



SEASON of ADVENT

— A Time of Anxiety or Anticipation —



DEVOTIONAL BOOK

Advent 2022

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Advent: A Time of Anxiety or Anticipation?

Introduction

Advent is a season that can be filled with hecticness, confusion, anxiety, and anticipation all at the same time. According to our personal calendars, we have barely recovered from Thanksgiving, and we are zooming toward Christmas Day at an alarming speed. According to the calendars of advertisers and merchandizers, preparations for Christmas started way before Halloween. So, reality is here, and we find ourselves beginning to feel the pressure of counting down the shopping days until December 25...**spoiler alert**...only 28 shopping days left from the first Sunday in Advent until December 25th...Christmas Day.

The truth is the preparation over the next four weeks of Advent will occur on two levels. On the one hand, there is the secular part of Christmas where many of us will shop 'til we drop...plan menus...send Christmas cards...decorate our houses inside and outside...give and go to parties...attend programs...wrap presents...plan out-of-town and in-town visits to family and friends all while keeping our daily life routines going. On the other hand, there is the Church preparation time of Advent

which beckons to stop...look...and listen for the voice of God who calls us to turn our hearts and minds back to the two reasons for Advent...a birth in Bethlehem and the anticipation of the second coming of Christ.

This Advent devotional guide has two purposes:

- First, it invites us to pause each day and take a deep breath, to turn away from the call of those preparations for Christmas that bring on anxiety and to discover a calm joy of anticipation and expectation of the coming of the babe in Bethlehem.
- Secondly, it invites us to study Polk Street's Core Values in connection with the Christmas stories.

We will follow a roadmap visiting four key waystations reading and pondering a devotional each day of Advent linking the Christmas stories to the following Core Values of Polk Street: *Hospitality, Authenticity, Theological Consistency, Innovation, Teamwork, and Grace*. (Polk Street United Methodist Church Website)

Let's begin this Advent journey at the first waystation: The Core Value of ***Hospitality***.

Advent: Week One

November 27: First Sunday in Advent

Hospitality

Hospitality: “We will care for the needs of our guests and extend an invitation to all people we encounter.”

Luke 2: 1-7 “In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. 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. 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.” (Common English Bible Version)

“No Place for Them in the Guestroom”

When I was twelve years old, our family took a vacation to Oregon. On our way home, late in the afternoon as we were traveling through Durango,

Colorado, our car developed trouble. By the time the car was fixed it was getting dark. My Dad decided we would stay overnight in Durango rather than drive unfamiliar, two-lane mountain roads to the next town several miles away.

What we did not know was that the next morning the opening of a hunting season began around the Durango area. As we searched for a hotel or motel room to accommodate our family of four, we found there was "no room for us in any guestroom or inn."

Having no choice Dad started driving towards the next town in the dark. Several miles outside of Durango, Mom and Dad spotted some very rustic looking tourist cabins. Dad pulled in and went to the office area to see if one might be available.

The manager explained they were all occupied, but he would talk to one of occupants to see if he would be willing to give up his cabin for one night and stay with his friend in his camping trailer, which was parked next to the cabin. The man agreed to let us have the cabin.

As we entered the cabin, we discovered how rustic it was...bunk beds...no indoor bathroom...only cold running water from the tap in the sink; but it was clean and a place to stay safely overnight even if we had to go down the trail to the outhouse hoping... no bear would greet us.

Luke tells of Mary and Joseph traveling 80 miles south from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Upon arrival Joseph began to seek a place for them to stay. Bethlehem, having a population between a few hundred and one thousand people, probably only had one inn, which was most certainly not a five-star accommodation.

The impression we might get by reading Luke's account is one of inhospitality by the inn keeper; it probably was not. The Mid-Eastern hospitality culture of the time would not have turned Mary and Joseph away so that they had to fend for themselves out in the harsh elements of weather or worry about being attacked by unscrupulous people or wild animals. Nor would they have allowed pregnant Mary to not have some privacy in case she gave birth while there. Perhaps all the living space within the inn or the houses were filled with inhabitants and visitors so that the one space the host or innkeeper could offer was the next best accommodations...the lower-level room with the animals where they would have shelter and privacy.

Hospitality may not always look like a five-star accommodation or the finest of cuisine or rolling out the red carpet. It may be a rustic cabin in the woods with no indoor bathroom and cold running water or a lower-level room shared with the animals and a bed of hay in a manger. But what it always looks like

in the church is taking care of the needs of guests through acts of sharing what we have with others. It is making others feel welcomed and at home especially when they most need a home away from home.

Thought for the Day

What we have to offer may not be five-star, but God takes it, blesses it, and makes it enough.

Today, look for opportunities to offer time, a listening ear, or a kind word to others.

Prayer: O God of love and hospitality, open my mind to make room for others even when my life seems the busiest. Amen.

Monday, November 28

Hospitality

Hebrews 13: 1-2 “Keep loving each other like family. Don’t neglect to open your house to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.” (Common English Bible Version)

This scripture reminds the reader of three men coming to visit Abraham bringing the good news of an heir soon to be born to him and Sarah...three strangers, who turned out to be messengers from God.

The story in Genesis 18 demonstrates the art of authentic welcoming. Abraham revealed the values of his society...openness and generosity to strangers as he welcomed the guests humbly and courteously.

Thought for the Day

Think about the times you experienced what it is like “to be the stranger.”

Think about when you decided to either leave or stay...to never return or try again because of the way you experienced “welcome.”

Prayer: Gracious God may I be more like Jesus. Help me be open to outsiders becoming insiders. Amen

Tuesday, November 29

Hospitality

Read Luke 19: 1-10

Luke 19: 5b “... he looked up and said ‘Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.’” (Common English Bible Version)

Hospitality does not always happen within the church walls. At times it begins by building a relationship with people out in the community. Jesus was interested in all people---disciples, Jews, Gentiles, tax collectors and other sinners, children, men, and women... but especially this day...Zacchaeus.

Extending hospitality draws the circle wider. It starts with having open minds, hearts, and doors--“Sharing God’s love in the homes and personal spaces of the very people the church wishes to serve.” (Philip J. Brooks, “What is Hospitality?”)

Thought for the Day

Where might we extend hospitality to young people and young families beyond our buildings other than through money?

Prayer: As Your Son did not limit his relationships to just a few, guide us to those You would have us serve. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

Hospitality

I Peter 4:9 “Open your homes to each other without complaining.” (Common English Bible Version)

As we prepare our church home for Christmas, some of us may find ourselves complaining about all the activities and disruptions in our daily routines. Peter would say there should be no complaining for it is through those very activities that the gift of new guests may come.

Most of us would agree that we want new guests; but then sometimes we find ourselves becoming unsettled because with new guests comes the possibility of gaining new members and with new members comes the possibility of changes as they try to integrate themselves into the life of the church.

Thought for the Day

Does your definition of hospitality go as far as to be open to change in the established routine of your personal life as well as change in the life of the church without complaining?

Prayer: God of love, help me to be more open to ideas and learnings so that I can celebrate the diversity in all aspects of Your creation. Amen.

Thursday, December 1

Hospitality

Genesis 24: 31 “Laban said, ‘Come in, favored one of the Lord! Why are you standing outside? I’ve prepared the house and a place for the camels.’”
(Common English Bible Version)

Philip J. Brooks in his article entitled “What is Hospitality?” states: “While hospitality does happen inside a church space, it does not begin at the church’s front door. It starts in the hearts of congregations committed to consistently reaching new people for Christ and sharing God’s love with the world.” Hospitality is an attitude of the heart more than it is the preparation of tangibles such as rooms, coffee, lessons, bulletins, etc.

Thought for the Day

- What attitude about hospitality resides in your hearts?
- Do we think about others we have yet to meet as favored ones for whom we have a welcoming spirit in our hearts and minds the minute they enter through the doors?

Prayer: For the unconditional love You have for everyone, we give thanks. May we reflect that love wherever we go and with whomever we meet today and in the coming week. Amen.

Friday, December 2

Hospitality

Romans 12: 13 “Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home.”
(Common English Bible Version)

In 1943, Abraham Maslow, an American Psychologist, authored a paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation.” He listed five levels of human psychological needs that contribute to an individual’s decision-making process. The third level is our need to be connected through love and belonging.

Everyone wants to be accepted, wanted, and included despite our insecurities, fears, doubts, mistakes, shyness, and negative self-stories we carry around in our minds. We want to be seen as a person who has worth and purpose.

Thought for the Day

In what way do you participate in the life of the church to make others feel they belong and have found “home” in this community of faith?

Prayer: O God of love and acceptance help me to feel I belong so that I can help others feel they belong. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

Hospitality

Luke 10: 40 “By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for the meal. So, Martha came to him and said, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me.’” (Common English Bible)

While preparing for Christmas, thoughts about all the directions in which we are pulled may surface so that graceful hospitality may not be in our hearts, actions, or words. Caring for the needs of others and extending gracious invitations may be hard for us to deliver. It may seem all we can do is to be where we need to be...to see the people we need to see... and to accomplish all the things we need to do. I know Martha well. Are you a Mary? Are you a Martha?

Thought for the Day

Jesus says, “take five” ... be hospitable to yourself so that you can be more hospitable to others.

Prayer: O God, nudge me to be Mary by leading me beside some still waters today. Amen.

Advent: Week Two

December 4: Second Sunday in Advent

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

Authenticity: “We strive to be consistent in our private and public life with no pretense or façade.”

Theological Consistency: “We will strive to be consistent in our commitment to the core doctrines of Christianity and our denomination.”

Matthew 1: 18-22, 24-25: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

(24-25) When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until

she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”
(New Revised Standard Version)

“Joseph, A Good, Moral Man”

Joseph was a man who displayed authenticity and theological consistency as he acted out of his Jewish beliefs. The relationship between Mary and Joseph reflected the customs of the time...an arranged marriage probably by their fathers which involved three stages:

- **The Engagement** which was a time when arrangements were made by the parents or a matchmaker.
- **The Betrothal** period which lasted one year in which the couple did not live together. This was a time when a decision was made to either break the marriage contract or go forward and agree to the ceremony.
- **The Marriage** ceremony, which took place at the end of the year of betrothal.

It was during this one-year betrothal period when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. Joseph had choices to make as outlined in the Scripture:

- He could expose her pregnancy where upon she would have had to endure the

- scandal and the consequences of being an unwed young woman in that day.
- He could quietly divorce her rather than publicly humiliate her for outwardly having broken the marriage contract.
- He could resolve to marry her.

Because Joseph was a “righteous man” the Scripture says, he chose to do the right thing that was both consistent and authentic with his personal beliefs of his faith and his everyday life. His choices showed him to be moral, honorable, and trustworthy. He chose to listen to God and to demonstrate his dedication to living a life congruent with the commandments to love God above all else and Mary as himself.

We all have hard choices to make in life. Choices that call us to choose between our desire to trust only ourselves or trust God; to choose our own pride over humility; and to reflect the teachings of Jesus or to reflect the teachings of the world.

Thought for the Day:

In the way we interact with others, we either reflect God’s goodness or human weakness...the choice is ours.

Prayer: Gracious God, help me not to be a lone clang ing cymbal but a harmonious melody in the lives of others as best as a follower of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Monday, December 5

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

I Corinthians 15:58 “As a result of all this, my beloved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn’t going to be for nothing in the Lord.” (Common English Bible)

Jesus Christ was the epitome of authenticity and theological consistency in a human world of inconsistencies, contradictions, and conflicts even though it led to the cross. By walking the talk as he went on his three-year journey, even in the face of persecution, mistrust, and abandonment, he fulfilled his calling and mission and brought the ultimate gift from God ...victory over sin and death!

We are called from the moment we wake up in the morning until we fall into bed at night to choose between...my way, the world's way, or Jesus' way.

Thought for the Day

Life is difficult, but the gift of God's unconditional eternal love is worth the reward for faithful living.

Prayer: O Lord, it is You, me, and the day! Amen.

Tuesday, December 6

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

Hebrews 10: 23 “Let’s hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promise is reliable.” (Common English Bible)

There was an inner joy and peace within the believers of Christ of the early church whether they were praising God through their singing and preaching or experiencing times of harassment and persecution from the Romans and Jews because of Jesus Christ.

Still today as believers when we confess belief in Jesus as Savior, there are times filled with joy in worship, study, and mission and times of uncertainty, sadness, and oppression in life.

The reliable good news of the Gospel never changes. We can trust Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is the perfect benchmark through which we measure the actions of our lives.

Thought for the Day

In all circumstances God, through Jesus Christ, is just a prayer away for love, strength, and peace.

Prayer: O Lord, through Jesus Christ help me my trust in You be unwavering. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

Matthew 12:10 “A man with a withered hand was there. Wanting to bring charges against Jesus, they asked, ‘Does the Law allow a person to heal on the Sabbath?’ (Common English Bible)

When trying to be theologically consistent, can we become too rigid at times and detrimental?

The Pharisees believed strictly obeying the Law of the Torah made them blameless and just before God. Jesus said he did not come to do away with the Law; but compassion, kindness, and empathy did not have to be sacrificed to follow the Law.

Trying to be theologically consistent and authentic are not to be confused with being stubborn or coldly righteous when confronted with a true need from another.

Thought for the Day

Never be so rigid that it gets in the way of showing God’s love to others.

Prayer: Compassionate God, guide me to be more considerate and kindhearted with whomever I meet today. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

Luke 16: 13 “No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Common English Bible)

This time of the year seems to be a “tug of war” between the quiet birth in Bethlehem and the frantic pace of elves and Santa at the North Pole. And the question to ponder today is which “master” claims more of our time, energy, and money? Which “master” wins?

If we try to attend every activity, spend more than we can afford, and fulfill every expectation of the Christmas season whether from the church or society, we may miss the true gift of Christmas...the simple whisper of a babe in a manger...God’s gift of unconditional love of Himself coming to save us.

Thought for the Day

“Serving God can never be a part-time or a spare-time job.” (William Barclay)

Prayer: Gracious God, direct me toward the gift of balance with my time and resources as I serve You. Amen.

Friday, December 9

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

John 15: 4 “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me.” (Common English Bible)

Years ago, on vacation in Vermont, we stopped at an apple orchard. We were allowed to pick apples off the tree. To this day those apples were the best tasting apples I have ever eaten. They remained connected to the tree until they were perfectly ripe. On the ground around the trees were apples, that for whatever reason had fallen off the tree. Some were damaged, some were shriveled up, and some bruised because the needed nourishment was no longer available to complete the ripening process.

Likewise, if we remain or hang in there with Jesus and his teachings consistently and authentically, we will produce the fruit that enhances our spiritual growth in our journey through life.

Thought for the Day

Making a commitment to read the Bible and pray each day helps us be consistent and authentic in life.

Prayer: Lord, today, through Jesus help me be consistent and authentic and produce good fruit for Your Kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

Authenticity and Theological Consistency

Malachi 3: 6 “I am the LORD, and I do not change; and you, children of Jacob, have not perished.”
(Common English Bible)

Malachi was a prophet to the Jews while in the captivity of Persia. He reminded them God never wavered from his promises even though they did; thus, that was why they were still alive despite their inconsistencies in their relationship with God and others.

Every day lures are cast that are enticing...do whatever it takes to become rich in money; do whatever it takes to be popular; do whatever you want, it is your life; love God when you have time; love your neighbor if it is convenient; and yet, God never gives up the hope that we will return to the covenantal relationship. God always has hope we will learn to be authentic and consistent in our love for God and others. God's love is authentic and consistent.... “I am the LORD, and I do not change!”

Thought for the Day

God's unending love is one of faithfulness, patience, and compassion.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for never giving up on me. Amen.

Advent: Week Three

December 11: Third Sunday in Advent

Innovation and Teamwork

Innovation: “We look for new ways for efficiency and effectiveness in sharing God’s love and bringing hope to the world.”

Teamwork: “We are stronger and better together.”

Matthew 2: 1-3 “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, Magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.’ When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.” (Common English Bible)

Matthew 2: 7-12 “ Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.’ When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to

their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasures chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.” (Common English Bible)

“Heading a New Direction”

The Magi came into Jerusalem and Bethlehem by one route and chose to leave by another. For those of us who are “one route people” whether in our personal lives or the life of the church, having to think about choosing between what we know has been safe and reliable in the past and a “tweak” to fine tune mission and ministry with a new custom, practice, or habit shakes some of us to our core. Yet, the innovative Magi knew they needed to modify their trip to find a new way back home to avoid Herod.

When faced with innovative ideas I do not always embrace them easily at first. In the 1970’s, Ridge, my husband, wanted to buy this “novelty” ...a microwave oven. It was touted in advertisements as the new way to reheat leftovers and to even cook whole meals much faster. I, on the other hand, thought it was silly to spend our hard-earned money on this just to have a faster way to reheat leftovers. Eventually, I gave in and while it has not replaced

cooking on a stove or oven, I use it every day and find it hard to imagine not having one.

The Magi came together and left together...they were a team. Many of us are reluctant to work with a committee because it just seems easier to "to do it myself" rather listen and consider the ideas, thoughts, and opinions of others. It sets our nerves on edge because it is challenging work to communicate, coordinate and collaborate. Teamwork is hard.

Innovation is just a new idea that stays in the mind unless a group of people are willing to try together to see if it works.

- What innovation did you resist that turned out to be rewarding?
- Does working with a team excite you, frustrate you, or bore you?
- Are you willing to say, "let's try it" even while simultaneously thinking "it will never work"?

Thought for the Day

"Sometimes it is not what we hold onto that moves us onto the right path. It is what we let go of."
(Kristy Woodsen Harvey)

Prayer: Lord, open my mind, eyes, ears, and heart to at least consider innovative ideas and being part of a team. Amen.

Monday, December 12

Innovation and Teamwork

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.” (New Revised Standard Version)

Most of us have heard the old saying, “Two heads are better than one.” In life I have discovered that when I have a job to accomplish or a goal to meet if I only rely on myself to get from here to there, I can become frustrated, discouraged, and weary. Only listening to thoughts, opinions, and suggestions from “me, myself, and I” becomes hindering to the outcome.

A good return for the challenging work it takes to accomplish a fruitful outcome of a mission or ministry takes more than one. It takes a team that listens to one another; that is independently dependent upon each other; and then celebrates the joint effort to make it to the finish line.

Thought for the Day

Teamwork “is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.” (Andrew Carnegie)

Prayer: Lord, today let me be the companion that picks up the other when they fall. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

Innovation and Teamwork

Mark 2: 21-22 “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” (NRSV)

Have you ever washed a garment, put it in the dryer and then took it out only to find it had shrunk or frayed or pulled apart? I have. I had not taken the time to read the care instructions. I just assumed the easy way of throwing it in the washer and dryer was sufficient to the need of getting it clean.

In the church we often assume if we just do ministry as we have always done it, that will be sufficient to our vision and mission. We can become comfortably stagnant. Let us not be afraid to ask the “who” are we missing and “why” as we say yes to the call of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thought for the Day

“A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.” (William Shedd, Theologian)

Prayer: Lord, help me not be afraid of change.
Amen.

Wednesday, December 14

Innovation and Teamwork

Luke 10: 1 “After this, the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.” (New Revised Standard Version)

Jesus was an innovator. He set the pace not only for his earthly ministry but for the time when he was gone. Jesus realized the most effective ministry was not a solo ministry; thus, he sent out the seventy, just as earlier he sent out the twelve, in pairs of two.

John Wesley was a classic example of innovation through teamwork. God’s call took him from a Holy Club of six to the world being his parish. He stretched his imagination from being an ordained clergy in the Church of England... to being an open-field evangelist...to founding the Methodist movement. His ministry led him to form classes, recruit lay preachers; to expand from England to America; to move beyond just a movement to a new denomination; to grow from the six holy club members to over twelve million worldwide today.

Thought for the Day

“Untold millions are still untold” (John Wesley)

Prayer: Lord, today lead me to be a witness for You.” Amen.

Thursday, December 15

Innovation and Teamwork

Psalm 96: 1 “Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth!” (Common English Bible)

Music evokes all sorts of emotions in us and often transports us back to a memorable experience. In church, the music that makes church “church” to us, is frequently influenced by the songs we sang in our childhood, youth, and early adulthood. Thus, the truth is many of us do not like to be introduced to new songs, new use of instruments, or new forms of music...” just don’t mess with our traditions!”

And yet, the Psalmist is calling for us to “sing a new song to the Lord.” Why? Just maybe a new hymn, instrument accompaniment, or way to vocalize can spark a new awareness of God in our worship. Every new day offers “a promise of new opportunities, new growth, and great flourishing.” (Rev. Gennifer Benjamin Brooks) So, let us never be afraid to sing a new song with eagerness and enthusiasm.

Thought for the Day

Never get too old to entertain a new thought, a new piece of knowledge, or a new song.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the hope of a new day, a new beginning, and a new person to meet. Amen.

Friday, December 16

Innovation and Teamwork

Proverbs 27: 17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens a friend.” (Common English Bible)

Have you ever had a friend that challenged you to move out of your comfort zone? It can be both helpful and irritating to be pushed to climb a little higher and try a little harder. Being “sharpened” to grow is not always pleasant or exciting at the time. However, I think God connects us with those friends so that we come to know we are not a solo act in this world.

We need people who will rub off our dull edges, sharpen our thinking, challenge us to be the person God created us to be. I would never have gone to seminary and answered the call to ordained ministry without people in my life who pushed me, questioned me, and affirmed me. My life would have been less fulfilling if it were not for the teamwork of God, church, my family, and friends.

Thought for the Day

Being part of a team is “getting your little self out of the way so your big self can stride forward.” (Wilfred A. Peterson)

Prayer: Today, O Lord, thank you for sending friends who care enough to sharpen me. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

Innovation and Teamwork

John 13: 34 “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.” (Common English Bible)

“Love is the creative fire, the inspiration that keeps the torch of progress aflame.” (Wilfred A. Peterson) It was Jesus’ love for the disciples and their love for Jesus that kept the torch of progress going that brought formation of the early church. As Jesus’ disciples, we are called to continue carrying the torch of love forward developing ministries that reach everywhere.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so” is not to be our best kept secret. God calls each generation to be trendsetting ambitious people, who carry this good news to everyone we know and everyone whom God puts in our path. Through innovative collaboration using everyone’s special set of skills we can live out that new commandment of love in making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Thought for the Day

Creativity calls you to see the world anew.

Prayer: O Lord, today help me to be aware of all of life today through the eyes of Christ’s love. Amen.

Advent: Week 4

December 18: The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Grace and Beauty

Grace: “We trust in the unwavering love of God and strive to show that in mercy, compassion, and joy.”

Beauty: “Because we are inspired by beauty, we work to create, sustain, and appreciate sources of beauty.”

Luke 1: 46-55 “Mary said,

‘With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God.

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 the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever.” (Common English Bible)

“The Magnificat”

This passage of Scripture is a beautiful hymn lifted to God by Mary. The picturesque words tell of God’s grace toward Israel through the gift of the holy child to be born. It speaks of the reversals, transformations, and hopes that will happen for Israel through the gift of God’s son birthed by Mary.

Do you ever wonder what thoughts this young teenage girl must have pondered and struggled with before she got to the place of being able to sing this hymn to God?

First, the idea that an angel would come to a small village, Nazareth in Galilee, and not to a big important religious center in Jerusalem would seem incredulous to the religious leaders of the Jewish faith. “Those people” living in Nazareth were seen as awkward, simple, unsophisticated people... “country bumpkins” as William Barclay states.

Second, Scripture tells us Mary was “confused and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.” (Lk. 1: 29 Common English Bible) We can certainly relate to those reactions. Often when we hear or feel within ourselves a call coming from God to move out of our comfort zones through a new mission or ministry arena, questions flood our minds and many of us may feel confusion, reluctance, and fear.

Third, despite all the unanswered questions and “butterflies in her stomach,” and uncertainty about Joseph and the community responses, she accepted the call to serve God and celebrated her blessing by singing this beautiful grace-filled hymn of praise to God.

Thought for the Day

“Just as Mary was called by God to carry within her body the infant Christ, so each of us is called to carry Christ within our lives wherever we go.”
(Seven Women of the Bible, Growing Christian Series)

Prayer: Lord, today help me to be like Mary, open to listen when you call; willing to trust you will provide what is needed to fulfill the mission; and able to sing praises to you for the privilege of serving. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Grace and Beauty

I Peter 3: 4 “Instead, make yourselves beautiful on the inside, in your hearts, with the enduring quality of a gentle, peaceful spirit.” (Common English Bible)

When our granddaughter was a small child, people would often stop and say, “you are a beautiful little girl.” After quite a few times of this, she answered one person who complimented her with “*I know.*” Her tone of voice was not in a rude or prissy manner; but she said it as if was just a very simple fact of her life because people told her so often. Nevertheless, her mom and I thought it was time to talk with her about outside and inside beauty.

First, we explained to her it was important to say, “thank you” instead of “*I know.*” Secondly, it was more important to be beautiful on the inside by being kind to others. As the saying goes “beauty is as beauty does.”

Thought for the Day

The inner qualities of the heart determine our behaviors toward others.

Prayer: O Lord, thank you for the grace you extend to me. Help me spread that same love to others today. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Grace and Beauty

II Corinthians 12: 9 “He said to me, ‘My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.’” (Common English Bible)

In the fourth lesson of the Disciple Bible Study Book there is a challenging question asked... “What weaknesses do you have that God might see as strengths and use?”

Often our weaknesses are the part we want to hide. We do not think of them as being useful to God. The Bible is full of stories about people pleading their inadequacies, messing up, running, and hiding not quite believing in God’s empowering grace.

- *A stammerer who confronted Pharaoh and led the Israelites to freedom,*
- *A powerless young woman who brought into the world a Savior, and*
- *A man who often had “foot in mouth disease” who led the formation of the Christian faith.*

Every time God’s grace wins.

Thought for the Day

“God answers the mess of life with one word: grace.” (Max Lucado)

Prayer: Today, Lord, I trust you will turn my weakness into a strength and use me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Grace and Beauty

Luke 2: 13 – 14 “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” (New Revised Version)

After each of our children were born, we sent birth announcements. We were so excited to share our good news of bringing into the world an extension of ourselves along with all the possibilities of who each of them would become as adults.

In my imagination God posted in a dark, starry sky, a beautiful birth announcement of good news to the shepherds. God was announcing here is an extension of me. He will bring peace, love, and new life to all who believe no matter what your status. Once again, we find grace and beauty in the simple...a starry night...lowly shepherds...and a baby.

Thought for the Day

“Life is full of awe and grace and truth, mystery and wonder.” (Dion DeMucci)

Prayer: Gracious God, today in the noise of life help me find beauty and grace in the simple. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Grace and Beauty

Luke 15: 11 – 13, 17, 20: “Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So, he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. (17) But when he came to himself....” (New Revised Standard Version)

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound” ... when the youngest son came to his senses and headed back home, he was greeted by his father running down the road, hugging and kissing him, putting on the best robe, and throwing a party...one who was lost is now found.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.” John Newton, a slave trader, a skeptic of religion experienced the grace of God. In 1748, during a fierce storm on the high seas, desperate and afraid, he turned to God in prayer. Six years later after retiring, he began to study theology, became a minister, and wrote *“Amazing Grace”* in 1772.

Thought for the Day

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.”

Prayer: O Lord, open my eyes to see and my heart to receive the gift of grace given me today. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Grace and Beauty

Genesis 1: 31 “God saw everything that he made, and indeed, it was very good.” (New Revised Standard Version)

“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful: the Lord God made them all.”

This is the chorus of the hymn *“All Things Bright and Beautiful”* in our UMC hymnal, written in 1848 by Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander. She wrote this hymn based on the phrase in the Apostle’s Creed *“Maker of Heaven and Earth.”*

Because of her reverence for the beauty of the world and her experiences of God’s grace and her talent, she used the proceeds of the sale of her hymns to benefit the poor, mentally handicapped, the deaf, and the sick. (Source: Ms. Byrd, student of Dr. Michael Hawn, Perkins School of Theology.)

Thought for the Day

“The art of the reverence for life is becoming aware that God is the source of all life and that we are one with life” (Wilfred Peterson)

Prayer: God of creation, today make me aware of and hold me accountable to the tasks of taking care of all creation. Amen.

Saturday, December 24

Grace and Beauty

Psalm 46: 10a “Be still and know that I am God!
(Revised Standard Version)

We have reached the last week, the last day of Advent...Christmas Eve. In these four weeks we may have experienced anticipation and anxiety; sung “Santa Claus coming to town” and our favorite Christmas hymns; and tried to create the romanticized idea of creating Christmas and bumped up against the reality of what it takes to do so.

Some of us will go to bed tonight excited and get little sleep anticipating tomorrow; some of us will fall into bed exhausted because once again we tried to do too much trying to make a “perfect” Christmas; and some of us will stay up into the wee hours of the morning because Christmas Day for whatever personal reasons does not bring joy and peace and love to our hearts. But, no matter what our circumstances, all of us need to take some time during this day to be in God’s presence, and “be still.”

Thought for the Day

God’s words of love are first, last, and always through the baby born in Bethlehem.

Prayer: O Lord, for Your presence, love, and the gift of the Christ child I give thanks to You. Amen.

Sunday, December 25

Christmas Day

Luke 2: 15 – 20 “When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.’ They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying, and praising God for all they heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.” (Common English Bible)

Thought for the Day

“In the birth of this babbling child in a Bethlehem manger, God speaks gently, softly, and quietly” to us one more time. (Joe E. Pennel, Jr. “The Whisper of Christmas)

Prayer: May God stir your hearts today and throughout the coming year to look for the quiet in the middle of the chaos, the calm in the middle of any tensions of the day, and for the harmony in the middle of the world’s discord. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas



“TO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE
CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS THE
MESSIAH, THE LORD.” (LUKE 2: 11)