

The First Week of Advent



Contributed by Rev. Abby Mohaupt

We invite you to take a breath and feel the peace that the Prince of Peace wants each of us to have in honor of his coming. Six times you will be blessed with an advent reflection that we hope you can enter into. Let us journey together to Bethlehem.

Scripture: Psalm 122:1-9

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

“Let’s go to the LORD’s house!”

Now our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem!

Jerusalem is built like a city joined together in unity.

That is where the tribes go up—

the LORD’s tribes!

It is the law for Israel to give thanks there to the LORD’s name,

because the thrones of justice are there—

the thrones of the house of David!

Pray that Jerusalem has peace:

“Let those who love you have rest.

Let there be peace on your walls;

let there be rest on your fortifications.”

For the sake of my family and friends,

I say, “Peace be with you, Jerusalem.”

For the sake of the LORD our God’s house

I will pray for your good.

Reflection:

Now our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem!

There is something about place—particular places, really—that bring us closer to God. I love that this passage reminds us about the holiness of the City of God—a place of justice and love and peace and rest. As we enter into this season of Advent, we so often get caught up in the bustle of things and we get pulled away from the places where we feel God.

We so often find ourselves surrounded by stores and more things to buy—pulled away from the beauty of creation in this season of hope. And there IS hope in this season as we wait for the Christ who came once long ago and who will come again, bringing the good news that God loves us and all creation. I want to spend this time of hope in places that make me feel that God is near. So, I’m avoiding places that distract from looking for justice and love and peace and rest this year. I’m hiking around the foothills of Northern California to look down onto the city where I feel God and praying.

Peace be with you, Jerusalem.

Prayer:

God of hope and light and life... help us find peace in this bustling season. Help us find places of rest and help us love each other as we wait for the Promised One. Thank you for the places to which you’ve called us and help us find you there. In the name of the One for whom we wait, Amen.



The Second Week of Advent

Contributed by Rev. Fred Milligan

Scripture: Genesis 2:15

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

Prayer:

O Lord of trees -- from the smallest shrub to the giant sequoia; from the garden of Eden at the beginning of our story to the Celestial City of Revelation at the end -- help us to make a straight path in the wilderness of our world by learning to weave among and care for the

Reflection:

One of the most famous trees (though it is a different one each year) in the country, is the one that is displayed each year in Rockefeller Center in Manhattan throughout the Christmas season. This year a roughly 75 year old, 76-foot-tall Norway Spruce has the “honor.” It is 46 feet in diameter, and weighs 12 tons! No doubt it was a thing of beauty to behold in its natural setting. And hopefully at least some who see it will still be inspired with visions of eternal life that have historically been the reason we turn to evergreens for this purpose.

But its natural beauty is to be shrouded with approximately 45,000 multi-colored twinkling LED lights, and topped with a “breathtaking” Swarovski crystal star that is 9.5 feet in diameter, and weighs in at 550 pounds! Talk about “guiding the lily!” One wonders whether this once beautiful symbol of eternal life has now become instead a symbol of commodification of nature for profit.

A second, and more recently famous tree is actually immortalized in a bronze sculpture of the roots of a Sycamore tree that once stood in the historic cemetery of St. Paul’s Chapel. The tree had been knocked over by debris from the Twin Towers on 9-11 but missed all the gravestones and chapel. Called “Trinity Root” by its creator, Steve Tobin, it is installed on the grounds of Trinity Wall Street Episcopal Church. In the description which accompanies the sculpture, the artist speaks of how the connected tendrils of the tree’s roots are akin to the network of human interconnections which helped the city to survive the terrible events of 9-11. It is this kind of Human interconnection that will become the basis for the hoped for Peaceable Kingdom toward which all creation groans in travail.

The third tree is a Callery Pear tree found on the site of the Ground Zero memorial. Known as the Survivor Tree, it has a truly dramatic story of survival. Planted at the eastern edge of the original World Trade Center plaza in the 1970s, workers found it damaged and “reduced to an eight-foot-tall stump” in the wreckage at Ground Zero. It was moved to a New York City park and nurtured back to health – that’s 32 feet tall! But then it was blown over in a 2010 wind storm and yet, once more survived to be brought back and restored to the memorial site in time to survive Hurricane Irene’s 40 mph gusts.

The message of these three trees seems to be this: that the same human beings who are capable of cutting down one tree in the name of honoring beauty and faith for the purpose of profit, we can also join together to help another one survive. As we yearn through the season of Advent for the coming “not yet” peaceable kingdom, we have the “always already” presence of the resurrected Christ among us to show us the way to being the stewards we were created to be.

In Mary Oliver’s poem titled “When I Am Among the Trees” her last verse seems to capture the essence of our takeaway as the trees call out to her: “It’s simple ... and you too have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”



The Third Week of Advent

Contributed by Paul Homeyer

Scripture: Luke 1:17

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

Prayer:

Lord God, Help us to keep the season holy by avoiding the cultural excesses that can so easily consume us by focusing our minds and hearts on the gift of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen

Reflection:

Advent: A Time for Preparation

Our pastor recently suggested “Joyous Advent” as a post-Thanksgiving greeting. Coupled with his suggestion was a reminder that our preparation and celebration leading up to Christmas day is equally important as our celebration of the day itself.

Ironically, the frenzy of the preparation often overshadows the event for which we prepare and causes us to lose sight of what it is all about. Sadly, this is often the case during what should be a joyous celebration of the Savior’s birth. Many of the activities of preparation on which we choose to spend our time and resources— though not necessarily bad in and of themselves— are also the things that not only drain our joy, energy and wallets but also place a greater strain on Creation: Think of the tons of wrapping paper produced for a single use most of which will likely end up in a landfill and the obligatory gifts – many of which will likely go unused if not returned. Or the annual harvesting of evergreen trees that have taken years to reach maturity only to be enjoyed for a few short weeks before being discarded. Then there’s the exhaust-emitting traffic and crowded malls that inspire moods that are anything but joyous.

I must admit that the pressure that our culture – and even our own families – put on us to engage in the frenzy is often difficult to resist. I love to lavish family and friends with special – and sometimes impractical – gifts but often have to be reminded that it really is “the thought that counts” not the amount of money spend or the miles driven (or the carbon emitted).

Though not a faith-based organization, The Center for the New American Dream has published a guide called “Simplify the Holidays” that provides many meaningful ways to have more fun with less stuff during this season (www.newdream.org). Those of us who revere this holy time of year as more than a secularized observation of consumerism have all the more reason to refocus our time and energy in ways that keep “Christ in Christmas.”

This year our family’s Advent preparation has paralleled our preparation for our move to Uganda next summer where we have been called to serve in ministry. Our impending move has helped clarify and inform how we spend our time and resources before we leave and especially our decisions regarding what we buy for Christmas. The adage “you can’t take it with you” takes on a different meaning when considering what presents we exchange this month are practical to ship to Africa next year. It is also a good concept to keep in mind on a regular basis when making choices about how to spend our time, energy and money.

I believe we honor the Creator and the spirit of the season more deeply by focusing less on the superficial and temporal trappings and instead lavishing those we love with the intangible fruits of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (and yes) self control”(Gal. 5:22) when tempted to engage in the frenzy of the season.



The Fourth Week of Advent

Contributed by Rev. Dana Eglinton

Scripture: Matthew 3:11-17

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Prayer:

Jesus you have baptized us with water, the Holy Spirit, and fire so that we can walk in the way of the cross confronting violence and greed with the power of self-giving love. Help me so to walk as I serve God by caring for the earth and its people. Amen.

Reflection:

Have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit and Fire? I imagine that most of you who are reading this have been baptized with water, but have you been baptized "with the Holy Spirit and fire?" John the Baptist announces the coming of a powerful one who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire." And this one – proclaims John – will burn up that which is "chaff" with "unquenchable fire."

Matthew of course tells us that the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire is Jesus. John it seems is not so sure. John, who has been imprisoned by King Herod, hears about the strange ways of Jesus. Jesus has been opening the eyes of the blind, healing the sick, and raising the dead. And Jesus has been teaching things like this, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth," and this, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." John hears about these strange doings and teachings, and sends a disciple to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" In other words – Jesus, are you the Messiah or not? In other words, John doesn't think that rescuing the wounded and teaching love of enemy are Messiah-worthy doings and teachings. You can understand why John might not be interested in "loving his enemies," enemies like King Herod, and why John might be more interested in seeing King Herod become some of that burning chaff.

Jesus it appears is heading in a different direction than John had anticipated. Jesus, who has himself been baptized with water, fire, and the Holy Spirit, is being propelled by those baptisms into a God worshiping, people and earth rescuing, life. Those baptisms and that life will lead Jesus inevitably, inexorably to the cross. It appears that God's judgment (surely God's judgment is what John envisions in the baptism with fire) it appears that God's judgment may not look so much like a man of violence burned up as chaff, but maybe God's judgment looks more a man of peace hanging on a cross. Jesus chose to live a life of self-giving love in confrontation with those who practiced self-serving violence and greed. It was a life that took him to a judgment on a cross. And was it not a life and death with which God was well pleased and honored with resurrection?

I don't know about you, but I have to confess – My natural inclination is to go with John the Baptist. Burning the chaff sounds like a good idea to me.

And as a candidate for chaff – How about the fossil fuel industry and their efforts to keep us on a path that may well lead to catastrophic consequences for the earth and its people? Although once that fire got going where would it stop? What would the industry be without customers? I'm beginning to feel a little warm. Maybe the way of Jesus has some merit – seeking to convert rather than destroy. Divestment might be a strategy Jesus would use. For one who has definitely been baptized with water, and so possibly also with the Holy Spirit and fire, maybe this Advent season would be a good time to begin working to put that fossil fuel divestment overture before my Presbytery.

Christmas Eve



Contributed by Jennifer Ayers

Reflection:

Tonight, in many of our congregations, we will hear this well-known refrain from Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined” (Isa. 9:2). Here, at the end of advent, on the cusp of the emergence of divine life into the world, we turn to the image of divine light as a symbol of the mystery of incarnation. In the gospel of John, we read, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn. 1:9).

But what about the darkness? Divine life inhabits not just the light, but also the dark. In becoming so enamored of the light, we might very well miss the God who comes in the still of the night. In a season dripping with candles, stars, tree lights, and flashing neon sale signs, how can we find our way to that dark and quiet stable?

One of the many gifts of the nativity story is its insistence upon the dark as the site for incarnation. It was under the canopy of stars that Mary birthed the child, and that the shepherds and (eventually) the magi, too, found their way to the presence of God in the infant. It is upon a blanket of deep, rich, dark soil that this story unfolds. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Even in the dark, the seed sprouts and grows—we know not how—while God goes on giving birth to the truly human in Christ and in us.”

And so, to go deeper on this night demands an embrace of the dark, even in a culture that so conditions us to illumine every dark room, corner, plot of earth, and roadway. Going into that deep darkness is the only way we’ll ever see that star. We might associate darkness with melancholy, with grief, or with fear. And all of those things are surely present. But in ecological context, we also know the beauty of darkness: It represents the health of the soil, the generation of nutrients, and a posture of restraint and rest. To thrive, living things need darkness as much as they need light. The mystery of creation, whether a seedling or a human being, begins in deep darkness. A darkness that demands our attention, our gratitude, and our tending.

When I was around six or seven years old, I learned to fall in love with the dark quiet that enveloped our family as we made our way back home from the Christmas Eve worship service at the First Presbyterian Church of Asheboro, NC. The very same darkness that blanketed us when we took family camping trips subtly beckoned to us as we left worship on that night. Having lifted high our candles in the dim sanctuary during the third verse of “Silent Night,” we each blew out our candles, extinguishing the flame just before emerging into the crisp darkness of that sacred eve. Although the extinguishing of the flames is a rather practical matter, it might serve as an invitation to meet God in the darkness, if we are bold enough to accept it.

Poem:

The Uses of Sorrow
by Mary Oliver

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

*Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.*

Christmas Day



Contributed by Rev. Curt Karns

Scripture: Luke 2:19

Mary Treasured these Words
and Pondered Them in her
Heart

Prayer:

Oh God, you have birthed a world that produced the blue of the ice, the fire of the aurora, and the thriving, music-like rhythm that is life. Today, in Jesus you are born to us. Touch us, we pray, with your salvation and your vision for abundant life.

Reflection:

As I moved my boat out of the brackish swamp into a freshwater stream to collect drinking water, a baby moose lay on the riverbank. It was perfectly framed in a bed of spring grass, its tiny body and disproportionately large eyes identifying it as a newborn. In that moment I was filled with wonder; I wanted to stop my little boat and just be with this marvel!

Every birth is a marvel. Yet on this Christmas Day we remember that the birth of Jesus was especially marvelous. Exalted angels combined with lowly shepherds to impart amazing news that is for everyone: the Savior was born! If Mary pondered these things in her heart, we should, too.

In its praise of God Psalm 139:13,15 shows that each of us is born from two mothers:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb...
My frame was not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven together in the depths of the earth.*

In the birth of Jesus we humans see God's communion with us, as Jesus was mysteriously "knit together in (Mary's) womb." And in the birth of Jesus we see God's communion with all creation, as Jesus was mystically "made in secret, intricately woven together in the depths of the earth." It is a marvel indeed!

Looking at that baby moose, I realized our relatedness—we were both creatures of God, intricately woven together in the depths of the earth. I also realized our common need for salvation—me from my sin, and this world from human-caused environmental collapse.

In Alaska, my home, ice is vanishing in astonishing fashion—vanishing from the polar seas, from the glaciers and from the permafrost of the ground. Animals that depend on ice are suffering, plants that depend on permafrost are suffering and people who, depend on the frozenness of the ground for food, home and livelihood, are losing it all.

Yet it is to us, a broken world and a broken people, that good tidings comes. In Jesus' birth God proclaimed God's relatedness to all creation, including humanity. In Jesus God took action to save us from the sin, which alienates us from God and from our fellow creatures. Because of God's communion with us all, there is a living hope in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, in due time Mary's baby will grow up. And Jesus will tell us that we really have a third mother: we will discover ourselves to be born yet again, born of the Spirit this time, called and empowered to live into a new way of being human for the good of this whole earth.

"Let heaven and nature sing!"