



Advent Devotionals
2009

November 29 2009

Luke 21:25-36

'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

First, God did not send his son, Jesus, in the way it seemed the scriptures predicted. The Baby Jesus arrived in Bethlehem in a lowly manger with none of the foreboding that had been predicted. Yes, God meant for this to happen as he meant from the start to have his son live a truly human life for his time on earth.

Secondly, the last verse of this portion of scripture speaks to us all. As we all lead our lives, we will need to be alert to all around us. Pray for the strength to rise above temptation. Pray for the strength to live your life as God would want you to. During Advent, pray that our world can find a way to escape the things predicted to take place by being ever mindful of God and his love to all of us.

November 30 2009

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethpage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'
This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'
The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'
When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Forever the signs.

“Peace I bring to you, Peace I give to you, Peace I leave with you.”

Jesus riding into Jerusalem mounted on the donkey's back;
Historically this gesture a symbol of a king coming in peace;
Spoken through the prophet Zechariah, “. . .and he shall command peace to the nations.”

Jesus in the virgin womb yet to be born unto this world, not of this world;
Carried through the streets of Bethlehem mounted on a donkey;
Spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “. . .and they will call him Immanuel.”

“Peace I bring to you, Peace I give to you, Peace I leave with you.”

Jesus, Son of David
Jesus, prophet from Nazareth in Galilee

Jesus, Son of God
Jesus, wrapped in swaddling cloth lying in a manger

“Peace I bring to you, Peace I give to you, Peace I leave with you.”

Crowds laying garments in the streets;
Branches bare to the feet;
Sovereignty to the peaceful one;
Crying “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Covered by the warmth of his mother.
Surrounded not by crowds, but of love.
Surrounded not by words, but of hope
Unseen, yet to be seen.

“Peace I bring to you, Peace I give to you, Peace I leave with you.”

Forever the signs.

December 1 2009

Matthew 21:12-22

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?' He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

In today's lesson, Jesus goes to the Temple in Jerusalem and throws out the money changers and people involved in other commercial ventures. He then heals the sick and lame. The next day, returning to the Temple, he curses a barren fig tree in an act of seeming petty anger and spite. The disciples then question his actions, and he tells them that they, too, can perform miracles.

When I first read through this passage, my head started to spin, and I thought there was no way I could connect everything in any coherent fashion. But then I looked up the story of the cursing of the fig tree and found that it's a parable that relates to the previous verses about overthrowing the money changers in the temple. Further investigation led me to a passage I had underlined thirty years ago in a book on New Testament theology, which also represented the passage as a parable relating to the pomposity, dishonesty, and lack of true faith of the High Priests and leaders of the temple.

The fig tree, unlike most other fruit trees, produces its fruit before it produces leaves. The tree in the parable had no fruit, only showy leaves to make it look productive. It COULD be compared to the leaders of the temple, who had many things going on, and presided over many activities at the temple --- all seemingly necessary to worship, but really just part of a barren pretense of true faith and worship, and part of the lucrative business and political dealings of the Temple leaders with the governmental rulers in Rome.

In explaining his activities Jesus tells the disciples that if they have faith, and never doubt, they too can overthrow and cure the "mountains" of hypocrisy and deceit in their own lives and in the world as well. As modern disciples, we too can move these mountains if we have faith in the God of Love, and invite and accept his healing presence and action in our lives.

December 2 2009

Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Imagine going to the supermarket and discovering that there are no labels on the canned goods. How would you find the items on your shopping list? How would you know what was in which can? If you had health problems and had to avoid certain ingredients, how would select the cans that suited your diet? Yes, labels are sometimes necessary, especially when we cannot see inside the container.

But, labels are a problem when we wrap them around a human being. Yet, we still use labels, especially as a way of distinguishing and distancing ourselves from one another, and maybe even as a means of feeling good about ourselves. American society is greatly polarized as we label one another as conservatives, traitors, unpatriotic or liberals. Even Christians label one another with sharp and painful words, e.g. heretic, hypocrite.

In Jesus' time, the words "tax collector" and "prostitute" labeled a person as outside the law, and therefore, unfit for the Kingdom of God. But Jesus came with a radical vision of God's New World. In God's New World, labels are useless because labels can never, ever describe all the contents within a person's heart and soul. Those contents are known to God alone. The mission of the Christian is to proclaim the good news that God in Jesus is drawing all people into God's heart of faithful love and tender mercy. Labels just get in the way of the mission. Labels are for cans, not for people! As we believe, so let us live.

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?' Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"

She birthed eight children. Her days were filled with noise and wash; feeding and caring; overwhelmed in all senses. The Lord had given her eight beautiful children, she told me. And then her husband became ill. Propelled back into the work force, she cried to God; questioning the burden placed upon her. Caring for children and working felt like an impossible task. Despite feeling abandoned by the Lord, she could do nothing but persevere through the hardship. Then the unthinkable happened. Her husband died. In hindsight, she realized that had she not returned to work, she would be in absolutely no position to raise her children. In what seemed like a terrible mess at the time, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Having solidified a position in the workforce, she was able to ably carry on.

Blessings in disguise. Whenever the worst seems to be happening – can we wait? Whenever we're in a position of feeling rejected by God and questions of doubt arise and despair prevails – can we patiently trust that in due course, God's grace will prevail?

In this season of waiting and preparation, I wonder what you have rejected because you believe you could predict the outcome? How has despair been turned into an amazing act of grace that you would have never predicted?

The truth is - 'This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.'

December 4 2009

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you can find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

The Lord calls each of us. Some come. Others ignore the call. Some of us throw away the chance to see the all-accepting love in the face of Jesus, our Lord. We might be tired or weary, but if we are open to the call to come, we will never be dissatisfied. He is living water. He unburdens us of our fear, shame, and guilt. He cleanses our souls.

If I am with the Lord, in communion with the Almighty God, if I am His servant and standard-bearer, whom shall I fear? Even in the greatest pain, seeing my loved ones suffer, feeling helpless, He is with me. Holding me, carrying me through. His love creates in each of us a nectar of dew, like on the blade of grass at sunrise. Each droplet shines like the sun! Each is a miniature reflection of His beauty!

And if we don't answer His call, how will that feel at the end of life? At the end of each day? A life lived, yet with a twisted face? A life filled with pursuits of me, myself, and I?

Our King calls us to live in His divine forgiveness, to bathe ourselves in the mysteries and depth of His redeeming love. Each day, when our eyes turn toward Jesus, resting in His love, each day we will reflect His face. We will shine like the sun.

Lord, You give life to your servants who honor your call. What amazing gifts You give to us who open our closed fists and reach for Your open hand! Thank You, Lord Christ. You are Heaven, dear Jesus. Amen.

December 5 2009

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Once again, the Pharisees were trying to entrap Jesus. The Pharisees, along with the Herodians, believed they could finally trick Jesus into either betraying the teaching of the Jews, or betraying the laws of Rome.

They thought Jesus could only answer the question with a yes or no. If Jesus answered yes he would have been labeled a traitor to his own people. The Jews believed God was the highest authority they answered to, and that Israel was being occupied by Rome. If Jesus responded no, he would be guilty of going against the law of Rome.

Jesus, aware of what they were doing, turned the questions back to them. He called them hypocrites because they would not have been allowed in a position of power in the community if they themselves were not paying taxes to the state. Jesus asked them to pull out the coin used in paying taxes, and asked who is depicted on the coin. The Pharisees answered Caesar. Jesus responded to give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to give to God the things that are God's.

This quote is often repeated in society about the need to pay taxes, but what does the second part mean? What do we give to God?

We give our love to God. We give our thanks to God. We promise to love one another as God loves us. Do not be distracted over temptations such as money. Live by faith in God and help others. Let God be the focus of our lives.

December 6 2009

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

“...The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

A few years back the dog that I loved with my whole heart was failing. He suffered from arthritis, lost his hearing and his sense of smell, and started behaving in an aggressive manner toward my husband and young children. It was a bad situation for my family, but I could not make the decision to put the dog down. I loved him too much.

People close to me didn't know how to broach the subject with me, so they didn't. One day during that difficult time, I struck up a conversation with a mom I happened to meet at a local park where I had brought my children to play. Somehow our conversation veered onto the topic of dogs. She told me about the animal love of her life, and I told her about mine. When I inquired in more detail about her dog, she told me about how she had to put him down. I started to tell this woman about my own situation, and at some point she looked at me and said very gently, “It's time.”

It was a truth I didn't want to hear from anyone I loved, and yet I heard it from this stranger. Somehow her voice speaking those words made me realize that I had to face this decision. Listening to her words over and over in my head on the way home, I prepared my heart for the difficult path of letting go of my suffering dog and making things right for my family.

I thought of this story in connection with John the Baptist because John was the stranger in the wilderness, that place outside our usual paths of life, outside our normal social circles, and he spoke the truth people needed to hear. “Make things right with God,” he urged. John's outsider voice probably confirmed what the people already knew deep down, and so they listened. Crowds were baptized.

Perhaps this advent the best way to prepare for the birth of Christ is to listen, really listen, for the voice crying out in the wilderness. Is there an outsider voice telling you that it's time to face a difficult decision, change your heart, re-examine long-held views or let go of old ways?

Listen, and prepare the way of the Lord.

December 7 2009

Matthew 22:23-33

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.'

Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

This passage contains teaching regarding the resurrection from those who are not believers in Christ. The Sadducees believed that the birthing of a child was necessary in order to be accepted in God's kingdom. When they were unable to logically deduce from their understanding the necessity of a child's birth, they questioned their value to God. They clearly had not studied God's scriptures. Jesus contends that worldly accomplishments don't matter as far as experiencing life after death. Jesus has taught that life after death is inevitable despite our transgressions. The present day message that we can find in this passage is that we can find comfort in the resurrection.

December 8 2009

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet' " ? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

These verses depict Jesus being challenged by the Pharisees. They ask him, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This question provides him the opportunity to sum up the crux of all the law and the prophets. I'm sure you know it well. He tells them, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself". What a magnificent summary and concise statement this is for us as followers of Jesus. Simple, easy to understand and unmistakably clear. Not easy to do in today's world with our daily and ever present distractions; with the pressure of everyday life and the many regrettable and unhappy things taking place in our world. It clearly outlines for us what we should do and how we should act to fulfill God's will for us.

Now it's Jesus turn, he asks, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Their reply, "he is the son of David." Jesus quotes David calling the Lord his Lord, so how then can he be his son? This abruptly ends the questions.

I believe this is more than the Pharisees testing Jesus. To me, this is Jesus saying to the Pharisees, "think outside the box". By naming the son of David as the Messiah, I believe Jesus is saying, 'you are thinking in political terms, in human terms, someone to win battles, victories and wield power. Your thinking is much too narrow. We, today, find ourselves, "inside the box" consumed by life's pressures, unable to see God's call for us.

December 9 2009

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus berates the Scribes and Pharisees because, although they occupy the "..chair of Moses," they do not "practice what they preach." This raises the question of whom our role-models should be, especially when our leaders have failed us.

Francis of Assisi has given us a model to follow, simply because he took Jesus' words to heart, and "followed Him," in the simplest and fullest of ways. He dropped everything, and committed himself to God. It is not surprising that he is credited with having begun the tradition of constructing a crèche to celebrate Christmas. (No surprise again, since Francis lived in caves and shabby huts in the course of developing the Franciscan "way.") The image of the crèche is simplicity itself: a radiant virgin mother filled with grace as no other person has ever been; a humble Joseph, whose obedience and compassion will keep them safe; and God Himself, showing us what simplicity is all about.

All this in a stable: no griping, no glitter, no money: only hope.

December 10 2009

Matthew 23:13-26

'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath." How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

In today's reading Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they have lost the essence of their religion. To quote James "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Jesus tells the Pharisees if they want to properly practice their religion and please God then help the poor and feed the hungry. In other words religion is more about love and compassion than ceremonial acts.

After I read today's passage my first thought was I really hope I am not like the Pharisees. My second thought was, I know I more like the Pharisees that I care to admit. As I dwelt on that idea I began to wonder what I am doing to shut out the kingdom of heaven to those around me? Am I a hypocrite? Unfortunately the answer is yes at least some of the time. Do I neglect at times the more important things in life like justice, mercy and faithfulness? Yes.

So where is my hope if I am not able to practice a pure form of religion that is

pleasing to the Father? My hope ultimately rests in Jesus – even though no matter how hard I try, I do not see myself as much better than the Pharisees. Jesus sees me as I am on the inside and yet I know regardless of my failings; Jesus loves and forgives just like he calls us to love and forgive. I see the only real difference between me and the Pharisees is I am a believer. I believe in the healing and saving love, compassion and eternal mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. I will continue to try to seek justice while I know I have at best an imperfect understanding of justice. I will try to give mercy even when I know I at times have no mercy in me. I will try to be faithful even when I seem to have no faith, and I will continue to try to love even if at best it is an imperfect love and when I fail I know Jesus will be there to forgive. He will pick me up and keep me running until I fall again then He will pick me up again and He will do this over and over again no matter how many times I fall because Jesus' love is eternal and knows no bounds.

December 11 2009

Matthew 23:27-39

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

When I think Advent, I think about a season for getting ready for Christmas. I am thinking ho-ho-hosanna. I am thinking about the cradle in Bethlehem. But what do I get? White washed tombs!

Although I have been raised in the Episcopal Church and I know that they are coming, because we read them every year, I am always shocked by readings such as the one for today appear during Advent season.

Advent is the season when we remember Jesus' first coming and hope for his next coming. Advent is a time of spiritual preparation so that we might experience Jesus' coming to us in new ways, right now.

Jesus called the Scribes and the Pharisees white-washed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of dead bones and every unclean thing on the inside. Perhaps this reading is calling us to look deep-within and to address those parts of our lives that we try to hide from others, from ourselves.

There may be a difficult relationship you know that you need to deal with but you avoid it. Sometimes we're racked by guilt about some issue all of the involved parties have long ago forgotten. You might feel so far away from God that you are not even sure if you believe anything anymore. It could be that old spiritual disciplines and practices aren't doing anything for you anymore and you wonder why you even try. We could go on and on.

Perhaps the best Christmas present we can give ourselves is get honest with ourselves about our relationships with God, and our neighbors, and ourselves. Sometimes doing that is impossible when we try to do it on our own. All of the clergy of Trinity Church have spiritual directors to assist them in their journeys. Fr. Dave, Mary, and Deacon Joe would be blessed to assist you in cleaning out your tombs.

December 12 2009

Matthew 24:1-14

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

'Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

Jesus was telling his followers: See all of this splendor and display of wealth and power? If my teachings are not followed, this place will stand no more – not by my doing, and not as the result of an angry Father, but by the lust of man for power and possessions that man can never attain – for to do so they would be able to present themselves as at least equal to the creator who made them and gave them being and the gift of choice.

I would extend this to mean: If you challenge His power with your power, this same scene might be repeated with the same painful ending. History confirms this message over and over again.

People, throughout the ages have predicted the “End of the age”, failing to understand that the ending of an age may not be the cessation of life on this planet – in fact there may be a multiplicity of ages given the opportunity to finally get it right. Jesus told us that no one but the Father knows as to the time of the final curtain. God has kept this information even from His Son.

Generation after generation has been told: Do you want to continue to pursue your path of controlling by power over my freely-given gift of peace? The only real prediction to follow is that: Someday “the age” may come to an end – and to be

prepared!

Josephus describes to us the insane cruelty the Romans inflicted on Jerusalem and its people. Mankind has been bent on flexing our power and strength, and relying on force to gain a lifestyle of unattainable peace and prosperity. We have been living in fear of losing a power struggle, and thus our possessions, to perceived corrupt leaders and nations. How can we find this peace if the tools used in the attempt are not charity and love and prayer for the other inhabitant of this tiny blue orb.

Our God is not a Roman Emperor, nor even a representative any other present global power. His power and might is best demonstrated in the beauty He has created – the flowers, animals, waters, sands and mountains, a universe filled with wonders yet to see – and yes, even the people who live here. Our focus and faith must be steadfast in a patient, loving and forgiving Father, who will, in His time, recall us from the creation He intended – to the peace He has promised.

December 13 2009

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

John the Baptist did not subscribe to the Dale Carnegie "How to Win Friends and Influence People" course. He had no need. John knew the truth from above and that Jesus was the Messiah. He understood his place in the divine plan and accepted his mission with zeal.

John the Baptist did not seek the easier, softer way in his spiritual journey. His intolerance for those looking for shortcuts is apparent. His answers to those who ask him what to do seem curt. But the truth is simple.

Our challenge during Advent is to keep it simple. There is only one reason for Christmas.

Christ came to be with us and offer all salvation.

December 14 2009

Matthew 24:15-31

'So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "There he is!"—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Look! He is in the wilderness", do not go out. If they say, "Look! He is in the inner rooms", do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

*'Immediately after the suffering of those days
the sun will be darkened,*

*and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from heaven,*

and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they

will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Approaching this advent season, this section of Matthew's text takes us back to a time of ongoing persecution of the Israelites and their quest for a savior to be born among them who would be their deliverer. This scripture moves the reader from fleeing from utter sacrilege to experiencing the resplendent return of our Lord to earth. It really represents His second coming.

Historically, the warning of desolate times for the Israelites represents their fear of being overcome totally by the Roman authorities. The relief sought by the Israelites was the coming of a Messiah who would save them from annihilation. On a spiritual plane, hope existed that redemption of sin and relief from pain and suffering would be alleviated in the saving grace of our Lord's coming. However, this overall scenario, apocalyptic in character, has been repeated throughout the ages and is particularly represented in the book of Revelations. This text was probably written after the time of the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, an event that warranted much fear of death without deliverance.

In relating this scripture to our personal lives as we anticipate the Advent season we question our current fears and needs. Do we not fear loss of life because of some accident or type of fatality? Does that type of loss translate into fearing lack of preparation time in anticipation of being with our Lord? We may not all experience a "good death". Perhaps our physical death and approach to hopeful eternal life will result in meeting Christ in all His glory...that is the hope of every believer. Yet, is unplanned suffering and death a concept to be feared? If we truly love our Lord, does it really matter how we leave this physical life? Does it really matter if He descends to us in shining splendor encircled by hosts of bright angels, or simply already be the "stranger among us"? In the end, it all comes down to trust and love. If we truly love our Lord and give to others the love that He has given to us, no matter what foregoing events occur, we know we will indeed see Him.

And so, this season of Advent, of expectation, of the glorious arrival of our Lord is to be celebrated with the knowledge that His birth is God's gift to mankind...a gift of redemption...a gift that eradicates fear...a gift of love...a gift of beauty. Let us rejoice as we recall the events leading to the arrival of our Savior.

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

“...about that day and hour no one knows.”

“...they knew nothing...”

“...you do not know on what day the Lord is coming.”

I don't know about you, but I like to know what's coming as much as possible. When I don't know what's coming, I begin to speculate on the worst that could happen. My worries and fears are triggered. Not knowing leaves me vulnerable.

This passage confirms that no one knows the time of the return of the Son of Man. It will be at an unexpected hour. Isn't this how the Holy Spirit works now? How many times have you been surprised at the hand of God at work in a particular situation you've been involved in? In hindsight, don't you often see how the Spirit was at work, even though we didn't recognize it?

“Being awake” may mean “Be aware”; “notice”; “pay attention”. When we are prepared, we are more ready to receive the gift of God's grace. We can notice and appreciate the mystery.

Developing awareness helps us to hone our God perspective. Jesus' remarks shake us from the stagnant, stationary, spiritless approach to daily living reminding us to be ever watchful.

Pay attention. Be prepared. Stay awake. You do not know on what day the Lord is coming.

December 16 2009

Matthew 24:45-51

'Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this passage, Matthew is challenging us to look at ourselves and ask the question, are we living our lives as the "faithful and wise servant" or are we living our lives as the "evil servant". He reminds us that we know not the day or the hour that the Lord will come and therefore we must live our lives, each and every day, in such a manner that when the Lord comes, we will be ready to delight in "all that he hath".

We are all servants over the Lord's household in this world and we must reach out in love and service to others to "give them their food in due season". We have a responsibility to be faithful stewards of the gifts that God has granted us in this life and to share them with others on this journey as an outward expression of God's grace and love for us.

I find this passage particularly poignant as we have just celebrated the harvest season and may have pondered in what ways we should be sharing the fruits of our labor with others. Matthew is cautioning us that we do not want to be caught gorging ourselves on those fruits and oppressing and denying others. It is our duty to share our gifts with those around us, to reach out to others so that when the Lord comes we will be prepared to enter into glory with him.

December 17 2009

Matthew 25:1-13

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

I wonder how many of us were taught a little tune as a child with the words as follows: "Give me oil in my lamp, keep it burning, burning, burning. Give me oil in my lamp, I pray. ...Keep it burning 'til the break of day." I also wonder if any of us understood the depth of the meaning of those words at a young age.

Do we understand the depth of these words - and the depth of meaning of this passage in scripture - as adults? Jesus seems to be asking us to stay alert and to watch for His coming. When? Today? Tomorrow? Next week? At the end of time? When things get really bad? When is He coming? And what happens if we miss it - if we don't see Him coming - because we ran out of our oil to see?

Perhaps Jesus is saying that He has a way of surprising us. I know in my life I am surprised by His presence on a daily basis. I sense His presence in the smile of a stranger I pass, or feel it in the touch or tender word of a friend or family member. I especially know His presence when I take time to really search for it - in times of quiet reflection in the absence of the hustle and bustle of the times. I think Jesus invites us to keep our hearts focused on His presence with us at all times.

With this in mind we can sing the song's varying words: "Give me oil in my lamp, keep ME burning, burning, burning. ... Keep ME burning 'til the break of day." And the chorus is as follows: "Sing Hosanna, Sing Hosanna, Sing Hosanna to the King of Kings!" -- Amen.

December 18 2009

Matthew 25:14-30

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This parable is one that sets forth in concept how talents, special skills, valuable capabilities, gifts when given to individuals might be used by them to varying degrees or in some instances might not be used at all. Two of the three in the parable doubled what was given to them and the third saved what was given to him but did not use it in a way so as to increase its value. The two who did use their gifts to make more were rewarded while the one who saved what was given to him and returned it to his owner was admonished and banished. While the punishment of the one who merely returned what was given to him might appear harsh this parable seems to be far more about those who enhance their talents, grow their gifts, and make more of what is given to them.

We all have GOD given abilities and gifts, some more obvious such as the ability to

sing or play a musical instrument, others more subtle a voice that comforts, eyes that see into a soul, a touch that is soothing, yet none more valuable than another, just different. Indeed it might be how these gifts are used that measures their true value. If one sings but only for him or herself and not in Praise of the Lord GOD, while another through his or her voice or touch or eyes softly reassures one who is in pain or suffering that by trusting in the Lord GOD their pain and suffering shall pass, then whose gifts are truly being used in a valuable way, whose talents are increased?

The Lord GOD in his unfailing and all enduring love, mercy, grace, forgiveness and compassion, wants us to love one another and through the teachings of his precious son our Blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we are taught to be of service to the poor and the needy. With that in mind is this parable teaching us that we should increase our talents by using our GOD given gifts to Praise our Lord GOD as the one and only true GOD, that we should use our gifts to love him and put no other gods before him, that we should use our gifts to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, that we should use our gifts, grow our gifts so that they help the poor, the needy to uplift spirits that are down? Is it not our joyful responsibility to spread the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to extend a hand to those in need, to provide a kind word, a gentle smile, an open heart to let those in sorrow, in pain, in suffering to let them know there is help and it's only a moment, a thought, a step, a prayer to our Lord GOD away? Is it not our joyful responsibility to use our talents to grow the communities within the Church and to outreach to the communities outside of the Church so they become one organic body?

To not grow these communities, not grow these talents and not use these gifts, be it a scripture not read, a prayer not prayed, be it a song not sung, a hymn not played, a smile not made, a look that is a look away, be it a hand not held, be it a touch that is kept maybe for another day might be in light of this parable a talent not used and a blessing that is not treasured. Let us pray to the Lord GOD through his son Jesus Christ that we be mindful not only of our gifts but of how wonderfully we can and should use them to love him and our neighbors. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

December 19 2009

Matthew 25:31-46

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

In our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote "all men are created equal". That is a paraphrasing of Jesus' words in this chapter from Matthew. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me" and conversely, "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me". Clearly Jesus is telling his followers that while he is the son of God, he is also "everyman". Thus we must treat everyone on earth with love, respect and dignity. It can be further interpreted that, through Jesus, God himself is telling us that "everyman" is his child, meaning we are all God's children. And we—all human beings on earth—are one family.

As we celebrate the season of Jesus' birth, we must remember these words. It is easy to get caught up in the frenzy of the Christmas season—decorating trees, baking cookies, buying gifts etc. We celebrate this season of joy with friends and family. But we would do well to take a moment to remember that we have a larger, more extended family—the family where God is the father of us all. There are those in this extended family who may on the surface appear to be "the least of these", yet Jesus teaches that they are in fact our family.

Let us remember to include all of God's children when celebrating the joy of the season. It need not be expensive gifts, or even fancy food and drink. Something simple like a kind word ("I was a stranger and you welcomed me") might make all the difference.

(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

"If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!"

These words of Jesus to the apostle Peter are harsh. This whole section of John's Gospel is a little tough for Peter. Earlier Jesus alluded to Peter's fate as a prisoner and eventually a martyr. Peter was probably mulling this over when he saw John and asked, "What about him?" What answer was he expecting?

Earlier in this passage, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me." The meaning of those words after His death and resurrection were profoundly different from before. Before, follow me meant to believe, serve others and do good works. Now, for Peter, it literally meant following Jesus to the physical horror of the cross. Having witnessed that scene on Calvary, I'm sure Peter was a little concerned. Maybe he was thinking, "why?" or "why me?" or, upon seeing John, "why not him too?" After all maybe it seemed a little unfair. Jesus, however, knew the unique and vital role Peter would play in the building of His church.

Jesus' rebuke stopped him short. He essentially told him that His (God's) will for one person is of no consequence or meaning to another. If Peter was going to worry about John's fate as opposed to his own, how could he focus on the monumental work Christ had for him to do. Jesus was harsh in order to re-focus Peter on the task at hand.

Most of us are like Peter at times. We look at our lives and sometimes wonder, "what about him/her/them?" We look at goals we set and plans we made that we have not achieved and wonder "why not?" We forget, that as followers of Christ, we must submit to his will in our lives. We can plan all we want, but if it does not fulfill His purpose for us, our plans may not turn out as we think they should. We can wish we had the same blessings as others appear to have but God will give us the blessings we need in order to serve Him.

As responders to Christ's call of, "Follow me", we must remember that we are following a God who is infinitely more faithful to us than we could ever be to him. Even if following Jesus results in difficulty, hardship and pain we can believe that there is a purpose and that He is with us through it all. Gods will for others is no concern of ours. Our only concern is discerning, and then acting upon, his will for us. This is how each of us plays a unique and vital role in the building of His kingdom.

December 21 2009

Luke 1:1-25

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Cont...

Luke comes to us as a skilled writer who openly states the purpose for writing this account which is so the truth of the gospel message may be known. Luke has made sure these accounts are historically accurate since he was not an eye-witness. The importance to details was important back then and it should be just as important for us today. These accounts were passed down by a carefully memorized oral tradition. We can read the Bible for ourselves, but let us try hearing someone else or electronic device read it to us. God speaks in many ways, so we may hear another message that God wants us to hear. The term eye-witness refers to the disciples. Theophilus means beloved of God or one who loves God. Luke sets the stage for the fulfillment of Jewish hopes for their messiah with John's birth and him preparing the way. Zechariah is a priest who was spiritually elite and Elizabeth is of priestly ancestry. It says that they were righteous in the sight of God, observing commands and decrees blamelessly. This Advent season is a wonderful opportunity to examine our own lives. Are we being pious and practicing spiritual disciplines?

Being childless was a great concern and shameful because the family was of critical importance. However being childless provided the opportunity for God to show grace and power. Being chosen is something to consider. Have we been chosen to do something? It is wonderful to see how God uses people and how he continues to use us. Casting lots is like rolling dice and a common method for discernment. There were many priest so to be able to burn incense was a chance of a lifetime. God is always giving us chances. Let us take some time to contemplate these chances and ask God to help us take advantage of these chances. Now, there is the typical scenario, when either God or another divine being appears, there are feelings of being startled and fear. With the response being, "Do not be afraid." Let us not be afraid and let God and His messengers come into our lives. It may not be easy to hear the messages we receive, but these messages come for our own good. The following message of Zechariah's prayer being heard is for us to know that God always hears our prayers. Disappointment with prayers only comes because our expectations to the answer is different from God's.

He was to be named John because John means that the Lord has shown favor. This child is filled with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit shows the presence of God and sovereignty to accomplish a purpose. We too are filled with the Holy Spirit and this allows us to be able to do great things. The next part of the story about being doubtful, which is not uncommon when we are given a message from God. It is good, as in Zechariah's case, to ask questions. We are not always sure that we or God can do something, but with God all things are possible. We need to have confidence in ourselves and in the God we serve. Doubt and unbelief are two separate concepts. It is because Zechariah has unbelief that he is silenced. This Advent season, let us take some time to silence ourselves so we can listen to God. This story ends with Elizabeth being joyful and in full confidence saying that favor has been shown upon her. As we contemplate and reflect during this Advent season, may we be filled with joy and believe that God has shown favor upon us as well.

Heavenly Father, you know all our wants and desires. Help us to be silent so we may listen to hear the messages that you have for us. Allows us to see the chances you have provided for us. Let us not be afraid to allow you to appear in our lives. Please help us give you control and allow the Holy Spirit that is within us guide and direct us. Help us with our unbelief and give us the confidence that anything is possible. Grant us joy and open us to the ways that you show favor upon us and continue to show favor on us. We pray this all, in Jesus' precious name and for His sake. Amen.

December 22 2009

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.
What if Mary had said NO?

Scripture does not tell us a whole lot about Mary. We know her as the mother of Jesus, as a parent who presented her child in the Temple as required in the book of Exodus. We know that at the age of 12, Jesus was taken by his parents to Jerusalem for Passover. We see her once again at the wedding at Cana, pointing out to her son the lack of wine. And finally we see her at the Cross. A good Jewish mother.

But in this annunciation passage, we learn everything about her. She was young, betrothed to Joseph. And along comes this angel with probably the most eternity changing challenge that anyone could possibly hear! It came with compliments "most favored one" - and comfort - "the Lord is with you, do not be afraid." And graciousness, never mind the stellar description of the child to come. And yet, before Mary would decide, she asked a simple question, "how can this be?" The angel described what would take place. And Mary truly believed she was the chosen handmaiden of the Lord.

How many times, or maybe even once, in our lives have we been greeted with what seemed like a very difficult challenge? Would we recognize the messenger? Could we comprehend the message? Would we be able to trust that God, in his love for us, would be gracious in his call to us? And in our fear and disbelief, have some opportunities of a lifetime slipped away?

Perhaps WE should ask "how can this be?", and trust the answer of eternity.

Mary said YES! Thanks be to God.

December 23 2009

Luke 1:39-48a

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

What then shall this child be?

When a child is born, this is the question we ask. Who will this child be? What will this child do in life? What can we as parents do to help the child be all that they or we want them to be?

But it's not just the parents who are responsible for a child. In previous generations neighborhoods were more open. Children wandered from one friend's house to another. But in our present culture, this often doesn't happen. Parents are often working long hours, and children don't roam their neighborhoods as they used to. Grandparents and other family often live in different parts of the country instead of just around the corner. The support system has changed.

What can we do? When a child is baptized into the Church, we as a congregation make our own promises to help support the child, but what does this mean? It's more than just providing church school and youth group. It's also reaching out to the young members of the congregation to insure they are a vital part of the congregation. We need to make sure that the church is and continues to be a place of acceptance and love for our children.

And we need to reach out to children in our community who may need us even more, particularly children who may not have the support at home that our children have. If it takes a village to raise a child, let us be that village.

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