



Advent
2024

Grace Anglican Community



Journey to Bethlehem

Dear Fellow Travelers:

Most people know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But did you know that the word Bethlehem means “House of Bread”? As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, it is interesting to recall how many times Jesus used bread in his teaching and ministry.

Perhaps the most significant and, to some in his day, most scandalous is in the sixth chapter of John. After feeding the multitude with five loaves and two fish, Jesus was followed by people who wanted more of his miracle bread. *“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* (John 6:35)

Later, the Jewish religious leaders grumbled about this saying. But Jesus took it even further (blowing their minds) when he declared, *“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* (John 6:48-51).

This image of Jesus is clearer to us than it was to them. Today, we know that Jesus became one of us and died in our place for our sins. Jesus is, therefore, the spiritual food that human beings need to sustain life. Moreover, one cannot help but recognize eucharistic overtones in his words. Thus, we say, “The gifts of God for the people of God. Feed on him in your hearts, with thanksgiving.”

Thus, the Bread of Life was born in Bethlehem, also known as the House of Bread. Cool!

I hope you are blessed by this year’s Journey to Bethlehem. As in past years, Bill Russell, our publisher, has assembled an outstanding team of authors: Henry Covert, Sue Dowell, Rita Lanham, Linda Lundquist, Dixie Mattingly, Ekene Ogbunamiri, Michael Popp, Frankie Rodriguez, himself, and me. I believe you will enjoy the insights each brings in their own way, using their own writing style. Please thank them and Bill for what has become a foundation of our Advent preparation.

Grace to you,



Sunday, December 1

Zechariah 14:1-5

¹ Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. ² For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. ³ Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. ⁵ And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On the first day of Advent, we prepare our hearts and minds to reflect on the comings of Christ, the Incarnation and the Second Coming. It can be difficult to think about a baby in the manger and equate that image with the Lord of Hosts, described in the verses about, who will come at the end of time in all His glory.

The first coming was about the Son of God who came in human form to live life with us in order to save us and redeem us for his own. The fact that he did this for us can be overwhelming. He didn't have to do this because he is God Almighty; but he chose to do it.

As Philippians 2:7-12 says ⁷ *but [he] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

As you prepare to celebrate the Incarnation remember that He will be coming again in power and glory!

*Thank you for coming to live among us and that you will come again to gather your people to you.
Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus.
Amen.*



Monday, December 2

Zechariah 14:6-9

⁶ On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. ⁷ And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

⁸ On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter.

⁹ And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one.

As with many prophetic declarations concerning the Lord's plans for His people, Zechariah's vision of a future in which Yahweh alone rules the earth from a majestic Jerusalem challenges our ability to imagine the scope of God's glory and grandeur. Perhaps even more significantly, this prophecy urges us to contemplate a future in which all wrongs are made right, all suffering is transformed into gladness, and the people of God dwell with Him in perfect joy for all time.

Indeed, Zechariah foretells the coming reign of Yahweh in a manner that aligns with St. John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22. Just as Zechariah's Jerusalem experiences a new order beyond day or night, this heavenly Jerusalem will have *no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.* (Revelation 21:23)

And just as the prophet's future city overflows with living waters, so St. John tells us that the New Jerusalem will possess *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city* (Revelation 22:1-2a). And in both visions, *"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."* (Revelation 11:15b)

As we observe the Advent season, we can rejoice in the reality that, with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the unfolding of Zechariah's vision has already begun. The Nativity not only calls us back to the past, but forward into the glorious future of God's universal reign. And that, as the angel said to the shepherds, is *"good news of great joy that will be for all the people."* (Luke 2:10b)

*Father God, we give You thanks and praise for the gift of Your Son, Who has secured our eternal destiny with You. May the hope of everlasting life in the New Jerusalem always dwell in our hearts.
Amen.*



Tuesday, December 3

Psalm 50:1-12

¹ The LORD, even the most mighty God, has
spoken
and called the world, from the rising of the
sun to
the going down thereof.
² Out of Zion, perfect in her beauty,
has God shone forth in glory.
³ Our God shall come and shall not keep
silence;
there shall go before him a consuming fire,
and a mighty tempest
shall be stirred up round about him.
⁴ He shall call to the heavens above,
and to the earth beneath, that he may judge
his people:
⁵ "Gather my faithful together unto me,
those who have made a covenant with me by
sacrifice."
⁶ And the heavens shall declare his
righteousness,

for God himself is Judge.
⁷ "Hear, O my people, and I will speak;
I myself will testify against you, O Israel, for I
am God,
even your God.
⁸ I will not rebuke you because of your
sacrifices, or for your
burnt offerings,
because they are always before me.
⁹ I will take no bull calf out of your house,
nor he-goat out of your folds.
¹⁰ For all the beasts of the forest are mine,
and so are the cattle upon a thousand hills.
¹¹ I know all the birds of the air,
and the wild beasts of the field are in my
sight.
¹² If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the whole world is mine, and all that is
therein.

This is a portion of a psalm about judgment. Our holy, righteous, powerful God is calling his covenant people to stand before him and make an account of themselves. And the disturbing thing is that God is not pleased with them. Although they are doing the right things outwardly, there is something amiss in their worship.

You will have to read the rest of the psalm to learn what the problem is. Better yet, read the rest of the psalm and tomorrow's devotion. But what we see in verses 1-12 is that God is unimpressed by his people's constant animal sacrifices. Although they were prescribed by God, what was being offered to him was not pleasing to him.

Should that worry us? Depends.

This could be a spoiler, but Romans 12:1 shines a light on the key issue in Psalm 50. The apostle Paul writes, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* Whereas Psalm 50 refers to the Old Testament sacrificial system, Romans 12:1 takes it a step further. While Jesus made the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete, God has yet another sacrifice in mind for all of us.

Paul says to *"...present your bodies as a living sacrifice..."* Paul is using Old Testament language to say this: God wants all of you. He is not impressed if you worship him every Sunday but are only going through the motions (the issue in Psalm 50). True worship, worship that is pleasing to God holds nothing back.

Thus, we begin every service with these words. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That is what God deserves. That is what God expects.

*Heavenly Father, we offer our lives to you afresh this day.
Amen.*



Wednesday, December 4

Psalm 50:13-24

**13 Do you think that I will eat the flesh of bulls
and drink the blood of goats?
14 Offer unto God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows unto the Most High,
15 And call upon me in the time of trouble;
so will I hear you, and you shall praise me.”
16 But to the ungodly God says:
“Why do you recite my laws, and take my
covenant
in your mouth,
17 Though you hate to be disciplined,
and have cast my words behind you?
18 When you saw a thief, you agreed with
him,
and you have taken part with adulterers.
19 You have let your mouth speak
wickedness,
and with your tongue you have set forth
deceit.**

**20 You sat and spoke against your brother;
yes, and have slandered your own mother’s
son.
21 These things you have done, and I held my
tongue,
and you thought wickedly that I am such a
one as yourself.
22 But I will reprove you,
and set before you the things that you have
done.
23 O consider this, you who forget God,
lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to
deliver you.
24 Whoever offers me a sacrifice of
thanksgiving honors me,
and to him who orders his way aright will I
show
the salvation of God.”**

In 2023, the term “indictment” captured the curiosity of many Americans, generating over 160,000 monthly queries per one million people. The 5th Amendment of the United States Constitution mandates that the federal government must seek a grand jury indictment when there’s probable cause for a serious crime. Prosecutors hold significant power—they can issue subpoenas, compel testimony, and even choose not to pursue a trial. Remarkably, some indicted individuals find release through plea bargains.

Now, consider the divine courtroom: God established six covenants with Israel in the Old Testament. The Mosaic Covenant emphasized worship of Yahweh, promising blessings for genuine devotion. This most noble activity ensures that man’s spirit and invisible parts are in everlasting intimacy with the invisible and immortal God—it transcends liturgy or place. When our praises and thanksgiving ascend, divine grace and miracles descend. And that’s what we are created for. Breaching this covenant of true worship of our Creator carried a severe penalty: death.

Throughout history, humanity continued to choose worship of creation rather than the Creator. Consequently, we cycle through moral decay, divine justice, repentance, and restoration. God’s love led Him to indict and issue spiritual subpoenas through prophets. Redemption remains available through the blood of the Lamb, yet tragically, not all heed the call.

The day approaches when God won’t merely summon or issue subpoenas. He will execute righteous judgment as prosecutor, jury, and judge. Our worship of God and our treatment of fellow humans will be scrutinized. His justice will be purposeful and decisive.

In this moment, we have an opportunity for reflection and repentance. Now is the hour of salvation; tomorrow might be too late

*God remind us always that you created us for fellowship. May we live in your presence every second of our lives.
Amen.*



Thursday, December 5

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

“Fine, thanks.” That’s the usual response given when someone is greeted with a “Hi! How are you?” What we don’t say is that the car just blew a transmission, I cannot get my kids to do the right thing, the pressure at work is almost unbearable, one too many glasses of wine last night (again). “How are you?” is not just a greeting. The question is an empathic opening of the heart. The person asking probably really cares about the person being asked.

As Paul, Silas, and Timothy journeyed between Jerusalem and Greece, they couldn’t stand being separated from the faithful in Thessalonica. However, they could not find any way to visit them. Instead, they sent Timothy to see how they were doing. That is how much they cared.

Does God ever ask us how we’re doing? There is no need. He is God and knows all things. You can tell God “I’m fine” all you want. He knows what you feel and your business. It’s because He knows the fullness of the answer to “How are you?” that we have an Advent. God knows sin abounds. He sent His Son so that grace would abound even more. This is the Messiah of whom we sing:

*“Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth...” (“O Holy Night”)*

In Advent we prepare for a new and glorious morning. We receive the Savior to break the chains of all the things we do not mention when greeted. We receive his power and glory evermore. We are saved!

Now how are you?

*This season puts songs on hearts, Lord. Thank you for being the hope which draws us to you as we celebrate your Coming with the promised Second just around the corner. May we greet you with the fullness of all we can offer. Bathe us again in your majesty for the sake of the whole world. In Jesus' Name.
Amen.*



Friday, December 6

Luke 21:25-28

²⁵ “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Are you looking for the coming of Christ? Based on this passage where Jesus foretells His Second Coming, it doesn't necessarily sound like something to look forward to: distress of nations in perplexity, people fainting with fear and with foreboding. So why did Jesus tell us this?

Did Jesus foretell His Second Coming to instill in us a spirit of fear? Perhaps, rather, it was to stir within us His compassion for the lost. Just two chapters earlier, in Luke 19, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, expressing His deep sorrow for the Jews who had rejected Him. The people fainting with fear at Jesus' Second Coming will be those who think they have no need for our Savior. Everyone is offered Jesus' gift of salvation, but not all will receive or accept it. Does it grieve your heart to think about these lost souls as it grieves Jesus' heart?

As you busy yourself this Advent season, preparing for Christmas and getting gifts for your loved ones, pray for those who do not know Jesus or who have rejected Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The best gift they can receive is Jesus' gift of salvation. Why not invite them to our Christmas Eve service to share in the joy of our celebration of Jesus' birth? Pray that their faith will be stirred and that He will open their hearts to hear the good news.

The more we share our faith, the fewer and fewer people there will be who will faint with fear and foreboding at His coming. That is the will of our Father. So, straighten up and raise your heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

*Come, Lord Jesus, reign in our hearts that we may have compassion for the lost.
Amen.*



Saturday, December 7

Luke 21:29-33

²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The fig tree is a symbol used throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation. The characteristics of the fig tree remain constant in symbolizing awakening life, abundance, beauty, shelter, strength, and the provision we are given through love, hope, and faith in God. Trees and nature trigger observable changes, harbingers of what is to come.

We can experience the fig tree with all our senses and appreciate this wonder of creation. *So also, when you see these things taking place, you know the kingdom of God is near.* The words of Jesus are clear. God has given us everything we need to go forward by abiding in his word. Words are powerful. All creation began with the Word.

In this season we celebrate the wonder of the birth of Christ. The word of God leads us so often with the unexpected. The simplicity of a fig tree or any tree as a symbol of scriptural prophesy and the birth of a baby as fulfillment of the prophetic Messiah sent to redeem all mankind brings us to man’s beginning.

What could be a better story than the story of God and man? The Christmas chapter is one of the most beloved and most shocking. Imagine the Savior of the world entering like any other baby, small and naked, crying and hungry. What kind of a Messiah is this?

Certainly not what many expected. For those thoroughly rooted in the words of the prophets, the fulfillment was and is clear. Luke’s message echoes the words of Jesus indicating purpose and truth: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*Heavenly Father, you have brought us to this season to be in harmony with you through the words of the prophets, the messenger angels, the brightest star above, and the faith of your servant saints. Give us such faith that we may carry out your will, fully depend on your provision and experience the joy of your saving grace.
Amen.*



Sunday, December 8

Malachi 3:1-5

¹ “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Even though Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, it was probably written between Esther and Nehemiah in the 5th century BC. God had, as he promised long ago, returned a remnant to Israel from exile in Persia, and the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt.

But after those events the Israelites were discouraged because the Messiah had not come to renew the kingdom to its former glory. They had also walked away from truly worshipping God. They didn't care anymore and thought God had abandoned Israel.

Don't we do the same thing when events are discouraging? We just think God doesn't care about us anymore.

But he does care. Through Malachi God tells the Israelites of that time that He will, in the future, send a messenger who we now know is John the Baptist to prepare the way for the messenger of the covenant who is Jesus the Messiah.

But God did care for the Israelites of that day and for us. He sent Jesus to cleanse and purify his chosen people, who now include us, so that their worship will be pleasing to him. But he will judge the sinners who do not fear him.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is true from age to age and everlasting. What you proclaim comes to pass. In Jesus' name,
Amen.*



Monday, December 9

Psalm 126:1-4

**¹ When the Lord overturned the captivity of Zion,
then were we like those who dream.
² Then was our mouth filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
³ Then they said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
⁴ Indeed, the Lord has done great things for us already,
whereof we rejoice.**

Lamentation is an inevitable aspect of the human condition. In a world that has been profoundly marred by the curse of sin, we all endure loss, wrestle with sorrow, and yearn for deliverance from adversity and suffering.

Among the Holy Scriptures, the Psalter is known for giving voice to these essential human struggles with unflinching honesty. And yet, the Psalms are also filled with testimonies of divine restoration in which Yahweh acts to rescue His people from hardships of all kinds.

Psalm 126 recalls one such transformation, where Yahweh reverses the fortunes of His children. Destruction, grief, and tribulation give way to healing, laughter, and joy. The barren valleys of the Negeb flow with nourishing streams. And, best of all, the peoples of the world recognize the saving deeds of Yahweh and are gladdened.

Israel is a witness to the saving love of God. The Psalmist invites us also to bear witness to this reality of God’s desire to restore what was lost, to heal what was broken, to replace lamentation with rejoicing.

And the greatest expression of Yahweh’s desire for human salvation is the gift of His Son, Who came *to proclaim good news to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor* (Luke 4:18-19). Indeed, the mission of Jesus was nothing less than to begin the restoration of the cosmos that was corrupted by sin.

May our lives be a testimony to Christ’s saving work among us, so that the peoples of the world might look upon us and proclaim, once more: *“The LORD has done great things for them.”* [For] *⁴ Indeed, the Lord has done great things for us already, whereof we rejoice.* (Ps. 126:3b-4).

*Father God, Your grace and mercy are miraculous. May we keep before us the truth that, no matter our circumstances, You are always doing great things for Your children.
Amen.*



Tuesday, December 10

Psalm 126:5-7

**⁵ Overturn our captivity, O Lord,
as when streams refresh the deserts of the south.
⁶ Those who sow in tears
shall reap with songs of joy.
⁷ He who goes on his way weeping and bears good seed
shall doubtless come again with joy, and bring
his sheaves with him.**

Jesus wept. (John 11:35) This is the shortest verse in the Bible and, perhaps, the most intriguing.

The scene was outside the tomb of Jesus's good friend Lazarus. Lazarus had been dead for several days, really dead, as in stinky, decaying dead. Even so, Jesus had a plan. He would restore Lazarus to life and call him forth from the tomb.

Yet, Jesus wept. Why?

No one knows. The Bible doesn't say. But it is easy to imagine that Lazarus's death represented more than a single death to Jesus. In a way, Lazarus is a representative of all deaths of all people throughout history. Understood this way, Lazarus is a reminder that death is an unwelcome intruder in God's world. God created people to live, not die. Every death is anguishing to God.

In a similar way, when Jesus summoned Lazarus from the tomb, one wonders if Jesus wasn't looking to the future when, "*The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*" (1Thessalonians 4:16)

Psalm 126 was written long before Jesus. Yet, it speaks of tears being replaced by songs of joy. The pattern is the same. And such is the destiny of every follower of Jesus. In this world, we experience tragedy and sorrow. Illness, violence, and death are our constant companions. Weeping is woven into the fabric of our lives.

But not forever.

Revelation 21:4 describes the new heavens and the new earth. "*(God) will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*"

The saying is sure. Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.

*Heavenly Father, we eagerly await the new heaven and the new earth.
Amen.*



Wednesday, December 11

1 Corinthians 4:1-7

¹ This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. ⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

In biblical times, Corinth was infamous for immorality and religious debauchery centered around its renowned temples. The Corinthian church, composed of gentile converts, emerged from this morally bankrupt and superstitious paganism. Paul, the church's founder, addressed their sectarianism, where factions pitted leaders against each other, resulting in a proud, unloving, and arrogant church.

Today, celebrity culture infiltrates our churches. Pastors and leaders are often exalted above biblical principles. Godliness is sometimes measured by church size, ministry reach, or social media following. Unfortunately, this can lead to a lack of accountability, diluted sermons, and a departure from biblical truth.

In Aaron MacDonald's article on "The Curse of The Celebrity Culture," he articulated the subject in a way that connects with me and hopefully you too. "If the kingdom is the place where God dwells in eternal purity and power, the church is the community of imperfect people he gathers on earth for a purpose. That purpose is to give him glory. Included in that purpose comes lots of other things, including evangelism, healing, discipling, teaching, community and so on. But everything God does has the goal of bringing himself glory."

The apostle Paul posed three crucial questions to the Corinthians: 1. "Who makes you different from anyone else?" 2. "What do you have that you did not receive?" 3. "Why boast as though you didn't receive it?" Our reflections should recognize God's sovereignty. Privilege isn't an excuse for human pride. His divine grace found us in our sinfulness and the blood of His beloved son atoned for our sins. Divine grace—our salvation—is a gift from God. We don't steal glory; we're debtors to His everlasting faithfulness.

By asking the above questions, Paul stripped away the mistaken illusions. None is more destitute than a person who thinks they have it all.

*May I always be careful to give my Lord and God all glory and all honor.
Amen.*



Thursday, December 12

1 Corinthians 4:8-13

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Full of themselves. Believing the newspaper clippings about themselves. Being puffed up. That is how the church acted after Paul's visit and teaching.

Especially the leaders of the faithful. They acted more like peacocks strutting their tail feathers so others might submit to their leadership. It is likely that the peahens were acting similarly. Paul admonishes them because they have chosen to become a spectacle rather than a testimony.

Consider the birth of the baby that would change the outcome of the world. It was not a spectacle of grandeur with pomp, circumstance, or mile-long parades.

Paul reminds them that ours is a different way. The Message Bible offers this: *When they call us names, we say, "God bless you." When they spread rumors about us, we put in a good word for them.* (vv. 12b-13)

In a world that rewards competition, followers of Jesus are called to submit. Our submission is to one who did not come in the regalia of power and majesty and theater. He was born in a place where animals roost. His first bed was a water trough. The big reveal was to a frightened teen-aged virgin girl in Nazareth of which Nathaniel wondered, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* (John 1:46)

Do we await the prime rib roast glistening and presents under the two-hundred-dollar tree? Or are we ready to be fools for Christ's sake for the King of kings. Here in this place, we are encouraged by the testimony of the people that Jesus is indeed Lord over all.

*We speak the words of your sovereignty over creation, Father. We also acknowledge that there might be some things we are holding back. The reasons are many; you know them well. Lord, give us the vulnerability to submit to you without reservation. For that is when we discover the divine strength you want us to unwrap. In Jesus' Name.
Amen.*



Friday, December 13

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

¹⁴ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

As human beings, we imitate. In fact, many, if not all, animals imitate. It's how we learn. It's how we establish habits and behaviors. Sometimes our imitation is quite passive; we don't even realize we have picked up a habit or behavior of another. *So, let's take a look...* (Now, I know you know I picked that up from Fr. Bob.)

I think Paul's clear message here is to be mindful of whom you imitate. Surround yourself with people of faith who are intentional in their walk with Christ. Study the Scriptures and write them on your heart that you may be able to discern the will of God and distinguish between Christlikeness and worldly behavior.

And don't forget, dear brothers and sisters, that you too are setting an example for others to follow. Be intentional about that too. Submit yourself to the power of the Holy Spirit to transform you day by day into the likeness of Christ Jesus and to enable you to be a faithful witness of Jesus as you disciple others.

Yes, God left discipleship up to us; He chose to use us as we are growing in our faith to set Christ-like examples for others also growing in their faith. Don't be misled by people going astray but find the Paul's and Timothy's that God has placed in your life and imitate the Christlikeness that you see in them.

Likewise, be mindful of the disciples for whom God made you a "Paul" or a "Timothy" and be intentional about setting a Christ-like example for them to imitate.

*Holy Spirit, I surrender to the living Word in me. May I be a deep reflection of the grace of God in me.
Amen.*



Saturday, December 14

Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

Luke’s gospel harkens back several centuries to Isaiah’s prophecy. The book of Isaiah, often known as the fifth gospel due to the stunning revelation of Christ’s witness, ministry, crucifixion, and Resurrection referenced in v. 40:3, is cited in all four gospels to describe John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ. Such repetition deems the importance of God’s word.

The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar was a compendium of occupation, domination, and reprisal for those in the occupied territory around Jerusalem and who were not aligned with the Government of Rome. This is the political, social, and cultural dome under which John the Baptist began his public life, prophesying and baptizing in the name of the Lord.

The timing could not have been more incendiary. John was not fazed by this having lived simply and apart from the culture in prayer and contemplation of God’s call on his life. A gifted, passionate speaker, many drew near and followed his ministry, repenting, receiving baptism, and waiting for the Messiah.

He was humble and obedient before the Lord. *“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* (Matthew 3:11) John spoke truth without worldly filters or concerns. His admonishment of Herod, who took his brother’s wife as his own, led to John’s beheading. His death was a testament to God’s purpose for his life.

God’s purpose in our lives may not lead to our beheading but is more easily discerned when we worry less about what the world thinks and free ourselves (a process) to fully embrace God’s truth through the scriptures and examples of the saints who have gone before us.

*Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prepare us and strengthen us in our journey through this world that we may be fearless beacons of your light forsaking all that is not of you. We are assured and humbled that through the cross of Christ, we are saved for eternity.
Amen.*



Sunday, December 15

Zephaniah 3:14-17

**¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!**

**¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.**

**¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion;
let not your hands grow weak.**

**¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.**

Zephaniah begins with “Sing aloud,” evoking a sense of jolliness and joy in my heart. I think of the Ghost of Christmas Present from *A Muppet Christmas Carol*—with his giant cheeks and merry demeanor, he brings a tune or two to life.

I also recall Palm Sunday when the crowd joyfully welcomed Jesus. Yet, just as the Ghost departed for a darker future, the crowd's mood shifts, turning against Him. Both in *A Christmas Carol* and during Holy Week, gloom may come, but joy ultimately prevails. Scrooge transforms his life, and Jesus rises from the grave, conquering death.

As we journey through this Advent season, we are called to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. In the midst of it all, verse 14 reminds us of one of the main themes of this season: joy. This time of year—filled with year-end work, Christmas planning, shopping, and family—can easily distract us from joy. We must recenter ourselves to rediscover that joy.

And Zephaniah's call to loud, joyous singing is a powerful reminder; it disrupts our busyness and reconnects us to the joy of the Lord. So why don't we embrace this tool more often as we navigate the rush and distractions of the season?

*Lord break through the stronghold of the world and recenter us on the joy of Christ. Lord bring song to my heart and allow me to sing of the beauty of the season.
Amen.*



Monday, December 16

Zephaniah 3:18-20

**18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.**

**19 Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.**

**20 At that time I will bring you in,
at the time when I gather you together;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes," says the LORD.**

The theologian Donovan McAbee recently wrote that “the beauty and healing power of the Christian story is that we believe in a God who draws near to the hurting, the suffering, the immigrant, and the marginalized.”

A particularly vivid demonstration of God’s compassion for “the least of these” is found in the prophet Zephaniah’s astonishing vision of Israel’s restoration at the coming “day of the LORD.” Zephaniah’s prophecy was proclaimed during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 BC), a precarious time in which God’s people were being influenced by both the forces of unfaithfulness that had led Israel astray and the call to repentance that was motivating the King’s liturgical reforms.

Zephaniah leaves no doubt that Israel’s violent oppressors, as well as those corrupt leaders in Jerusalem who were participating in the oppression of their own people, will face the justice of God.

However, as with many of the prophets’ oracles, the most glorious realities are revealed at the end. Those who mourn, who suffer reproach, the oppressed, the lame, the outcast, the shamed, and the scattered: all will experience the deliverance of Yahweh. He will gather them together and He will save them. He will tear down the oppressors and restore the oppressed, making them *renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth* (v. 20).

And it will be Jesus Christ, the greatest expression of God’s love for humanity, through Whom the final restoration of all things will be accomplished. As we remember His birth and anticipate His coming again, may we participate in the work of incarnating His love for the impoverished and the afflicted, the displaced and the imprisoned, the Stranger and the Other.

And may we rejoice in the truth that as we draw near to “the least of these,” the triune God draws near to us.

*Father God, empower us with Your spirit to share the healing power of Your love with all people, but especially with those who need it the most.
Amen.*



Tuesday, December 17

Psalm 85:1-7

**¹ Lord, you have been gracious to your land;
you have turned away the captivity of Jacob.
² You have forgiven the offence of your people
and covered all their sins.
³ You have taken away all your displeasure
and turned yourself from your wrathful indignation.
⁴ Restore us then, O God our Savior,
and let your anger cease from us.
⁵ Will you be displeased at us for ever,
and will you stretch out your wrath from one generation to another?
⁶ Will you not turn again and quicken us,
that your people may rejoice in you?
⁷ Show us your mercy, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation.**

God's people, Israel, had a bad habit. Here is some history.

God had chosen Israel from all the people groups in the world to be his special people. They and God even had a special ceremony (not unlike a marriage ceremony) to ratify and seal this unique arrangement. In essence, God would be their only God, and they would be his only people. Based upon that relationship, God promised to bless them. But if the people, worshipped other gods, there would be a price to pay.

Eventually, Israel strayed from this agreement. God's chosen people incorporated other gods in their worship. These gods were imaginary deities, carved by human hands out of wood or stone. Apparently, when your God is invisible, it is comforting to have extra gods, just in case.

When this happened (not once but repeatedly), God would do something to get his people's attention. This might be an invasion by an enemy or a withering drought. Having experienced God's wake up call, his people put away their false gods, but only for a while. Alas, this was a bad habit that happened time and again.

Psalm 85 takes place in the middle of one of these cycles. God's people had strayed and were experiencing tough times. The psalmist is reminding God of his past mercy and imploring him to show mercy again. What would God do?

Here is a spoiler alert from another part scripture, *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."* (Lamentations 3:22-23)

God expects us to love him above all else. But, like our spiritual ancestors, sometimes we put other things ahead of God. These false gods can be money, relationships, fitness (the possibilities are endless).

But God is faithful, even when we are not. This is good news.

*God, we thank you for your faithfulness and mercy.
Amen.*



**⁸ I will hearken to what the Lord God will say,
for he shall speak peace unto his people, and to his saints,
that they turn not again.**

**⁹ For his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.**

**¹⁰ Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.**

**¹¹ Truth shall flourish out of the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.**

**¹² Indeed, the Lord shall show goodness,
and our land shall give its increase.**

**¹³ Righteousness shall go before him,
and he shall direct his going in the way.**

I'd love to meet General William Booth in heaven and ask him about the inspiration behind his famous late 19th-century quote: "The chief danger that confronts the coming century will be religion without the Holy Spirit, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, and heaven without hell."

Interestingly, recent studies (2023) show that nearly two-thirds of the American public (64 %) no longer tie morality and good values exclusively to belief in God. It is not an uncommon feeling that though God created man in His image, man is striving to return the favor. Quite remarkable and fascinating how societal perspectives evolve over time, isn't it? The mysteries of history and human beliefs continue to unfold, and perhaps one day, you'll engage in that conversation with General Booth himself—should heaven allow. I sure would.

Yet, amidst this evolving landscape, as Christians and true followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, we mustn't forget our convictions. While we navigate a world often devoid of God's glory, we remain His chosen people, filled with the Holy Spirit, and set apart for divine works.

Psalm 85 provides insight into how saints of old faced similar challenges. When the Israelites returned from exile, physical restoration didn't fill the void—they sensed something missing, the departed glory of Yahweh. They turned to God, remembered His forgiveness and deliverance, acknowledged His righteous anger, and clung to His promises. So shall we.

We pray for restoration and revival, waiting for His peace amid turmoil. We hold onto salvation and watch as His glory fills our atmosphere. Ultimately, as we await the fulfillment of these promises, may our way of life align with God's moral compass, guiding us through life's complexities.

*Father, we pray that your Holy Spirit may deepen our knowledge of you. May we wait on your words as you only will speak peace, and only in your salvation shall our land be revived and restored.
Amen.*



Thursday, December 19

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

As someone who worries quite a bit, I've often found verse 6 convicting. What do you mean *do not be anxious about anything*? That sounds quite impossible; it sounds almost trite like a "don't worry, be happy" bumper sticker!

And the second half of verse 6 is just as convicting: "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." My prayer life certainly isn't what it ought to be...which might explain the incessant worrying.

As a young Christian, Philippians 4:6-7 were among the first verses that I memorized. It was as if I thought: if I memorize these verses, then I'll no longer be anxious, I can fix this problem by myself!

What I've learned (a few decades later) is that worry and anxiety are really a heart and mind issue. My heart and mind are focused on what I'm doing or not doing, what I can attempt to control, instead of on what God has done and who he is. I need God to guard my heart and my mind. I need God to instill a deep sense of trust in His Sovereignty and love for me. I need God to help me focus on what is true, what is pure, what is holy.

Most loving Father, you will us to give thanks for all things, to dread nothing but the loss of you, and to cast all our care on the One who cares for us. Preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and grant that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which you have manifested unto us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(BCP Occasional Prayer 80)



Friday, December 20

Luke 3:7-14

⁷ He [John the Baptist] said therefore 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? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

We’re coming to the end of the calendar year, which means that New Year’s resolutions are right around the corner. Is that a tradition that you partake of: committing yourself to change, sticking with it for a while – perhaps you fare better than most, but maybe not – and then returning to your previous self? Seems pointless, doesn’t it? Jesus offers us a better way.

John the Baptist advises us, *Bear fruits in keeping with repentance*. To repent is to turn away from sin. We cannot do this on our own, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we submit to His power in our lives, we are transformed from the inside out. The work He does within us changes our thoughts, attitudes, and values to align with God the Father; it is a lasting change. Others cannot necessarily see our changed heart, but they can observe our visible growth in character, compassion, and godly behavior as we are molded and shaped by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting; we do the submitting and cooperating.

Cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives brings about lasting change, meaningful change, change that is aligned with the will of God. And by God’s design, the transformation He leads you through prepares the way for others to see Jesus in you.

To truly know and to follow Jesus is to be transformed into His likeness for the glory of God, for our own sake and for the sake of others; we bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

*Gracious Father, work in us to shine Your light and love into this hurting world. Help us to bear fruits in keeping with repentance.
Amen.*



Saturday, December 21

Luke 3:15-20

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

John the Baptist was an extraordinary man; Herod, John's contemporary, was just another politico. John was a first century religious celebrity, a prophet as the Jews termed it; Herod was a first century oligarch, a tetrarch as the Romans titled it.

Both men faced crowds of onlookers that extolled them. John, the extraordinary one, rejected the herd's desire to embrace him as someone he was not; Herod, John's lesser, embraced the world's desire to win, baby, win to become a puppet of any pack that centered on him.

At first, Herod was fascinated by John's extraordinariness. That spoke well of Herod, for he could see and hear the truth. But he could not accept truth as his master as John had, so he ultimately became a cornered enemy of John's truth at a dinner party and had John murdered.

When Jesus later appeared before him, Herod was lost. Best he could do was to gain a friend in Pontius Pilate, a government-issued oligarch of the time, when Pilate had Jesus murdered, making these puppets brothers in killing the truth—"veriticides" if you will.

This is how it is with the things of the Christ, even today; perhaps especially today. To be fascinated by, interested in, or curious about the Truth is never the same as accepting the Truth as Master. Jesus *is* the winnowing fork.

Nearing our commemoration of his coming, let us do so with clear eyes and open ears. His gift comes with his own consumer warning: *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.* (Matthew 10:34)

Any other expectation for an earthly life as his follower is sheer fantasy.

*Lord, strengthen us to stand when they insist we sit.
Amen.*



Sunday, December 22

Micah 5:2-5a

**² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.**

**³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.**

**⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.**

⁵ And he shall be their peace.

We are two days out from Christmas Eve. Today we sit with Micah's prophecy about the birth of Christ with anticipation right at our doorsteps. We live in a post-resurrection world so it's hard to take in his picture of our desire for a savior. At this point, Israel had been conquered by so many different empires that the majority of the twelve tribes had lost their name and lineage, and they did not know what freedom from oppression looked like.

It's hard to imagine that reality, but in it their identity was stripped down to simply waiting and hoping in this prophecy and many like it, hoping they would ultimately receive security and peace. The ancient Jews did not know either in Micah's time.

We know because Jesus came, unlike the Jews but also like the Jews, that we too have our own waiting to do, our waiting for him to come again. That is how we can identify with these people—our Micah has become Revelation.

So, in these two days out, how do you identify with these people waiting for someone great in the Lord? Where do you need Jesus to bring peace? Where do you need security? Where do you need patience as you wait?

So, we wait...

*Lord, help me to rest in your hope. Give me the strength and courage to wait just like the ancient Jews waited on you the first time. Help me in my anticipation and work on my soul. Help me to celebrate you,
Lord.
Amen.*



**¹ Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, you that lead Joseph like a sheep;
show yourself also, you that sit upon the cherubim.
² Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.
³ Restore us again, O God;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be whole.
⁴ O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people that pray?
⁵ You feed them with the bread of tears
and give them plenteous tears to drink.
⁶ You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.**

In the wake of the introduction of the curse of sin into God’s creation, human life became susceptible to pain and affliction, decay and death. In Genesis 3, Yahweh describes some of the consequences of sin, including travail and strife, which reflect humanity’s alienation from God and from itself.

Within a generation of the Fall, physical violence is manifest with the murder of Abel by his own brother, Cain. Sinful human beings come to regard one another as rivals, and the whole world history of violence and persecution begins to unfold.

In Psalm 80, the Psalmist speaks of the persecution the Israelites had suffered under the oppression of their pagan neighbors. The writer laments Israel’s lowly state and sees the judgment of Yahweh at work in their sufferings. They have been given tears to eat and drink; they are mocked and scorned by their oppressors.

And yet, the hope of divine restoration springs eternal.

The Psalmist entreats Yahweh, the King of the Cosmos Who Is enthroned upon the Ark of the Covenant, to show the Israelites “the light of His countenance,” which will make them whole. Here, the Psalmist is articulating a prayer that is a model for all generations of believers for he understands that the presence and power of Yahweh the King is what brings wholeness and salvation.

As we, too, experience a world filled with chaos and discord, violence and oppression, we are emboldened to approach the throne of God knowing that He alone is sovereign and just. And it is Him alone Who will deliver us from the consequences of sin, both ours and others.

For, through the saving work of Our Lord Jesus Christ, *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* (Colossians 1:13–14)

*Father God, give us the faith to trust completely in Your deliverance. Even amidst our trials and tribulations, may we carry with us the joy of Your salvation.
Amen.*



Tuesday, December 24

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴²and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

**“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.**

**⁵⁰And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.**

**⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵²he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;**

**⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.**

**⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,**

**⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”**

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Where does a fourteen(ish) year-old girl from a tiny, backwater village learn to speak the profoundly eloquent, words of Luke 1: 46-53? Certainly, it wasn't at Nazareth Independent School District (aka the local synagogue). No, the words of this young woman were not learned. They were inspired. Mary spoke these words (known as the Magnificat) under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is what gives Mary's joyful expression of praise a special, prophetic significance.

Take note of what Mary declares that God has done.

- He has looked on the humble state of Mary
- He has done great things for Mary
- He has shown his strength
- He has brought down the mighty
- He has exalted those of humble estate
- He has filled the hungry
- He has sent the rich away empty
- He has remembered his covenant with Abraham

There is a theme here. Do you see it? With the coming of Jesus, God is overturning the deeply ingrained ways of this world. In this world, the strong dominate the weak, the fast win the race, the clever outwit duller thinkers. Woe to anyone not up to the standards that the world has for survival and success.



But God hates that. He hates it so much that he actually identifies with the poor and weak. One example is found in Proverbs 19:17, *Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.*

We, of course, don't see this overturning of the established order. Not yet. But in the mind of God (as seen in Mary's prophecy), it is already accomplished.

The Magnificat is a glorious celebration and revelation of God's intention for the world. But it is also a warning. Which side of the strong/weak, haves/have not's divide are you on?

*Lord God, please give us a heart like yours, a heart that breaks for others.
Amen.*

Merry Christmas!

