

Waiting With Purpose: An Advent Devotional



A 2024 Devotional by Jason Jones

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I love Advent. These four weeks before Christmas are packed with events and gift-buying and Christmas card writing. There's no shortage of things to do during these weeks, but they don't have to be only weeks of busy-ness. If we make room for it, Advent can also be a time to hear the calling to be our better selves. As we prepare to look in the manger on Christmas day, we also are given the chance to reflect on God showing up in a lovely, vulnerable, and giving way, and hopefully in reflecting we, too, are called into a life of faithfulness and charity.

Each page of this booklet includes a short scripture, thought from me, and a prayer or action you can take each day. My hope is that, following along, each day of Advent will draw us into deeper faith and deeper compassion for the world God loves. So, thank you, in advance, for walking with me through this Advent Journey.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, come from the Common English Bible (CEB) translation. All the illustrations are products of DreamStudio.

Grace & peace, Jason Jones

Country Homes Christian Church, Spokane, Washington



Sunday, December 1, 2024

*Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths. -
Psalm 25:4*

Each night, assuming the weather allows it, I go out and look at the stars for a minute. It's not long, especially if the night is cooler, but for a few seconds I want to look at the night sky. I think about how far away each star is, how vast the universe is, and I think about, too, here I am, just a little grain in all the sand of the beach of the universe. It's a dose of the medicine of humility I give myself with stargazing each evening.



Equally vast is the heart of God. Who is God? What is God really like? What can we, drops of water in the vast ocean of the universe, know of God? What we believe, as Christians, is the life of Jesus of Nazareth gives us a window into the heart of God. So here at this Advent season, we look to Jesus' arrival, like looking at one star in the whole of the universe, and we say, "Here we can learn." So we pray with the Psalm writer, "Teach me your ways, Lord," as we look to Jesus.

Task for the day: Go out at night and look at a star.

Monday, December 2, 2024

I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. - Matthew 25:36

As I write this, in October, I'm not sure what the weather will be on December 2, but I know, usually, in early December it's time for sweaters and heavy coats. Summer, at this point, seems a long past memory, and we're just beginning the cold season. I have more sweaters and hats and gloves than I know what to do with, but I often see people who are unhoused who don't have enough. In my neighborhood there is an unhoused man I often see on the streets. I don't know where he camps, but I know it must be close. On the most frigid days I occasionally see him still out, pushing his shopping cart through freezing temperatures.

The dynamics surrounding homelessness are complex, and the solutions are never easy. Whatever a person thinks is the best response to caring for those experiencing homelessness, as a Christian compassion must be in our response. If you're able, a gift of money or



warm clothing to an organization that cares for our unhoused neighbors is a compassionate thing to do. A warm coat, hat, or gloves may be assumed in your life, but in another's they may be a lifesaver. Here in Spokane, A Cup of Cool Water serves youth and young adults, and some warm clothing shared with them will make its way to a young person whose days (and possible nights) are spent on the street.

I don't think twice about having a warm coat at this time of year, but others don't live with that basic necessity. A small act of compassion by you may be the thing that keeps someone warm this winter.

Task for the day: Donate warm clothing to a group that serves those experiencing homelessness.

Tuesday, December 3, 2024

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. - John 14:27



We don't think of this time as a quiet time of the year. We're all attending parties and gatherings, listening to Christmas music, and shaking jingle bells. All of these things are positive and fun, but all the noise of the season can overwhelm many. For a couple

of years, I visited a small monastery in Michigan during Advent to find some quiet space in this very full time. During those visits, I took long walks in the woods, read books in silent rooms, and participated with the monks' quieter worship. I remember those times as being like a little oasis during this season, a welcome break from the activity and fullness of the season.

Most of us probably can't get away for a quiet retreat, but we all can create spaces of quiet rest. Take a few minutes in your home to turn off the television or whatever noise makers you have, set your phone far away (so you can't easily pick it up), and sit and listen to the noises of the house. You might hear the refrigerator turning on and off, the blowing of the furnace fan, or the sounds of a car passing by. Learning to listen to these more subtle sounds is healing and renewing, and the gift of a quiet few minutes might be life-giving in ways that surprise you.

Task for the day: Take five minutes to rest in silence.

Wednesday, December 4, 2024

I have calmed and quieted myself - Psalm 131:2

Many of us are stuck in fight-or-flight mode. Our bodies have the ability to go into high alert, sensing potential danger and the need to fight it or flee from it. It psychs us up in order to do something about the possible threat.

Many of us, though, get stuck in this way of being. We move through the world constantly stressed and on edge. We're stressed and angry and ready to snap. We drive ready to jam on the gas or brake and ready to lay on the horn at whatever offense we encounter. We move through stores and public spaces ready to confront whatever we view as wrong. We consume news that puts us in stress, telling us whatever new thing is the worst thing ever unless we do something about it. This is an unhealthy way to live. Our bodies have the ability to ramp up to avoid danger, but when we live constantly on edge, it takes a toll on our bodies.

The good news is we can do something about it. Taking some time to rest and focus on our breathing deescalates our nervous systems. Laughter renews us and takes us out of stress. Time in natural settings quietly soothes our inner being. Prayer is a way to not only connect with God but to also create some peace in our bodies. We, ourselves, and the people around us all benefit when we're able to let go of stress and learn to move through the world with more peace.

Task for the day: Do one thing that creates peace in your body.



Thursday, December 5, 2024

Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. - Luke 2:4-6

Whenever I lead a memorial service, I think, "Of all the billions of lives lived on this earth, here is this one who mattered." Here were hopes and loves, challenges and victories, all lived in the life of one person. Estimates say that 109 billion people have lived on Earth, but I have to believe that each one out of the 109 billion still has significance.



Christians often refer to the "scandal of particularity" when talking about the incarnation. That God would show up in one life, one of those 109 billion, and meet us in the particularity of one person and place seems almost scandalous. Who would work that way? We usually assume bigger and bolder is the way to go. Preachers have dreams of speaking to tens of thousands in megachurches. Authors have hopes of selling millions of books. Musicians want to sell out stadiums on tours that connect with hundreds of thousands. But the outrageous claim of our faith is that God shows up in one particular life and one particular and not very notable place.

If God is incarnate in one particular person, doesn't it mean, too, that all lives are made holy? Aren't all lives and places of significance if this one life, the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is the place God meets us? Could it be that your life, in all its uniqueness and drudgery and beauty, your particular life, is holy and beautiful and loved by God?

Prayer for the day: Loving and knowing God, be with me in all the uniqueness and detail of my life today. Amen.

Friday, December 6, 2024

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." - John 3:16

I remember, in the 70's and early 80's, the special days when the Sears and JC Penney Christmas catalogs came. It must have been a rough day for the mail carrier, because they were thick books full of stuff. There was, in my memory, a little bit of everything in the catalogs, clothes and tools and home goods. The most important part for me, then, was the toys. I can't say I took my time with much those days, but I would take long sessions pouring over those pages, considering each thing. Every *Star Wars* toy, ball and bat, slot car racing track, and remote control car needed considering. Eventually I would go through it with a pen, circling the things I thought were worthy of arriving under the Christmas tree. I'm sure my parents took my ideas into consideration, but they had their own thoughts about what I needed, too, but for a while it was so lovely to look through those pages and wish.

What is your deepest wish? If you could flip through a wish book of hopes for your life and pick something out, what would it be? All of us carry these hopes, and maybe they go unexpressed and they're buried deep in secret places in our hearts, but we all have them. What would happen if you got some of your wishes fulfilled

or all of them? Would you then finally be happy? Or would the ache in your heart still be there? What will it be like if you get none of your wishes? Can you still find joy, even then?



I didn't get all I wished for under the Christmas tree back when I was studying the Christmas catalogs like they were dropped from God's hands to my lap? I really only got a few, but I was still ok. Most of all, I was loved, and I didn't appreciate it enough then, but I was. Whatever gifts I did get were tokens of that love that was all around me, and the gifts didn't last but the love has. Whatever your life looks like now,

whatever wishes you have fulfilled or don't, I hope you know you're loved. What is Christmas but a celebration of "For God so loved the world"? Even if your life seems like a wish list with not enough things checked off, know that the most important one, love, is there all the time for you.

Prayer: Loving God, May I know your love for me today. Amen.

Saturday, December 7, 2024

“Allow the children to come to me,” Jesus said. “Don’t forbid them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these children.” - Matthew 19:14



We have kids here at the church most weekdays attending the preschool that meets in our building. I hear them come and go. Some I get to know and say hello to. I’ve been a father for a few years now, so every day involves the care of a young one. It’s very different, for me, from just ten years ago. Ten years ago I was living on my own, and the only kids I regularly encountered were the ones I saw on Sunday mornings at church. My life is better now with regular contact with kids.

Children remind me of a future that is beyond what I’ll experience. Kids bring energy and life. Kids bring honesty. Kids will call out your lies and dishonest living in ways that adults won’t. I do all kinds of fun things, now, with a kiddo in my life. Life is better with kids around. As much of a blessing as children are, children, too, are the most vulnerable. They can’t vote or advocate for their needs, and they often get ignored. Children are more likely to be in poverty, experience food insecurity, or be worried about having a home.

If you’re doing something for a child this Christmas, do one more thing that will help the well-being of children. If you’re buying a gift for your child, grandchild, niece or nephew, give a gift, too, to an organization that promotes the good of children. The scouts, UNICEF, and Save the Children are a few. Here in Washington state, Embrace Washington helps kids in the foster system. And, advocate for the needs of children. Write a letter to one of your elected representatives asking them to put children’s needs at the top of their agenda. Jesus came to us as a child. As an adult he wanted to welcome kids when his followers were ready to push them away. He made a place for children. Let’s do the same.

Task for the day: Do one thing that supports the well-being of children.

Sunday, December 8, 2024

John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. - Luke 3:3

There’s a song by the band, Lake Street Dive, called *I Can Change* that, whenever it comes on, my heart tunes in to it in ways that are much deeper than the ways I usually hear music. The song begins with the words, “Hate casts a long shadow. I know that I lie in it and let it rule my mind from time to time.” I hear it and think, “Yes. That’s me.” I’m too often putting on the old clothes of resentment, hate, grudges, and loathing for others and myself. Then the chorus of the song comes with the good news: “I can change. I can still change.”

We think of John the Baptist as a rough guy delivering a harsh message, but the core of his message was that we can change and be forgiven. He wasn’t just an angry preacher wagging his finger at his crowds, telling them how awful they were. Instead, he was offering people forgiveness and a fresh start. In a way, he’s singing the same song saying, “We can change.”

How do you need to change this Advent? What do you need to leave behind? What is something new you need to embrace? How can you welcome forgiveness and a fresh start, allowing God to grow something in the fertile soil of your life? It’s not too late to hear the voice of John the Baptist, calling people to repentance and forgiveness, and know again the beautiful arrival of change.

Task for the day: Change something.



Monday, December 9, 2024

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. - I Thessalonians 5:16-18

If you could be anywhere right now, where would it be? If someone gifted you a first-class ticket to any destination of your choosing, along with all the expenses you'd need for a trip, and all your local responsibilities would be covered, where would you go? Would you go to a tropical destination? Would you travel overseas? Would you go see people you miss? I'd probably go to the desert in Arizona, or I might find a European destination that appealed to me. Maybe I'd find my way to South America or Asia.



Here's the bad news: that's extremely unlikely to happen today. More than likely, you're going to be right here in the place you call home. There's nothing wrong with dreaming or longing to be in another place, but in all likelihood you're right here in this place today. It may have fewer palm trees or elegant European cafes, but it is home for you, and that's where you are.

Ram Dass had a book I've never read, but the title was always intriguing. It was called *Be Here Now*. That's the job for most of us, most of the time, to actually show up to the place you're at in the moment you're in. You are where you are, and the best path is to actually be where you are, to enjoy and appreciate it in all its fullness and uniqueness. You might be surprised by the good you see, all the ways you can spiritually travel, when you actually see the place you're in.

Task for the day: Try to notice and appreciate the place where you are.

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. - Philippians 4:8

What is your favorite Christmas movie? Surely that question is enough to start a conversation. I'll spend time in the storehouse of my mind thinking through the favorites, classifying my top five holiday films. Our ancestors gathered around fires at night, telling stories and legends. We still do our share of that, but we have movies, too, stories told on a big screen (or a smaller home screen). There are movies, I'm sure, that when you recall them brings back the laughter, tears, anticipation, or excitement of each. I regularly replay funny lines from movies in my head, laughing again at each rerun played on the screen of my memory. I often think about inspirational moments in Christmas movies, Kevin in *Home Alone* being reunited with his family or George Bailey recognizing the value of his life in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and I'm inspired to live a better life.

Watching a movie can be a spiritual act, a chance to grow and learn and expand one's spirit. Movies, at their best, expand our understanding of humanity and our own selves. The cold season is as good a time as any to watch a movie. If money and weather allows, take a trip to the local theater. If being home-based makes more sense to you, find a good Christmas movie to watch at home. If there are others in your household, the watching can draw you together and make for good conversation after. I remember a winter day, a few years ago, my wife and I watched *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, and when it was over I thought, "I need to be a better person." Movies can do that, call out the best in us and renew our spirits. Maybe a movie today might do that for you.

Task for the day: Watch a Christmas movie that helps you grow as a human being.



Wednesday, December 11, 2024

That same day two of them were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem.- Luke 24:13 (MSG)

Is there anything as healing, as life-giving, as the simple act of taking a walk? Whenever I take a walk, my body is renewed, my mind is cleared, and my mood is changed. I remember after a surgery, I was unable to do more strenuous activity, but my doctor recommended walking. I was surprised with how much I enjoyed the walks. While walking, I had time to notice nature, converse if someone was joining me, and just enjoy the experience. Each walk was a renewal of body and spirit.



I've heard, if you're stuck on a problem and your mind can't seem to get to the solution, just taking a walk allows your mind to passively work on the problem. When the walk is done, and you return to the work, you might find the freshness of mind brings you a solution. I owe my marriage to a walk. While on a trip, I

took a walk after dinner, and I took a picture of a unique building. I posted the picture to social media and my wife, then a friend from way-back in another place, recognized the building because she'd moved to where I was visiting. We reconnected, and here I am writing this wearing a wedding ring. All of that was the gift of a walk.

It's December, and walking might not be available where you are, but even an indoor walk might bring treasures, surprises, and a body that feels better. If you can, get your body up and take a walk.

Task for the day: Take a walk.

Thursday, December 12, 2024

Speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts. - Ephesians 5:19



What's the Christmas music that gets you up and moving or gets your heart filled with joy and your voice singing? Put on The Pogues singing *Fairytale of New York*, and I'm nodding and singing along to their joyful and tragic Christmas song. When I hear Christmas music from the 80's, something like Wham!'s *Last Christmas*, a wave of nostalgia and longing hits me, drawing me into my high-school heartache and joys all over

again. Even now, if I hear some of my favorite Christmas tunes, my heart grows with joy and exhilaration, feeling things I don't allow myself to feel in the normal drudgery of living.

What is it about that song that hits you? Does it remind you of a time you miss? Does it unlock a part of your body that stays hidden? Does it translate some secret part of your heart that you don't know how to express until you find yourself singing as you drive along in your car? Whatever it is, our lives are so much better for the gift of music, especially here before Christmas.

Can you imagine a life without music? It would be a lonely, colorless life. Even if you think you're tone-deaf and without any rhythm, the right song will get you singing along and tapping your toes to the beat of joy. I don't want to even think about a life without that.

Task for the day: Listen to Christmas music that makes you feel something.

Friday, December 13, 2024

Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts. - Psalm 126:2

When you think of Santa, don't you think of him laughing with a "Ho, ho, ho"? When was the last time you laughed with that type of deep belly laugh? Sometimes I really have to think about it, to remember the time I held my stomach while I laughed. Maybe it was a joke, a funny movie, or an amusing anecdote, but something got me laughing. Todd and I, in the church office, regularly get ourselves laughing with funny stories. Just the other day we were both doubled over and teary with laughs over a story from older days.



I know not every season in life is given to laughter. We've all had dark journeys, days and weeks and years we'd just rather forget, and in those times laughter isn't plentiful. Saying we should just laugh more doesn't work for every time in life. But if you can, allowing some laughter surely would make the day better. Watch a movie that makes you laugh, find or tell a good joke, or just remember a funny episode from your past, and see if the chuckles they produce do you some good.

I've had, more than once, people mention they love the sound of hearing me laugh. Maybe I don't do it enough so it is surprising. If you can, don't let laughter be rare in your day or your life. Find some reason to laugh and see if it doesn't make the day a little better.

Task for the day: Laugh.

Saturday, December 14, 2024

But I will remember the Lord's deeds; yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past. - Psalm 77:11

Do you have an old box of photographs? If you're old enough, you probably have a box or two of random photographs. Whenever I get mine out, I lose an hour wandering through memories. When I review pictures on my phone from years ago, the same thing happens. I'm lost reviewing pictures and videos from years past.

What is about the past that can carry us away? Usually, when I'm thinking about past experiences, I'm remembering who I was then and what I was doing. I think too about people I've known and possibly lost. I remember them and the influence they had. All of that and more comes when I take a journey through the memories brought back by old pictures.

The past is over, but it is a part of us. The experiences, growth, people, and places of the past all shape who we are now. The past doesn't have to confine us or constrain us only to a few possibilities, but it is a part of us. Even things I've turned away from in my past, the turning away is still something that's made me who I am. Usually a time with old pictures brings all of that back, the good and the bad of the past. Mostly (and maybe I'm lucky), when I see old pictures I'm thankful. I'm thankful for what the past, even the harder passages, gave me and who it has shaped me to be now.

Task for the day: Look through old pictures and consider the past.

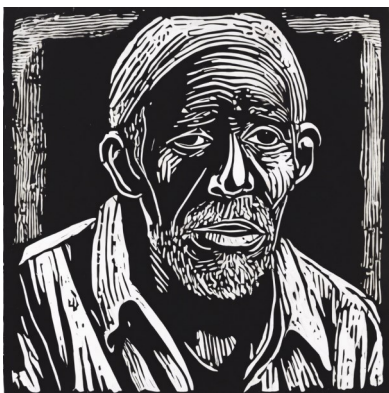


Sunday, December 15, 2024

The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners. - Isaiah 61:1-10

What is good news for you? Maybe it's a good medical report or a healthy new child in the family. I remember letters in the mail and phone calls announcing good news, scholarship and job offers that came with celebration. I was usually glad to share whatever new it was, the information that came telling me that my life could improve.

But what would be good news to the poor? What would make the poor rejoice and share the good that's happening to them? Would it be adequate housing, a job with a generous salary, or a release from crushing debts and financial burdens? Isaiah, at the beginning of chapter 61, describes his prophetic calling. He says God's spirit is on him and God has anointed him, and the first thing he says he is anointed to do is bring good news to the poor.



Along with healing for those brokenhearted and liberation for those in captivity, Isaiah says God has given him the job of bringing good news to those in poverty. I realize my own privilege when I understand good news for me usually means health, opportunities, and more privileges. For the poor, though, good news may mean access to basic necessities and access to a life lived without the daily burdens of not having enough. If this is a season of good news, and it is, it must be good news to all, not just people like me. We are people of good news, and we can share good news with others. Maybe there might be something you can do, today, that would be good news for the poor.

Task for the day: Do something that brings good news to someone in poverty.

Monday, December 16, 2024

Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart. - Psalm 90:12

I have a broken heart. It's broken, not in the way we usually say hearts are broken. My actual physical heart has problems. The problems started earlier this year and they led to a couple ER visits and then many cardiologist visits and tests. At the time of this writing, I'm still waiting to get in for one more test to get some clarity on my problems. This is new for me, though. For most of my life I've skated through without many physical challenges. Now, though, I have moments and days where I am lightheaded and dizzy, unsure how the day will turn out. Occasionally, when I feel bad, I want to jokingly echo Fred Sanford from the old show, *Sanford & Son*, saying, "This is the big one, Elizabeth!" Another wiser part of me, though, says don't make jokes about heart attacks and death when the joke could be on me.



Our bodies are resilient but also frail. Our bodies can overcome so much and do so much, but they also are subject to sickness and defects. Our bodies are miracles of beauty and wonder, but they also are vulnerable and fallible. Eventually, too, our bodies stop working and we die.

Whatever challenges you know in your body, they could be not just burdens but opportunities for growth and empathy. I have a new appreciation for those with needs in their health now that I have my own needs. My broken heart leads me to slow down now and not fast-forward through life. When I slow down I see others whose health has unique needs. Knowing this broken body won't go forever makes me appreciate the time I do have, too. The musician, Warren Zevon, knowing his days were numbered due to mesothelioma gave this wise advice: "Enjoy every sandwich." Hopefully even the most simple sandwich can bring joy in the life I have in my body. Psalm 90 asks God to teach us to number our days so that we might have a wise heart. My broken heart teaches me to number my days, and I hope even as it's broken it's a little more wise now, too.

Prayer: Faithful God, Teach us to number our days so that we may have wise hearts. Amen.

Tuesday, December 17, 2024

God so loved the world .- John 3:16

There's a question we ask and answer almost every day: "How are you?" How many times have we asked or been asked that question? I usually answer it, not thinking, with a simple "fine." Many times I have said "fine," I have not actually been fine. Many times I've masked pain, doubt, misery, and loneliness behind a forced smile and the words "fine."

Who do you go to, though, when you're not fine? Do you bury the pain deep inside, or is there a person or place you can go to where you are your whole self, able to express pain and seek help? I've learned, during the holidays, that some are not ok. The stress of the time and the expectations that all should be happy and jolly leave some with an ache in their hearts that is hidden but still very real.



This is not everyone, I know, but some. If you are part of the suffering some during the holidays, know this: you are loved. The message of our faith is "For God so loved the world," and that's the love we celebrate at Christmas. And there are people in your life who love you and will be with you in whatever hurt you carry. There is someone out there who will listen to you and love

you in whatever pain you have. If you're not fine right now, you don't have to be alone.

Task for the day: Share your heart with someone who will truly hear you.

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. - Matthew 2:3

There are basic Christmastime villains. Ebenezer Scrooge, Scrooge McDuck, The Grinch, and Harry and Marv, the thieves in *Home Alone*, are all easily classified as bad guys. You could add another to the list, and he's the original Christmas villain. King Herod, the Roman ruler of the area where Jesus is born, is the first wrongdoer of the Christmas story. You probably know the narrative. The Magi come to Herod, after following the star signaling a new king of the Jews, and Herod, already in power, tries to weed out this threat to his power. He attempts to get rid of Jesus, first by trying to trick the Magi into letting him know where Jesus is and then putting to death all the infant boys in the area.



Villains in stories usually follow a certain type. They have evil looking mustaches or goatees. They rub their hands together. They have a maniacal laugh. They wear black like Darth Vader or they are disfigured like Two Face in *Batman*. These are all easy stereotypes, ways that stories tell us these people mean the good person in the story harm. It would be easy to see Herod this way, his fingertips pressed together as he plots to remove Jesus from the story.

When I think about it, though, I realize that I am not a stranger to Herod's impulses and behavior. King Herod is threatened by the new thing God is doing which he perceives as taking away from what he has, and all of us are guilty of that. I think about how many times I've resisted, fought against, or challenged something that was new and helpful in my midst simply because it caused me to change my status quo. I wonder how many times I pulled a Herod when a new idea, person, or opportunity came to me, but I was threatened because it made me go outside of myself and welcome a different reality. Here, today, we're given a choice; will we welcome whatever God is bringing to us, or will we fight it like King Herod?

Task for the day: Say "yes" to something new.

Thursday, December 19, 2024

Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." - Luke 1:38

Yesterday we mentioned Herod, the one who tried to fight God's purposes, and Herod's opposite in the Christmas story is Mary. Mary said yes.

I remember the teenage fear that came with asking someone on a date. I was never the overconfident guy, the cool dude who could just walk up to someone and ask for her phone number or her presence at the Homecoming dance. The question always looming for me was, "What if she says 'no?'" If she said no I'd be embarrassed. I didn't know if I could walk down the school hall again and face her. Everyone, I thought, would label me a loser if I asked and she said no.

I remember the fear of asking the question. I'd sit in front of the phone for many minutes, trying to work up the courage to dial her number. Once I did, I tried to dial rapidly before I talked myself out of it, afraid that if I thought about it more I couldn't do it. When there was an answer on the phone, I'd ask if the young woman was there, and when she was on the phone, with hesitation, I'd ask for her to go with me to the dance or the movies or whatever it was. I remember the beautiful words, after all my hesitation. I'd hear, on the other end of the line, "Yes."

Mary says yes, not to a date but to God's plans. An angel shows up with the news of a coming child, and not only a child but the plans to change the fortunes of the world. It begins with her journey as a mother. Mary's simple reply, so full of faith and hope, is a yes. May it be the same with us, too.

Task (again) for the day: Say "yes" to something new.



Friday, December 20, 2024

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. - Matthew 1:24

I believe one of the unsung heroes of the Christmas story is Joseph. Joseph doesn't play the leading man in this movie. He's quietly there in the background. Jesus and Mary play a larger role, but Joseph is needed, too. Joseph wants to quietly walk away when the news of this child has come. It takes an angel to talk him into staying, and Joseph stays. We don't know much about Joseph. We know he was a righteous man. We're told he was a carpenter. By the time of Jesus' adult ministry, Joseph is not mentioned, leading us to expect that he had died by then. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers call him the Patron Saint of Homes, and I have to think Joseph was there, making a home for his family.

We'd all like to believe we are the stars of the show. We all want to be the leading woman or man in the movie. We look down on those who aren't the loudest or most noticeable. When we do that, though, we ignore the quiet saints among us. All around us are people quietly doing the right thing without the need for recognition or the spotlight. In sports they refer to "glue guys," players who aren't getting all the stats and recognition but yet quietly do the things to hold the team together. Joseph was a glue guy, someone who when called to quietly get on board with a bigger story did his part.

There are people like this around us all the time, quietly serving in ways that hold us and the world together. What would we be without these quiet saints among us? Surely there is someone like Joseph in your life, too. Maybe they don't even want or need the spotlight, but a quiet thank you might lift their spirits today.

Task for the day: Thank a quiet saint.



Saturday, December 21, 2024

If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you!- Psalm 139:11-12

Today is the winter solstice, making it, here in the Northern Hemisphere, the shortest day of the year. Here in Eastern Washington the sun will set at 4:01 PM. Breakfast and dinner, today, will likely both be eaten with darkness outside.

We usually think of darkness as scary or forbidding. I remember the fear of going alone into the dark basement of my childhood house, afraid of what might lurk in the mystery of the darkness. Even now, when I step out into the dark backyard, the second before the motion-activated light turns on is a scary second of mystery and fear. I had a dream, years ago, looking out to the darkness of the Missouri River at night in my hometown. I couldn't even see the river, but I knew it was there. Gazing into the thick darkness, I said, "How beautiful." There was something, in the dream, beautiful about the darkness, something lovely about the heaviness of night.



So much of life is like tonight's darkness, unknown, mysterious, and possibly fearful. But even in the darkest places of life, God is not absent. Our Christian faith tells us that Jesus, whose arrival we celebrate at Christmas, met us in the darkest places of life, the cross and the tomb. If Jesus has walked that path, know that whatever valley of the shadow of death you walk through today, God is there, too.

You don't need to be scared of the dark.

Task for the day: Appreciate the darkness of the longest night

Sunday, December 22, 2024

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. - Luke 1:51-53

People like me do our best to ignore verses like these. Most of my life, I've enjoyed privileges. I've never wondered if there will be food on the table. I've never been without a place to call home. I'm not, because of my gray hair and light skin, the first accused if something goes missing. I've been able to, because of the generous support of others, walk across graduation stages and rub shoulders with powerful and influential people.

Even beyond what I have or already enjoyed, I aspire to more privileges. I aspire to champagne wishes and caviar dreams. I dream about nights in fancy hotels, being chauffeured about in luxury automobiles, and dining at restaurants where the prices aren't even on the menu (because if you have to ask, it's too much). I think to myself, "I'll be living the good life, then, when I'll have enough to buy every want and spend all my problems away."

Mary, though, envisions a different reality. Here as she celebrates both Jesus and John the Baptist's coming births, she celebrates, too, that God is turning everything upside-down. God is lifting up the poor while giving the rich some downward mobility. God is letting the privileged experience some new-found emptiness while also filling the pockets and plates of those who have lived without. People like me should take notice and know that God isn't as concerned with getting me in the back of a limousine as God is concerned with making sure those with none have enough.



Task for the day: Make your place with the lowly, the hungry, and the empty-handed.

Monday, December 23, 2024

Some chatter on like a stabbing sword, but a wise tongue heals. - Proverbs 12:18

Happy Festivus for the rest of us! Today, December 23, is Festivus. Festivus is not a real holiday but something given to us by the television show, *Seinfeld*. In the show, George Costanza's father, Frank, has created an alternative holiday that involves feats of strength, an aluminum Festivus pole, and the airing of grievances. Frank begins the airing by saying, "I've got a lot of problems with you people, and now you're gonna hear about it!"

You're probably getting ready, if you're not already there, to be around extended family at Christmas, and it's safe to say there are probably grievances with the gathering. Within any human connection there are mistakes, hurt, slights, abuses, and aggrieved hearts. Not every family is this way, but I know for some getting together involves simmering discontent hidden by cool smiles and polite conversation.

The Christmas dinner table is probably not the time to air your grievance, but could your gathering lead to a more transparent conversation with your loved one? Is your grievance keeping your family from being a nourishing presence in your life, and could working through it make for a level place of loving? I know not every grievance needs airing, too. Sometimes the right thing is to silently forgive and move on whether it does or doesn't involve a deeper connection with family. Whether your gatherings are joyful or strained, or a mix of both, I hope it leads to clarity on what loving conversations need to be had.

Prayer: Ever-present God, Give us clarity on how to heal our hurts in our families. Amen.



Tuesday, December 24, 2024

While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. - Luke 2:6

One of my favorites on social media is Barista Dritan Alsela. He's an Albanian man, now Germany-based, who likes filming himself with a two-liter coffee cup. He'll quietly drink from the cup while onlookers gawk at the absurdity of his humongous cup of coffee. Coffee lovers appreciate, though, the spectacle. There's a part of my coffee-loving heart that thinks, "Yes, pour me a cup of coffee that big."

I'm a week ahead of myself, but I'm thinking of a New Year's Eve song, not a Christmas Eve tune. In *Aud Lang Syne*, the Robert Burns poem put to the tune often sung at the beginning of the new year, we sing the line, "We'll take a cup of kindness yet." I wish the cup of kindness we drink would be like that two-liter cup of coffee, more than any one person could contain.



This is not a particularly kind time. Maybe the gentleness of Christmas Eve might call us to serve up a cup of kindness for ourselves and the world around us. Maybe the candlelight of Christmas Eve, drawing us to peer into the manger and see Jesus there, vulnerable, humble, and lowly, might draw out some tenderness for one another. May we see for all our neighbors, unhoused friends seeking shelter, migrant families hoping to get past a border to a safe home, those near and far doing what they can just to hold it together for one more day, those fleeing the power of addiction, those just doing their best to be a human being today, may we see them all as one of us just as Jesus was one of us, and may our hearts be warmed to kindness for one another.

If God could meet us there in the manger, then surely we can meet our neighbors near and far with sympathy and a cup of kindness shared among us all.

Prayer: Gentle Jesus, Serve us all an extra-large cup of kindness this night.

Wednesday, December 25, 2024

She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom. - Luke 2:7

I remember visiting a new mother and child a few hours after the boy was born. The mother was gracious enough to allow me to hold him, and this little boy new to the world slept quietly in my arms. After all the preparation, the months of pregnancy, the baby shower and acquiring all the baby stuff, and the time in labor, here was a boy just beginning his life. All of the anticipation led to this child's beginning, a life that had just begun as I held him.

Today we see Jesus, the same way, just beginning. We know the whole story, but we pause for a minute at this point, to savor the moment for what it is. After all the months of waiting, the travel to Bethlehem, the time delivering him, here is Jesus swaddled and laid in a manger. I've never believed the line, "No crying he makes," in *Away in the Manger*, but the description is peaceful, Jesus born but now quietly sleeping, just beginning his earthly story. Our stories still have plenty of pages in them, but we pause here, too, on this Christmas to peer into the manger and appreciate a story just beginning.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for this Christmas day. As we look to the beginning of Jesus' story, we ask, too, would you love us and be with us as our stories go forward? Amen.

