

Week 3

Devotions for ADVENT through EPIPHANY



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
Church of Nashville

Sunday, December 13

THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT

Read

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Reflect

Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica is a letter of encouragement. These are people he loved dearly and was forced to leave too soon because of intense persecution (Acts 17). Paul sent Timothy back to visit the Thessalonians and was overjoyed to hear that though they continued to suffer at the hands of the government because of their refusal to worship Caesar as Lord, the church continued to thrive, laboring in love and enduring in faith (1Thess. 1:3).

Our reading today is from the very end of the letter as Paul gives some final words of wisdom, and I just love how pithy and simple these directives are (simple in word, not necessarily in action).

Respond

Which of these exhortations resonate most deeply with you today? With which are you struggling right now?

- Be joyful always
- Pray continually
- Give thanks in all circumstances
- Do not put out the Spirit's fire
- Do not treat prophecies with contempt
- Test everything
- Hold on the good
- Avoid every kind of evil

Paul is not just demanding that the church be sure to accomplish each of these like tasks on a to-do list, but rather he is giving framework for their common life together. And these are not commands that the Thessalonians must meet on their own. They have the God of peace sanctifying them (v.23). In this Advent season, as we continue to mark the days leading up to Christmas, take time to focus on one of these exhortations that they might become your prayer and hope through the grace and power of the Lord Jesus. For, He "who calls us is faithful and will do it" (v.24).

Pray

Faithful God, the other gods we choose to bow down to do not resemble those of the Thessalonians. We don't worship a king, but we do still have idols. In these quiet moments, we surrender those idols to you and ask that You would replace them with Your Son who is coming to us this Advent. In Your Spirit's power, help me to _____ (fill in one of Paul's exhortations from above and take a few moments of silence to sit with that prayer making it your own). We know You are faithful to do these things and so we offer these prayers in the name of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, Amen.

THE REV. SARAH BIRD KNEFF

Monday, December 14

DAY 16 of ADVENT

Read

1 Kings 18:1-18

Reflect

What in the world does this passage have to do with Advent? How could it possibly help us wait with expectant hope for the coming of Christ - the word of the Lord made flesh? Verse one answers that question for us. "After a long time in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah..." After a long time. 2020 has felt like a very long time. It is like we've crammed three years into one. While we are not in the midst of a famine, Advent in the midst of a pandemic has increased our need for Christ's hope. At best, the pandemic has made us acutely aware of our ongoing need for Christ to come. At worst, it has added one more complicating factor to the stressful holiday season. Perhaps that is why the most Christmassy character of all in this passage is Obadiah.

Obadiah is Ahab's Type-A administrator. Our passage tells us of how Obadiah uses his organizational skills to protect 100 of God's prophets from Jezebel's murderous agenda. He's divided them into two separate groups of fifty so if one is found the other will be safe. He's managed the logistics keeping them watered and fed during a famine while at that same time running the kingdom. Obadiah's stress level is similar to the holiday stress of managing intergenerational family logistics and traditions during a COVID-19 Christmas.

It is in that stressed space that Obadiah meets Elijah. One of the miracles of Advent is that the Christ child doesn't wait for our plans to be implemented. Jesus is born ready or not. Elijah has a task for Obadiah, but he refuses. Obadiah points to his planning and organization as the reason why he shouldn't have to do more on top of what he's already doing. During this season of Advent, it is easy to spend more time planning and organizing than hoping and waiting. To be clear, Obadiah did good important work. But the planning and logistics are not the point. In the season of Advent, we prepare our hearts for the coming Messiah. Those are the preparations that matter most. Eventually Obadiah says "yes" to Elijah's request. May we too say "yes." The most important pandemic preparations that can be made this Advent season are those in your heart.

Respond

The word of the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him to go to the man who has been hunting him. This was probably not what Elijah was expecting but he obeys. Elijah tells Obadiah to go to Ahab, but he resists in fear and eventually agrees. What could God be calling you to do in this season? Are you obeying like Elijah or resisting like Obadiah? What would it look like to say "yes" to God's call in this season of Advent?

What are the good plans you've made? How have those plans gotten in the way of hearing God's unique call on your life to hope in Christ this Christmas? How have you already been faithful to your friends, family, and community of faith in this season?

Pray

Emmanuel, you open the eyes of the blind, you unstop the ears of the deaf, you cause the lame to leap and the mute to sing. Grant me the courage and creativity to prepare more room in my heart for you than for my plans. May my hope be anchored in your coming Lord Jesus. Amen.

THE REV. ADAM DEVRIES

Tuesday, December 15

DAY 17 of ADVENT

Read

Psalm 33; Colossians 1:15-17

Reflect

The verses from Colossians serve as a bridge for us: between the Psalmist's summons for God's people to praise the Lord and our Advent reception of Christ the Lord.

There always has been a tendency on the part of humans to compartmentalize the world, to divide it into spheres of influence. For us, it makes life more manageable. We try to keep our relationship problems stowed away in an emotional place where we don't have to deal with them; we put our ethical dilemmas in a folder and save them for another day; we prefer not to hold up our social or business or political lives to the light of the Gospel, knowing that Jesus reveals our words and works that are not worthy of him.

Psalm 33 calls us to place our ultimate trust in the Lord God of Israel, who is Lord over creation (verses 6-9), history (10-12), people (13-15), and objects of trust (16-19). It teaches people who sing it the integration of our lives. It gradually erodes the compartmentalization of our lives. Colossians ascribes to Jesus Christ all that the Psalm ascribes to the Lord: whatever powers may be at work in the world, they were created through him and for him, and hold together only in him.

Respond

For the Psalmist, to be "righteous" is to affirm "our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield." Take a look at your life. In what ways have you been prone to compartmentalize? What things might you entrust to the Lord this season? Is it a relationship conflict that you've been avoiding and need to engage, seeking the reconciling power of God? An ethical dilemma that summons you to be obedient to God, even at the risk of loss? A political conviction that leaves you believing that the Lord is powerless in the face of politicians you can't stand? A work or financial burden that makes you doubt the providence of God?

Christians confess an integrated world: "We believe in one God." We sing our praises to this one God and Father of the one Lord, Jesus Christ, to be reminded that the earth and everything in it belong to this gracious Lord. To belong to Christ is to be incorporated into his body, to have our own lives integrated, made whole.

Read the Psalm over and over. Let it shape your view of the world, breaking down the little compartments that create anxiety and fear. Memorize that last verse: "Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you."

Pray

*Make us strong, Lord God,
with all the strength that comes from your glorious power;
and prepare us to endure everything with patience.
Lighten our hearts to joyfully give thanks to you,
who have enabled us to share in Christ's inheritance.
Free us from unwisely trusting in lesser powers, less-gracious powers,
powers that cannot save but only maintain the status quo.
In this season, make our hearts glad anew
because you show yourself faithful, through Christ the Lord. Amen.*

Wednesday, December 16

DAY 18 of ADVENT

Read

Luke 1:5-17

Reflect

I've always found this story a bit funny. It makes me chuckle. Luke makes it clear that Zechariah is a man of deep faith. He's a "child of the manse" so to speak. The priesthood is the family business. And he's married into another clergy family, "And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth" (1:5). We learned that this clergy couple walked the walk, "And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (1:6). Verse 7 stands as a great reminder to us all: A righteous life does not spare one from deep heartache, "But they had no child..." It's verses like this that strike a blow to the quiet prosperity gospel that infects so much of American Christianity: If I live rightly then I'll be blessed as is defined by my own wants and wishes.

In our story, Zechariah is on duty in the Temple. He has the great honor of being chosen to enter the Temple of the Lord to burn incense on behalf of the nation. While crowds of people are outside praying, an angel of the Lord comes and meets Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness..." (1:13-14).

Here is the line that makes me laugh, Zechariah responds, "How shall I know this?" You've got to be kidding me! Here is a man of deep faith. He knows all the commandments of the Law. He could rehearse all the mighty acts done by God on behalf of his people. And yet, he questions the efficacy and power and intent of God's angel. Zechariah has gone to church, so to speak, and is surprised to find God there! Zechariah is leading the people in worship, praying and offering incense, and yet he's shocked that God would respond!

Respond

Do you expect God to be present in power and glory? Don't reduce faith to a set of historical facts, a code of conduct, or list of God's attributes. This is Emmanuel, God with us, that we are talking about! When we call upon His name let's do so with great hope and expectation that He desires to be present in power. In fact, God is always and already present to catch us in the net of His grace-filled story for us and for the world.

Pray

We come to worship you Triune God. We do so not simply as a memorial but as an encounter in the present that will leave our future filled with eternal hope. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DR. RYAN V. MOORE

Thursday, December 17

DAY 19 of ADVENT

Read

2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4

Reflect

The Samuel passage is strange to our 21st Century ears. Touching the Ark of the Covenant causing death?

King David is uniting all the tribes of Israel by making the neutral city of Jerusalem as the new capital. He wants to make it also the center of worship. To do so, David is moving the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant contains the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. However, the top is designed as a chair formed by two golden cherubim. This throne is where the invisible Lord God sits. Archeologists have found a Pharaoh's throne made out of carved cherubim. Just before they reach Jerusalem Uzzah reaches out to steady the Ark and dies. This scares David. Is his moving of the Ark wrong? Is God displeased? We have to wait for tomorrow's reading to find out. The Letter to the Hebrews starts by talking about the throne of God. Jesus is sitting down at the "right hand of the Majesty on high." This beautiful passage declares the work of Christ as the Word of God that has created all, upholding the whole universe, and purifying us of our sins. It is full of majesty and glory. Both of these passages are filled with images of mystery, power, and glory that of which we can only stand in awe.

Respond

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany is a time of awe. We pull out all the stops with lights, candles, decorations, manger scenes, and glorious music to create a sense of awe. I can remember my first candlelit Christmas Eve service. The amazement I felt is still powerful. There is much for us to be in awe of. This marvelous creation that God redeems through Jesus Christ is full of glory and power. God's love for us is beyond all understanding. Christ being born in a humble stable is a mystery to behold. In the Old Testament, God sits on the throne of the Ark of the Covenant. In Hebrews, God sits on the "Majesty on high." May Christ sit on the throne of our hearts and fill us with awe.

Pray

Come Lord Jesus, fill us with awe of your power and majesty. Come Lord Jesus, show us your glory and beauty. Come Lord Jesus, save us from ourselves and evil. Come Lord Jesus, sit on the throne of our hearts. Come Lord Jesus, make all things well. In your glorious name we pray. Amen.

DR. JOHN L. MUSGRAVE

Friday, December 18

DAY 20 of ADVENT

Read

2 Samuel 6:12-19

Reflect

In this passage, we see an image of complete and total worship of God with voice and body, mind and soul. David is bringing the ark of the Lord into Jerusalem to the tent that David has established for it until the building of the Temple. David sings, dances and rejoices before the Lord (albeit rather scantily dressed!). While not everyone (including his wife, Michal,) approved of his display of such joyful worship in his scanty attire, David has only one concern. David is worshipping the Lord his God with joy and thanksgiving.

When our church mission teams travel to Kenya and Rwanda, the worship services are often filled with joyful singing and dancing before the Lord. While such liturgical movement is not part of the tradition of our church, we also can praise our God as we worship with our hearts, minds and voices. We can seek to be mindful of the goodness of the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to teach, lead and guide us in the ways taught to us by Jesus Christ. We can embrace the invitation of Jesus Christ to abide in Him as He abides in us. We can express our gratitude to God in word and in the dedication of our lives to the purposes to which God calls us. Especially during this season of Advent, we are called to contemplate the wondrous gift of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit who assures us that Jesus is present with us always, until the end of time. Thanks be to God.

Respond

How do you worship God? Does your worship of God include your voice, your body, your soul and/or your mind? Have you attended a worship service where you felt uncomfortable with the style and traditions of worship? What made you most uncomfortable? What worship service traditions and styles are you most comfortable with? What best assists you as you seek to worship God in spirit and truth? If you are not blessed with a singing voice or musical instrumental gift, do you think God is pleased when our worship of him includes a joyful “noise,” rather than a beautiful singing voice or instrumental music?

Dare to worship God in new and different ways with your focus on worshipping God as your Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer.

Prayer

Gracious God, may our worship of you be pleasing to you and serve to draw us ever closer to you. Lead us and teach us how to joyfully express our gratitude to you and our love of you. May our worship strengthen us for faithful service to you and guide us in our service of others in your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DR. SANDRA L. RANDLEMAN

Saturday, December 19

DAY 21 of ADVENT

Read

Judges 13:2-14, 24

Reflect

Scripture only introduces a woman as barren, if indeed, she goes on to bear a child. Samson's mother is no different. Amid this miraculous birth announcement, there is plenty of ordinary parent behavior. A mother and father seek out details for how they are to raise their child and pray to God for more specifics. Samson's life goes on to be rather colorful, to say the least. He marries a Philistine, tells a riddle or two, and becomes known as one of the strongest leaders in Israelite history. Samson's story, start to finish, is incredibly dynamic.

There was a season when the only Bible story my son wanted him to read was the story of, "the strong man." Seemingly, his interest in the story of Samson centers heavily on Samson's strength. The children's Bible that we have doesn't share any other details of Samson's life. I trust that the grace of God intersects somewhere in the decision making of the creators of the children's Bible and my son's interest. As it stands, reading the story to my son is a relatively simple endeavor.

It is quite the exercise to consider the origins of God's providence and the exposure any individual has to the details. One of the most interesting verses in scripture comes at the end of John's gospel, 21:25, "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." How much more is there to God's work in scripture and our world than we often realize?

Respond

Choose a story from scripture that you are familiar with from your childhood. Noah's ark, or Jonah and the big fish, or even Samson's story above. Read the story, and pay attention to the details you forgot, never knew, or that God seems to be drawing you towards in this season of Advent.

As you read the story, make note of all the ways God's grace seems to be evident, in new or renewed ways. Once you have done it with a story from scripture, take the time to do the same with your own story.

Pray

God of all creation, you have journeyed with so many and you have journeyed with me. Thank you for all the ways your grace has been present in this world. May your Spirit create a holy curiosity in me, when I read your Word, consider my life, and attempt to faithfully follow your son, Jesus. In his name I pray, Amen.

THE REV. JOSH RODRIGUEZ