

THE ORIGINAL



**Advent Devotional
2015**

Advent is a season observed in the Christian church as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas. The term is an anglicized version of the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming."

For Christians, the season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ from two different perspectives. The season offers the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah and to be alert for his Second Coming.

The season proclaims the comings of Christ---whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and Spirit and whose return in final victory we anticipate. Each year Advent calls the community of faith to prepare for these comings.

The question is are you prepared for Advent? During the next four weeks this devotional will help you prepare. The "Original Christmas Album" sermon-series devotional has been written by four members of Hyde Park Community UMC.

Each week there is one scripture reading, a main "song" character, a narrative and a few questions for reflection and sharing. Pastor Cathy and Pastor Doug will preach on these same texts during worship each Sunday of Advent. Let the songs of the season touch your souls.

This is a church-wide four week study that you are being invited to participate in during Advent. You can do this in an adult Sunday school class, a Connect Group or in your own personal quiet time at home. Our Children & Family and Student Youth Ministries are participating too.

It is my hope you will take time to prepare for the Advent story being retold. We need to hear and experience it anew as the family of faith. "The Original Christmas Album" will help us focus on the deeper meaning of this holy season. Let us sing, "O Come, Let Us Adore Him!"

May the gift of Jesus fill your hearts and homes with Christmas joy!

Pastor Dave Weaver

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First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015
Zechariah's Song of Faith Luke 1: 67-69
by Marietta Garber

What a bummer! Poor old Zechariah is struck dumb, speechless when he asks the angel/messenger a totally logical question – “Since I am old, and my wife is old, how can we now become parents?” The gospel writer’s take is that he was punished for doubting or questioning God; our interpretation, with our much later knowledge of medical diagnoses, might be that he suffered a small stroke which disabled his speech center – whatever, however, whenever, let’s explore how God used it for their good and for His purposes.

This story is reminiscent of the angel who told Abraham and Sarah, many, many years earlier that they would have a son; they, too, were aged! Sarah, as you may recall, also questioned it, but she escaped Zechariah’s fate. Mary receives startling news close to the time Zechariah hears such. She gently questions the news that she will bear a son, citing her maiden state. The Angel then cites “the Most High,” and she is submissive and responds, “Be it unto me according to Thy Word.” All of these announcements, prophecies defy logic; today, we refer to them as sacred mysteries.

Zechariah returns home after his priestly service in the temple. His wife, Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, becomes pregnant, and they become homebound for months. How did they spend their time? Did the time drag? Did they become restless, doubtful, impatient? Did they learn anew over and over what it means “to wait upon the Lord?” Did they become closer to each other and to God?

The Scriptures do not answer these questions; we do know, however, that Zechariah’s speech was restored after the baby was born. The parents agreed on the name “John.” And we do know, also, that Zechariah then sings this beautiful song about faith, about

redemption, about his son's role in preparing the way for one who is to come. I do believe that the silent time, the quiet time which Zechariah experienced deepened his faith, enriched his waiting and even provided times of joy, all forerunners for his song of faith.

If you have an established quiet time, continue to nurture that. If not, consider quietly and gently working this into your daily routine and your conscious mind. This focus may be "realized" at a traffic light, in the shower, in the 10 minutes before the household awakens. Better still, in a planned, intentional entrance into a prayer place – our Lord will use it all! Many people begin a meditation/prayer program on a small scale, and they discover that they hunger for more.

One such person was John Oxenham (1858-1941), noted British writer, who wrote this beautiful hymn: "Mid All the Traffic of the Ways."

"Mid all the traffic of the ways, turmoils without, within; Make in my heart a quiet place and come and dwell within.

A little shrine of quietness, all sacred to Thyself, where Thou shalt all my soul possess, and I may find myself;

A little shelter from life's stress, where I may lay me prone, and bare my soul in loneliness, and know as I am known;

A little place of mystic grace, of self and sin laid bare, where I may look upon Thy Face and talk with Thee in prayer."

Reflection Questions:

1. *What could be a shrine for you? A shelter? A place of mystic grace?*
2. *Have you experienced these places in former times? Have they rescued you, sustained you?*
3. *How can quiet meditation strengthen our waiting in this Holy Season?*

During this Advent Season, may we wait expectantly, faithfully, and perhaps even "touch the silence." (Elizabeth O'Connor)

Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015
The Angels' Song of Peace Luke 2: 13-14
by Craig Miller

Luke 2:13-14 (New International Version) 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

It was a quiet night in the Bethlehem countryside. An ordinary night like many that had come before. A group of shepherds cared for their sheep, just as they had done night after night. It was routine, perhaps even a little boring. But then suddenly things changed.

First an angel came to visit. That, in itself, was an event like nothing they had ever seen. The angel had come to make an announcement like nothing they had ever heard, that tonight the Savior of the World had been born. Suddenly, a common, routine, boring evening became anything but. In the blink of an eye things changed for the shepherds and for every human being who would come after them.

Even that was not enough, though. Now a great company of God's heavenly host came to join the angel. It was as if God were saying, “You think this is life-changing news? You haven't yet begun to understand.” I get goose bumps when I hear Neal and our choir perform “Handel's Messiah.” But compared to what the shepherds heard that night, what we hear is miniscule in comparison.

Have you ever thought about what multitude or great company of the heavenly host means? Was it a hundred angels? Or a thousand? Or ten thousand? Or ten thousand times ten thousand? Whatever the number, let's agree that there were lots of them, that their singing of God's praises was loud, and that it was meant to bring glory to God at the birth of the Messiah...God with us for all eternity. This was

an over-the-top event. It changed the course of history. It changed the relationship of God to all of God's creation. It brought eternal salvation to humankind. And it was worthy of praise...much praise...loud praise...great rejoicing.

So I'm struck, first, by the way this common, ordinary night turned into the biggest celebration and offering of praise to God that has ever happened before or since. This baby's birth was a big deal!

Second, I'm struck by where God chose to announce his coming to be with his people. It was not in the homes of the wealthy or the temples of the devout. It was not in a setting that was religious. It had nothing to do with the seats of government or power. It came to simple folks...common people who were simply doing their job. God was probably the furthest thing from their minds that night.

This says to me that, in spite of our best efforts, God is always looking to extend God's grace to us. Whether we are rich or poor, whether we are devout or on the margins of religious faith, God cares equally about us and wants to be in relationship with us. Remember how many of Jesus' parables taught us to rejoice over the one (sheep, prodigal, coin, etc.) that had been lost rather than the many that were already there. God wants to be in relationship with us...all of us!

Finally, I'm struck by what the angels said to the shepherds that evening. "On earth, peace." God sent God's son to us to bring us...

- A well maintained building?
- A wide variety of programs?
- A balanced budget?
- A commitment to our long-standing traditions?

Of course, the answer is "none of the above." God sent God's son to bring us peace.

Peace, of course, can be experienced in at least two ways. First, there is peace with ourselves. Are we on a lifelong journey of faith and spiritual growth? Are we doing all we can to understand God's calling

in our lives? Are we working to deny our wants and take up the cross of discipleship? Are we listening, every day, for that still, small voice that overcomes fear, offers hope, brings calm to our lives, and offers a holy relaxation to our souls?

Peace is about prayer. Peace is about seeking to understand God's will for my life. Peace involves listening for God to nudge us or lead us in a certain direction. Peace is about obedience.

Perhaps Richard Foster sums it up best when he says, "We have real difficulty here because everyone thinks of changing the world, but where, oh where, are those who think of changing themselves? People may genuinely want to be good, but seldom are they prepared to do what it takes to produce the inward life of goodness that can form the soul. Personal formation into the likeness of Christ is arduous and lifelong."

And, of course, peace can have to do with the way we relate to one another. We need look no further than our television or an online news source to recognize that peace is hard to come by these days. Our world is filled with war, disregard for God's creation, racial tension, ethnic hatred, and political division. At times, it feels hopeless. We feel overwhelmed and we don't know where to begin. Our resources, our knowledge, and our efforts can't begin to make a difference in overcoming these divisions. And therein lies the problem. When we are confronted by those things that overwhelm us, we tend to try to figure them out, to discern the answers using our knowledge and experience.

We forget the central message to the announcement of the Messiah's birth... "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." If we want to impact the divisions that tear apart our world, we need to insure that we bring God into the equation. We need to pray that "God's favor" rests on the situation at hand. And notice that the word is "pray," not "discuss."

Willard M. Swartley writes about it this way, “One of the weaknesses of the contemporary church’s peace witness is that so often its rationale is grounded not in Scripture but in general cultural notions of justice and fairness. Equally lamentable, Christians who stress biblical authority and preach ‘biblical’ sermons react by criticizing peace and justice proponents and then put peace on discount, regarding it secondary, perhaps even unimportant, to the evangelistic mission of the church.”

And so, as we once again journey through the season of Advent, anticipating that God will break into our world and our lives as God does every year, let us anticipate with the words of God’s Heavenly Host in our minds... “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you believe that additional angels arrived to herald Jesus’ birth? How does their arrival speak to the church today? In what situations can the church have an impact on the world where individual Christians cannot?*
- 2. Why do you suppose that the angels chose to reveal the birth of Christ to non-religious folk first? What are the lessons here for the way we are called to relate to non-Christians today?*
- 3. What does this story tell us about ways we can relate to God? Is there a relationship between the response of the Shepherds and the ways we are called to react to God’s presence in our lives today?*
- 4. What did you think of Swartley’s comment? Describe some situations where our culture influences or defines your faith? How does this happen during Advent and Christmas?*

Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2015
Mary's Song of Trust Luke 1: 46-56
God Keeps God's Promises
By Christine McHenry

I am sure you know the story. Mary, a young girl of 13 or 14 years, lives in the town of Nazareth and is engaged to Joseph. Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel who was sent by God to announce that Mary will give birth to God's Son. After a moment of stunned disbelief, Mary says, "Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (v. 38) What an astounding statement given the potential consequences of being unwed and pregnant in that culture at that time! But Mary trusts God and is obedient to God's will.

In addition to this astounding news, Gabriel tells Mary that her older cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant as well. Elizabeth was thought to be beyond child bearing age, but by the grace of God, she is now 6 months pregnant. Mary goes on a journey to visit Elizabeth and as soon as Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, both she and her unborn son, who will be known as John the Baptist, recognize that Mary is the bearer of God's Son. Elizabeth exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ... And blessed is she [Mary] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (vv. 42, 45) The word "trusted" could easily be substituted for the word "believed" in verse 45. So here are two women at both ends of the age spectrum graced by God and trusting in what God said God would do. What follows is a hymn known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song of Praise or Song of Trust.

The Magnificat is similar to other scriptural hymns of praise such as 1 Samuel 2: 1-10, Hannah's Prayer. The Magnificat combines praise for what God has done with a recognition of God's grace, loving-kindness, and faithfulness. By praising God for her blessings and by remembering how God has acted in Israel's history and how God

promises to act through Israel, Mary is able to say with confidence and trust that the promise made to Abraham and his descendants will be fulfilled (Gen. 12: 1-3). And it is Mary's yet to be born son who will be the agent of that fulfillment.

How is it that Mary is able to trust God in the face of what seems to be the impossible? From my perspective, there are two key factors. First, Mary believes in what she has been told about God through the Hebrew scriptures, but more importantly, she believes in her own experience of God. It is only with an intimate experience of God that Mary is able to say, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (vv. 46b-47) Her experience affirms what she has been told through scriptures (Ex. 43: 6-7a), that the God of Israel is gracious and loving, merciful and faithful. Her experience tells her that all good things come from God and that God has done wondrous things for her (vv. 48-49.) Mary is over-flowing with gratitude!

Second, Mary remembers. She remembers God's goodness (v. 49.) She remembers how God has been merciful to those who fear God by showing reverence and respect to God and by cherishing God. (v. 50.) She remembers how God has rescued her people from oppressors and brought down the powerful, the wealthy, and the proud (vv. 51-53.) She remembers how the lowly have been lifted up (v. 52.) She remembers God's promise to Israel (vv. 54-55,) now to be fulfilled in her unborn son. Mary's experience of a gracious and loving, merciful and faithful God along with her memories of God's goodness and mercy and faithfulness allow her to trust God and God's plans for her.

So, what does all this mean for us today? I can tell you from personal experience that we can trust God to be faithful to God's promises. Trusting that God is with me as I face a serious medical issue gives me strength and courage for the days ahead. Trusting that God's love surrounds me and gently guides me when I go through a spiritual

desert and remembering God's faithfulness in past deserts give me hope and comfort. Trusting in God's forgiveness and mercy helps me to face each new day with an opened mind and receptive heart for what the day may bring. For me, the foundation of this trust is experience and remembering, experience of the scriptures and of the heart and remembering God's grace and mercy and love and faithfulness in my life. So I can assure you that we can trust in God's presence that surrounds us and is within us for strength and guidance. We can trust in God's love that is ever available to us for comfort and hope. And we can trust in God's forgiveness and mercy that are ours for the asking. For our God is a God of grace, mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. Our God is indeed a trustworthy God! We truly can TRUST God in all things great and small. Let us praise God and give thanks!

Reflection Questions:

- 1. How or in what ways are you aware of God's presence, love, and mercy?*
- 2. Think of a time when you found it easy to trust God. What were the circumstances? Why was it easy to trust God in this situation?*
- 3. Think of a time when you found it difficult to trust God. What were the circumstances? What were the obstacles blocking your trust in this situation?*
- 4. In what areas of your daily life do you find that your trust in God is not very sure? Open your heart to God in prayer and ask for God's help to trust God in all aspects of your life.*
- 5. How might you magnify the Lord and rejoice in God this Advent season and throughout the new year?*

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015
Simeon's Song of Hope Luke 2: 25-35
by Kevin Buckley

As a young boy, I was a big snoop when it came to Christmas presents. I would find the wrapped gifts under our family Christmas tree with my name on them and try to guess what was inside by shaking them. One year, my sister gave me a gift that I will never forget. When I shook it, it rattled around inside the box like it was something with many parts or pieces. I thought it might be a model car that I had been wanting or a puzzle or possibly even a board game that was on my wish list. I was taken by complete surprise when I unwrapped the gift on Christmas morning and found a new sweater inside. The rattling I heard was dry macaroni that my sister had put in the bottom of the box to fool me.

The Jewish people had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah. Some thought that he might be a military or political leader who would lead Israel in overthrowing the occupying Roman forces. Others thought that the Messiah would be a spiritual leader who would bring about religious reforms and call people to renewed faithfulness to God's Law and worship rituals. A tiny baby born to a carpenter and his wife in a stable was certainly not what anyone expected. Whether Simeon had any expectations of who the Messiah would be is unclear from Luke's account. It is clear that Simeon lived with the promise that he would see the Messiah in his lifetime. With this certain hope, Simeon was directed by the Holy Spirit to go to the temple courts. It was there that God's promise to him would be fulfilled as he encountered Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

As we journey through these remaining days of Advent in anticipation of the celebration of Christmas this week, there are important lessons to be learned from Simeon's witness and the song that he sings on "The Original Christmas Album."

Luke tells us that Simeon took Jesus in his arms before he started to sing. It wasn't enough for Simeon to just see Jesus. He reached out to him and embraced the Messiah.

Like Simeon, we are also called to embrace Jesus during this Advent and Christmas season. It's easy for Jesus to get lost in all of the things that our culture embraces during this time of year. We can spend hours shopping for the perfect gifts for the people on our list and forget that we have already been given the perfect Gift: Jesus Christ, God's only Son. We can open presents but forget to open our hearts to the Good News of God's salvation for all the world. If we are to fully understand the meaning of this season, then we need to embrace the One who is a Light to the nations and the Hope of the world.

Bless Others:

This was the moment for which Simeon had been waiting all his life. He could have easily said or thought to himself; "This is all about me. It's my moment in the spotlight with Jesus." One might imagine that if Simeon was alive today, this would be the perfect moment for him to whip out his cell phone and take a selfie with Jesus. However, instead of selfishness, he chooses to offer a blessing to Joseph and Mary. He puts himself aside and offers words of encouragement and inspiration to these new parents.

Following Simeon's lead in our lives can be challenging. Many of us see the ideal Christmas as one spent by the warmth of a crackling fire enjoying a family gift exchange and a good meal. However, if that's all that Christmas is for us, then we have missed the point. As Christ followers, we are also called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick. At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of One who would grow up to teach us that whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all. Make no mistake, Jesus likes a good party. His presence at the wedding in Cana reminds us of this. However, Jesus also knelt down and washed dirty, stinky feet as act of love. He taught us to both celebrate life and to bless others through acts of service and self-giving.

Sing Praises:

In addition to embracing Jesus and blessing Mary and Joseph, Simeon sings a song of praise to God. He adds his own track to “The Original Christmas Album.” It’s a song of thanks to God for the moment he is experiencing. It’s a song of praise to God for fulfilling God’s promises. It’s a song that recognizes Jesus is Savior of the world. In the face of the overwhelming goodness and mercy of God, Simeon sings from the depths of his soul.

We are also called to sing during this Advent and Christmas season. I’m not suggesting that everyone join the choir or audition for “The Voice.” Although that may be what God is calling you to do. What I am suggesting is that you add your voice to the chorus of believers who throughout history have testified to the saving grace of God made known through Jesus Christ. In response to God’s blessings in your life, you can worship with God’s people. You can also read and reflect daily upon God’s Word. You can reach out to the least, the last and the lost with Good News. You can invite others to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. Through your life of praise, you can proclaim to a world living in sin and darkness that the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. You can sing along with Simeon to God “for my eyes have seen Your salvation!”

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall a time when you were surprised by a Christmas gift that you received. How did you feel? What was your response? How did this surprise impact how or what you gave to others after receiving this gift?

2. Are there any barriers that prevent you from fully embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior in your life? What steps do you need to take to overcome those barriers?

3. How does blessing others through acts of service bless your walk with Christ? Are there ways in which you are being called to serve those in

need in the coming year?

4. How are you singing God's praises through worship, study, service and witness? How do these acts challenge you? How do these acts comfort you? How do these acts empower you?

Notes:



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