

Week 4

Devotions for ADVENT through EPIPHANY



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
Church of Nashville

Sunday, December 20
FOURTH SUNDAY *of* ADVENT

Read

Luke 1:26-38

Reflect

The story of the annunciation has captivated Christians for centuries. It is such a mystifying yet tender scene as the angel Gabriel tells this young peasant girl of God's plan to redeem the whole world. Gabriel addresses Mary with strange and powerful words, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Why would *she* be highly favored? She is not royalty. She has no power, no status. She is just an ordinary, faithful Jewish girl planning her wedding to her fiancé Joseph.

This is what I think is so striking about this story – Mary was living a quiet life of faith when she is approached by this angelic messenger. While the news of the Messiah's coming is indeed GOOD news, she is still puzzled by the mystery, "how can this be?" (v.34). Renowned artists like DaVinci and Boticelli, among others, have taken a stab at trying to capture this moment in Scripture through art, and it is fascinating to see how Mary is depicted. Often she is shown looking confused, meek, or frightened. However, some artists make it a point to show her as composed and almost royal and saintly. I prefer the former as I think it highlights how ordinary Mary was, and yet God chose to do extraordinary things in and through her.

But it wasn't easy! The angel's message is hopeful but also challenging. When Mary asks how she will bear a son in her virginity, Gabriel's response is rather scary and vague, "the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 36). When we say "yes" to God as Mary did, we too may not know exactly what we're agreeing to. But that is the beauty of the journey as bit by bit we see more and more of God's redemptive plan for us and our world.

Respond

At the risk of devolving into an art lesson, take a look at the paintings below.

What strikes you about Mary's countenance? Does she look hopeful? Fearful? Confident? Peaceful? Which painting resonates with you more? Why?

Take time to Google "annunciation paintings" and see what other pieces pop up. Read the passage again and allow yourself to enter the scene and imagine you're there as this world-changing event is taking place.

Pray

Jesus Christ, whose birth was announced years ago and miles away to a young virgin in Nazareth, we don't always understand what the promise of your coming means. We get caught up in the saccharine sentimentality of the season and fail to remember you ultimately came here to die. Mary couldn't have known that was the plan, and yet she agreed to be a part of the story. Help us, even in the unknown, to remain open and willing disciples in a world that is in such desperate need of you. For we ask it all in your holy name, Amen.

THE REV. SARAH BIRD KNEFF



Angelico



Ossawa

Monday, December 21

DAY 23 of ADVENT

Read

Luke 1:46-55

Reflect

The Magnificat, the song Mary sings to her relative Elizabeth. The truth of the Christ child forming in Mary's womb brings her to spontaneous rejoicing. It's curious that she does not sing this song directly after her meeting with Gabriel. First she travels to visit Elizabeth, and it's only after interacting with her that Mary's song is born. Confirmation takes place in Mary's interaction with Elizabeth that leads to Mary's song of praise. Mary knows Elizabeth is pregnant. Gabriel told her so. But how does Elizabeth know about Mary's pregnancy? Presumably this is the first time they've spoken since the Angel visited Mary. In classic Holy Spirit fashion, the truth of the Christ child forming within Mary is revealed to Elizabeth and she proclaims that truth to Mary. It is that moment that sparks Mary's rejoicing. After singing, Mary spends the next few months with Elizabeth. If you do the math, Mary is there when Elizabeth gives birth to John the Baptist. She doesn't have to go through it alone. Faith is personal but it is not individual. Only Mary can carry Jesus. Only Elizabeth can carry John. Only Mary can give birth to the Christ child. Only Elizabeth can give birth to the voice crying in the wilderness, "prepare the way for the Lord." Only Mary can say yes to the calling to be the Mother of Emmanuel. But they don't have to be solo recipients of God's grace. God gives them the gift of saying yes to grace together.

Respond

Elizabeth recognized and celebrated God's favor on Mary. That recognition was the catalyst for the Magnificat. Where and in whom have you seen God's favor? What would it look like for you to tell that person that you recognize and celebrate it?

Mary's song is filled with gratitude and hope. She knows her pregnancy is a Gift of God. She knows its grace. Mary's wisdom is beautifully in display throughout her song. A thematic refrain throughout Proverbs is the *fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. She's not tempted by arrogance and shame. Even though she's lowly she's not filled with shame. Even though she's carrying the savior of the world, she's not filled with arrogance. How have arrogance and or shame blocked you from recognizing God's activity this advent?

Mary sings that "The mighty one has done great things." Her song speaks of God *scattering the proud, filling the hungry, and the rich go away empty handed*. What if the rich go away empty because they gave what God had given to them? The generosity of God is revealed in advent. Mary is pregnant with the fullness of God. God gives us all of God's very self in Jesus Christ. What would it look like for you to practice the generosity of God? Who are the hungry that God could be calling you to fill? Who are the lowly that God could be calling you to lift? What would it look like to walk away from the Christ child empty handed, because you gave what you were holding?

Pray

Look with favor upon your servant oh God, protect me from any arrogance and guard me from shame. Spark your generosity in me this day and teach my spirit to rejoice and magnify your glory and grace. Amen

THE REV. ADAM DEVRIES

Tuesday, December 22

DAY 24 of ADVENT

Read

Psalm 146

The temptation to put ultimate trust for salvation in human leaders and institutions is perennial.

*In Psalm 146, praise becomes a critique of
such misplaced trust and a proclamation of the only right use of trust –
in God who keeps faith.*

-James Luther Mays

Reflect

Psalm 146 is an instructional song, not unlike the little songs that preschoolers learn: “Clean up, clean up, everybody clean up.” In this case, we’re invited to sing this song that warns adults not to trust elected officials with things above their pay grades.

The psalm begins with a vow to praise the Lord as long as one lives; it ends with the declaration that the Lord will be worthy of praise as long as there is a world. Praise of the Lord frames the world for a believer. Praise of the Lord helps to order our thoughts rightly.

In the middle, the psalm contrasts trust in the Lord to the folly of trusting human rulers, who are, after all mortal. Think about Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!” By that, the preacher means, “Vapor: everything in this world is vapor – transitory, sure to fade.” It’s not that human rulers aren’t necessary, or that human rulers don’t have an enormous impact; they do. They simply are not God, not eternal.

What is the character of the eternal God? The Creator God
*keeps faith forever/executes justice for the oppressed/
sets the prisoners free/lifts up those who are bowed down/
upholds the widow and orphan/brings to ruin the way of the wicked.*

Respond

Given the political climate in our land, one constructive task for each of us is to check ourselves. How much trust do we put in our human leaders? One helpful check on our sense of anger at the “other” side is to ask, “Am I looking out for my own interests, or someone else’s interests?”

Do a little inventory now. Did you feel strongly about the recent presidential election? Can you name the reasons for your passion? Which reasons were personal feelings and which ones were policy disagreements? Of the policy disagreements, which ones directly affect you: your freedoms, your pocketbook, your sense of security as a citizen and Christian in the U.S.?

Pray

Lord, you alone are our Keeper. Open our eyes to any way in which we expect too much of elected officials, or ignore the well-being of others, or ignore your character as our Lord and sovereign. Come, Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

DR. STUART R. GORDON

Wednesday, December 23

DAY 25 of ADVENT

Read

Mark 11:1-11

Reflect

The lectionary reading takes a strange detour. I thought we were on our way to Bethlehem? Instead we are with John in prison. John and Jesus, first cousins, cut a strange pair. John, as Jesus acknowledges, is a bit rough, to say the least, around the edges, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? A man dressed in soft clothing?” If Jesus and John were to join us for Sunday worship, they certainly would elicit plenty of stares and make not a few of us uncomfortable. Jesus and John, not as babies but as young men, wouldn’t fit in our modern day Christmas pageants. Jesus says of John, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” This, in other words, is what greatness in the kingdom of heaven looks and sounds like! Jesus’ message is clear, “If you have a hard time with John the Baptist, then you are really going to have a hard time with me.” And, “If you aspire to greatness by any other measure, then you will be less, much less in fact, than the wild man from the wilderness.”

Respond

John asks the universal question, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” This is a question we all must ask of Jesus. Are you the one God is sending into the world to save us? Are you the one we need, who alone can set wrongs to right? You can boil John’s question down this way, “Jesus, are you enough?” Jesus, should we keep looking to others for answers? Jesus, should we find hope in other programs and schemes of self-improvement? Jesus, can I look to some professional to fulfil my deepest needs? Jesus invites John to review the record, “the blind see...the lame walk...lepers are cleansed...the deaf hear...the dead are raised up...the poor have good news preached to them.” Jesus is more than enough.

Pray

Jesus, you are my only hope in life and in death. Forgive me for not trying harder to earn your love. Let me rest in your grace. Keep me very near the Cross. Amen.

DR. RYAN V. MOORE

Thursday, December 24

DAY 26 of ADVENT

Read

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Reflect

These beautiful passages that are read every Christmas Eve contrast the majesty and power of the coming of our Lord with the humble setting of the incarnation. Isaiah is proclaiming the coming of a righteous King that will liberate and bring peace. Luke tells the story of how God comes not in the royal palace not even in a travelers' hostel, but amongst the animals, and greeted by lowly shepherds. Be filled with awe on this day, one of the shortest days of the year, the Light of the World is pushing back the darkness.

Respond

Because of this unusual time, this may be the loneliest Christmas Eve that we have experienced. However, it might be less stressful without all the frantic preparations for large gatherings. Gather those around you, take time to reread the Christmas story, and reflect that the "Wonderful Counsel, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" was born in a humble setting to dislocated peasants. In our dislocated settings Jesus is coming to us, pushing back the darkness of our times, bringing the bright love and salvation that defeats all evil and fills us with hope.

Pray

Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the Universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Savior of all lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

DR. JOHN L. MUSGRAVE

Friday, December 25

DAY 27 of ADVENT

Read

John 1:1-14

Reflect

There is no more appropriate text to read and contemplate on Christmas Day than the words of John 1:1-14. We are told that Jesus was in the beginning, a time before the creation of the world. Jesus was with God and participated in creation bringing life and the life was the light of all people. All the spiritual and moral darkness of the world cannot overcome the light, for the light of Jesus Christ shines in the darkness.

Jesus is God's only Son, full of grace and truth. Jesus became flesh and "lived among us." Literally, this may be translated, Jesus pitched a tent to dwell among us. Jesus' physical sojourn on this earth was temporary. Jesus came from the Father and returned to the Father, but through the Holy Spirit Jesus abides with us still.

The wonder of Christmas is the coming to earth of God's love shown to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. God's love is a light that transforms life, for it is a light that shines in the darkness of the world. While Jesus' sojourn of physically living among people on this earth was temporary, Jesus' presence with us and His life and light and love are eternal. Thanks be to God for this holy, wondrous gift.

Respond

What does Jesus Christ's birth mean to you?

Do you ever become discouraged by what you see as the darkness of our world of sin?

We are promised in the Gospel of John that the light of Jesus Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. How does this promise bring you hope?

Pray

Gracious God, how grateful we are for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. May we embrace with thanksgiving the promise that Jesus Christ's light shines in the darkness of this world. As we surrender our fears, we place our trust in you, our God. Help us to live with peace and hope and gratitude, receiving your eternal love and allowing the light of Jesus Christ to shine in us and through us to others.

We pray in the name of the Light and the Hope of the world. Amen.

DR. SANDRA L. RANDLEMAN

Saturday, December 26

DAY 28 of ADVENT

Read

Jeremiah 26:1–9

Reflect

God told Jeremiah to say something that evoked the response from the people, “You shall die!” What is required of us to remain faithful to God’s call in your life? Perhaps, no one will want to kill us for what God has called us to, but it seems worth considering how far we are willing to go to remain faithful to God’s call upon our life. So much of our existence in America in 2020 is marked by comfort. Even during a pandemic, many people, not all, were able to maintain an abundance of comfort. Though, even in some of our discomfort, we must admit life remained rather pleasant. So, how far would you be willing to go in God’s call?

Driving down the road, I saw a sign that read, “Worried? Jesus offers security.” The picture that accompanied the message was a man with his head in his hands, seemingly distressed. My gut response was something like, “absolutely not.” The scene from scripture that came to mind was when Jesus is talking with his disciples, and says to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24) Of course, Jesus’ main concern is not to make someone uncomfortable, but for them to come to faith, living into God’s Kingdom. Still, when our savior spoke of what is required to follow him, he chose the image of a cross, which was an execution device of the Roman Empire.

It is a dangerous thing to believe what Jesus has to offer is comfort, security, and that following him will require something less than a denial of self. Jesus makes no accommodations for the one who would prioritize comfort over Kingdom. During this advent season, a season of waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus, may we remember that the one we celebrate requires our whole life. If that seems impossible, consider that God gifted the Holy Spirit for such a task as this.

Respond

What is your relationship with comfort? Have you ever considered that one’s relationship to comfort may impede their willingness to faithfully follow Jesus?

In what ways have you lived out the calling of Jesus upon your life?

If the Holy Spirit were to move you this season of advent, what might that look like?

Pray

God of all creation, may we walk in the way you have set before us, may we heed your words, and faithfully follow The Word. Amen.

THE REV. JOSH RODRIGUEZ