

*...The world awaits, breathless, for the coming of the Savior...
Recapture the sense of wonder and make space within for the
indwelling of God's Spirit.....*

-Adrian Buchanan

*St. Mark's Devotion Booklet
for the seasons of Advent & Christmas - 2009*



St. Mark's Episcopal Church

St. Mark's Advent and Christmas Calendar of Events

Sunday, November 29

Advent Wreath Making, 9:15 Mahon Hall. All Parish event, including children

Sunday, December 6

St. Nicholas Luncheon 12:00 noon All Parish event, especially for children
Bring a toy or gift card for the Peoples Resource Center "Share the Spirit."

Evensong and Community Dinner 6:00 p.m.

Sunday, December 13

Nursery Open Houses for families with infants through 4 years old; 9:15 a.m.

Lessons and Carols; 7:30

A favorite St. Mark's tradition, featuring the Adult Choir and Glenbard East Madrigal Singers. Childcare provided by advance reservation.

Sunday, December 20th

The Annual Christmas Pageant, at 10:30, featuring St. Mark's children and youth.
A treat for all!

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...."
Isaiah 40:3

Blessing of the Advent Wreath: Lord God, You who sent into the world Your Beloved Son as a light that shines in darkness, invest this wreath, our Advent symbol, with the power of Your energy and light. With each of these candles that is lighted, may we rekindle within ourselves the desire to prepare a way for the birth of Christ. With each new candle that is lighted, may the flame of Christ's coming grow brighter and brighter so that this Christmas may see a fresh and ever-green coming of the Lord of Light into each of our hearts and into our whole world. (Light candle) We pray then that the richness of God's blessing rest upon this Advent wreath, upon our home, and upon each of us as we light this candle in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Prayers for the Domestic Church: Edward Hays. Forest of Peace Publishing, 1979.

Read Luke 21:25-36

Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility. That in this last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal. Through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Ben Maxson

Matthew 4:18-22

It was a Friday afternoon and I was driving home from Detroit. I had received my devotional text Matthew 4:18-22 and thought the long drive home would be a good time to compose some thoughts as to what to write. I was thinking, "If a perfect stranger came up to me and said, "follow me!" I would probably say "are you kidding, I don't even know you!!!"

I had just passed Battle Creek on the way to Chicago on Highway 94, when I noticed along the highway large, orange construction signs, and just ahead, I was greeted by a sea of red brake lights reflecting off the pavement from cars stopped on the highway. "Oh no, this will add at least an hour to my trip home!" I said under my breath. My car started slowing down to a crawl. Then the most amazing thing happened! The man in the car next to me was honking his horn and waving at me! I rolled down my window and heard him shouting to me....."Follow Me!" I stared at him, and he again yelled out ... "Follow Me! I know a way out of this mess!" He said it with such authority that I got behind him and followed him, right down the off ramp. We went through a small town, then weaved through some countryside, then another town. Before I knew it, my car was on the ramp back to Highway 94. We had completely bypassed the construction area. I rolled down my window to yell thanks, but it was too late. He had already sped down the highway. Then it came to me. God had taught me another lesson. Many of us are living in gridlock. We think that the best way to get through life is to endure it. We take things in our own hands, get by and go along, settling for a life of "quiet desperation."

Yet, everyday Christ says to us, "Follow Me. I can get you out of this mess. Just believe!" Yet most of us choose to remain bogged down, hoping that sooner or later we'll make it through. "Things have to get better!" we say to ourselves. But most of the time they don't, and sometimes they even get worse. All we need to do is open our hearts and minds, and let the Lord lead. I don't know why that man chose me out of all those cars to lead out of that traffic jam or why Christ gave me the choice to follow him, but I'm glad they did. Christ invites all of us to follow him. He says, "Do you want to live longer, healthier, happier lives? Follow Me! Do you want less heartbreak, worry and stress? Follow Me!"

Many of us have suffered loss of a relationship through death, divorce, or separation. Some have lost financial security through loss of savings or job, and some have lost home and property. Yet, as Christians, we have the promise that in every crisis we are not alone. Christ will be with us leading the way out. No matter what the situation. Ultimately it's your choice, but when we choose to follow Christ, we're amazed at where and how he leads us! All we need is the faith to follow Him.

Prayer:

Father in Heaven, strengthen our resolve to be Your Followers. By following You our lives will have purpose and meaning. Give us purity of heart that we may follow You everyday, until that day when we follow You through the Gates of Heaven is our prayer.

St. Mark's Advent Devotional
Sandy Allison

Tuesday, December 1

Isaiah 11:1-10

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Lord, the branch of Jesse's stem, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living, pardon and rest to the dead, to your holy Church peace and concord, and to us sinners everlasting life and glory. For with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign one God, now and forever. Amen.



Matthew 15:29-39

In the church calendar, this is the appointed reading for November 11, known as Veterans Day in the U.S. and Remembrance Day in Canada, when we remember all those who have died in wars. This is also the day when we remember Martin of Tours, a Roman general who gave his warm cloak to someone who was cold and hungry; then he left the Roman army.

In this reading from Matthew, we hear two of Christ's most important messages, loving each other enough to feed the hungry and to help heal the sick. This is what Martin, near the little town of Tours in France, did. This is what we also do as we give food and clothing for the People's Resource Center and PADS and as we go to the altar and ask for prayers for ourselves and those we love.

This very important and very old challenge is just as vital today as when Christ lived on earth. His compassion is the greatest example we have of how to treat each other. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, as you ministered to the sick and hungry, help us also to minister in your name to the people in our parish, our community, and throughout the world. Increase in us an awareness of the needs of others; help us to be sensitive to those we meet daily, ready to assist as we can. As you have blessed us, give each of us the willingness to bless others, be it in thought, word, or deed. We ask this in your name and for your sake. Amen.

Isaiah 26:1-11

Advent is a season of anticipation. Counting down the days to Christmas seems to occupy all of our waking hours and not a few of our sleeping hours. We are all waiting to celebrate the birth of a baby who was born over 2000 years ago. And then, what happens? There is that sense of finality; Christmas is over again. Is that all there is?

This passage in Isaiah reminds us that there is yet another arrival to wait and hope for. Even before the birth of Jesus, Jews were waiting for "That day," the day on which the righteous would be vindicated, the day on which the poor and the oppressed would triumph. "My soul yearns for you in the night...my spirit longs for you..." (Isaiah 26:9).

Today we focus on waiting for a celebration which will take place a few short weeks from now. This is a joyous time for most of us. But let us not forget those for whom this is a day of exquisite sadness. Remember that Christmas is not all there is. We have a hope and a future in the words of Isaiah that take us beyond the dark days of this month of December. "That day" is coming which will complete the work begun so long ago.

As you prepare your home for the coming of Christmas, remember to prepare your heart for the coming of the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord, prepare our hearts as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son. Make us ever mindful of the needs of those for whom Christmas is a time of sadness and loneliness. Direct our paths that we may bring joy into the lives of all we come into contact with this day.

Psalm 27:1-6; 17-18

Like so much of the praise that permeates our culture, David's praise is tied up with a particular violence. He is confident that when adversaries attack, he will prevail. When armies encamp against him, they will be torn down. When adversaries attack, it is they who will stumble and fall. Sustained by the belief that God's faithfulness is realized in violent victory, David's confidence functions as the opiate for his fears.

It is through this lens that one should then approach Psalm 27, where the writer admits that in "bow and sword," God has, "not gone out with the armies" (v. 4). What began as praise for a God whose faithfulness was realized in some kind of sacred war against the Other ends in the confused and despairing accusation that God himself is faithless, that he abandons and betrays his people. Bewildered, the Psalmist asks: why has this happened, why doesn't God act? After all, there is no indication that the destruction was just punishment; Psalm 27 even goes so far as to flatly say that the people haven't sinned. Is God the faithless one who abandons his people by not taking up a warring side?

During the Advent season, it seems particularly appropriate to connect the Psalms of David on violence and war with the birth of Christ. To do so, one could mention the genealogical connections between David and Jesus which the gospels indicate. Furthermore, one could note the similarity between David's request—"One thing I have asked the Lord... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord..."—and the disciples request at the last supper—"Lord, can we sit at your right hand?" However, something much more subversive is at work in these connections, and it has everything to do with this change of perspectives that the Psalmist demonstrates.

At the origins of human religion are real victims of human violence and the false gods who demand such victims. The true God, on the other hand, is revealed as on the side of the victims, the oppressed, not that of the idolatrous and perpetrators of violence. Rather than being bound up with violence of any kind, the true God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ is the victim of human violence, not the perpetrator or instigator of violence. The fact that historical Christianity has been a perpetrator or instigator of so much violence in the name of its god only reflects on the colossal failure of historical Christianity, not on the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. The true God is nonviolent; humankind is solely responsible for its

own violence. And the advent of Christ's appearance reveals violence for what it is: human. In this way, God's faithfulness is conditioned by his refusal to draw up arms. It is here, that one finds the proper release of fear: in the revelation that God has nothing to do with our human violence.

Prayer:

God of mercy, help us to not be so afraid of being loved. Help us not to draw up defenses when risk and vulnerability meet us. Rather, help us to be so established by your love that fear of others, even fear of you, turns from sacrifice to communion.

St. Mark's Advent Devotional
Liz and Tim Dorgan

Saturday, December 5

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

We need to trust God's plan for us. His plans include travails and hardships, pain and difficulty. But, if we have faith in the Lord's grand scheme, he will ultimately show us the way. Faith in the Lord's plan for us will provide us with the strength and nourishment to endure life's difficulties and emerge to realize all the good that He can bestow on us.

Prayer:

Lord, grant us the patience and serenity to understand and endure the hardships that befall us. Give us the faith and strength to see these travails for what they are...temporary hurdles that shouldn't weaken our faith, but rather steel our resolve to stay the course and follow your plan for us. The rewards to be found in your plan for our lives will only come from our ability to handle the good days with the bad with an unrelenting faith in you. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Read Luke 3:1-6

Light two purple candles.

Prayer:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one god, now and for ever. Amen.

Next Sunday the Adult Choir and Glenbard East Madrigal Singers will present the annual Lessons and Carols service at 7:30 p.m. If you've never been to a service of Lessons and Carols, read on...

"I remember the first year I went to an Advent Lessons and Carols service over 30 years ago. I was a new Episcopalian and didn't come from a tradition that acknowledged Advent. So, when I heard the word "carols," I assumed we would be singing "Joy to the World", "Away in the Manger", and "Silent Night."

I was initially disappointed when all of the music was new to me. These were *Advent* Carols, songs about waiting for Jesus to come. I'd never before heard most of them. Why weren't we singing all the Christmas carols I had grown up singing? I soon learned that in the church year, Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and continues until Epiphany...these are the 12 days of Christmas. The beautiful service of Advent Lessons and Carols is now an annual favorite."

Joyce Fletcher

Childcare will be provided. Take this opportunity to withdraw from the business of the culture and soak up the mystery of Christmas as presented in scripture reading and song.

Isaiah 35: 1-10

All we have to do is look for “the glory of our Lord, the splendor of our God”. Do we fear the desert, the parched land, the wilderness, or do we fear what can be, the gladness, the joy, the glory, the splendor that is meant for us? Too often I find comfort in the darkness, in the limitations I believe are my boundaries. Too few times do I open myself to that which is unknown to me but is known to God, that which He knows of me and which I doubt I can be or do.

Prayer:

Dear God—Please nudge us from the security of the known, the comfort of the discomfort, the parched lands and wilderness of our being. Take us beyond the false evidence against reality into the light of Your design for each of us. So in living in the light without fear, we may be all that You want us to be.

Grant us the courage to live in Your love, the strength to walk toward Your glory, and the wisdom to recognize Your splendor.



Isaiah 40:1-11

There are times in life when I make foolish mistakes. Once it is obvious to me that this is so and the embarrassment, regret or guilt sets in, I sometimes tend to avoid friends and family who I perceive as judgmental or who might say, "I told you so!" or who might even offer advice or support. I cut off communication and isolate myself instead of reaching out to the very ones I need or who could help me most. When I finally do reach out, it is such a joyful relief and once again I have peace.

I think this often happens in relationships with God, whether it's intentionally or not. We cut ourselves off from God out of regret or guilt from our actions or inactions. We might feel down, hurt or angry, and need someone to blame we blame God. Maybe we have never really bothered to establish a regular routine of connecting with God. We might tell ourselves that we lack the time or have more important things to do. We forget or reject the greatest love. Instead, we create high mountains, rough places and a convoluted path between ourselves and God. In a sense we create our own wilderness by not allowing his amazing love, healing power and wisdom to work in our lives. We don't get to experience the splendor of the Lord.

Prayer:

We need to cry out: Oh Lord, Heavenly Father, I am in a wilderness. Come to me. Help me to recognize and tear down those obstacles I have erected between us. Help me to build a straight path for the love, healing power, wisdom and splendor that is You. Amen.

Isaiah 40:25-31

In devotion, anxious to know our Father and His will, the living ever cry for understanding and comfort from God. In Isaiah, our Lord reassures His children, reminding us what has gone before; describing how we are to prepare for Him; and encouraging confidence and patience in all His promises.

It was established that God, our Father, has no comparison. He is the Creator of all; He cares for all forever; He *is* all. He is the Everlasting God, and "His understanding is unsearchable." God's children are as limited and powerless and finite as the grasses and the flowers. Because our Lord stands with us and for us, He knows us, each and every one. The sovereignty of God and His Word will stand forever.

In preparation, the Lord's simple, yet monumentally challenging, desire for us is to be like Him. The comfort extended and promised is that our Lord God will renew and strengthen those who seek this Light and do this work, as He desires, and we wait and trust.

By your grace and according to your will, sweet Lord and Father, grant your children humility and wisdom in appreciating your Creation; shine your light on our path of discernment and preparation; and keep us, now and forever, as we rest in your promises to your everlasting glory.

Prayer:

To you, we lift loving hearts; to the darkness within us, come, Jesus, come. Amen.

Isaiah 41:13-20

This passage from Isaiah closes with some wonderful verbs--actions we can take as we approach Advent: See. Know. Consider. Understand.

The prophet's consoling reassurance of God's abiding help to Israel brings to mind the image of a strong parent protecting his offspring, taking "little Israel's" hand like a frightened child, and building up that insignificant child's confidence with imaginative, evocative language--essentially promising to make Israel so powerful that God's people will obliterate mountains, and their dust will fly away on the wind. Our God protects us, calms our fears, and builds us up beyond our imagination. He promises not to forsake the poor and needy, but to create a lush and plentiful land in the wilderness, so that all may view what the Holy One of Israel can accomplish. Like the Israelites in exile, we are asked not only to see God's works, but to fully know them, to carefully consider their significance, and finally, to internalize this knowledge by understanding.

Prayer:

Holy Father, we give thanks for the abundance you have created, for calling us to be your children, and for assuring us that you are our protector and strength.

Help us to fully comprehend your glory. Open our eyes that we may see, our hearts that we may know, our minds that we may consider, and our whole selves that we may completely understand your love for us, and in doing so may embrace the coming of the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Matthew 11:16-19

In this reading Isaiah makes the choice seem so simple; Follow the Lord your God and life will be good, Go against God and his plan for you and things won't be so good. However, the decision to follow in the direction that God is leading and the consequences of that decision are not as easy or as simple as this passage makes them out to be.

Right now I am spending the year living in Port au Prince, Haiti and I think it should be said that following the path that God thinks is best for you is not easy.

I find myself spending a year away from my family, my friends, my dogs, and it's hard. I don't think there would have been anytime when it would have been easy to go, but I do find myself questioning why God had to choose this year of all years for me to be away. There are all the difficulties with trying to adjust to a new country, a new job, and all the trials that just come with being in Haiti, of all places. While I know that I have had moments of true happiness and understanding here, I have to admit it is still difficult.

All of this is to say things are not as easy as Isaiah says. So, how do you accept the path that God lays in front of you? How do you live with that choice? And how do you begin to understand why this is the path God has chosen for you?

These are questions I am grappling with this Advent. They are important questions for all of us to think about as we continue in the direction that God is leading us, whether you're living and going to church in Haiti or back home at St. Mark's.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to do as you teach and to follow the path you have set before us. Please give us strength in the midst of difficult times and help us to be thankful for the moments of understanding. Amen

Matthew 17:9-13

I just can't seem to get my mind around the tremendous implication of the coming of Jesus into the world. It's just too much! Why am I so incapable of understanding, or even merely accepting, the gift of God's only son?

I don't think I'm alone. Even his closest followers seemed to have trouble understanding not only Jesus' message, but also the idea that Jesus himself was the message... and they had first-hand exposure to him. Peter, James and John watched the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain... a really awesome experience... and even then they didn't "get" it. They wanted to know why they were taught that Elijah came first. Why didn't they ask what Jesus meant when he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had been raised from the dead? Or when he told them that he would suffer as John the Baptist had?

It seems to me that they, too, didn't grasp the immensity of the gift that God gave when Jesus was born.

I find that Advent gives me a chance to grapple with this totally overwhelming idea. And sometimes, during Advent, if I set aside time to think about this, pray and read God's word... sometimes a little glimpse of the enormity of God's love appears, and then is gone again.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for all your gifts, but especially for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. Help me use this Advent time reverently. And also help me to understand the depth of your love for us shown in his birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection. Amen.

St. Mark's Advent Devotional
Third Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 13

Luke 3: 7-18

Light three purple candles.

Prayer:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Lessons and Carols - this evening, 7:30 p.m.

St. Mark's Advent Devotional
Tanya and Jerry Carey

Monday, December 14

Psalms 25: 3-8

Psalms 25 is a lament written in acrostic form about deliverance from enemies. In the time of David the enemies were those of Israel. Who or what are the enemies of our time? Are they terrorists or Wall Street financiers? Are they the dichotomies within ourselves or outside ourselves which serve to pull us away from good and the Word of God?

The words of the Psalm give us hope to trust in the Lord: He will lead us in truth. He will show us the way. He will help us ask for forgiveness for the sins of the past, and help us to know God's steadfast love.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us to understand the words of your prophets and to incorporate those ideas into our lives. Amen.

Matthew 21:28-32

A certain man had two sons...

Jesus and his followers and also the leaders in the Temple where Matthew sets this scene knew that when Moses led their ancestors out of Egypt, and when they came to Sinai and camped in front of the mountain and Moses taught them what the Lord commanded, "the people all answered as one: Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). The commandment is both to hear the Word of the Lord and to do it.

The elders to whom Jesus is speaking, Matthew says, didn't believe that John the Baptist was a true prophet, though they knew that most of the people around them did, and he tells this parable to say that even the most despised of the people who heard and believed the word from John are those who do the will of their father. But if we hear and believe the prophecy of John, what is it that we should do? Jesus also teaches (Matthew 25): feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and prisoners. As we love God, we are commanded to love our neighbor.

Prayer:

Loving God, in this time of preparation, help us to see our way in the world around us, to give as we have received, and to reflect Your light in the dark season.

John 4:31-38

Advent is a time of waiting. We wait for the right time to hang wreaths and decorate trees. We wait for guests to arrive, for planes to land, for family to come together. We count the days down by opening cardboard doors, eagerly looking forward to tomorrow and the next illustration or piece of chocolate. We may be waiting for the celebration with exuberant impatience or we might be carried through the season with a dreamy anticipation as we contemplate the season.

As I prepare for parties, outings, and of course Christmas Day itself, it is easy to tell myself that there is time in all of this waiting to fulfill my commitments to God. After all, it is a long season and the day set aside for celebrating Christ's birth is a few weeks away. It's not quite time, the mood isn't quite perfect, there are just a few more tasks that need to be completed and then I will be ready.

John 4:31–38 reminds me that I should not be waiting. The work has already been done for me. The gifts are here, waiting for me to gather them into my life. There is not one day to be set aside for this celebration; I cannot let these gifts rot on the vine until I am ready. Just as I try to teach my children that their graciousness and sincerity is a responsibility to claiming a gift, I am reminded that by taking God's gifts I assume the same responsibility.

While John speaks of the gift of eternal life, I am called to think of the labors of those before that created the gift of my spiritual community. Accepting these gifts joins me to the community. It also inspires me to continue celebrating Christ's life and work every day through my own labors, creating an opportunity for others to receive His gifts.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the gift of eternal life. Thank you for the strength to accept these gifts and the desire to continue Your work.

Psalm 72:1-8

I loved expecting a child. I always felt to be pregnant was to walk around with a big secret, like God had lifted a curtain and was giving me a glimpse into the mystery of creation. I especially loved being pregnant during Advent. All the talk of being a vessel had me connecting with the mother of God on a totally new level. While expecting my first baby, I was made an object lesson in a sermon about Mary. Through both of my pregnancies I was in a constant state of wonder, fully aware of what it meant to be filled with another (or others!) and full of expectation. How must Mary have felt, being filled with God? What a secret she shared with the Lord of the Universe! That sense of expectation and awe is the essence of Advent. The world waits, breathless, for the coming of its Savior. How can we recapture that sense of wonder? How do we make space within our whirling selves for the indwelling of God's spirit? How do we push aside all the noise, all the sparkling shiny bits, all the competing demands to focus on the source of all the celebration? Every Advent, I look forward to the service of Lessons and Carols. In the darkness, I wait for the music and candlelight while I ponder the mystery and wonder of God coming among us. The expectancy I feel is just the right mood for this time before Christmas that has been co-opted by our culture as Christmas itself. But it's not. Advent is not Christmas. Advent, like Lent, is a season of expectation, of preparation, of clearing the decks of our busy lives to make room for God to move in us. Each year, I try to push Christmas back into its place by a few more days. I wait a few more days to buy the tree, to break out the Christmas carols, to visit the mall. I try to make space for expectation, for wonder, for peace . . . for God.

Prayer:

Lord of the Universe, silence the noise of this busy season and fill us with a sense of wonder in all your works. Make us breathless with anticipation as we await the coming of our Lord and prepare us to receive "a Light to enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel." Amen.

Matthew 9:35-38

When I think of the Harvest and the laborers and what Jesus is calling for from His disciples, I think of the many times we get caught up in the end result of ministry. We want to be a part of the celebration, such as the successful food drive or the change in someone's life because of what we've done. (All very good.)

Jesus speaks to the importance of the worker:...those who are involved in the unnoticed work...a gentle handshake or hug, an unexpected smile or just listening to someone when they want to talk. This is also work that must be completed before the Harvest.

This passage was a great reminder that the light within us can shine in so many ways and that the everyday work we do is still very important in His eyes.

Prayer:

Lord, we all know that buildings must be built and food must be handed out and the mission of the Harvest is important. But help us to remember that you need the worker too and that it's the little things we do along the way that are just as significant. Amen.



Matthew 16:24-27

What do we do to follow Jesus?

“Then Jesus told his disciples if any man would follow me, let him deny himself and pick up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life.”

Jesus and roads always go together. Jesus was born a traveler. He was born “on the road” in Bethlehem and travelled to Egypt, Nazareth, Galilee, Cana, Capernaum, Samaria, Jerusalem and more places. But wherever he was, he was “home” because his Father was always with him. When he talks to his disciples about “following” him, they were already following him, at least technically. Why does he ask them to do more? Why does he say to them that true followers “deny themselves and pick up their cross to follow him”? For the disciples and for us, following Jesus isn’t just hanging around him. We can hang around Jesus and still keep our eyes on our lives and our own interests. If we do, we don’t get life with Jesus but are far away from him.

When we unite our life with Jesus we gain that Christmas gift that’s the best – life! It doesn’t matter what our circumstances are or where we are – life with Jesus is getting to be home and fully alive, no matter where we are. Jesus says the road to life is the road with our eyes on Jesus and our hands and lives wide open to serving him and others.

Prayer:

O Lord, thank you for wanting to come to earth to live the life that we live, to show us who God is and to bring us into your family. Help us respond to You with joy today, knowing that in You we have life and are at home. Help us to serve others in your Name, with your own love, joy, strength, and peace. Amen.

St. Mark's Advent Devotional
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 20

Read Luke 1:39-45

Light all four (purple and pink) candles.

Prayer:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one god, now and forever. Amen.

Christmas Eve and Day are rapidly approaching. Plan now to join our parish community in worship.

Christmas Eve

4:00 p.m. Family Friendly

8:00 p.m. Brass and Carol Singing

10:30 p.m. Brass and Adult Choir (music begins at 9:30 p.m.)



Christmas Day

Worship at 10:00 a.m.

Hebrews 10:35 – 11:1

This passage ends with a definition of faith. I've never really been able to define faith in my own words very well, but, for me, faith is a state of being. As the author of Hebrews describes it here, it's a "conviction of things not seen." For me, faith at its core is a feeling that I'm not alone in my community or the world at large. Another point that strikes me in this passage is the exhortation not to abandon one's confidence, or faith, and to persevere in doing the will of God. In the 7th/8th grade Sunday School class that Kim Reed and I teach, we end each class by reading the Baptismal Covenant, since our class is also the Confirmation class. That covenant closes with our agreement that we will love our neighbors as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace. In other words, we are reminded to act out our faith through service.

Prayer:

A family friend who has had a long interest in Thomas Merton introduced me to his writings when I was a teen. I like Merton's take on confidence in the face of uncertainty in this prayer, and I like the way he points out that we don't necessarily know what God's will is.

Dear God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe this:

I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please You.

I hope I have that desire in everything I do.

I hope I never persist in anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it at the time.

Therefore I will trust you always, for though I may be lost, and in the shadow of death, I will not be afraid, because I know you will never leave me to face my troubles all alone.

Luke 1:46-56

This is one of my favorite scripture passages. It is joyful and promising. It is also known as the "Song of Mary." Songs are very important to me. They have a special ability to lift my spirit. They can teach me many things, and help me to express my feelings. When I wake up in the morning with a song, I know it is going to be a great day. It may seem silly, but I just realized that I learned the alphabet with a song.

In Mary's song, she is expressing her feelings. At the same time, she is teaching me how to pray and praise God. We praise God every Sunday in song. In the context of scripture, Mary is preparing for the coming of Christ. Advent is a time every year when The Church prepares for Christmas, or the coming of Christ. I can remember someone asking, why do we need to prepare for the coming of Christ when he already came. I wanted to ask the same question and was thinking the same thing. At the time, the answer didn't really mean anything to me and I accepted it as just another something that I needed to do. When I was studying about the nature of Creation, The Church, and The Kingdom of God, it became clear to me that The Kingdom of God was already established long ago. Nevertheless, it is always becoming more perfect. Someone once described it to me as "the already, but not yet." As Christians, Christ is a very important part of it. In fact, we are The Body of Christ, The Church. We always need to prepare for the "not yet" by praying and reflecting on God's great love and mercy through the ages, as Mary does in this song. We need to spend time to know hunger. We need to know what it means to feed the hungry and be prepared to do it.

Prayer:

"God who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his Name." Amen.

Luke 1:57-66

The moment is only days away. The most fantastic and decisive event in the history of life on earth comes near. And our leaky old sieve of a world can hardly contain the impending glory: little miracles keep shooting out as the brilliant day comes closer. An elderly woman conceives. Her husband is visited by an angel and loses his speech. Babies in separate wombs leap to greet each other. The herald of the messiah is born, and an old man's speech returns.

If at this moment of his birth, Elizabeth and Zachariah knew the man that their infant would grow to become, what would they have thought? The adult John isolated himself in the desert for months on end. He survived by eating insects. He was so filled to bursting with the news of the coming Messiah that all he could do was shout and rave.

Why did God choose such a man to be the forerunner of Christ? If we saw John today, freshly returned from his wilderness experience, we likely would take him for a homeless man and quickly pass him by. As with so many prophets, God chooses to deliver his truth in unruly packages. Could it be that God's truth is so wild and unruly that the message shapes the messengers?

Consider how God will reveal truth to you this holiday season. Will it be a whisper in your ear, the way Elizabeth received the name of her infant son? Or will it be a raggedy and foul street person shouting in your face? Whatever the way, be open to the message.

Prayer:

Gracious Father, we thank you for sending John to herald the arrival of your Son, Jesus Christ. Quiet our minds, open our eyes and soften our hearts so we are ready for your message. Amen.

Luke 1:67-79

In this passage in Luke, Zechariah celebrates the birth of his son John and rejoices that John will lead the way for the long awaited Messiah. I am struck by the patience that Zechariah exhibits. He doesn't complain about waiting. Instead, he patiently looks forward to the event that is to come.

Advent is the season of waiting...yet waiting, for me, isn't so easy. And it doesn't seem natural for most people in our culture. In September the stores replace their school supply sections with Christmas decorations. We begin hearing Christmas carols in the mall immediately after Halloween. Before the first snowflakes fly in early December, we are already surrounded by all the accoutrements of Christmas.

I remember the first year I went to an Advent Lessons and Carols service over 30 years ago. I was a new Episcopalian and didn't come from a tradition that acknowledged Advent. So, when I heard the word "carols," I assumed we would be singing "Joy to the World", "Away in the Manger", and "Silent Night."

I was initially disappointed when all of the music was new to me. These were Advent Carols, songs about waiting for Jesus to come. I'd never before heard most of them. Why weren't we singing all the Christmas carols I had grown up singing? I soon learned that in the church year, Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and continues until Epiphany...these are the 12 days of Christmas. The beautiful service of Advent Lessons and Carols is now an annual favorite.

Since then I have come to appreciate the season of Advent...preparing my heart, mind, and home for the arrival of the Christ child. It isn't easy to wait, but on Christmas Eve when we loudly sing, "Joy to the World," I find myself truly rejoicing that the Lord is come!

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for giving us the short days and long nights of December to reflect on your gift to us. Teach us to be patient and to develop the ability to wait for the important gifts in our lives. We thank you that you loved us enough to send us the perfect gift of your Son. Amen.

Luke 2:1-14

One of my habits is to write down phrases or ideas that catch my eye and imagination. Scraps of paper end up in the bottom of my briefcase or under a pile of papers on my desk. On the inside back cover of my Prayer Book is a wrinkled yellow Post-It note with one of my favorites. This has been its home for five or six years, when I placed it there while preparing for a mid-week Eucharist. It reads, "No ear may hear his coming, yet the dear Christ enters in." These words may be familiar to you because they are found in the lyrics to "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Phillip Brooks, a legendary Episcopal priest and rector, penned a poem containing this verse after visiting the actual Bethlehem in 1865.

On this Christmas morning, who has heard his coming? Perhaps no one, whether filled with Christmas spirit or empty with depression. But that doesn't matter. Whether you are among family and friends, by yourself sitting at a kitchen table, in a hospital bed or driving to work, the dear Christ has entered the world. His arrival and presence is quiet and gentle and sure. Every time I open my Prayer Book, I see that reminder there. It makes me smile and be glad.

Prayer:

Lord God, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son who has entered a world of noise, joy, pain, love and confusion; for the gentleness of his ways; for his loving care which surrounds us, and for his blessing on us and the whole world. Amen.

The Second Day of Christmas -- St. Stephen
Matthew 23:34-39

It is the day after the Day, Christmas Day. Our various family traditions around Christmas have been enacted again. We have cleared out and recycled the wrapping paper. The tree is still up in most of our homes. The gift of the seasons of the church year allows us to celebrate Christmas for twelve days. The retailers may think Christmas is over and are getting ready for the next holiday, but we know different. We know it is still Christmas. So what is this passage we read from Matthew's Gospel? Why these words while we have baby Jesus settled safely in his crib? Why *these* words from Jesus, words of prophesied murder and bloodshed? Why the words that call us to remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before his crucifixion?

The Church, in Her wisdom, has set the day after Christmas Day, as St. Stephen's Day. Stephen is named in the book of Acts as the Church's first martyr (Acts 6 and 7). He was stoned to death for his faith with Saul standing by and approving; Saul, the one who later converted and was named Paul. It seems we are not meant to hold one piece of the Story without remembering the rest. The gift of the Incarnation, God's coming to us, ends with the Crucifixion and begins again with the Resurrection and Ascension until His coming again. We have Jesus in the manger (it is still Christmas). Today we are invited to hold the rest of the story in the manger with Him. We know how the story ends and that it continues on today. The story of Stephen helps us remember this. Jesus did not come without cost, cost to God, cost to each of us who believe, cost to the whole world. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of your Son, born to us as a baby, born just as each one of us was born. Today it is still as miraculous. Help us to hold the whole Jesus in the manger of our hearts: the baby and the grown man who entered Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna. Help us together to know and hold both the joy and the cost of our faith, even as Stephen did. We offer our prayer in the name of Jesus, who was born, lived and died for us and for the world. Amen.

Join us for worship at 8:00 or 10:30 a.m. A special Sunday School class for Preschool through Sixth Grade students will be offered in the Undercroft and St. Mark's Café (Lehman Parlor). Regular Sunday School classes will resume on January 3.

*Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light, and usher in the morning;
O shepherds, greet that glorious sight, our Lord a crib adorning.
This child, this little helpless boy, shall be our confidence and joy,
the power of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.*
Johann Rist (1607-1667)

Rev. Walter Dunnett

Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14

In the land of Israel in ancient times, the date-palm and cedar trees were symbols of health and fruitfulness. Their deep roots searched out water; their branches produced rich fruit and enduring wood. So they were pictures of righteous (torah-abiding) people, "showing that the Lord is upright." Their lives were a testimony to the all-sufficient power of God.

Prayer:

Lord God, as we again anticipate your appearing to us, grant that our lives may be witnesses to your grace and righteousness. Amen.

Matthew 2:13-18

Christmas is a wonderful time. For most of us, perhaps, our childhood Christmases were times of joy and delight unmixed with sadness. As we grew older, our joy has sometimes been mingled with sorrow. My own father died on this date thirty years ago, and for me the remembrance of that is always a part of my experience of Christmas.

The first Christmas was a spectacularly wonderful occasion, yet even the coming of our Lord as a baby in Bethlehem was mingled with severe distress for the holy family and for many others. Not long after Jesus' birth, an angel warned Joseph to take his family to Egypt to protect the young Jesus from the king. Joseph immediately obeyed and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they remained until the danger passed. Imagine having to take a long journey to a foreign land to keep one's baby from being killed. It is good to remember in a day in which many families are refugees, fleeing their homelands from danger and scarcity, that our Lord himself was a refugee. King Herod, a ruthless ruler, had learned from the Magi that a king was to be born in Bethlehem, and he ordered the murder of all boys in the area age two and under. Yet Jesus was safe in Egypt.

Let us continue to rejoice with great joy, knowing that in this world joy and sadness are always intermingled, yet it is joy that predominates.

Prayer:

Dear God, your own Son was a refugee. Help us to see him in the refugees in our midst, and thank you for the sacrifice of those like the babies in Bethlehem who have given their lives to further the spread of the Good News. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

I John 2:12-17

For those who claim the Christian faith, the Christmas season is now unfolding. While many in the world are packing up Christmas as if it were only one day, we as Christians are called to savor the meaning of the birth of our savior and to look past the message of materialism that permeates our culture's interpretation of Christmas.

Verse 16 in this passage reminds us to consider our love for the world and the things in the world. The world does not give, does not sustain and does not love us as God does. Reflecting on this truth is always comforting to me, especially when I am caught up in the details of a long to-do list or exhausted from a non-stop schedule, which has eaten away my quiet time or my desire for quiet time. What it tells me is that some of the things which I think are so all important are not important at all. It reminds me that this year's Christmas season will be over all too soon, and that if I'm not careful, I just might miss the message altogether.

Prayer:

Dear God: Thank you for reminding me of what is important and what is not. Please grant me understanding to know you in new and deeper ways. Amen.

St. Mark's Christmas Devotional Thursday, December 31
Erin Campagna, St. Mark's fourth grader

John 1:1-18

What Christmas means to me is a lot of different things. Joy, for seeing family that I haven't seen in a while. Praying and helping those in need: poor people.

I also think of Christmas as a time for giving. Donating clothes and food to people who need them, all are acts of giving. Some people help others just because they think they'll be rewarded. I think you should help others because you want to.

Having a pageant every year at my church helps bring up the holiday spirit. Little kids dress up as sheep, angels, shepherds, wise men and all the other Bible characters and act out the scene in which Jesus is born. It is a lot of fun!!!!

Dear God,

Thank you for giving us Jesus to teach us right from wrong and thank you for giving us each other. Hope that we may be grateful for all that you have done. Amen.

St. Mark's Christmas Devotional
Pastor Robin Currie

Friday, January 1

Luke 2:15-21

The holidays are ending. Trees lie in a tinsel heap in the street and once tasty cookies are dusty crumbs. Now what? Is that the question the shepherds asked as they left the stable late the night Jesus was born? What do shepherds do who have seen the miracle of angels and glimpsed the face of the Messiah? Now what?

The shepherds knew what to do. They ran to tell others. The good news spilled out of them like confetti thrown in Times Square on New Years. There was no stopping it! They ran and told and ran and told some more. And all who heard it were amazed.

As we enter 2010 there can be a “now what?” feeling to our lives. Perhaps the answer is to run and tell the good news in our words and our actions, tell others that our Christmas was not about parties or trips or gifts. It was the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ.

A prayer for 2010

Give us the kindness to hear with compassion, to offer support, loving comfort, and care.

Give us the courage to do what is needed, the wisdom to choose what is right and fair.

Give us the vision to see what is possible.

Give us the faith that will help pave the way for a present that is hopeful, a future that is peaceful—

Give us a heart to bring joy to each day.

Psalm 98:1-5

The Lord has made known his victory;
He has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.

Rejoicing in this psalm of victory in celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation, we Christians claim that the mighty power of our God is revealed in the birth of an infant. God's steadfast love for Israel is now expressed in God's own human birth, joining us in human life.

We know the story already; this is the yearly beginning of the retelling. Mary (Luke 1:46) sings of how God has shown strength with his arm: He has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things. In Jesus, our God lives and dies as one of us and teaches us the ancient lesson that the first are last, and the last first.

In our time, the 21st century since this joyous birth, we are certain that the victory of our God is indeed known to all the ends of the earth. As we sing our songs, may we also show forth God's power of abundant love to all the world.

John 1:35-42 (The Message) Come, See for Yourself

³⁵⁻³⁶The next day John was back at his post with two disciples, who were watching. He looked up, saw Jesus walking nearby, and said, "Here he is, God's Passover Lamb."

³⁷⁻³⁸The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, "What are you after?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

³⁹He replied, "Come along and see for yourself."

They came, saw where he was living, and ended up staying with him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened.

⁴⁰⁻⁴²Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John's witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, "We've found the Messiah" (that is, "Christ"). He immediately led him to Jesus.

Jesus took one look up and said, "You're John's son, Simon? From now on your name is Cephas" (or Peter, which means "Rock").

We walk hopefully, hesitantly, into the new year, not knowing what 2010 will hold. Perhaps, after dealing with difficult times in the past year, we are wary about what might be coming our way. Maybe in these first days of the year, we are quiet, quiet like the two men who follow after Christ in this story.

Having heard from John the tantalizing words that Jesus is "God's Passover Lamb," the two men walk behind Jesus. They don't speak but follow after him. After a while, Jesus looks over his shoulder and asks: "What are you after?" This is the way The Message Bible puts it. "What are you after?" In other translations, Jesus says "What do you want?" or "What do you wish?" or "What seek ye?" When I first read the way the two men answered Jesus, I was confused. Jesus asks them what they are wishing for and, in response, they say, "Teacher, where are you staying?"

Don't you think that's odd? I can think of some better answers. Like, "I wish to know what you want from me." Or "I wish for peace." Or "I want to serve you." Or "I want to let go of this grief." Or "I want you to give me strength." But "Where are you staying?" Odd answer. It's like if someone asked you what is the desire of your heart and you answered, "What did you have for lunch?"

In response, Jesus says "Come see for yourself", welcoming them to join him. And then I imagine they caught up with him, walked alongside him, and the Bible says that they stayed with him. Maybe when they said "Where are you staying?", it is another way for them to say "How much time have you got?" Maybe their hearts were full of questions, like mine is, and they knew it would take a long time to untangle and express it all. But Jesus is unperturbed and says "Come along with me", and they walk alongside him and stay with him.

Prayer:

Jesus, thank you for welcoming us to come with you and for walking alongside us in this new year. Thank you for knowing the desires of our hearts and staying with us, whatever the year holds.

John 1:43-51

Are you a Philip or a Nathaniel? Do you make a decision based on what you have read or in what a friend tells you?

Philip accepts the request of Jesus and makes the decision to follow him based on an educated faith founded on what he learned in his studies.

Nathaniel's initial response to that same request is based on an educated prejudice, assuming that since Jesus is from Nazareth, Jesus can be of no good. Despite that, Nathaniel does make the decision to follow Jesus, but he bases his decision upon his faith in the word of his friend.

Fortunately, Jesus finds joy not in how each man reaches his decision to follow, but in each man for making the decision to follow. And He finds that same joy when we choose and remember to follow Him. However, too often the power of the written word or the spoken word prevails over my decision to follow. I hope, as in the case of Philip and Nathaniel, that my decisions have been acceptable despite my means to the decisions.

Prayer:

Dear God— Thank you for trusting us before we trusted You. Thank you for knowing us before we knew You. Thank you for waiting while we examined our educated faith, what we read and what we heard, before we followed You. Please remind us that the choice to follow You is all we need to know when faced with a dilemma, an uncertainty, a decision. Grant us the faith to trust, the clarity to recognize your guidance, and the wisdom to follow You always.

Matthew 2:1-12 "...after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea..."

What happened after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea? What strikes me as I read this passage is how wildly divergent are the reactions to this news.

Wise men from the East, Matthew says, sought information about the birth of the "king of the Jews" in order to go visit Jesus, to worship him, bring him gifts, and pay him homage. Did the wise men, or magi, thought by some to have been astrologers from Persia, embark on this journey motivated merely by scholarship – investigating that amazing star? – and curiosity? Or did they really understand, beyond anyone else's ability to comprehend, that they were going to visit the incarnate Word, Emmanuel, God-with-us?

King Herod hears the same news as the wise men – Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea – and has a decidedly different response. I imagine Herod wincing or grimacing as some staff member brings word to him about the birth of this child, his anger set off by the use of the word "king." Herod's mind can grasp the concept of kingship only in one way: worldly power, land and fortunes, supremacy over others.

The wise men embrace a sense of possibility and wonder, and because of that they encounter Jesus and lavish Him with praise and rich gifts. King Herod is gripped by fear and a sense of scarcity; there is one kingly pie, and Herod means to have the whole of it. His fear of losing what he has amassed in his kingship drives him to almost-unspeakable horrors: the slaughter of the innocents, the killing of all the male children in the area under the age of two, in hopes that this rival king, Jesus, will be among those who die. Of course, Jesus' kingship and kingdom were not rivals – in the sense that Herod understood – toward any earthly king or kingdom.

It is easy to distance ourselves from the failings of someone like Herod – after all, we are not kings! – but how often do we make Herod's same mistake, of hanging on so tightly to temporal things, things which are of no value in God's kingdom, to the extent that we miss the abundance of the gift of God-with-us, Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.



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