

ADVENT

Advent is an incredibly rich season. It is a time when we prepare our hearts once more for God to enter in newness and intimacy. It is a time of expectancy, longing, preparation, watching, and waiting. More deeply, Advent has a great treasure: our Lord Jesus. Robert Morneau makes a wonderful suggestion when he asks, “Where will you advent this year?” I give you the words of Ann Weems to stimulate your prayer life:

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let’s go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
let’s ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
let’s look for the gold of the Christmas Star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let’s listen for the brush of angel’s wings.
This Advent, let’s go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

This Advent, as you find your kneeling places, I have presented to you some of God’s gifts to think about. As you prepare your hearts to meet your Lord, think on these wonderful gifts. Read the Scripture reading, pray the prayer, and let your spirit soar into the heart of God.

Friday, December 1, 2023: The Gift of Watchfulness

Luke 21:25-31 – *Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us of the necessity to keep watch. We do not know when our Lord will come in his final glory. For that matter, we do not know when he will come for us. Will we be ready? Will we be ready for him to come into our hearts at Christmas? Still your hearts and look for him in the unexpected.

Our God is the One who comes to us in a burning bush, in an angel's song, in a newborn child.
Our God is the One who cannot be found locked in the church, not even in the sanctuary.
Our God will be where God will be with no constraints, no predictability.
Our God lives where our God lives, and destruction has no power and even death cannot stop the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born, but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready God will come even to a godforsaken place like a stable in Bethlehem.
Watch for you know not when God comes.

Watch that you might be found whenever, wherever God comes.

(Ann Weems: *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 13)

Prayer:

God, mysterious source of all life, we do not know when you will appear to us.
Therefore, teach us vigilance. Give us the alertness to perceive your presence and to hear your call to serve. Jesus said, "The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."
Give us such strength of faith that your nearness is no surprise any day of any hour.
Amen.

(Diane Karay: *All the Seasons of Mercy*, p. 16)

Saturday, December 2, 2023: The Gift of God's Continual Presence

Romans 8:35, 37-39 - *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Matthew 28:19-20 – *Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

God loves us with a supernatural love that knows no bounds. Though we cannot always feel his presence, God is always with us and will never leave us. God's coming into the world as a baby at Christmas reminds of this truth and is a powerful testimony to his love. Today, we need to open our eyes to God's presence. He can be found when we open our eyes, and the good news is that God is always reaching towards us.

Nothing in your life is so insignificant, so small, that God cannot be found at its center. We think of God in the dramatic things, the glorious sunsets, the majestic mountains, the tempestuous seas; but he is in the little things too, in the smile of a passer-by or the gnarled hands of an old man, in a daisy, a tiny insect, falling leaves. God is in the music, in laughter and in sorrow too. And

the gray times, when monotony stretches out ahead, these can be the times of steady, solid growth into God.

God may make himself known to you through the life of someone who, for you, is an ambassador for God, in whom you can see the beauty and truth and the love of God. It may be that there is someone who loves you so deeply that you dare to believe that you are worth loving and so you can believe that God' love for you could be possible after all. Sometimes it is through tragedy or serious illness that God speaks to our hearts and we know him for the first time. There is no limit to the ways in which God may make himself known. At every turn in our lives there can be a meeting place with God. We have only to want him now at this moment – and at any moment in our lives – and he is there, wanting us, longing to welcome us, to forgive us all that has gone before that has separated us from him.

(Prayer: Mother Frances Dominica, From Rueben P. Job & Norman Shawchuck: A Guide to Prayer, p. 16)

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, help us to remember that you are always beside us, guiding us, loving us, and teaching us. And when we cannot recognize your presence, open our eyes to those whom you have put in our pathways, bearing your love. May we also bear witness to your love, especially during this Advent season. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, December 3, 2023: The Gift of Peace

John 14:27 – *Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*

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!”*

God's peace is a precious gift that enables us to live life no matter what the circumstances. It is a peace that is so great that we say it “passes human understanding.” God brings peace to his people at Christmas.

God of holy peace, we are accustomed to the darkness of our world, accustomed to tragedy, sorrow, and worry. Like the shepherds sitting in darkness, expecting nothing, we are familiar with dim hope. Yet we brood over our troubled lives and world, wondering when you will come in power to bring unassailable peace to all hearts and all lands. Break the hold of darkness, O God, and let your peace dawn in our hearts! Look with favor upon your people and grant us your blessing. And should angels intercept us with clear messages of your intent for our lives, should angels shower your radiance before us like the falling snow, let us with wonder accept your love as the generous gift that it is. Amen.

Monday, December 4, 2023: The Gift of Elizabeth

Luke 1:5-25, 39-45,57-66 - *In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.*

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. An older woman, she was married to Zechariah and had been barren all of her life. Suddenly God chose her to bear John the Baptist. Unlike her husband Zechariah, she received the news on faith and served as a remarkable mentor to Mary. Mary and Elizabeth were chosen as vital instruments in the work of salvation. They would give birth to Jesus and John the Baptist. If we read the word of God with deep faith, we realize that we too are part of this story. Our call is to trust that God's word of love and forgiveness will be fulfilled in our lives. God is a giver of gifts. For Mary and Elizabeth that was the gift of new life. For each of us, it is the gift of time, the gift of freedom and opportunity, the gift of grace. An Advent challenge: take nothing for granted. We have been dearly and abundantly blessed.

Reception of gifts is not enough. We must give thanks; we must become an enchanted people. Thankfulness comes in two forms: words of gratitude and gifts shared joyfully and with charity. Beneath thankfulness lies faith. And deep gratitude leads to peace.

Prayer:

Lord, hear the prayers of your people. May we who celebrate the birth of your Son as men and women rejoice in the gift of eternal life when he comes in glory, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5, 2023: The Gift of Hope

Psalm 71:5-6 - For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

Hebrews 6:19-29 - We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Romans 8:24-25 - For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

As God's people we have a hope that defies pessimism. Hope allows us to live life joyously, because we know that we have eternal life. We know from God's promises and love that he is entirely trustworthy. We can hope for goodness and joy in life, knowing that God loves us. Advent reminds us to hang on to that hope. Jesus has come and will come again.

Advent is a season of hope. If we but open our souls to this singing bird and offer it gracious hospitality, we will indeed be blessed. But hope only comes when there is an atmosphere of faith. Belief in promises and presences creates an everlasting melody. Hope, this ball of feathers, does not have easy sailing. Courage is necessary to confront the buffeting wings and waves of life. The paralytic (whose friends lowered him through the roof for Jesus to heal him) had to have courage in the storms of his illness and even in the transforming encounter with Jesus. The synergism of both hope and courage led to new life. Some winters are filled with discontent, some days so cold as to hold no promise of warmth. Yet God does not leave us without some comfort. Hope is a faithful bird that empowers us to face the future with determination and fortitude. (Robert Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem: Advent Meditations*, pp. 31-32)

Prayer:

O Christ, we watch and wait for the warmth and light of your presence. As candlelight is not overcome by darkness, we rejoice that your light is radiant within us, despite the wintry seasons of our lives. We live with hope that your birth will occur in every heart and the world will fall to its knees in joy. Amen.

Wednesday, December 6, 2023: The Gift of Compassion

Micah 7:19 - *He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

Matthew 9:36 - *When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

Matthew 14:14 - *When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*

Advent is a season of compassion. Our God comes to us again and again because our suffering and troubled lives are known in heaven. Nor is this coming an extrinsic approach. God comes in Jesus from the womb of Mary. This embrace of our human situation and this participation in our sorrows and joys are the result of divine compassion. Compassion gives meaning to life. As we attempt to stop hearts from breaking, as we bring comfort to those in pain, as we express reverence toward all creation, we come to realize that our lives are not lived in vain. We take upon ourselves the yoke of others and find ourselves, perhaps for the first time, experiencing happiness. Our Advent invitation is to come to the Lord who had to flee to Egypt, who knew the rigors of the desert, who took upon himself the yoke of the cross. From these difficult, painful experiences we have the assurance that our burdens are embraced by God's compassionate heart.

(Morneau Fathoming Bethlehem, pp. 35-36)

Prayer:

All-powerful Father, we await the healing power of Christ your Son. Let us not be discouraged by our weaknesses as we prepare for his coming. Keep us steadfast in your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Thursday, December 7, 2023: The Gift of Mercy

Lamentations 3:22-23 - *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

Psalms 51:1 - *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*

Our God is a merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We can always turn to him, no matter what we have done and he will receive us with mercy. He looks upon our needs, our sorrows, and our burdens with compassion and mercy.

Prayer:

Most Holy God, deep are the wounds of the people of the earth. Overwhelming are the tragedies of families and nations. Do you not see the rivers of tears? Do you not hear the cries of grief echoing from the earth's abyss? We are not strangers to grief or pain, loneliness or seasons of emptiness. But the burdens of the world, so unfathomable awful, we cannot bear. O God, the world and its people need you. We need you. Come, care for us as a forgiving father; comfort us as a mother bending over her child. Speak words of wisdom and guidance in the hearts of all your children, words of comfort and hope. And lest we, like errant children, fail to listen and so fail to live, bear with us in mercy until your kingdom comes and the world is one family. Amen.

(Diane Karay: *All the Seasons of Mercy*, p. 23)

Friday, December 8, 2023: The Gift of Proclaiming the Good News

Luke 3:1-6 - *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus. He came to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ was coming and salvation was near. We, who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, also have an obligation to proclaim the good news. This Advent is a good time to share that news with others. Most proclaiming, however, is shaped by the way we live. We can most effectively witness to the joys of the Christian life by the way we live.

John the Baptist was also a person of faith. When God's word came to him, he listened and responded. Into the desert he went to confront his own sinfulness and to call the people of his day to repentance. The wilderness became the geography of grace and from this place he pointed to the coming of someone far greater than he. His whole life was a commitment to preparation, seeking by fasting and simplicity of life to provide lodging for the divine guest. His faith was deep, deeper than death. John the Baptist knew that "this world is not conclusion."

(Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, p. 28)

Prayer:

God of grace and mercy, help us to have a steadfast faith in your redeeming love, and when we fall prey to unbelief, uphold us in your arms. As we live through this Advent season, give us courage and strength to proclaim by word and example, the truth of your Good News. Amen.

Saturday, December 9, 2023: The Gift of Mary/ The Gift of Trust

Luke 1:26-56 - *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is*

with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.” And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Mary found favor with God. Herein is the source of her joy and her mission in life. This highly favored daughter was to conceive, bear, and raise a son. Though deeply troubled by this event, and not comprehending all the details, Mary identified herself as the maidservant of God. Her will gave way to God’s design. We cannot celebrate the Nativity without pondering the mystery of the Annunciation. Indeed, “nothing is impossible with God.”

All of Mary’s senses were open, inner and outer. Her attentiveness was supreme and her willingness absolute. Here we see the obedient one, the one who listened in love and cried “yes!” There is cause here for praise and happiness because life is being lived to the full. In John’s Gospel we read the Jesus came to bring life, full abundant life (John 10:10) and we see this mission already being realized in Mary.

Prayer:

God of love and mercy, help us to follow the example of Mary, always ready to do your will. At the message of an angel she welcomed your eternal Son and, filled with the light of your Spirit, she became the temple of your Word, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, pp. 61-62)

Sunday, December 10, 2023: The Gift of the Holy Spirit

John 14:15-17 - *Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."*

The Holy Spirit, perhaps the least understood member of the Trinity, empowers, teaches, and transforms our lives. When we are open to the Holy Spirit, wondrous things begin to happen. We become alive and suddenly the changes and transformation, once thought impossible, become realities. The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God...For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:35,37)

You will find the living God in the pages of the Bible. You will find him also just exactly where you are. When Jesus knew that he would not have much longer with his disciples he knew they were sad at heart and he said to them, "It is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I do go, I will send him to you...I still have many things to say to you, but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth." (John 16:7,12,13) Jesus does not break his promise. God has sent the Spirit of truth, he dwells in your heart. You have only to listen, to follow, and he will lead you to the complete truth. He leads through all the events, all the circumstances of your life. (Mother Frances Dominica: *Prayer from A Guide to Prayer*, pp. 15-16)

Prayer:

O Holy Spirit of God, visit now this soul of mine, and tarry within it until eventide. Inspire all my thoughts. Pervade all my imaginations. Suggest all my decisions. Lodge in my will's most inward citadel and order all my doings. Be with me in my silence and in my speech, in my haste and in my leisure, in company and in solitude, in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening; and give me grace at all times to rejoice in thy mysterious companionship. Amen.

(John Baillie: *A Diary of Private Prayer from A Guide to Prayer*, p. 23))

Monday, December 11, 2023: The Gift of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-2 - *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.*

Faith is one of the most mysterious and daunting of all gifts. Indeed, faith is a gift, for we could never conjure up for ourselves that ability to maintain faith in an unseen God. We desperately need and want faith, and the God-sized hole in each of us cries out for faith, but we need to have it given to us. And so we are blessed with this wondrous gift. For human beings, faith is mixed

with doubts, but that is not to be feared. Doubts and questions help us to internalize more deeply our faith, and God uses honest doubt to reveal himself to us. Faith is a journey, one that reaches majestic heights and dips to the lows of unbelief. If we consistently ask God to strengthen our faith, he will honor that request, for God wants nothing more than to be in constant communion with us.

Advent is a season of faith, a gift that resembles music in its invisibility. Yet for that, it is no less real. Far beyond the wisdom of philosophers and all academicians, faith lies in the land of a radical conviction of God's redeeming love. Faith, however, is not always steady on her feet. Given our desire for certitude, we do seek assurances and evidence. Doubt is not necessarily a stranger to our souls. Blessed is the person who can still laugh and blush on this long and arduous journey back to God. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, p. 29)

The Christmas spirit is that hope which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce and all the inn doors slammed in our faces and all the dark nights of our souls that with God all things still are possible, that even now unto us a Child is born! (Weems: *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 51)

Prayer:

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

(Book of Common Prayer: *Collect for Proper 11*, p.231)

Tuesday, December 12, 2023: The Gift of Love

John 15:12-14 – *Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

1 Corinthians 13:7 – *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

John 3:16 - *Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

God's love is the most precious gift for which we could ever ask. The good news is that we do not even have to ask for it. God's love is as unconditional as it is freely offered. God loves us so much that he sent his Son to live amongst us and die for us. Probably the hardest thing we face as Christians is deeply internalizing this love. It's real! And we can truly say, "love came down at Christmas." Because he loved us, we can love others, and there is no greater gift than the love of God that is shared between loved ones, family, and friends.

Advent is a season of love. Our journey toward celebrating the birth of Christ is essentially an experience of God's love for us and for the world. As the days lose more and more of their light, we are given this light of grace, a light of love to counter the darkness and anxieties of life.

St. Augustine of Hippo describes grace in these terms: “Because you have loved me, O Lord, you have made me lovable.” There is herein a double blessing. God’s love makes us loveable in an active sense, empowering us to love. And, in a passive sense, we are made capable of being loved. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, pp. 33-34)

Prayer:

Holy God, Mover of the earth and Anchor of our souls, you never give up on us. Why is it that you will not let us go? Who would have thought that divine power could care for us? Again and again we refuse to listen to your voice; we close the door on opportunities you open; we ignore and deny you; we refuse the shelter of your strength. And yet you affirm us and persist in giving us good gifts.

Your love is not tame, God. Your love surges – wave upon wave of light and mercy, breaking in upon us. You knock at the door of our consciousness. You search out the one lost coin, the lost sheep, the one person yet out in the cold. You urge us to persistent and bold prayer. And time after time, you bring miracle, wonder, and healing, teaching us to expect your overwhelming love.

If we have resisted your love in any way, Holy God, open us to your power. Let Christ be born in our hearts and turn us to face the Light. Amen.

(Diane Karay: *The Seasons of Mercy*, pp.25-26)

Wednesday, December 13, 2023: The Gift of Forgiveness

1 John 1:8-10 - *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

Luke 23:34 - *Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing.*

The gift of forgiveness is probably the most freeing gift God can give us. We all make mistakes, do foolish things, and hurt people, particularly those we love most. Few things in life are as painful. The gift of forgiveness allows us to move on and in some way restore the relationship or repair the damage. Of course in every violation of love, every act of hate, falsehood, injustice, and faithlessness, God is the injured one. But God is always eager to forgive. He calls us to repentance, forgiveness, and renewal of our relationship with him. And he asks us to come exactly as we are. God does not demand moral perfection before coming to him. Martin Smith notes that, “The New Testament makes clear that God forgives us before we can show evidence of our change to the good, and claims that this gift of unconditional acceptance is what makes our transformation possible. Forgiveness is no empty decree, but the renewal of personal union with Christ. Out of this new closeness, we look for the changes that Christ can bring about.” (Martin Smith: *Reconciliation*, p. 51)

Sometimes it is not only hard to forgive others, but it is hard to forgive ourselves even after God has already done so. In reality, the two issues are related to each other. Henri Nouwen says, “Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others 70 times 70 times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom. A

forgiven person forgives. This is what we proclaim when we pray, ‘and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.’ This lifelong struggle lies at the heart of Christian life.” (Henri Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, pp. 35-36)

Prayer:

Merciful Father, we confess we have failed you – spurning the resources of prayer, doubting your power to intervene in human life and world events. We confess that we have failed those we love and those who depend on us – not loving as fully as we can, leaving kind words unsaid, withholding caring actions, doing and saying things that wound others. We confess that we have failed ourselves – making feeble use of our gifts, falling short of our goals, failing to allow ourselves to accept forgiveness for our faults and the grace to begin anew. God, in your unfailing mercy, grant us the peace to part with past failure and the courage graciously to accept the future you offer. Amen.

(Karay: *All the Seasons of Mercy*, p. 99)

Thursday, December 14, 2023: The Gift of Repentance

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 - Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near— a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?

Repentance literally means turning in the other direction. When we repent we not only ask God to forgive us, but we ask him to help us turn in another direction. Repentance also involves recognition of our failures and a realization of what it means to have turned away from God. Fortunately “our confidence relies not on our capacity to get rid of sin from our lives, but in the power of God’s love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit to displace our sins or transmute them with the gifts of new life. Repentance is not a strategy for self-improvement, but the surfacing of desire for those gifts – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – which render sinful ways redundant and rob them of their appeal.” (Martin Smith: *Reconciliation*, p. 59)

Prayer:

Merciful God, it amazes us that you do not deal with us as we deserve. We run from you, yet you stand ready to embrace us. We squander your gifts, yet you never cease bestowing your gifts upon us. There is nothing we can do to work ourselves back into your good graces, for in your eyes we were always your children and heirs of your grace. God, we don’t understand how you can welcome us home, or why, but we accept your acceptance with eternal gratitude. Amen. (Karay: *All the Seasons of Mercy*, p. 124)

Friday, December 15, 2023: The Gift of Preparation

Luke 3:7-18 - John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Preparation allows us to ready our hearts for the many gifts that God wishes to bestow upon us. Just as John the Baptist was sent to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, so Advent allows us to prepare for Christ coming into our hearts in a new way. Advent gives us the opportunity to still our hearts and lives and intentionally hear God's word. We are encouraged to slow down, purposely set aside time for God, and wait with expectant hearts.

Advent tells us to prepare our hearts for the invasion of God's holiness by staying awake. When we are awake and our eyes are open, we see far-off things and even things that are near. Jesus came to bring us fullness of life. If our souls are asleep, we fail to notice the advent of grace. Being awake is a constant challenge. So quickly our eyes close and our ears block out sounds seeking our attention. We slip back into darkness, and life continues to pass us by. Even the morning alarm clock struggles to bring us to full attentiveness. Sleepwalking may be more common than imagined. Someone once said that spirituality is easy to define: "Just stay awake!" But we don't do that of our own accord. The Spirit breaks into our sleep and dreams, continues the beehive labor of turning our failures into sweet honey, bringing the water of new life to our parched souls. The Spirit empowers us to listen "at the shores of the great silence" and there to be embraced by Love. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, pp. 23-24)

Prayer:

Lord our God, help us to prepare for the coming of Christ your Son. May he find us waiting, eager in joyful prayer. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, p.16)

Saturday, December 16, 2023: Gift of New Life

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 - *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

God promises us that when we are baptized, we are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. In that sense, when we are baptized we are given new life. The old way of life dies and we are given new life. In our daily life, we are given the opportunity to begin again, repenting of our sins and beginning over again. Advent reminds us that Jesus longs to be born anew in our hearts. As we ponder the season we remember that Jesus came to give us new life. It is, however, a gift which demands a response. Jesus is ready to be born in our hearts anew. Are we ready to receive?

Every year the Child is born again. Every year some new heart finally hears, finally sees, finally knows love. And in heaven there is great rejoicing! There is a festival of stars! There is celebration among the angels! For in finding one lost sheep, the heart of the Shepherd is glad, and Christmas has happened once more. The Child is born anew and one more knee is bowed!

(Ann Weems: *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 26)

Prayer: Pray the words of "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of this heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend on us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel! Amen.

Sunday, December 17, 2023: The Gift of Truth

John 8:31-40 - *Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"*

Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father."

They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did."

Advent is a season of truth. In an age of relativism, we find it difficult to listen to the prophets who tell it the way it is: God's love for us, our sinfulness, restoration in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. We must keep returning to the double truth of our incredible dignity and our profound wretchedness caused by sin.

Truth is blinding, so we need to hear it and tell it in appropriate ways so as not to do harm. God "modifies" the truth so that we can take it in proper dosages. This is not to water down revelation but to respect the disposition of each listener. Just as children (and adults) are frightened by lightening and its associate thunder, we must comfort each other with gentle explanations.

Advent truth is indeed astounding: God with us in Jesus. But this "with-ness" involves believing that the infinite Deity has taken on our finite limitations. The Bethlehem mystery must be pondered in prayer if the truth is to be known. The "truth's superb surprise" brings deep joy to the believing heart. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, pp. 37-38)

Prayer:

Dear Lord, you are the Truth. When I keep myself rooted in you, I will live in the Truth. Help me, Lord, to live a truthful life, a life in which I am guided not by popularity, public opinion, current fashion, or convenient formulations but by a knowledge that comes from knowing you. There may be times during which holding onto the Truth is hard and painful, and leads to oppression, persecution, and death. Be with me, Lord, if that time ever comes. Let me then experience that to hold onto the Truth means to hold onto you, that Love and Truth can never be separated, and that to live truthfully is the same as being faithful to a loving relationship. Lord, bring me always closer to you. Amen.

(Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, p. 110)

Monday, December 18, 2023: The Gift of Prayer

Philippians 4:4-7 – Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Prayer is described in many different manners, but perhaps the most persuasive for me is that prayer is a relationship, a way of life if you will. Henri Nouwen says, "to live is to pray, to pray is to love, and to love is to serve." (*With Open Hands*, p. viii) I think that gives us a much broader vision than is normally associated with prayer. Too often we think of prayer as merely speaking to God. For too many people, prayer comes mainly when we are in trouble, and then we wonder where God is. Prayer, in fact, is a relationship with the living God and a means for us to know and love God and intentionally place our lives in his hands. It can be intensely personal or wonderfully communal.

I turn to Nouwen again to help us out. "For many of us prayer means nothing more than speaking with God. And since it usually seems to be a quite one-sided affair, prayer simply means talking to God. This idea is enough to create great frustrations. If I present a problem, I

expect a solution; if I formulate a question, I expect an answer; if I ask for guidance, I expect a response. And when it seems, increasingly, that I am talking into the dark, it is not so strange that I soon begin to suspect that my dialogue with God is in fact a monologue. Then I may begin to ask myself: To whom am I really speaking, God or myself? The crisis of our prayer life is that our mind may be filled with ideas of God while our heart remains far from him. So listen to your heart. It is there that Jesus speaks most intimately to you. Praying is first and foremost listening to Jesus, who dwells in the very depths of your heart. He doesn't shout. He doesn't thrust himself upon you. His voice is an unassuming voice, very nearly a whisper, the voice of gentle love." (Nouwen: *Show Me the Way*, p. 28)

Our task then is to intentionally set aside time for God. As we listen more and more to his voice, we will sense his voice, his love, and his guidance. Prayer will become a way of life. And we will realize that we can pray anywhere and at anytime. Sometimes we will want to be alone and at other times we will want to be with a friend. At times we will want silence and at other times the glories of music. Sometimes our prayer will be with words and at other time prayer will come from the deep silence of our heart or from our tears that give words to our pain or joy. Prayer is as natural and as necessary as breathing.

Prayer:

Why, O Lord, is it so hard for me to keep my heart directed toward you? Why does my mind wander off in so many different directions, and why does my heart desire the things that lead me astray? Let me sense your presence in the midst of my turmoil. Take my tired body, my confused mind, and my restless soul into your arms and give me rest, simple quiet rest. Amen. (Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, p.29)

Tuesday, December 19, 2023: The Gift of Joy

John 15:9-11 - *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

Perhaps more than anything else, God wants us to have joy in our lives. Jesus says that he wants our joy to be in him. In a certain sense, joy is much deeper than happiness. Our Lord knows that we will have times of sadness as well as times of happiness. Joy is the byproduct of living a life of radical commitment to our Lord. It is a deep sense of security that knows no matter what happens, our God will never leave us, and thus we can weather the changes and difficulties of life. At Christmas we can experience a special joy, knowing that God loves us enough to come to us in the flesh.

Joy and gratitude are the qualities of the heart by which we recognize those who are committed to a life of service in the path of Jesus Christ...Wherever we see real service we also see joy, because in the midst of service a divine presence becomes visible and a gift is offered. Therefore, those who serve as followers of Jesus discover that they are receiving more than they are giving. The joy of those who follow their Lord on his self-emptying and humbling way shows that what they seek is not misery and pain but the God whose compassion they have felt in their own lives: Their eyes do not focus on poverty and misery, but on the face of the loving.

(Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, pp.50-51)

Prayer:

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ever faithful to your promises, and ever close to your Church: the earth rejoices in hope of the Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts and remove the sadness that hinders us from feeling the joy which his presence will bestow, for he is Lord for ever and ever. Amen. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, p.45)

Wednesday, December 20, 2023: The Gift of The Future

Jeremiah 29:11 - *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 - *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Advent celebrates three comings. We remember that God came to us in the flesh 2,000 years ago. We celebrate Jesus' coming into our hearts in new and deeper ways. We celebrate that Jesus will come again some day. The prophets were the first to speak of God's coming into the world. They spoke of the "Day of the Lord." On that day God will come in judgment and bring about the peace and restoration of all humanity. New Testament writers took up on this theme and proclaimed that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. It is to us to remember that though we are accountable for our actions, God's mercy is great, and we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Therefore when our Lord comes again, regardless of how he comes, we can rejoice, because on that day all things will be made new and earth restored to the glorious purity that was intended by God in creation.

On a day to day basis, we have the joy of knowing that every day brings us the opportunity to begin again. We are called to remember that "joy comes in the morning" and that our Lord's mercies are new every day.

Prayer:

Lord our God, grant that we may be ready to receive Christ when he comes in glory and to share in the banquet of heaven, where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, p. 20)

Thursday, December 21, 2023: The Gift of Song

Ephesians 18b-19 - *Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.*

Psalms 95:1-2 - *O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

Psalm 100:1-2 – Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song.

Our Lord has given us the gift of song to make melody in our hearts. Music often expresses that which we have difficulty proclaiming with words. Music can also call forth from the depths of our hearts emotions that have no other means of expression. For others, music is a way of praying. The Psalms, perhaps the greatest voice for human emotions found in the Bible, were meant to be sung. When the Israelites were in bondage in Babylon, their emotions came to life through song.

Song can also lift our spirits. When Paul and Silas ended up in prison in Philippi, they prayed and sang hymns to God. Despite their difficulties, they managed to sing.

Prayer:

Gracious God, giver of all gifts, we thank you for the gift of song. Through song our voices lift up in prayer and praise. Through song our hearts are uplifted and we are drawn closer to you. As we come closer to Christmas, help us to echo the angels' voices of praise. May the world be filled with glorious song as we celebrate once more the gift of that birth in a manger 2,000 years ago. May we celebrate our Lord's coming once more into our hearts. We pray in the name of the One who came to us in great humility. Amen.

Friday, December 22, 2023: The Gift of Christ With Us

Matthew 1:18-23 - 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." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."

Emmanuel means "God is with us." At Christmas we celebrate that God has come to us in the flesh 2,000 years ago, and today we celebrate that he is still with us. Our God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pains and participates in the fullness of the human struggle. Our God is a compassionate God. This means, first of all, that he is a God who has chosen to be God-with-us.

As soon as we call God, "God-with-us," we enter into a new relationship of intimacy with him. By calling him Emmanuel, we recognize that he has committed himself to live in solidarity with us, to share our joys and pains, to defend and protect us, and to suffer all of life with us. The God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and even more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love. We will never really know God as a compassionate God if we do not understand with our heart and mind that "he lived among us." (Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, p.103)

God's compassion is not something abstract or indefinite, but a concrete, specific gesture in which God reaches out to us. In Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God's compassion. To us, who cry out from the depth of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, an arm that can embrace us, lips that will kiss us, a word that speaks to us here and now, and a heart that is not afraid of our fears and tremblings; to us, who feel our own pain as no other human being feels it, has felt it, or ever will feel it and who are always waiting for someone who dares to come close – to us a man has come who could truly say, "I am with you." Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us, has come to us in the freedom of love, not needing to experience our human condition. In Jesus Christ the obedient servant, who did not cling to his divinity but emptied himself and became as we are, God has revealed the fullness of his compassion. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

(Nouwen: *Show Me The Way*, p. 67)

Prayer:

O God, Emmanuel, what concerns me, what lies on my heart is this: That we in the church papered and programmed articulate and agenda-ed are telling the faith story all wrong, are telling it as though it happened two thousand years ago or is going to happen as soon as the church budget is raised. We seem to forget that Christ's name is Emmanuel, God with Us, not just when he sat among us but *now*, when we cannot feel the nailprints in his hands. Help us to recognize that you are with us now and always. Amen. (Weems: *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 75)

Saturday, December 23, 2023: The Gift of Community

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 - *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

God has blessed us with the gift of one another. We come to community bearing many gifts, each of which is needed for the good of the community as a whole. Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes that "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Life Together*, p. 21)

I think we need to remember that community is a gift of God. We were not put together by accident, but rather as a gracious gift of God. It is in community that we can grow and become the people that God intended in creation. In community we share our joys and sorrows. It is here we can come for strength when facing difficulties. We hear the word of God through the love of our brothers and sisters in community. When pain and sorrow make it difficult to pray, the community prays for us. In joy, our pleasure becomes contagious as we share with one another. The community also holds us accountable for our actions, and does so in love. Finally, in community, we find friendships that can last a lifetime, for I can think of no stronger love than that which is based upon the love of God.

Henri Nouwen says, “Real friends find their inner correspondence where both know the love of God. Their spirit speaks to spirit and heart to heart. True friendships are lasting because true love is eternal. A friendship in which heart speaks to heart is a gift from God, and no gift that comes from God is temporary or occasional. All that comes from God participates in God’s eternal life. Love between people, when given by God, is stronger than death. In this sense, true friendships continue beyond the boundary of death...And so, dare to love and to be a real friend. The love you give and receive is a reality that will lead you closer to God as well as to those whom God has given you to love.” (Henri Nouwen: *The Inner Voice of Love*, pp.80-81)

Prayer:

Almighty God, you have called the church into being and have gathered us into one family. By the power of your Holy Spirit help us to live in unity and peace with all of your children. May our actions this day be fruit in your kingdom. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sunday, December 24, 2023: The Gift of Angels

Luke 2:1-15 - *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 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!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Perhaps during Advent and Christmas we think of angels more than at any other time of the year. After all, it was the angel Gabriel who came to Zechariah and told him that his wife, Elizabeth would bear a son and his name would be John. Thus we have our first knowledge of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20). Six months later this same angel was sent to a virgin named Mary. There Mary learned that she would bear the Son of God. He would be called Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). And angel came in dreams to Joseph two times in his young married life. After Mary learned she was carrying a child, an angel came to Joseph to tell him to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, for the child she was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:19-24) Later as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were preparing to leave Bethlehem, an angel warned them to flee to safety in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-14). And of course on Christmas, we will once again hear the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds in the fields, telling them the good news of Jesus' birth. What we should remember is that while the angels' appearance was shocking, their message was always to "Fear not." When God comes to us, he wants us to be not afraid, but rather rejoice in his coming.

Are there angels today? Some would answer, "yes" and others, "no." Perhaps we don't directly see or hear angels, but God does speak to us in innumerable ways. Often times, God's angel appears to us in the person of a much loved friend or a complete stranger. At other times we know we have been protected from danger in some mysterious way. Still others pray for "guardian angels" to protect and teach our loved ones. Are there angels today? Don't close your mind to that possibility.

Prayer:

I wonder if God comes to the edge of heaven each Advent and flings the Star into the December sky, laughing with joy as it lights the darkness of the earth; and the angels, hearing the laughter of God, begin to congregate in some celestial chamber to practice their alleluias. I wonder if there's some ordering of rank among the angels as they move into procession, the seraphim bumping the cherubim from top spot, the new inhabitants of heaven standing in the back until they get the knack of it. (After all, treading air over a stable and announcing at the same time can't be all that easy!) Or is everybody – that is, every "soul" – free to fly wherever the spirit moves? Or do they even think about it? Perhaps when God calls, perhaps they just come, this multitude of heavenly hosts. Perhaps they come, winging through the winds of time full of expectancy, full of hope that this year (perhaps) the earth will fall to its knees in a whisper of "Peace."

(Weems: *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p.39)

Monday, December 25, 2023: The Gift of Jesus Christ

John 1:1-18 - *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Today or perhaps last night we remember the wondrous gift of Jesus coming to us, to live with us, to die for us, and to rise again so that we might live. Normally I read from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but tonight I love to hear the words from the King James Version: "And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to god in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:10-14).

Today when a child is born, video cameras are often used to record many of the proceedings: the wait in the delivery room, the wrinkled skin of the newborn, the parents holding gently their new life. We have no video of the birth of Jesus. But we do have some aspects of the event: shepherds and angels, hosannas and fear, poverty and wonderment. At the center is the mystery of faith: God enters history. Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, is born of Mary. Night would no longer be dark because of a new Light. Night would not ever be silent again because of good news that must be shouted and proclaimed. The day draws near. The Christmas mystery is upon us. We must do what God has empowered us to do: enflesh love in deeds of kindness.

(Morneau: *Fathoming Bethlehem*, pp.73-75)

Prayer:

Almighty God and Father of light, a child is born for us and a son is given to us. Your eternal Word leaped down from heaven in the silent watches of the night, and now your Church is filled with wonder at the nearness of her God. Open our hearts to receive his life and increase our vision with the rising dawn, that our lives may be filled with his glory and his peace, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen. (Morneau, p. 75)