ll never forget how much those people appreciated the little things, like a game of monopoly or sack lunch that had been made at 3:00 a.m. I went home counting my blessings, and I haven’t stopped.

But these verses also remind me of the Youth Group’s Fall Retreat at Calvin Center. We each lit a candle and fastened it to a paper plate and floated it out onto the lake at night. It was a beautiful sight to see each light floating out onto the water. It is also a beautiful sight when we let Christ shine in us while we reach out to those around us in need. What better time to do this than Christmas; maybe these verses of scripture are related to Christmas after all.

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, as we approach Your blessed birthday, may all the lights we see remind us that Your light is in us – even when we don’t feel like we “shine.” Help us to be truly grateful for what we have this season instead of wishing for something more. You are all we need. Amen.

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Luke 19:40

Reflections by Bruce Campbell

Just Thinkin' ...

It's a well-known fact in the scientific community that all things vibrate. Yes, **ALL** things have an inherent and unique vibration, even you. You see that coffee table in front of you, the glass from which you're drinking your Christmas eggnog, and even that huge chunk of rock Northeast of Atlanta we call Stone Mountain, it's all vibrating. Even the stoic Bob Lukat has a unique vibration. Ya think?

A piano, guitar, trumpet, drum, and most, if not all, musical instruments, make their sounds through vibrations of various materials or apparatus. Those sounds, when specifically arranged, create melodies and harmonies. Then add voices and words, you have our modern day plethora of musical entertainment. Ya think?

Perhaps God can hear those inner vibrations much like we can hear a piano, guitar, trumpet or drum. Perhaps God has arranged those vibrations/sounds to make a beautiful song that He listens to as He enjoys the Creation that He proclaimed 'Good'. Ya think?

FAR FETCHED? Maybe not. Luke 19:40 reads "I tell you that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." Perhaps those stones, through their vibrations, are crying out and God hears them. Nothing can stop them. Ya think?

This Christmas, make sure the gift you bring to Christ is you (with your unique vibrations) and let Him have you as part of His Song. We always focus on the gifts the biblical visitors brought to the manger but fail to mention that they all brought themselves as well. Mary, Joseph, the wise men, shepherds, even animals all came, personally, to the manger. As such they have become part of that great story, 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' ... Or ever created? Ya think? ...

Remember, you are the only gift that only you can bring to the manger. Ya think?

Friday, December 3, 2021

Isaiah 11:1-5

from Advent 1995

Reflections by Dock Gammage

As you read the passage for the day, what jumped out at you? I think many times I read my Bible and do my devotional out of habit and sometimes I do not put a lot of effort or thought into what I read. During the Advent season is when I notice this the most. Much of the scripture that I read during this time is extremely familiar. My eyes tend to move quickly across the pages of my Bible because I know what is going to happen next. I need to be reminded to look deeper and find more out about this wonderful time of the year.

In this passage, Isaiah predicts the coming of the Messiah who will pardon us from our sins and restore righteousness to God's people. He describes this Messiah as someone with understanding, wisdom, power, knowledge, and who has the fear of the Lord. God chose to send His Son, who was and still is all powerful, in a peaceful and natural way.

Notice that Jesus was not sent to throw all the rotten apples of the world away. He did not come with an army to kill all evil people. Instead, He came to show us that we all have rotten places and are imperfect, but that He still loves us. He came to help all people gain a better understanding of His Father. He wanted us to see that we have a loving and caring Father. Even a rotten apple can sow beautiful apples if the seeds are tended and cared for properly. At this very special time of the year, remember to prepare your heart and soul for the coming of Christ.

Try to find something different that you may have overlooked in years past.

PRAYER:

Lord God, teach us to open our eyes and see more clearly during these hectic days leading up to Christmas. Let us not forget to prepare ourselves for this Advent season. Help us commit ourselves to see how loving and caring You are because You gave us the greatest Christmas present ever by sending Your only Son so that we may have everlasting life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 4, 2021

I John 4:7-16

from Advent 2001

Reflections by Jack Bell (former member)

Prepare to Prepare

Advent, the season that we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Today is the beginning of the rest of your life. Go back and reread today's scripture and pay particular attention to verses 13-14. Verse 13 says, "*We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit.*" (NIV) If you are not doing it already, let me invite you to begin doing a daily devotion each morning in Advent and to continue the rest of your life to seek God's Spirit when you first awake. Even if it means getting up 30 minutes earlier, when you spend time with God in the morning through His scriptures and prayer, you will have His peace and be aware of the leading of His Spirit throughout the day. Allow His Spirit to use you to spread His love everywhere you go and to everyone you meet during the day. Also ask Him to help you to do what needs to be done according to His will for that day. If things don't go as you have planned for that day, just realize that, in the words of our Youth Minister, Dock Gammage, "It's a God thing!" During this Advent Season, ask God to show you the true meaning of Christmas each day through the eyes of His Spirit, and to share His love with someone during each day of Advent. I know from experience that you will receive blessings far above anything you could imagine and that you will want to continue starting each day with God for the rest of your life.

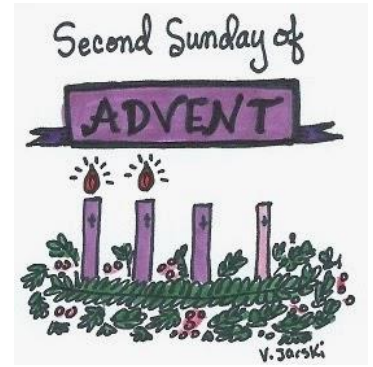
PRAYER:

Father, thank you for the gift of eternal life You have given us through Your only begotten Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Open our hearts to receive Your Spirit's leading each day and to spread Your love with each person we come in contact with. Give us the desire to want to begin each day anew with You. Forgive us of our sins and shortcomings. In Your Son's precious name we pray, Amen.

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Ephesians 1:3-14

Reflections by Shirley Bradley



This scripture is dear to my heart, and should be held in high esteem by all Christians. This scripture praises God for the spiritual blessings He has bestowed on all believers. In verses 4 and 5, it clearly states that God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. In verses 7 and 8, it shows that God accomplished the adoption by redeeming the believer through the blood of Christ.

This wonderful spiritual blessing serves to emphasize this great central truth of Christianity. God's eternal purpose is to gather the universe into one body. This purpose is to be realized through Christ and through the church, which is His body. In verses 9 and 10, it reveals that all of this is "the mystery of His will" and God will bring all things together in Christ. This includes all believers into a single people who receive the Holy Spirit from God.

Verse 4 is my favorite as it states, as He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love. This is referenced to 1 Peter verse 2. Those who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with His blood: may grace and peace be yours in abundance.

This wonderful spiritual blessing in Christ shows God's will is to bring all people together into an "oneness."

PRAYER:

With our prayer today let us pray for the conversion of the non-believer so we can become as one body of believers according to God's eternal purpose.

from Advent 2001

Monday, December 6, 2021

from Advent 2001

Isaiah 2:1-5

Reflections by Ronnie & Dianne Hooten

When we first read this scripture, our initial thoughts were: what in the world does Isaiah have to do with Christmas? However, after reading it again and again, and after reading Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching for Isaiah by Christopher R. Seitz, thoughts actually began to form about why this text is used for Advent.

As we see it, the scripture talks of Jesus coming to teach us His ways so that we may walk in His paths, settling disputes for many peoples, and bringing peace to the world where nation will not train for war anymore. We believe this is why it is used for Advent, talking of the coming of the Christ-child. However, we look around and see that although Christ has come once, we still have no peace in the world.

Today, exactly three months since the September 11 tragedies, it is hard to think of Christmas coming in the middle of wartime. It is hard to think of gifts and celebrating when so many have lost their lives, are living without knowing for certain where their loved ones are, or are trying to go on with their lives after burying family members and friends. Our world doesn't see peaceful times when looking with the human eye, but when looking with a heart full of Christ, our hearts can feel God's peace. There is no peace inside without the Christ child coming and living in your heart.

We believe that this scripture probably refers to the Second Coming of Christ. That is when Christians will truly know peace beyond the peace of mind that God gives. Until that time, it is up to us as children of God to share the message of Christmas – God gave us His Son to bring the gift of salvation to all who desire the peace that only God can give.

PRAYER:

O Heavenly Father, God of Peace, today we want to pray for peace...for all the families affected by the tragedies, all the children who know, understand, or can't understand what is happening in our country, for ourselves. We ask today that You give us inner peace to not be afraid of what the world may bring our way. We ask for Your comfort for those who are suffering. We pray for our leaders who have difficult decisions to make and our military that have difficult tasks to perform. We ask for strength and courage to share Your message of Hope with others who need Your peace. We thank You for Your Precious Gift of Jesus, our salvation, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, December 7, 2021

from Advent 2001

Isaiah 11:1-10

Reflections by Mary Dyche

In anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Christ and reflection on His attributes, one of the most precious to me is the way He judges us. He is a just and fair judge – not judging on our outward appearance or on someone else's opinion or experience as we so often times do with each other – He judges each of us with a perfect heart full of love that surpasses human understanding.

The challenge then to me is to become so connected to Christ through the Holy Spirit's work in my life that as I encounter individuals in my daily walk, especially those who I find difficult to love, that I look at them through the eyes and mind of Christ. I must look beyond the surface and outward appearance – perhaps, spend just a few additional minutes to look within and seek to understand what is going on in their lives and motivate them to act as they do – just as it is my prayer, that they would look within me to seek that same understanding. As God's children, He may want to use us in a special way – just as Christ, the fulfillment of God's promise in Isaiah has made a difference in our lives, we are to live and interact with others so that they will be drawn to Him through our lives. When I let God lead me and make the extra effort to look beyond what I see with my eyes and hear with my ears – but am guided by the Holy Spirit – the encounter with that individual most often enriches and blesses my life in ways that I could not have imagined.

PRAYER:

Ask God today to give you a heart full of love and understanding for those individuals that you encounter today – it may make a difference in your life as well as theirs – but most especially it will help us prepare our hearts for the coming of the Messiah and the celebration of His birth.

Wednesday, December 8, 2021

Luke 1:26-33

from Advent 2011

Reflections by Jeannie Hodges

We never know what can happen when we open our heart to God. Mary had no idea what to expect when the angel of the Lord came to her saying she would give birth to the Son of the Most High and ...He will reign forever over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will not end."

I can just imagine what she must have been thinking: How could this happen to me? What will happen to me now? What will others say?

Mary knew only that God was her Lord and that she had been blessed. What an incredible journey she was to have.

So when we give our hearts, mind, and body to God, we are blessed by our Lord and Savior. Every day I pray, "Today I am blessed – Lead me, Lord."

Helen Steiner Rice is one of my favorite poets, and so I share this with you today:

God Bless and Keep You in His Care

"There are many things in life we cannot understand

But we trust God's judgment and are guided by His Hand

And all who have God's blessing can rest safely in His care

For He promises safe passage

On the wings of faith and prayer."

God's blessing to you as you journey today and always.

Thursday, December 9, 2021

Mark 13:24-27

from Advent 2002

Reflections by Allen Grant

This is a time in our world when there is unrest and the threat of war. As we read Mark 13:24-27, remember that there will be these times of unpleasant things as mentioned in Matthew 24:6. In this season that we celebrate the birth of our Father, we should take comfort in Him.

He was born to be our protector and warrior and died to forgive us of all our sins. He promises to be loving and all-powerful for His believers and followers of His word. He will punish those that trouble His believers (II Thessalonians 6:10). He will search for those He calls His “elect” no matter where they are. On the day of our Lord, He will gather us in His loving arms and calm our storms.

We should celebrate His birth with the love and power that He gives to us unconditionally.

PRAYER:

Father, with the birth of Your Son, we have received the greatest of all gifts. Help us to stay focused on His presence. We are here to glorify You by leading Christian lives. Guide us and mold us as You will. Amen.

Friday, December 10, 2021

from Advent 2002

II Corinthians 6:1-2

Reflections by Mary Ann Warlick

Advent and Christmas is to me a time of Salvation, for this is the time of year when we reflect upon the life of the Baby Jesus who was born so long ago in the little town of Bethlehem.

Christmas is a special gift, not like those we sometimes give – hastily picked and hurriedly purchased. It is lovingly offered to all who will receive. God's grace is what keeps us from perishing in the fires or storms of our own making. God's peace, God's love, and our salvation is coming for Christmas.

The gift of Grace is hard to describe. It is unbounded love. It overflows. It is deeper and wider and higher than we can ever imagine. It is never forced. We must accept the gift. So as we prepare for His coming, let us be open; let God surprise us. Maybe you will find God in the carols and the presents and the feasts and festivities, but God may offer you a different vision of Advent this year. Prepare for His coming! Listen! Salvation is yours through grace.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, Your earthly life, which began so long ago on a Christmas morning, was concluded when You were lifted up in a cloud and taken from the sight of your disciples. You, our Lord, Son of God, Emmanuel – You led us to Your Heavenly Father. You taught us all that we need to know. You did all that could be done; You gave us all that You had. What would our lives have been without knowing You. All my joys and comfort and pain are connected with Your having come into this world. Thank You, Lord, for Your life on this earth. Thank You for my salvation through Your birth and death. In Christ's name. Amen.

Saturday, December 11, 2021

from Advent 2002

Philippians 2:1-7

Reflections by Bob Lukat

“God so loved the world that he sent His only begotten Son.” Why would He have made Jesus take on the limitations of the flesh and live among us? Perhaps He loves us so much that He provided us with the perfect example of what He intended for us in His original plan for people to live in a God-centered community. Living in God’s will is all about us living in a loving, caring Christian community that expects us to love and care for others in the same way in which we would like to be loved and cared for.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a reality that we can experience only when we extend to others the same love and concern that we crave for ourselves. The truth of the Advent season is that we receive the blessings we need when we shower on others the fellowship we desire for ourselves. God showed us through the life of Jesus that abiding joy and the sure security of eternal life comes in putting aside selfishness and self-centered living for the higher calling of living life in a selfless community of service and care for others.

As we reflect on Jesus’ advent, may we realize that life is about living life for others and not about power, wealth, and preserving our personal space or security. Just as Jesus gave His life for others, may we dedicate ourselves to making the Kingdom of Heaven a reality for all we bring into fellowship as we live our life from day to day.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, You have provided us with a perfect example of Your love and Your purpose for our lives in Your Son, Jesus Christ. I pray that You will enable me to put aside my selfish desire to be all that I can be. Replace it with the desire to make my fellow believer all that Jesus wishes us to be together. Open my heart and my eyes to see that Your Kingdom is surrounding us, Your love is protecting us, Your power is enabling us to make community a reality today and every day of our lives together. Thank You for sending Your Son to assure us of Your love and presence in our world. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, my Lord and Savior, I pray for myself and my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Sunday, December 12, 2021

Isaiah 40:31 & Luke 2:10

Reflections by Jaime R. Moriles



While air travel today within the country showed semblance of normalcy in this time of pandemic, it is not so if you are a foreigner traveling to another country. Health travel restrictions may vary from one country to another. But generally, the restrictions proved cumbersome and have caused anxiety to many. I just had this crucible of fear and anxiety in my recent trip to the U.S. from the Philippines. Philippines, my country of origin, requires travelers to present a negative result of RT-PCR, a test that will show that I am not infected with Covid-19 and thereby fit to travel. But the test result will only be valid for 48 hours before travel time and therefore timing is extremely crucial. As to my choice of testing facility where I went to, the purported waiting time for lab result to come out is 24 hours. The Philippines, being a third world country, ill-equipped to meet this unprecedented health crisis, is notoriously unreliable when it comes to ensuring timely release of test results considering that we have limited Covid-19 testing facilities. What if the test result will be delayed and I couldn't catch up my flight timeline? I had a round trip ticket with me that costs thousands of dollars. What if I tested positive of Covid-19? Certainly, all my travel plans will be laid to waste. But my anxiety did not end there. In case I will be tested positive, I cannot simply go back home from the airport because government imposed mandatory quarantine for all travelers who have been tested positive. So, from the airport, going back home is not an option. Worse, I will not only be forfeiting the cost of my round trip air fare to the U.S. but have to shell out obligatory expenses for my hotel quarantine accommodation and board for ten days; all will be charged to my personal account.

All these mental, emotional, and psychological distress that I endured was condensed in that critical 24 hours of anxious waiting. This experience helped me discover anew the telling message of advent season. Advent is a time of waiting. It is a season of anticipation as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Life is characterized by waiting. It could be anything from diagnosis, childbirth, graduation, job placement, future engagements that test our ability to wait, oftentimes sapping all our energy. As I waited for my travel clearance to come out, I was honestly wrapped in fear that I couldn't almost endure. But the gospel is all about overcoming fear that promised to bring hope and joy through Jesus Christ in a world full of troubles, afflictions, fear, and anxiety. It reminds us that the world's cares need not distract us from seeing the good side of life. This was the message spoken by the angel as it appeared before beleaguered shepherds saying "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Luke 2:10

Anticipating Christ's coming in this season of advent, then, must not be a time of anxious waiting. It is a time of joyful anticipation as the good news of Jesus Christ is one of gratitude and celebration for God has redeemed us from sin and His promises are true that He would never leave and abandon us. True enough, in less than 24 hours, I received my laboratory result through email informing me that I am negative of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, thus, giving me the green light to travel. I cannot hold back tears of joy welling up my eyes for God was really true to His promise. God will pour out His mercy upon them who wait patiently and trust upon His promise.

The advent message is inviting us once again to trust in God's presence who is Immanuel, "God with us." Though trials and afflictions will always lay claim on us, God is there to fight the battle for us. He is with us. He can give us strength more than what we could ask for to renew us as we wait patiently and trustingly upon Him. Isaiah 40:31 says, "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Questions:

1. What experiences in your life where the words of the angel spoke to you intimately, saying, "Fear not..."
2. After being devastated by a seemingly insurmountable problem or affliction in your life and God saved you, did you reach out to someone who is similarly situated?
3. How has your patient waiting upon God yield surprising strength that you never expected?

Prayer:

Loving God help us to wait patiently upon you as we celebrate this advent season- your coming. We welcome you today in our hearts, knowing that your presence is mightier than our fears. Help us to surrender all our troubles in your merciful hands and find rest in your everlasting love.

Monday, December 13, 2021

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

Reflections by Mike Sneed

The Commissioning of the Disciples

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Great Commission is one of the most familiar charges in the Bible, but it typically isn't used during the Advent season. It talks about the disciples going to the top of a MOUNTAIN to worship Jesus. Then Jesus told the disciples to GO TELL the gospel, and make disciples to all nations, over hills and everywhere... Hopefully by now you might see where I am going with this...

Go Tell it on the Mountain is one of my favorite Christmas Hymns. It's so energetic and soulful. I think a lot of times we sing this song and just go through the motions of singing the words. But this song is a Charge into action. It is in line with the great commission telling us to GO. To spread the good news to all nations. Christmas is the perfect time to talk to others about your faith and use your testimony to bless others. Whether it is a family member or a neighbor or the person at the grocery store, God has placed someone on your heart to share "the reason for the Season". Look for those opportunities that God has for you to be a witness.

1 While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night, behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light. *Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.*

2 The shepherds feared and trembled when lo! above the earth rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior's birth. *Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.*

3 Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born, and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn. *Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.*

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank You so much for everything You have provided. Thank You for Your son that You gave to die so that I might live. Thank You for Your love and help me to share it with others. Place people in my path to love on and to share Your message. Help me to have courage to talk to them, and let me continue to share Your love after the season is over. Thank You for all that you do, In Your name we pray. Amen

Tuesday, December 14, 2021

from Advent 2003

Malachi 4:5-6

Reflections by Frank Warlick

As you know, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. Malachi wrote it over four hundred years before Jesus was born. He had the job of chastising the Jews, chastising them for years of apostasy, willful disobedience, and contempt of God. He started with the priests and then widened his remarks to include everyone. They had shown contempt for God and practiced false worship. They even led others into sin and were at the point of calling evil “good.” They kept their tithes and offerings for themselves and became arrogant. They were not unlike our own society in some ways. He told them they would inherit judgment for their actions. Some of the people, though, still loved and honored God and these would receive God’s blessings.

In spite of the wickedness of most of the people, there was hope through forgiveness. Malachi 4:2 says “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” His love for people is great and is poured out for those who worship and love in return.

Malachi concludes Chapter 4 and the book with the promise of the coming Messiah in verses 5 and 6.

“See I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Elijah was one of the greatest prophets and was used to symbolize freedom for the people and was used as a sign for the Messiah. So when Malachi quoted his name, it was to tell the people the Messiah was imminent. After Malachi died, it would be four hundred years before God sent another prophet. That prophet would be John the Baptist, and he is the prophet like Elijah to whom Malachi referred.

Malachi tells us how we should live and closes his book by telling us to be prepared for the coming of the prophet and to be prepared for God. This is something we can do today. We should be prepared for God by letting the message of the Messiah He has already sent be in our hearts and by demonstrating the love of God in our lives.

...We need to keep God in front of us in all that we do. We need to use prayer every day to find God’s will for us and for the world. We need to help others as the Messiah told us. God’s will will prevail in spite of our shortcomings, but we should work to understand and live His will. We should heed Malachi’s words as we prepare for the Christmas season and have a renewal in our faith and lives.

PRAYER:

Lord, during this Christmas and Advent season, we seek your healing and renewal in our lives. Amen.

Wednesday, December 15, 2021

Luke 1:46-55

from Advent 2012

Reflections by Maria Cruz

Humble yourself in the presence of GOD, giving Him all the Thanks and Glory. There is always a reason for GOD to choose you to do His work and we should be humble like Mary that gave God all the glory and accepted that she was going to carry the savior, Jesus Christ, and bring Him into this world. Rejoice and be humble!

It's very easy to say that we Trust GOD but we can, and sometimes do, have doubts that He will come through. We give it to GOD and just as quickly we take it back. I have learned from someone very wise in our church something that helps me through each day – “LET GO AND LET GOD!”

We have to get out of the way and let GOD do His work with all our hearts and trust in the Lord. Just like Mary who had no idea of what GOD was going to do, when the Angel appeared to her and told her that she would be with child, and how it was to happen. Mary chose to trust GOD and humbled herself. May it be what you have said Lord GOD.

In my life I have faced many obstacles, I have had it all pampered and sheltered, but I had no faith. Starting in 2000, I had to watch my father die within a month and make the decision to let him go as his earthly body could not keep him here any longer. This helped me survive seeing my first husband go instantly within 2 hours right in front of me. GOD and His wonderful plan gave me Felix whom I thank GOD for every day mostly because he has given his unconditional love to my children from the day we met. Shortly thereafter about a year later, my mother went to be with our Lord along with my kids' two other grandparents all within six months of each other. This all led me to come to Georgia where I have laid my brother to his rest and the most difficult life-altering crisis that I am still going through the loss of my own first-born child.

Through all of this GOD has been there for me; always putting calm and peace in my heart. I have chosen to humble myself before GOD and I have said, “Let it be as you want.” In feeling GOD'S love through this wonderful church family, I pray that GOD gives us all peace and happiness and that the Holy Spirit guides us and may we be humble servants as we try to do as GOD says, Amen.

Thursday, December 16, 2021

from Advent 2004

John 3:14-21

Reflections by the late Connie Funk

The children weren't home, but there was a notice posted on the door. We hurried to see it and found a drawing made by our four-year-old grandson. A thick, black swirl covered the page. He had asked his friend to print the heading, 'IVAN THE TERRIBLE IS COMING.' His warning was valid, but we didn't connect to his knowledge and experience until after the fact. Ivan indeed did come!

Their family vacation in Destin was interrupted by the onslaught of hurricane Ivan south of them. Boarding over windows was an important part of securing the property. Shutting out the light terrified the little boy. Even though there was other light, he still wanted to see the true light. His loving and compassionate father mercifully removed a board so he could see the light until the last moment before they departed for their journey home to Atlanta. I am reminded of John 3:14-21 where Jesus refers to a historic fact that Nicodemus understood. Moses had lifted up the bronze snake in the desert, and the repentant people looked up in faith and hope for healing from fatal bites of the snakes (Numbers 21:8,9). This archetype points to the future, to the cross where death and life meet. Jesus would be lifted up to death, resurrection, and ascension. He will return glorious and lifted high, King of Kings forever. Amen.

John, looking back to the cross, speaks of the great, compassionate, providential love of God. The Father wants desperately to save His creation from "snakebite." He sent His only Begotten Son, Jesus, into a condemned and dying world to save it. He wants none to die. All He asks is that we, repentant, look up in faith and hope to Him who is the true Light in a dark world. Then, we are healed of our unrighteousness, to live eternally with Him.

Sadly, the world becomes more chaotic and lost. Men are "putting a spin" on the darkness in their world, giving the appearance of truth. They revel in their dark understandings. They cannot see that their philosophies lead to death. They call goodness evil, and evil good. They don't leave their "comfort zone" no matter how vile or destructive. The truth terrifies them. They hide in the dark from God. Nevertheless, we must continue in the Truth and let the Light shine through us. Too often we have boarded up, closed off the light in self-protection. How then shall they see to live?

PRAYER:

Father, help us to go into our world with compassion. In loving kindness and respect may we lift up Jesus, the Risen Christ, that men may see Him and be drawn to Him. At the cradle help us see the cross and the Kingdom to come.

Friday, December 17, 2021

from Advent 1995

Isaiah 40:1-11

Reflections by Heather Fordham Natter (at the time an Intern in the White House)

What does a shepherd look like? What personality traits does a shepherd possess? Many of us have never known a shepherd, since shepherding is no longer one of the more popular vocations pursued today; however, if you are like me, you have a fairly well-defined image of who a shepherd is based on a combination of Sunday school lessons and Hollywood movies.

When I think of a shepherd, I envision a simplistic outdoorsman who is kind, patient, and gentle. He is intensely devoted to his sheep and serves as their sole provider and protector. In today's passage, it was no mistake that Isaiah called upon the shepherd image when he prophesized about future hardships Jerusalem would experience as a captive city of Babylon. Her citizens would be slaves to a foreign country and would lose hope as discouragement overcame them. In his prophecy, Isaiah reminded Jerusalem that God was their Shepherd. God would comfort His people like a shepherd does his sheep. He would gather Jerusalem in His arms and carry her close to His heart. Isaiah's message to Jerusalem was one of comfort and hope in a distressing time of trouble.

Many of us can relate to the discouragement felt by Jerusalem. The coming of Christmas does not erase the troubles we experience in our careers, families, and relationships. We want desperately to get into the "Christmas Spirit," but some of us have allowed life to get us down. Some of us feel sad and frustrated.

Today, I want to remind you that God is your Shepherd. He wants to comfort you if you are experiencing times of discontentment, depression, or disappointment. Allow Him today to fill you with His love and refresh you with the hope of the sweet baby Jesus. The Lord is your Shepherd. You no longer need to be discouraged.

PRAYER:

Lord, Christmas is coming soon, but our hearts just aren't ready for it. Some of us are distracted by the troubles in our life, and we are discouraged. Remind us today that You are our Shepherd. Comfort us and lead us into this Christmas season with a renewed sense of hope. Prepare our hearts for the joyful celebration of Christmas that will supersede our current difficulties and give us a hopeful perspective for the future. In the Comforting Shepherd's name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 18, 2021

from Advent 2012

Matthew 2:1-8

Reflections by Ugo Chukwura

God has a plan for each of us and it is important to note that God's plan always prevails. God always fulfills His promises to us. When we are in the midst of trouble, be it health issues, financial issues, problems in our schools, problems in our places of work, or in our families, it is important that we remember that God is always in control and works in mysterious ways to deliver us from the trouble.

Herod the King of Judea was troubled when he heard of the birth of Jesus, who would be the king of the Jews. Herod was not prepared to give up his throne nor bow down to King Jesus. Herod was not prepared to share the spotlight with Jesus. He began immediately, in secret, to plan and plot a way to stop that from happening. One thing Herod was unaware of was that God's plans supersede all our plans.

In our world today there are many like King Herod. We come across them in our places of work, in our schools, and yes, in our families. These individuals, due to their positions, fame, and/or strength plan and plot against anyone who challenges them or dares share the spotlight with them. Like Herod, these individuals tend to believe they are in control of their lives. As Christians, we should remember that God always has a plan to deliver us from any difficult situation that we face. All that God requires us to do is to listen to Him and obey Him.

Think about what would have happened if the wise men had returned to King Herod to tell him where Jesus was. Or think about what would have happened if Joseph did not obey God and took Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape King Herod's vicious plans. God promised us that He would send us a savior, His son Jesus Christ. God also knew that King Herod would plan and plot against that. But God proved to us that His plans supersede our plans and will always fulfill His promises to us.

When we are faced with difficult situations, we should always remember that God always has a plan to deliver us out of that difficult situation. Like the wise men, God expects us to always trust Him and follow His directions even when we think it did not quite make sense to us. And like Joseph, God expects us to obey Him and go wherever He sends us, even when it is to an unfamiliar place.

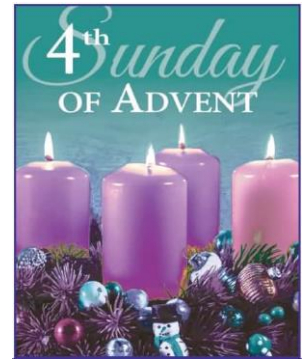
PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for the gift of Your son, Jesus Christ, who came that we may have eternal life. We thank you God, for the knowledge that in all situations Your plan prevails. We ask You, Lord, to teach us to always listen and to obey You. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen!

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Luke 1:18-24

Reflections by Betty Spier



Do you believe in angels? If you believe the Bible, you believe in angels because they are mentioned hundreds of times in the scriptures. Angels brought messages and sometimes help from God. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, a priest who did not believe the good news announced by the angel. It would be a miracle for Zechariah and his wife to have a son at their old age. Because Zechariah didn't believe, the angel took away Zechariah's ability to speak until the miracle occurred. This was unfortunate for him because the people were waiting for him as he came from the sanctuary. In time, the miracle that the angel announced came to pass. His wife, Elizabeth, conceived.

Just as angels were used by God in the Bible, I believe God uses angels today. I can't be sure that an angel has spoken to me although events have happened in my life that there is no way to explain. God works His will through people and angels. Most Christians can recall an incident in their life when a tragedy was avoided by an event that completely changed the situation. We hear about ordinary people experiencing "modern miracles." Recently, in Chile, 33 miners were miraculously rescued after being trapped 2,000 feet underground for 69 days. Some of the miners believe there were 34 of them. Could this extra one be an angel sent to give them strength and hope?

It is sad for people who cannot see God working in their lives. They explain miracles as luck or fate. Christians are comforted by knowing that God's love and care surrounds them with His Spirit along with the angels.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the love and care you give us every day. Help us to see Your miraculous intervention at those difficult times in our lives. Open our hearts to the miracles of the Christmas season. Amen.

from Advent 2011

Monday, December 20, 2021

from Advent 2010

Jeremiah 23:5-6

Reflections by Kimberly Moriles

A promise of hope

One of my favorite verses from Hillsong's *To the Ends of the Earth* goes as follows: "Love unfailing, overtaking my heart – You take me in." I think that this ties in quite well with this verse from Jeremiah. All throughout Jeremiah's ministry, the people of Judah ignored, rejected, and persecuted Jeremiah. All the while, Jeremiah continued to give the message of God to the people. Judah, at the time, was a corrupt nation. The people turned their hearts away from God, and over and over again, Jeremiah cried for them to come back to their Father. However, they consistently refused, instead choosing to murder, commit adultery, lie, and commit idolatry. The people of Judah turned their hearts away from God, and instead of punishing them on the spot, He gave them chances to change their ways through Jeremiah. However, Jeremiah's words of warning fell upon deaf ears. Eventually, destruction came upon Judah. In time, though, God gave Jeremiah a new message for the people to hear – one promising hope for future generations to come. This hope would come in the form of Jesus Christ, who would save the world from themselves. The reason I chose the lyrics from Hillsong is because the verse from Jeremiah and the verse from *To the Ends of the Earth* both give us a promise of hope and love. Even though the people of Judah, like us, continuously turned away from God, his unfailing love prevails. God continuously takes us in despite our sins, despite our shortcomings, despite our own selves. And this is all because of His mercy. He even went as far as to promise us a deliverer – one who would end the use of a prophet and the altar burnings. God promised us a Savior – someone we could have a personal relationship with. And this is Jesus Christ, the Messiah. As we come closer to Christmas time, let's really meditate upon this verse, and think deeply about how amazing it is that God promised us a Savior, despite the fact we don't deserve such a blessing.

End the devotion with meditation upon the following verses from the song *This Is Love* by The Autumn Film from their album *Safe and Sound* regarding our Lord, followed by a prayer.

This is Love

When I give my heart to

Everyone but you

This is Love

When I have turned my back

Away from you

This is Love

When I have left you for the

Selfish things I do

This is Love

That you would still love me, In spite of me.

Tuesday, December 21, 2021

from Advent 2012

Luke 1:26-33

Reflections by Grayson Gammage

What this verse means to me is that Mary was a very special woman. She was very honored to get to bear the Son of Man. I am sure that Mary was very surprised when she heard the news, mostly because she was only a virgin. Also, Mary and Joseph had not yet been married. When the angel approached Mary, I am sure she was very nervous. This verse also shows you have to trust in God because she was worried and the angel said to not be afraid. When the angel tells Mary she will have the son of the most high, I am sure she was shocked and began to cry.

PRAYER: Dear God, please let us have trust in God when You would like for us to do something even if we do not want to. Amen.

Wednesday, December 22, 2021

Isaiah 49:1-7

from Advent 2011

Reflections by Audrey Sharpe

Jesus is the way to salvation! God proclaimed, through His messengers, that He would deliver His people from the yoke of sin through one yet to come. He chose Cyrus, King of Persia (modern day Iran), as one very important messenger. If you question whether God can use you to fulfill His purpose, consider the fact that Cyrus was a pagan, war-mongering king and a totalitarian ruler. Yet he was chosen by God to let the peoples of the world know of God's purpose for them and the plan to bring that purpose to fruition. Even if Cyrus was not aware of the enormity of the fulfillment of his task, he was willed by God to complete it. He decreed that a temple be built in Jerusalem which was devoid of idols and that the Jews be brought back from Babylon because of God's instructions. He also proclaimed God's purpose for peace.

God let the world know that a servant, yet to come, had been chosen by Him and would be equipped to carry out all tasks necessary to achieve His will. He would be the light to show the way to salvation. This servant's purpose would be to lead the errant back to God and to bring salvation to those not yet born. We need not worry about any difficulties we may face in following God's Great Commission. He will equip us to serve His purpose. Our task is to believe, to spread God's word and to follow the teachings of God's Holy Servant, the one we have come to know as Jesus, the Christ.

PRAYER:

Father God, give us the power to discern the direction in which you are leading us. Help us to respond to Your light as you shine it upon more and more peoples of the world. Let us be mindful of the fact that You will prepare us to navigate all of the difficulties that we see as hindrances and troubled waters when we rely upon your strength rather than our weaknesses.

Thursday, December 23, 2021

John 3:16-17

Reflections by Sharon Goza

Christmas is about love, God's love. God loved us so much He sent His only son to be born once, so we could be born again. God sent Jesus to live among us so that one day He would grow up to be the Savior of the world. He would pay the price for our sins by dying on the cross. *"But God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8)

The story of Jesus is one of truth, love, and hope that brought salvation for all of us. Without the birth of Jesus, there would be no hope of eternal life. As we celebrate the birth of our Savior this Christmas season by giving gifts, worshiping Him, and rejoicing in the promise of Heaven, let us remember how much God loves us.

A few years ago I was scrolling through Christian songs on YouTube when I came across a song by the Ball Brothers. I hope you will listen to the whole song and love it as much as I do. This is just the first verse and chorus.

It's About the Cross

It's not just about the manger where the Baby lay

It's not all about the angels who sang for Him that day

It's not all about the shepherds or the bright and shining star

It's not all about the wise men who travelled from afar

It's about the cross, it's about my sin

It's about how Jesus came to be born once

So that we could be born again

It's about the stone that was rolled away

So that you and I could have real life someday

It's about the cross.

PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for this Christmas season when we celebrate our Savior and His love for us. We pray for love in our hearts, and hope in Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 24, 2021

Luke 2:1-20

Reflections by Anne Fordham

In Bethlehem

To Bethlehem, years and years in the Past,
Some people made a trip that would last and last.
They had been ordered to appear in the town in which they were born;
It was a trip that made many very forlorn.

Caesar Augustus gave this order
That no one could disobey.
Even a woman “great with child”
Would have to attend; she would have to pay
Any taxes that she and her husband might owe
To this terrible tyrant, whom the people hated so!

Mary and Joseph, two young parents-to-be,
Were part of the crowd who came from afar.
They entered Bethlehem, the town of their birth.
They searched for a room; cold, tired, and forlorn,
Knowing the time was near for Mary’s child to be born.

As Mary and Joseph went from door to door,
They looked for a room; they needed no more
Than a shelter from the cold and bitter wind,
Just a small place where they could spend
A private night to await the birth
Of their child, the promised Messiah, who
One day would save the good people of earth.

As they searched for a room among the people so loud
The innkeepers cried, “No room! No room!”
So large was the bustling crowd.
Finally, one innkeeper, feeling their pain,
Said, “I know of a place.” It would keep them out of the rain.
The couple was thankful to the innkeeper for being so good,
Even though the place was a stable close by filled with animals and animal food.
A manger filled with hay was chosen for a bed,
Where the baby would be able to lay His sweet head.

Out in the fields, some shepherds awoke.
They heard angels singing, and one of them spoke:
“Go to Bethlehem to a stable,” the angel said.
“See the star above and a baby, The Messiah, asleep in His bed.”

The shepherds hurried to see the child.
First, they worshiped and adored Him, and
Then left to spread the good news; near, far, and wide.
The horrible ruler, the terrible tyrant, heard about The Boy.
This news, of course, gave him no joy.
Therefore, he decided, because he feared the child,
That all the boys, born in Bethlehem, he would destroy.

A group of Wisemen followed the star and found both the tyrant and family several years later.
They presented gifts to the child and worshiped Him,
But never would they cater to a ruler who would murder a little lamb so mild.
Instead, these men kept the birth a secret about the Christ-child.

Today, there are those who seek to destroy our love
That this little child brought to our lives from Heaven above.
We must hold fast to our faith, and prophecy, too.
That God would send His Son to fulfill His promise to me and to you.

Thank you, dear Savior, the Christ-child of that night.
We celebrate you each year and will never lose sight
Of the story that happened a long time ago
In the little town of Bethlehem; May it be so!

PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you so much for sending Your son, the Baby in Bethlehem. As we ponder the journey of Mary and Joseph, we know that You are with them guiding and directing their steps. Please always remind us that while we are on our life's journey that you are with us, even to the ends of the earth. We praise and love You! In Your Son's Name, Amen.

Saturday, December 25, 2021

Isaiah 9:6

Reflections by Anne Fordham

Not an Ordinary Boy

While shepherds watched their flocks one night,
A story was unfolding that would make the world right.
At a stable not so very far away,
In a manger, in a feeding trough, a baby boy lay.
He was not just an ordinary baby boy;
He was the Messiah who was promised to bring us all joy!

His mother, called Mary, was special indeed.
Mary was a virgin, and by the Holy Spirit she conceived.
The baby's father, Joseph, a carpenter by trade,
Was one in a million with the decisions he made.

In another country, miles and miles away,
Some wise men saw a star, to the East it did lay.
Three of those wise men traveled slowly and followed that star
To worship the babe bringing presents from afar.

And what about those shepherds tending their sheep?
No longer the same as they woke from their sleep.
A host of angels aroused them and sang so loud,
That those shepherds went straight to the baby,
Where on their knees they bowed.

What about today? What are we supposed to do?
We worship the King, the Lord, Jesus, and the Baby, too.
For without the story, which unfolded that night,
(Even though it gave the shepherds quite a fright)
We would not have the hope, the belief, the joy
That we are now saved because of that sweet, baby boy.

He grew to be a man, who gave us His all.
Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being born in that stall,
So that we can all know the promise of life after death,
And at Christmas each year, we can believe that promise with our every breath.

“Gloria! Gloria” the angels did sing.
Today, and for always, we welcome our King.
Joy to the world, to Bethlehem we go
So that our children and grandchildren continue to know
The wonderful story which happened such a long time ago.

PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, I praise and worship You for who You are. I thank You that even though the world may be a scary place, that Your Son was no ordinary boy, but Your child sent to save us! Please grant us this Christmas and New Year, Your peace that passes all understanding. Forgive those who would do harm to Your children around the world and help them know Your Son. For it is in His name, I pray, Amen.