

O come, O come, Emmanuel...

Advent is a time of preparation, not merely to prepare ourselves for Christmas, but to prepare our hearts to receive Christ, our Savior, who receives all of us into His loving embrace. And one way to help us prepare is through the spiritual discipline of prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation.

We hope this devotional can help to serve just that purpose as we collectively pray, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." Although many of our devotional writers may focus on a few verses as the basis of their reflection, we encourage you to read each passage listed in full before reading what each person has to offer as we journey through the season of Advent together.

Church members and friends of all ages (along with a few special animal friends!) from Boonton UMC and Montville UMC offered to share their reflections on one of several lectionary passages provided for each day. Thank you to all our contributors for your witness and ministry in this endeavor. We are also grateful to Linda Brennan who designed our beautiful Advent cover this year.

Now, we encourage you to grab your Bible and this devotional, perhaps with a journal and pen in hand, and find a quiet space where you can focus on God. By carving out time each day to consider the perspectives shared in this devotional, may we find ourselves more mindful of our Emmanuel, God with us, in our midst with each and every passing day.

Pastor Donald Kirschner

Sunday, December 2, 2018

Psalm 25: 1-10

My favorite part of this reading is "*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long*" (25:4-5). It makes me think of the people in the time this psalm was written, waiting for the coming of the Lord. We sometimes take the teachings of Jesus and his followers in the New Testament for granted. I know I do. We have never known a time before Jesus had come. As we begin this Advent season today, let us remember that God gave us his Son that we might learn from him. And let us also remember what our passage goes on to state: "*Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way*" (25:8-9).

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus, that we could grow and learn your ways through his example and teachings. Help us to understand what path you would have us follow. Be with us through this Advent season, as we once again await his coming. Amen.

Karen King, Boonton

Monday, December 3, 2018

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Paul is talking to the Church at Thessalonica, explaining that he is joyful and wants to thank God for the continued faith and efforts of the Thessalonian church. Paul and his followers want to assist them in strengthening their faith further. Paul's desire is for the members of the Thessalonian church to grow in their love, not only for each other, but everyone else. At this time of year, these verses remind us of God's love in sending his Son to teach us to love and care for each other.

Perhaps this is also a message for us to assist and encourage others in their faith because God's presence brings such joy to us, as evidenced in verse 12: *"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else."* The Gospel is not only what we believe but also what we must live—lives that are faithful and bold, yet sensitive and self-sacrificing.

Prayer (verse 13 paraphrased): May God strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our Heavenly Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen.

Faith and Fellowship Small Group, Montville

Tuesday, December 4, 2018

2 Samuel 7:18-29

In today's passage, David praises God, again and again. He is thankful for God's love and grace, and the blessing of his house, and the family for generations. God is so great that it may seem like a small thing, but it is big. Myself, when I turn on my computer, smartphone, radio, or TV, I hear of terrible suffering from disasters (and I mean just in the United States; there is much in the world I know nothing about). I should say I'm *reminded* of the suffering, because when I'm just going about my day... doing things...that need to be done...I'm not thinking about it.

So it occurs to me that I am so blessed to have a house. It's a mess, but it's a place to be safe, and it's ours, and we are family. And yes, I am so blessed with family. I appreciate the fact that I am able to do simple things with people I love, and I'm reminded that there are so many stricken people who have lost loved ones, and who are not able to do the simplest of tasks or do not have a roof or a safe place.

Prayer: Let me remember, over and over, how blessed we are, to keep my eyes open to small and lovely pleasures, and to value every day with family and friends. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.

Amy Whitmer, Boonton

Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Luke 11:29-32

This scripture passage can be entitled “The Sign of Jonah.” In verse 29, Jesus, speaking to the crowd, points out that they are a wicked generation, ask for a sign, and that the only sign they will get is the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, who listened to his preaching and repented of their evil ways and were not destroyed, Jesus would be a sign to his current generation, which did not repent and who were condemned by the Queen of the South (Sheba), who did destroy them.

In summary, history could well be repeating itself. Our present generation in this country is turning from the teachings of God, and we too could be destroyed.

Prayer: Lord, help us to understand “The Sign of Jonah” and understand its significance that we too must repent and live lives closer to your teachings. Only with this understanding can we have changed hearts and lives to serve you better. Amen.

Richard Stone, Montville

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Philippians 1:12-18a

Every Christmas since my mid-teens, I over-planned for Christmas. So it seems that the “reason for the season” was a bit shoved into the background as I worked through my “to-do” lists. I worked hard and late, forgetting some things and searching too far and wide for a special toy, and sometimes getting impatient. But Paul reminds us of the special gift that came at Christmas. So, while it can be fun to “shop ‘til we drop,” it is important to keep our Savior deep in our hearts at all times and thank God for the Greatest Gift of all that was given to each of us.

One Christmas at college, I took a seasonal job at what I called a “miniature Fortunoff” in Millburn, NJ. I was excused from afternoon classes and exams until after the holidays but I was so tired that the Christmas spirit just disappeared. I watched people buying expensive jewelry for themselves as well as other items. I had to answer the phone for the service department and tell customers that their engraved orders promised for Christmas did not come back in time. To me, many of the purchases were a symbol of greed. I learned a lot from those weeks. And I had to gift wrap 24 large Salton hot trays (“the gift of the year” for that year).

As I grow older, my lists have become shorter, but I still try to do too much. As we get further into Advent, take time for yourself for quiet reflection about God’s gift and why it was given (this Advent booklet is a great tool for helping us). Tell the people you meet that it is the season to celebrate Christ’s birthday, not just as any holiday, not just a time to shop and party. Wish “Merry Christmas” to all and thank God and praise Him with all your heart.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we go about all our Christmas chores, we thank you for the wonderful gift you gave through your Son. Help us not forget that this is why we celebrate Christmas and help us take time to reflect upon the Gift and praise you for our Savior throughout each day. Help us to make giving an important part of the season. For as you gave us Jesus, our giving needs to be an important part of our thanks to you. Help us to remember members of our families and friends near and far and share our joy and thankfulness with them. Help us to make our reflections on Jesus more important than all the lists of chores, shopping, cards, etc. Help us to make this Christmas a true reflection of thanks for your great gift. In your Son’s name we pray. Amen

Laura Beyer, Boonton

Friday, December 7, 2018

Philippians 1:18b-26

In verse 18, Paul says “*the important thing is that in every way...Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.*” Paul frequently talks of joy even though he is often facing difficult times—as at this time, he is a prisoner in Rome. In these verses, he also talks about his being. In death he would be in Christ, which is his ultimate goal. But, as he has not yet been called home, he is determined to go on serving God by encouraging the church at Philippi. He sees his purpose as guiding them so they may progress and find joy in the faith through his efforts. We might even surmise that Paul would want those he knew to live in harmony with others as well as in obedience to God and know the joy in Christ Jesus.

As joy is a theme in these verses, let us remember to find joy each day of Advent and in the coming year no matter how difficult things may seem. May we always search for the light and see Christ among us.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to follow Christ in our daily lives with hope and joy and praise, no matter how difficult things are. May we follow Paul’s example and live in Christ. Amen.

Faith and Fellowship Small Group, Montville

Saturday, December 8, 2018

Luke 9:1-6

“Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” -Luke 9:1-2

- Who’s your favorite superhero? *Mermaid Ariel*
 - Why? *She used her powers and is nice.*
- Is Jesus a superhero? *No*
- What powers did Jesus have? *A lot like Elsa’s powers.*

“He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic.” -Luke 9:3

- If you went on a trip, what would you want to take with you? *Elsa, Anna, Olaf, and Mommy*
- What would you say if you were told you couldn’t take anything? *I would be sad.*

“Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” - Luke 9:4-5

- What does the word “welcome” mean to you? *Hello*
- How would you feel if someone wasn’t welcoming (nice) to you? *Sad, because I don’t like bad people. I only like good people.*
- Do you like shaking the dust off your feet (or scraping yucky things off your shoes) on a welcome mat? *Yes*
 - Why? *It’s important so we don’t get germs inside.*
- If you had a dance move that involved shaking something off, what would you call your dance move? *Dance mover*
- Does Jesus like to welcome people who come to his doorstep? *Yes*
 - Why? *Because he is nice.*
- Does Jesus ever have to shake things off? *No*

“They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” -Luke 9:6

- What’s some good news you want to share with others today? *Kisses*
- What do you want to pray to Jesus about today?: *Jesus loves me this I know (singing).*

Kara (age 3), Boonton

Sunday, December 9, 2018

Malachi 3:1-4

The Advent Season is a time of preparation for all and Malachi emphasized this in this reading. Malachi was a prophet around 500 years before Christ and after the Temple had been rebuilt. This reading refers to the fact that even though the Temple had been rebuilt, justice for the people by the people was not happening. Also, the people's behavior had brought into question divine justice. The passage says that God's messenger will be coming suddenly and when least expected to refine and purify God's people, as they had again lost their way to God.

Messengers can bring good news or painful news, or the news can be awesome, yet produce fear. The example he uses is the refining process of precious metals. The process removes the impurities through fire and the process could be repeated several times. Likewise, God's people are refined for God's works throughout our lives. As Christians, we should be able to accept this message with joy because we know the messenger, in this case Jesus, brings us God's salvation and His presence in our lives and in the world. The refining process for us brings us to focus on others more than ourselves. This process can be easier for some than others. You can reduce the refining process by studying the Bible, listening to God's direction in our lives, and then being a messenger to others.

The question then is: How will you respond to God's messenger?

Prayer: Help us this Advent season to prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming as HE is the only pure totally refined gift of God's love. Help us to show this love each day to others and to look for the opportunities presented to us so we can be the messengers of God's and Jesus' love. Amen.

Renee and Ron Gilbert, Montville

Monday, December 10, 2018

Psalms 126

God rescues us from tribulations and anxieties. What do you need rescuing from today?

"The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the streams in Negev" (126:3-4).

In gratitude for his gifts, we should express our own joy and glorify him. We should act with patience for his help and sustenance. God's power releases us from sin and brings us back to him as he shows us mercy.

"Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (v. 5), and this is because of his love and compassion. God promises us he will never abandon us or fail to come to our aid in his own time and his own way.

Are you in need of asking God to direct you so you can conquer challenges in your life today? God is always present waiting for our prayers. His ultimate example of generosity and unconditional love is demonstrated by Jesus Christ's sacrifice.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for being with us in the midst of crucial times. Open our hearts in gratitude. Let us praise you for your abundant blessings you bestow upon us. Amen.

Larry Korinda, Boonton

Tuesday, December 11, 2018

2 Peter 1:2-15

Self-Sacrifice

A family consists of a lot of different personalities. We live together and have to get along to co-exist...if we don't, we have turmoil and unrest. You would think that if we loved each other, we would surely get along. Really?

Recently, I visited a nearby zoo, and because it was late autumn, many of the animals were not there. I came upon a porcupine and was amazed to read that a porcupine has 30,000 quills! When a porcupine grows cold, he seeks warmth by huddling with another porcupine...and as they do...unfortunately, they needle each other and pull apart...only to become cold again. They have a predicament—they have to learn how to not hurt each other.

Personality differences are like the quills of a porcupine. They can get tangled and cause hurt. We must work at our relationships to demonstrate Christ-like qualities of love, compassion, self-sacrifice and a forgiving spirit. Self-sacrifice is loving someone unselfishly. Self-sacrifice is against our human nature, yet it should be part of our "new nature." If each of us had an attitude of self-sacrifice, what a change would come about in the atmosphere of our homes.

Prayer: Creator God, we ask that you continue to show us the way, to accompany us on our journey. Please be with us along the twists and turns of our lives. Enable us to show compassion, forgiveness and love to each other. During this Advent season, help us to learn self-sacrifice, to prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus; your Son and our Savior. Amen

Annette Thurkauf, Boonton

Wednesday, December 12, 2018

Isaiah 35:3-7

When we think about the Christmas season, do we stop and think about what this season truly means? Do we understand that God has already given us the best gift we could ever be given, which is salvation through the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Or do we, instead, stress ourselves out with trying to find the perfect gifts for family members or friends, when perhaps what we should be doing is sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, especially as we prepare to celebrate his birth?

Imagine a Christmas with no perfectly wrapped packages under the tree. But, instead, spending the day sharing the joy, love, and peace of this miraculous event with those we love, and embracing the true meaning of Christmas. I doubt many of us would do just that, myself included. But what we can do is take some time during the Advent season to let God know how thankful we are for the gift of Jesus Christ by spending time in prayer and meditation.

As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to the Israelites in captivity all those years ago, *"Be strong! Don't fear! Here's your God, coming with a vengeance; with divine retribution God will come to save you"* (35:4). Open your eyes and look deep within yourselves for the spirit of God, and let it work within you. Let your ears welcome God's words as you pray. Let all of us leap like deer and speak of God's hope to those who do not know Christ as we prepare for the birth of our King.

Emmanuel, Emmanuel...God with us for all eternity.

Prayer: Lord you have given us life and blessed us abundantly with your love. Help us to remember that the best gift we could share is the gift of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Be with us, Lord, as we celebrate your birth. And provide for us a heart that is willing to love all people, regardless of race, color, or creed. Emmanuel, Emmanuel...how blessed are we to be called your children. Amen.

Debra Catena, Boonton

Thursday, December 13, 2018

2 Corinthians 8:1-8

Even in the midst of great affliction and extreme poverty, people can find abundant joy and display generosity. This was the case for the people in our passage today. These generous believers were also described as not just giving according to their means, but beyond their means, and doing so gladly for the sake of others. How might we be called to gladly give beyond our means for the sake of others, especially around one of the most giving holidays of the year?

The generosity of the people was a sign of the genuineness of their love, and it was something they considered to be a privilege, rather than an obligation. As Christmas Day draws ever closer, how can you display generosity as a sign of genuine love for God?

And what would it look like for you to embark on a “generous undertaking” this season (v. 7)? Whatever embarkation you decide upon, let us remember that Jesus embarked on the most generous undertaking of all: becoming poor, so that we might become rich; dying, so that we could find life. And that generous act of love is what keeps us spurred on toward generosity, whether we’re a giraffe or a friend of Montville or Boonton UMC.

Prayer: God, stretch our necks and hearts toward a life of generous living, where sharing is viewed as a privilege, and where all our giving stems from our deep love for you and our desire to help others. Amen.

Gerald the Generous Giraffe, Kenya High Rise UMC

Friday, December 14, 2018

Isaiah 12:2-6

“In that day you will say: ‘Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.’” -Isaiah 12:4-5

Although we know that salvation is only obtained through accepting Jesus Christ, living that in the day to day is harder for some of us than others. We take him for granted, knowing he will be there for us, but what have we done for him lately? Give him praise, proclaim what he has done. We should not be sitting idly by, quietly being the meek church mouse Christian. Instead, we should be singing out all he has done for us.

How have you sung out your praises for God today? Did you share, did you pray, did you read your Bible, did you give unto the least as if it was him? Did you sing to him, tell him how much you love him, ask what you can do for him? If you went home to be with God today, would it have been a long time since your last love letter to him, your last song of praise?

Remember, a relationship takes effort from both sides, not just one. If something is lacking, it is not on God’s part; maybe you are missing out.

Prayer: Dear Lord, let me sing to you daily. Let me proclaim your wonders and love in all I do to everyone I meet. Let your example of grace and love shine through me daily. Amen.

Lisa Loper, Boonton

Saturday, December 15, 2018

Luke 1:57-66

I invite you to read the following passage three times, following the prompts provided below for each reading:

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

1. Read the text out loud. What words, sentences, ideas, or images came to you as words of hope and encouragement?
2. Read the text out loud a second time. What words, sentences, ideas, or images did you find disturbing, challenging, or begging for further elaboration?
3. Take a few moments to read through the text silently. What is the lesson you think God would like you learn from this reading today?

Anonymous, Montville

Sunday, December 16, 2018

Luke 3:7-18

These verses go from harsh chastisements to the affirmation of the long-awaited promise of the coming of the One to be sent to the people by God. John the Baptist's announcement of the Good News comes in what we might call a "mixed bag," with words of condemnation and warning. We recognize that John is demanding repentance, and he tells us that the one to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, will separate the chaff from the grain, and burn the chaff in a never-ending fire.

How different this is from our vision of the baby Jesus, bringing peace and joy. We live in a time when we are *encouraged* to repent, to change our ways, so that we may be true followers of Jesus. We are no longer threatened with eternal damnation and publicly chastised, but *invited* to be in community with one another as Christians. The ministry of Jesus Christ was very different from the ministry of John the Baptist. John may have "prepared the way," but Jesus "showed us The Way". Jesus showed us the way to live a life of outreach, service, caring and love. Living the Christian life does bring us that peace and joy that we envision lying in the manger in Bethlehem.

Prayer: Lord, we acknowledge that we need to examine the way we live our lives and need to make changes in order to be in a right relationship with God. Help us to continue to learn all that your life on earth brought to us—from the babe in the manger, to the teacher and healer, to your astounding sacrifice on the cross. Amen.

Lee Vink, Boonton

Monday, December 17, 2018

Hebrews 13:7-17

“Reezus Riste ris ruh rame resterray, rooray, rand rorever.” – Hebrews 13:8 (NRDV – New Revised Dog Version)
“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” -Hebrews 13:8 (NRSV – New Revised Standard Version)

As I go from kennel to foster home until I find my forever home, and as the seasons change around me, I find myself grateful that Jesus Christ remains the same every day, no matter how many changes I go through.

When have you been grateful for Christ’s constant and consistent presence in your life? What is about God’s love, as presented in Christ, that you cling to as you go through life’s ups and downs?

“Ror reer ree rav roe rasting ritty, rut ree rar rooking ror ra ritty rat ris roo ruhm.” -Hebrews 13:14 (NRDV)
“For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” -Hebrews 13:14 (NRSV)

We may not have had a permanent residency with Donald and Katherine, much like humans don’t have permanent residency on earth, but we are grateful to know that we now have a permanent residence to call home, just like all humans will someday have a permanent residency in heaven (a place where I hear there are dogs too, and all the glorified humans feed you as many scraps off the table as you want!).

Life isn’t as ruff as we thought after all.

Rare: Reer Rod, rank roo ror ruving rus rand riving rus ruh runderuhl rome. Ramen.
Prayer: Dear God, thank you for loving us and giving us a wonderful home. Amen.

Marco, Dugan, and Bobbie

Tuesday, December 18, 2018

Acts 28:23-31

“They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.” -Acts 28:23-24

The passage speaks to how Paul started preaching the word of God and about the Lord Jesus Christ from his home to anyone who would listen and be open minded. Paul did so boldly and without reservation. Despite some difficulties, Paul was persistent to convince non-believers that Jesus was the prophet who was sent here for their salvation.

They remind me to do the same as Paul despite the challenges. That there will be some people who refuse to believe and that we should pray for them. In some cases, it may take some time for people to embrace the word of God and to accept our Lord Jesus Christ into their lives. I understand those who are not “convinced”, but I have hope.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please help us to spread your good word and to have faith despite our challenges. Amen.

Michael Bolen, Boonton

Wednesday, December 19, 2018

Isaiah 11:1-9

“He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”

-Isaiah 11:3b-4a (NIV)

The passage is telling us to stop judging others by what we think, what we perceive we see, or what we think we may have heard. To not judge, but to love one another as God shows his love to us. To put aside preconceived notions of one another and to sincerely and honestly be side by side with one another. This passage is a guide to our moral sense of how society should be. This is showing us the need for changes in our and society. To put our fears aside and truly live in harmony with one another. For this will bring us all tremendous peace and joy.

Prayer: Dear God, let us see that the differences among races and cultures are manifestations of Your doing. Open our hearts and our minds to celebrate our similarities and differences among Your people. We pray that racial harmony is shown to our neighbors in our actions and words. Help us to show acceptance and respect to all of Your children. May every person live in peace and in Your light. Amen.

Tammy Martone, Montville

Thursday, December 20, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Have FAITH in God...Receive a Gift

*“Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord , ‘when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah....I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it ; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”*

-Jeremiah 31:31 & 33b

The prophet Jeremiah writes to remind us that as “new covenant people,” we can come before Jesus, God’s newborn Son. As Christians, we have this relationship through faith. I am thankful that during this Advent season, we have a devotional booklet to help us come before Jesus in thought and praise. My prayer now is that all the earth will one day have this faith in a loving God. Wouldn’t it be a beautiful Advent scene to see all the world worshipping and adoring God, who longs to be in relationship with His children?

*“... I will **forgive** their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” -Jeremiah 31:34b*

Jeremiah also tells us that we each receive a gift from God. The precious gift of forgiveness from our sins. The prophet adds that God will not even remember those sins! All we need to do is have faith and open our hearts to receive this wonderful gift.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for being a God who loves His children. May you continue to help us in our faith journey. Especially, Lord, lead us to help others who do not know you. Amen

Janet Beam, Boonton

Friday, December 21, 2018

Isaiah 42:10-14

Warrior and Mother

Singing, shouting, roaring out in battle, crying out in childbirth. This passage from Isaiah is filled with sound. God uses a voice like a warrior in battle and like a woman in labor to call out to us and make us hear. The prophet urges people from high and low to sing and shout to declare God's praise. I remember as one of our daughters was being born, the doctor said to me, "Focus the energy you are using in crying out to push." It was a time when God's presence felt very close.

In my world I am often surrounded by sound, and I often seek out sound to fill the quiet times—turning on the TV if I'm alone in my home, turning on the radio when I'm driving. But I know that much of the sound that is omnipresent distracts me rather than giving me moments of focus on what is really important and on the presence of God that is as close as the notes of a song.

Prayer: God of Love, help us to hear your voice, and help us to find a song of praise this day. Amen.

Rev. Laurie Zelman, Montville

Saturday, December 22, 2018

Luke 13:31-35

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" -Luke 13:34-35 (NIV)

This passage ends with the famous line, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,*" and I wanted to reflect on what such a popular line means. Many interpret this line in a more physical sense (e.g. "The person who seeks to talk to and follow God is blessed"), but I believe it is more important to interpret it more literally: "He who comes in the name of the Lord" as a reference to Christianity/Christians, the name we attach to those who follow the teachings of our Lord and God. "Coming into," in this sentence, would refer to converting to Christianity, but the entirety of the sentence would mean to seek conversion. In common language, "blessed" is used to refer to "good fortune" or "luck", whilst definitionally it means "made holy," which is a very important parallel. It is common knowledge that one simply leads to another—following the ways of the Lord leads to good fortune, whether earthly or heavenly. So, perhaps this passage can be more accurately interpreted as "Those who seek to become Christian will be granted the good fortune of God."

Prayer: God, help us to come this day and every day in the name of the Lord, following you all the days of our lives, receiving your good fortune for us, while also spreading that good fortune to others. Amen.

Sean Garry, Boonton

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Luke 1:46b-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." -Luke 1:46b-47

- Mary burst into song when she found out she was going to be Jesus' mommy. Why do you think Mary was so happy and felt so blessed? *She was happy to be a special mommy*
 - What makes you happy? *My grandma*
- Do you ever burst into song? When? *Yes, I sing all the time in the car, at home, and in school.*
- What good things has God done for you that you want to thank God for? *Pumpkin pie and for my family.*
- Mary was young when an angel told her she would be used as an instrument for God. What does it mean to be an instrument for God? *I'm going to sound out "loved."*
- If you were a musical instrument, what would you be and why? *A drum, because they are loud, and I want to be in a band.*
- What do you want to say, "Yes," to Jesus for today? *Thanks for my stuffed animal, Bell.*
- What do you want to pray to Jesus about today? *For Jesus to take care of Beethoven and me.*

Leeya (age 5), Montville

Monday, December 24, 2018

Luke 2: 1-7

The Right Time

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child."
-Luke 2:6

About 30 years ago, during my first pilgrimage journey to the Holy Land, I visited the grotto under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, a place revered since the 4th century as the precise location of Jesus' birth. As wooden building materials were scarce

in this area, natural caves were commonly used to shelter animals. Our group of pilgrims descended the worn stone stairs along with others from other groups, all crowded into this dark and tight space where a silver star on the floor marks the place where Jesus was born. We began to sing *Silent Night*, and the others there joined with us, singing in German, French, and at least one other language that I could not recognize. It was an amazing moment that spoke so profoundly to how the Savior born in this place was the savior of all people throughout the world. We just happened to converge in this place at the right time.

Some might wonder whether it was the right time for Jesus to be born. After all, his parents were far from home. The city of Bethlehem was crowded and filled with visitors. The registration was called for by a tyrannical emperor in Rome who had little concern as to whether this was convenient or even possible for people to travel. Yet this was the right time for the Christ-child to be born. Why? We might never know, but look at what has happened throughout the ages.

If you are like many people, it seems that Christmas comes too quickly. There is too much left to do: packages to wrap, last minute shopping, cooking and baking. Some might feel that there is simply not enough time to worship with others at the Christmas Eve service. But this is the right time, because it is God's time to meet us, to come into our lives, to still our hearts, to enliven our spirits, and to welcome us once again as we welcome the Christ child again. No matter what is left undone, this is still the right time, just as it was the right time on that first Christmas. How could it be the wrong time? After all, God is always waiting to welcome us anew into the great human family.

Prayer: God of grace, may we find excitement and joy on this Christmas Eve because the waiting is over and your son is ready in this time to come to us once again. Help us to welcome him with open hearts, ready to be transformed anew in this Christmas season.

Rev. Steve Bechtold, Skylands District Superintendent

Tuesday, December 25, 2018

John 1:1-14

It's become a tradition for me to go on a run when it's snowing outside, especially during or shortly after the first snowfall. One year when I did this, while I was in seminary, I was running before the sun had risen. To my surprise, the woods and trails I was running on, which would normally be pitch black at that time of morning, were actually brighter and clearer than I could have ever imagined. The sun didn't rise the entire time I was on this snow run, but it didn't matter, because the snow lighted my path.

John 1:5 tells us, *"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."* In the most ultimate sense, Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Light of the World, the One whom we have waited for this Advent season, is the bright snow on our path. Because Jesus came to the earth and walked among us, even when it's pitch black and the sun has not yet risen, there is still light on the path we tread. In the places we are most fearful of treading for a lack of light, Christ brightens our dark paths to help us see.

What are those dark places you are most afraid of treading? This Christmas season, Jesus wants to be the snow on the path you walk or run. But mindful that I was almost tempted to not go for a run because I thought it'd be too dark, I dare you to boldly step out of your place of fear and into that dark, cold sky. For I bet you will be surprised, that where you expected the deepest darkness, you will find the light of Christ offered in a new and unexpected way.

The snow shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Prayer: Shine your light on us, O Lord, and illuminate our dark paths before us, reminding us each day of how our lives have been made bright by way of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel. Amen.

Pastor Donald Kirschner

Christ, Our Emmanuel, has come!

