

NEW COMMUNITY COVENANT CHURCH

Advent Devotional

2020

Sunday, November 29

Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-27

Today is the first day of Advent, and the start of the liturgical year. As Christians, our year begins with a season of waiting. In these passages, we see that this period of waiting is a time in which we look above in humble anticipation of God's return. In Mark 13:26, Peter writes that we will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory". In Isaiah 64:1-3, we find vivid descriptions of God's return, with mountains trembling and fires setting twigs ablaze. In our current moment, I find this frightening imagery incredibly comforting. I will confess that more days than not, I tell myself, "Our world is on fire—sweet Jesus, descend and bring us home!" In meditating on these passages, I realized that my eagerness for His return largely stems from my feelings of hopelessness and judgments of others. Yet the Isaiah passage reminds us that waiting in expectation is not for the purposes of our own vindication. God returned because our sinfulness can only be abolished with His act of grace. This period of waiting requires that we acknowledge our lowliness relative to God's awesomeness. This truth is the only reason why this season can be humbling, freeing, and joyful, all at once. It is my prayer that you are reminded that the gap between Heaven and Earth signifies not only how far we are from God, but also the vast distance that Jesus traveled to make our union with God even possible. Praise the Lord for his inexplicable plan to restore us, save us, and re-unite us with Him!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the start of this season of waiting. Help us to hold both your magnificence and our own filthiness together today and in these next coming weeks. Overwhelm us with the reality that you came, physically, to this Earth as a demonstration of your love. We know we don't deserve your perfect love and for that, we thank you. We eagerly wait for the day when we will be fully restored and reunited with you. Maintain our focus on you so that our faith, and not our circumstances, becomes the lens we use to view our lives and the world. We love you, we love you, we love you. Amen.

Monica Ko is a sleep-deprived but doting mother of two amazing boys.

Monday, November 30

Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8

Psalm 79 opens with the image of a defiled and destroyed temple, followed by the psalmist asking God to pour out His wrath on nations that “do not acknowledge you” and kingdoms that “do not call on your name.” (79:6)

Micah 4 and Revelation 15 jump ahead to the last days, and again the temple (worship) is centrally placed, but this time, we see a contrasting picture of the nations coming to worship and seeking to learn His ways (Micah 4:2). There are themes of judgment, as well as peace, with the nations turning their “swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” (Micah 4:3)

The contrast between these passages helps capture the tension between what we feel today, and what we long for as we wait for Jesus to return. This season reorients us to the Savior who came and dwelled among us—and whose birth pointed to rulers being brought down from their thrones, the humble being lifted up, and the hungry being fed (Luke 1:52-53). As we wait for His return, we look forward to the day we see described in Micah 4, where His reign is established, and justice and peace are evident.

Prayer: God, may our worship in this season remind us of who You are and what is coming. Lord, shape us as we wait.

Zach Gallentine *likes books, jazz, bread, beer and being with his wife and daughter.*

Tuesday, December 1

Revelation 18:1-10

I have been asking myself the same question for the past few years now. Is America Egypt or is it Babylon? The answer would greatly inform my next steps. Do I pray for plagues? OR do I build houses, plant gardens, take a husband, and bear children? Do I pray for justice and judgment? Or do I pray for peace and prosperity? The answer is, "Yes." The answer is both. Are these not the very characteristics of God: justice and compassion? So, maybe God will ask us to pray for the wellbeing of our enemies today, and maybe they don't deserve that grace. Perhaps they never will. Maybe their hearts will never be softened by our attempts to seek the peace of the city. And that's okay, because God is not only a God of compassion but of justice. Today I may be called to pray for the peace of flourishing of the city. Tomorrow, I may be called not only to come out of her, but also to assist in her destruction. So then, do not worry. God will come to make every crooked place straight. Pray the heart of God and expect a mighty move from Him.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember who you are in all your majesty. You are a good Father who wants the best for his children. Soften our hearts when we pray for our enemies. Help us to remember that we too were once your enemies. We know and trust you to be a deliverer and a redeemer God. So come now and do what only you can do.

One of **Jasmine Hill's** love languages is receiving hot stone massages.

Wednesday, December 2

Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21: 34-38

Like many of us right now, I have been frequently overwhelmed by the chaos, confinement, and confusion that has marked 2020. Feeling besieged by enemies seen and unseen, in my head and heart as well as in the world, I can fall into a vortex of anxiety and panic—I don't know who to trust, and everything seems out of my control.

Fortunately, scripture provides a lifeline: a promise we can trust, and action we can take. The promise is found in today's first passage as the prophet in Micah speaks of hope in the face of oppression, abandonment, and struggle. He points us to the One who, rooted in ancient ways and history, will come standing in the strength of the Lord to protect and to provide. This One is not someone with human limitations. He has a "greatness that will reach to the ends of the earth." And he will be our peace in the midst of all battles. The required action as we wait is given to us by Jesus in the Lukan passage: while waiting for the kingdom of God, be careful of your hearts, be always on the watch, and pray.

Hope and alertness. Celebration and preparation. A lifeline for my head and my heart.

Prayer: O Precious Savior, I trust in the promise of your coming. Give me strength to actively wait with guarded heart and watchful eyes for the hope that is in you.

Terry Marks *has recently moved back East to the forests and foothills of western NJ. She has been enjoying quiet time in nature and rambunctious time with her grandkids. Especially jumping up and down and yelling encouragement at their soccer games.*

Thursday, December 3

Psalm 85:1-2 & 8-13

My wife is on nothing short of a crusade against single-use plastic. Our family is pretty good about bringing bags to the grocery store, going to a refill store for many items, and clicking the “no utensils” buttons when ordering takeout. We even compost. While I occasionally tease her, I am genuinely thankful for the Holy Spirit’s movement in her to care for creation, even in small ways.

To the Israelites, there was an unmistakable connection between God’s blessing and the land. They were an agricultural society, but I believe the connection runs deeper. Even in Genesis, we see that the welfare of the land, animals, and plants is very much our responsibility. God appointed us stewards over His good creation.

In a culture that considers most things disposable, this intimate relationship between people and creation has largely been severed. Instead of loving the land, we’ve attempted to subjugate it to serve our short-term purposes. We then pile up our heaps of waste in poor neighborhoods, so the privileged and wealthy don’t have to think about it.

Advent is a reminder to slow down and to wait on God. That means setting aside short-term benefits for the greater good. Steps such as eating less meat, ordering fewer times on Amazon, or deleting your emails to lessen your carbon footprint may seem small, but when we are consciously better stewards, “truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven” (vv. 11-12; NAB Revised Edition).

Prayer: Father of creation, help us to love all that You have made this Advent season. Give us clarity and conviction on how we can steward Your creation well. Amen.

Won Kim *believes that desserts without chocolate are not actually desserts (pies are the obvious exception).*

Friday, December 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26

“Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.”

Ministering from Vulnerability

One of the treasured traditions in my family is reading Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* aloud in the days leading up to Christmas. The many adaptations—including an incredibly faithful Muppet feature film—speak to the timelessness of this story of a man who has worldly wealth, power, and privilege who learns just how spiritually impoverished, powerless, and mired he is.

A Christmas Carol is an illustration of the countercultural reality of Christmas: The salvation of the world, embodied in the most vulnerable form possible. The Son of God, also the son of a politically powerless family. The only person without sin, born in a situation that to outside eyes must have seemed sinful and shameful.

God has always called the vulnerable to ministry. Jeremiah in his youth, the early missionaries in their exile and persecution. In this Christmas season there are few reminders that I need more than that. No matter how powerless and vulnerable I feel, it means nothing to God.

“See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Prayer: Lord, show us the places where you are calling us to participate in the work of uprooting, and where you are calling us to plant. May we serve you from our weakness, and in doing so witness your strength.

Erin Mulholland is a Christmas enthusiast and enjoys carols, holiday baking, brown paper packages, and 101 Dalmatians.

Saturday, December 5

Ezekiel 36:24-28

While on the beach, I found several beautiful pieces of colorful sea glass. Each piece was unique in its shape and had a soft frosted appearance. As I gently fingered the smooth surface of the glass I started to notice blemishes and imperfections. Like me, this glass has a past. What started as a broken shard of glass with sharp jagged edges was tumbled in the waves for decades and washed against the sand revealing its beauty.

Similar to the glass, my life has been full of sharp edges. I have not been perfect. My life has been filled with the sins of selfishness, idolatry, and countless other sins, which I'm ashamed to name. Over time God has softened my hard heart and my rough edges. God can not only soften our hearts, but He can change our hearts. His promise of restoration to the Israelites is also available to you. Let's pray that our hearts be remade in his image and spirit.

Prayer: Heavenly Father I am thankful for your forgiveness. I pray that you heal this broken world and renew the hearts of your people. Amen.

*In the midst of her mid-life crisis, **Sandra Rogers** is looking forward to obtaining her motorcycle license.*

Sunday, December 6

Isaiah 40:1-11

In this passage, the people of Israel are living as exiles in Babylon and are given these words of encouragement as they wait for deliverance from their present suffering. Though they are strangers in a foreign land, the Israelites are encouraged to “prepare the way for the Lord” in the wilderness and to “make straight in the desert the high-way for their God” (v. 3). Reading this passage, I can’t help but think that this message must have been so encouraging to the Israelites. Their plight as exiles in a hostile land is addressed and validated, but they are given words of hope that their king is coming and that, unlike the people/rulers of this world who are like grass that withers or flowers that fall, their king speaks truth that endures forever (v. 8).

I believe these words can be a source of comfort for us as well during this Advent season. This year has given us so many signs that we are also strangers in a foreign land, living in a kingdom that has yet to be set right. However, we can take heart that our God is coming and that He will usher in righteousness with a mighty arm and draw us near to Him with the tender care of a shepherd gathering his lambs (v. 11).

Prayer: Lord, thank you for hearing the cries of your people as we yearn for your return during these undeniably trying times. Remind us of the hope and joy that we can cling to as we make way for your glorious return. Please give us strength to endure until the day when we can be gathered in your arms as citizens of your reclaimed kingdom.

Amarachi Erondu is currently learning how to play the ukulele and is so grateful for her roommates for tolerating all the “music” she has been playing.

Monday, December 7

Psalm 27; Isaiah 26:7-15; Acts 2:37-42

This year, I'm more in touch with waiting. We've been waiting since March for this pandemic to be over. Sit a minute and connect with that longing for this to pass. It's an inkling of Israel's longing for One who would make things right.

In our passages today there are different ways to wait.

David waits by being in God's presence. His longing is to be with God. For the people of Israel, the temple was a tangible picture of the presence of God. If he could just be in His presence, David could survive everything that was coming against him. And his declaration to the people at the end of the psalm is, "...be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

Isaiah waits by obeying the Lord. I think it's a declaration of his faith in the Lord. Isaiah demonstrates his trust in God by walking in His ways. I hear him saying, "I know that You are the One True God, so even when I can't see what You're doing, I'm going to live according to Your ways."

The new believers in Acts wait by repenting. The passage says they were cut to the heart when they heard that Jesus was the Messiah. Coming face-to-face with the truth of our mess has only one response, "Lord, have mercy." And, even though they are the recipients of all that Isaiah and David were waiting for, they also were waiting for the complete fulfillment of the promise—for which we also wait.

Let's wait today by being in His presence, walking in His ways, and asking for mercy for anything the Holy Spirit brings to mind.

Prayer: Lord, thanks for the way that the pandemic has caused us to connect with waiting in a new way. Would you pour out your mercy on us today as we lean into the wait?

Amy Calkin *loves working with her hands. All things rehab-connected are a joy. :)*

Tuesday, December 8

Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18

Isaiah 4 greets us with a “beautiful and glorious” description of God’s kingdom. As you read over these verses, ask the Holy Spirit to guide your mind and imagination to see this vision of the kingdom. How is God your refuge and shelter? Are you letting him be this for you? For me, this passage so succinctly and powerfully encapsulates God’s love and vision for us, His people.

Turning to Acts 11, we are reminded this vision is not simply for us (those currently in the church) or the Jewish people of the time, but for all people across time and place. As the Holy Spirit guides Peter’s understanding of Christ’s coming for all people, Peter reflects “who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” in light of his cultural background. Recognizing the socially-constructed divisions that were being broken down through Christ’s coming to us, the Spirit leads Peter to quickly and humbly see past these barriers to fully align himself with God’s work.

As we await the coming of our Savior this Advent season, are we clinging to aspects of culture or religion that may stand in other’s way? What do we need to let go of and what do we need to embrace to prepare the way of the Lord so that all people may come to know his saving grace?

Prayer: Holy God,

You are beautiful and glorious. Renew and guide our spirits, minds, and bodies this season as we prepare to celebrate your coming in grace and truth for all peoples.

Amen

Allison Mobley: *As an oenophile, few things I love more than breaking bread and drinking wine with others.*

Wednesday, December 9

Malachi 2:10-3:1; Luke 1:5-17

In these surreal days, I feel I am losing hope. I witness people treating each other poorly, with disdain and hate, thinking they know what God desires. I wonder and doubt how things can be better than they are now. At the same time, I cast judgment on these same people, believing that I act better than they do. I would be wise, however, to confront my own faults and complicity first. How have I been impatient or angry with my family or with strangers? Have I contributed to the further deterioration of relationships between people and God? For even Zechariah, a priest who was considered blameless and righteous before God, fell in fear when confronted by an angel of the Lord.

Yet it is encouraging that God works through us and uses our faithfulness to work out His will. Through God's will, Elizabeth and Zechariah gave birth to John, who returned Israel to a right relationship with Him. These verses demonstrate to me that even when we feel hopeless in our situation, we must continue to remain faithful because God will work to complete His will. Be patient and obey what God asks of you.

Prayer: Father, help me to guard my heart from becoming hard and uncaring. I pray that you show me how I may be faithful to who You have called me to be and to how I may represent You to the world.

Dave Yoo: *I think I should take up a hobby during the long months ahead. I don't think playing video games will be enough. Perhaps painting by numbers...*

Thursday, December 10

Psalm 126

Upon reading Psalm 126, for me, it is a reminder that God is in control and nothing is beyond His doing. In this psalm, he restores the fortunes of Zion and the people. He did not only do it for Zion and the people of Zion but for other nations to witness as well. It reminds me that one day he will return and restore the entire world!

I can take the hardships that are faced today like social injustice, greed, hatred, sickness and death, and the many unspoken hardships and sins that are being faced every minute of the day that the Lord is aware of and He is with us. He truly is good news!! That we need to look to him for our fortunes!! Not the fortunes of this world but the fortunes of knowing and walking with the Lord!! That we can wait with great anticipation like those during the time of Jesus that He is among us with His Holy Spirit and He will return in the flesh!! Hallelujah!! Praise the Lord!!

This passage gives me great hope and allows me to lean not on myself but to look to the Lord for all the things I need and He will provide.

Prayer: So my prayer, Lord, when we have lost our laughter when we have lost our joy when we are filled with tears that we have the faith to know that the Lord knows our fortunes and You can comfort, heal, and restore us. Amen.

William Jackson: *I cherish going to NYC and California to spend time with my children.*

Friday, December 11

Habakkuk 3:2-6; Philippians 3:12-16

Habakkuk 3:2-6 is an allusion to Exodus 19 (read it, if you get a chance) when God literally descended to earth and met Moses on Mt. Sinai in a cloud of smoke, fire, amidst an earthquake and trumpet blasts.

God is of a wholly different substance than humanity. God is so holy, so set apart that God coming to the people in multiple natural disasters toned down the majesty and power of God.

In Habakkuk 3:2-6, the writer is reflecting on the power, might, and awe-inspiring nature of God. God who made us, who loved the Israelites and loves us and wants to be with us, even if it takes multiple natural disasters to tone down his power.

God in Christ calls us to run the race of becoming who God created us to be. We press forward doing the work of making ourselves and the world more as God intended it to be, striving not for perfection but remembering where God has already taken us.

When running a race, we look towards the finish line rather than back at how the mileage behind us has been covered. Our past is still part of us, bringing us to the present. Putting our energy into what lies ahead allows us to see how far God has brought us and anticipate what is to come. The God of Exodus 19 is with us and for us as we run the race of becoming more like Christ.

Prayer: God of power and glory, in your mercy you harnessed your power to be with us. Give us the courage to press on towards that which you have called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. May we see ourselves worthy of being called by you, just as you do. Amen.

Valeri Chow Tao *has a growing appreciation of nature (though not the cold), but especially looking up at the stars.*

Saturday, December 12

Habakkuk 3:13-19

We are living in a time where there are constant reminders of the instability of the world—the pandemic, blatant racial injustice, oppressive rhetoric normalized by elected leaders. Consequently, when we see trouble approaching, we are inclined to prepare; we have witnessed preparation to take the form of hoarding resources, irresponsibly going out for “one last time,” and even arming ourselves, literally.

Grieving and mourning are necessary postures when in distress and spiritual warfare. But what if in that space, as the prophet Habakkuk reminds us, we equally sit in the truth and knowledge of God's graces and comfort so that our inclination to prepare looks markedly different from the rest of the world?

What would it look like if our first instinct was to look back upon the experiences of the church in former ages, observe what great things God had done, and remember the steadfast nature of God's sovereignty, holy justice, and righteous anger? What if we could then publicly sit in holy joy despite the losses and ruins the world presents to us? I often wonder how different the soul of our nation would be if all who claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior live in a manner where when full, enjoy God in all, and when empty and poor, can enjoy all in God.

Spiritual rhythms provide stability. As a tangible way to prepare in distressing situations, consider identifying an experience in your personal life and an experience of God's people in former times as reminders that the mighty God of the Old Testament reigns at present. Habakkuk reminds us that as a waiting people, we must remember that our faith in Christ prepares us for every event.

Prayer: Sovereign God, you give reason for our fear and trembling to find root in joy and triumph. Remind us that preparation in any and all circumstances begins with knowing and remembering You and Your faithfulness.

*In lieu of not being able to attend hip hop classes this year, **Sonia M. Wang** has been participating in zumba classes, led by her niece, Eleanor (aka Nugget).*

Sunday, December 13

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The journey we take while longing for the return of our Lord is prone to find us losing vigor on days we are tired, distracted, enticed by sin. Given under the title "Final Instructions and Benediction," this passage provides brief yet clear steps to take as we continue moving in the direction of our Lord. Whether travelling the road as seasoned followers or as new believers, as this letter was penned for, find here the steps to the destination where we will meet Jesus! Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies.

When even all these feel unheard and unseen, do not toss aside the longing for the return of our Lord, but instead lean into a yearning to draw close to Him. Speak aloud and pray the words of verse 24:

Prayer: He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.

Danae Gordeuk: *As I have watched Hyde Park change since 2009, the best retail swap was Treasure Island for Trader Joe's and the worst was Barnes & Noble for Akira/CorePower Yoga!*

Monday, December 14

Ephesians 6:10-17

God seems to favor juxtaposition as he orchestrates history: a shepherd boy promoted to king, pharaoh's son as liberator of the Jews, and the force of the universe encapsulated in a tiny infant. Similarly, the "comfort and joy" that the Advent season brings stem from the knowledge that this tiny baby would one day choose to be murdered on our behalf. Our celebration of Jesus' birth finds power in the reality of his death and resurrection.

Ephesians endows us with our own part in the jarring contrast of God's plan. We face the onslaught of the "evil day" (v. 13) and yet in the midst of the chaos, we have been given the "gospel of peace" (v. 15) in order to withstand it. This year has nearly universally been one of chaos for us, filled with outbreaks of COVID-19, gun violence, and racial tension. Yet God's gospel is one of peace, comforting us and sustaining us. Our peace is possible because Jesus already endured the ultimate conflict for us and overcame!

Prayer: Lord, as we commemorate twinkling stars and sleepy baby Jesus, let us not forget the power of the moment in the death and resurrection of Christ. Envelope us with your gospel of peace in this time.

Will Weber *loves exploring nature, especially if it is only accessible by miles of backpacking.*

Tuesday, December 15

Acts 3:17-4:4

What a year! One thing is for sure. Jesus Christ is still Lord! In the Acts passage, we read of how it had been spoken of the prophets that Jesus Christ would come and suffer. You have to wonder, why were there numerous reminders of Christ coming to earth to suffer for the sins of all? What was the significance of that repeated message?

In this Advent season, as we commemorate the coming of our Savior, can we also embrace the significance of His suffering? As we think of the joy His birth brought, can we think of the joy His suffering brought as well?

As Isaiah wrote, may we have joy for our suffering. On this day, can we examine ways we have suffered this year and acknowledge how Jesus Christ has, is, or will bring joy out of it? Rejecting our suffering is rejecting the joy it intended to bring. I am sure no one wants to equate joy with suffering when speaking of 2020. I definitely do not! Let's try it today.

Jesus fulfilled every prophecy spoken about Him. My hope is that we fulfill God's plans for us as we strive to end this year healthy and strong. In spite of it all, we are blessed! Today, let us be reminded of a loving Savior whose purpose was to come to earth so that He may suffer and bring us joy. If Christ could do that for us, how much more can we know the purpose of our suffering and live in the joy of the Lord. It is our strength! We got this y'all!

Prayer: Lord Jesus! We've made it this far in 2020! May we look at our suffering differently and think of You knowing the end result is joy. It may be tough but with You it can be done. Thank you, Jesus!

*One of **Markeyta Sconiers'** new favorite things to do is WALK! Self-care that is pandemic proof!*

Wednesday, December 16

Mark 9:9-13

In today's passage, Jesus had just come down from the mountain where he revealed himself in all his glory to his closest disciples. In this moment of transfiguration, the disciples were invited to see the very face of God in looking at the fully human Jesus. But despite His self-revelation as the Messiah, his disciples were still perplexed. And when Jesus goes further, telling them that the Son of Man will need to suffer, it didn't help clear up their confusion. They were expecting a political revolution brought forward by military power, not suffering and resurrecting love.

Over 2000 years later, as we get ready for Christmas, I'm reminded too that the birth of Jesus is yet another opportunity to behold a transfiguration. When we look at the face of this baby, we will see the full glory of God. We also remember this God-child isn't born on a throne but in a manger; born into the scandal of an alleged maternal infidelity, material poverty, predatory census, and a malevolent king bent on murdering Him; indeed suffering and contempt will mark this Savior for the whole of His life. And yet glory will come even within the suffering. In Christ's suffering every force of militarism and materialism, racial supremacy and imperialism, violence and incarceration are overcome. The political order could not "kill what was unkillable" (J. Kameron Carter)—life itself. We aspire to that life which will one day be made complete. Until then we work and wait.

Prayer: Jesus, as we continue to wait for you, let us behold your transfigured person, reject the false comfort of our manufactured securities, and fully entrust ourselves to your life and love in our world.

Mark Tao *thinks Sts. Alp in Chinatown has the best almond milk tea.*

Thursday, December 17

Hebrews 1:1-4

I am more acutely aware of suffering now than I have ever been before. I've had an uncle die in the last year, an aunt who was hospitalized for three weeks in the ICU, and a father-in-law who is currently admitted to the ICU, all from this virus. The tension of not knowing what will happen with him along with the possibility of death and loss of control that I feel has made it hard to think and sleep. I have friends who have lost parents and loved ones to this virus without having the chance to say goodbye. I have taken care of patients who have had this sickness, realizing that the isolation and loneliness is sometimes harder than the sickness itself. I've witnessed the slow and painful death of patients on hospice and zipped up body bags to take to the morgue.

Even amidst all this, I have the tendency to downplay my personal experiences, telling myself that my suffering is relative. I see the difficulties that many others are facing, losing jobs and savings, those who live alone wishing they were able to be with others, strained family relationships due to the extreme confinement, and feelings of anxiety and depression.

Suffering is central to the gospel. According to the creeds we say, Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried. He experienced all of the things you and I have experienced this year, loneliness, despair, loss of loved ones, and death. The suffering that we are all enduring is real and universal. Yet God, in his infinite mercy, came down in the form of his son, Christ, "the heir of all things (Heb 1:2)," and bore all this suffering on behalf of us. His life, death, and resurrection mean that suffering and death do not have the final say. This is good news.

Prayer: Lord, have mercy on us. Comfort us in the midst of our sickness, anxiety, and hopelessness, and help us remember that you will be coming again soon.

Jarrett Yu

Friday, December 18

2 Samuel 6:12-19

“David danced before the Lord with all his might.” In today’s passage we enter the middle of a story. The ark—containing God’s law and God’s presence—had been captured because of Israel’s pride and disobedience. God freed it, but in David’s first attempt to bring the ark back home, he did not follow God’s commands for carrying the ark—and someone died. David was angry and afraid, and full of doubt. But in verse 12 he hears the testimony of the family caring for the ark—God is blessing them!—and it rebuilds his faith. He once again calls the people together to bring the ark back to Jerusalem. But this time, they carry it with reverence, awe, and worship.

David dances with all his might.

David is overcome by his gratitude, joy, and reverence before God. God has forgiven Israel, is restoring His presence among them, and is keeping His covenant. As king, David both humbles himself in worshipful dancing, and also uses his position to lead the people to worship their true King.

When was the last time we worshipped like this? Full of humble awe, and responding to the goodness and holiness of God with every fiber of our being? Inviting the world around us to join in, not because we are so good but because God is?

This Advent, may we be gripped with such an awe for our King that we cannot help but dance with all our might.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your abundant grace, no matter how many times I stumble. May I respond to your presence with us this Advent with an “all my might” kind of worship. I ask that you deepen my awe, my reverence, and my love for you. Amen.

*As someone who loves summer and water, **Susan Sperry** can’t wait to get out on a paddleboard next year.*

Saturday, December 19

Judges 13:2-24

One of the most poignant scriptural images of longing and anticipation is found in the picture of the childless couple. The ideal is known but unrealized. The absence is as tangible as the empty crib in the nursery.

In today's passage we meet two people with dramatically different responses to the news that the wait was over. Typical for the day, the man is named (Zorah), and the woman is simply "a wife", "the woman". Despite this patriarchal bias, the heavenly messenger seeks out only the future mother to receive the good news and the angelic instructions which she passes on to Zorah.

Zorah is skeptical. Is the woman to be believed? So, he requests that God arrange a repeat visit with the angel. God complies but again, sends the angel to the woman who hunts her husband down and makes the introduction. Again, Zorah doubts his wife and challenges both the identity of the messenger and the veracity of the instructions she had already received and communicated to him. The angel's response, in essence, is: just do what I already told your wife. The messenger makes an angelic departure, Zorah completely freaks out and has to be talked off the ledge by his well-grounded wife. The passage beautifully concludes with these words: The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him.

The big difference between how these two received the news that the wait was over can be summed up in one word—faith. The woman took God at his word. Are we willing to do the same as we await the promised return of his son?

Prayer: Faithful God, you have been true to your word and have never failed to keep your promises. As we anticipate the return of your son to make all things new, may we do so with simple, childlike faith. In the name of our Savior - Amen.

*Eliot regularly beats **Kevin Swanson** in dominos and Rummy Cube, Winston beats him at Uno and true to form, Linda caught more falling leaves again this year.*

Sunday, December 20

2 Samuel 7:1-11

Most of my job as a therapist is helping people repair, recover from, or avoid broken relationships. So, I often find myself reframing people's concept of the Golden Rule. In practice, do-onto-others-as-you-would-have-done-onto-you frequently looks like giving the other person what we've received or want to receive. Author, Catherine Wallace, however, describes the exchange within relationships in terms of reciprocity not equality. I trade my ability to meet your needs for your ability to meet my needs, without assuming our abilities or our needs are the same or equal.

In the passage, we see God has blessed David with a kingdom, a palace, and a sense of stability. David wanted to thank God by giving God the same thing in the form of a temple. But, God gave David a palace and peace because that's what David needed at that moment, not to guilt David into an elaborate building project. God is not like us. He doesn't need what we need. Our ability to meet his needs will never match God's ability to meet ours. Whatever God has given you, all he asks in return is your worship and submission.

At the end of the day, the Temple and any church is less a house of God than a table where you are invited to break bread with God. God will never care about the building as much as he cares about the hearts that the building reminds of his presence, because those hearts are where God truly dwells. So, the next time you're tempted to build God a temple, remember the best gift for a God who has everything is your heart.

Prayer: Father, let me see you for who you are and not as a bigger and sometimes better version of me. You gave me what I truly needed: your Son, Jesus Christ. Let me respond by giving you what you asked for: a heart full of gratitude and worship.

*One of **Dennis Bourne's** greatest joys and biggest regrets is being a jack of many trades and master of none.*

Thursday, December 21

Luke 1:46-55

Luke 1 contains the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise about the coming birth of her baby, Jesus. It is a song that rejoices in being chosen by God for her role in bringing God's Son to the earth, but it also gives us a glimpse toward the kingdom of God that He would usher in. The birth of Christ was a moment that flipped the economy of this world on its head. While the world defined success through wealth and power (and continues to do so), that definition would soon be challenged by the way that Jesus lived His life. But in Mary's song of praise, it seems that she already knew this. While she lived in a humble state from an earthly perspective, she knew that future generations would call her blessed because of this baby that she was carrying. She also clung to the hope that God would scatter the proud, bring down the mighty, all while exalting the humble. And while the rich would be sent away empty-handed, the hungry would be filled. Our world still caters to the wealthy and powerful in oppressive ways, but Christ's birth reminds us that this will not always be the case. So this Christmas, let our souls magnify the Lord because we are fast approaching the day when Christ will return, God will bring justice to the earth, the humble will be exalted, and the hungry will be filled!

Prayer: Our Father, thank you for the gift of your Son that brought true justice into our world. When it seems like that justice will never be realized, help us remember that the hope of Christmas is the hope of Jesus' return, when your just kingdom will be realized. In Jesus' name, amen.

*One of **Pete Blodgett's** favorite things is to be on the beach with his family.*

Tuesday, December 22

I Samuel 1:19-28

Several phrases jump out as I read this passage:

“...and the Lord remembered her.” (v. 19)

“She named him Samuel, saying ‘Because I asked the Lord for him!’” (v. 20)

“I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always” (v. 22)

“...the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord” (vv. 27-28)

This story resonates with me. I can't help but reflect on my own journey to motherhood. For years, I remembered praying, asking for prayer, and confessing my desires to conceive. And finally, it happened. God has blessed us with a son and we have another child on the way. God remembers us and our prayers, no matter how many times or years we ask or say the same prayer.

This story also challenges me. What is Hannah's response to her answered prayer? She gives her son back to the Lord. The child she's been longing for all these years! My son is about to be two and I've poured so much of my being to caring for him. My heart breaks with the thought of letting him go. It's so hard for me to imagine doing what Hannah did. Yet, during this season of Advent, Hannah's story draws comparisons to Mary's story in the way both Samuel and Jesus were given to them by God; only to return back to Him. Both mothers looked beyond their own personal blessings. They were able to let go of their sons because they trusted and understood God's greater purpose—to expand those blessings to last generations—for our sake.

Prayer: Father, thank you for being all-knowing...for remembering us and our prayers. We confess the idols we have in our lives which prevent us from fully trusting You. Holy Spirit, inspire us to live our lives as a blessing to last generations.

Elora Hsu *dreamed of becoming the first woman to play in the NBA, but has since replaced that passion with organizing data/tasks in excel.*

Wednesday, December 23

I Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah's story had ups and downs. She was childless for years, and her husband's other wife used that fact to taunt her. They went to the tabernacle every year, and every year the other wife provoked Hannah to such sadness that Hannah did not eat her portion of the sacrifice. Eventually, God answered Hannah's anguished prayer and she gave birth to a son.

Then I imagine Hannah finally enjoying the sacrificial meal with her son by her side, but that joyful moment is short-lived. She has to fulfill her vow. She dedicates her son to God's service, and then perhaps braces herself for yet another journey home from the tabernacle, childless.

Yet this is when Hannah prays her prayer of praise! Her prayer gives an honest description of God's identity and power: God rescues, gives life, lifts up the needy, and makes some people rich. But God also judges, gives death, and makes some people poor. The God who opened Hannah's womb is the same God who had closed it in the first place: God is the God of our ups and our downs.

As we go from 'prayers of anguish' to 'prayers of praise' and then likely back to 'prayers of anguish' again, may we be rooted in the truth that God remains in control.

Prayer: Almighty and trustworthy God, you are the reason our heart rejoices yet sometimes you also seem like the reason we're in pain. Remind us of your love for us. You are our rock throughout our life's ups and downs. Amen.

*Jesus is the reason for the season; but if you asked **Brittany Poku** for a second reason, it'd be cornbread dressing*

Thursday, December 24

Luke 2:1-20

Luke says at the start of this passage, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world..." I have read those words many times in the past but this year they "hit different." It was because of that census that Joseph had to gather his-far-too-pregnant-to-be-traveling-bride-to-be and head out on a road trip. It was because of that census that the couple ended up in Bethlehem, in the town of David.

A secular ruler, through a mundane political act, unwittingly set the stage for the fulfillment of one of the most important prophecies to ever have been given, the messiah being born in the town of David! This one, seemingly insignificant, piece of information that Luke chose to include in his retelling of this story shows us that all of life is held together by our sovereign Lord!

2020 is a year that most of the world is eager to send off, kicking rocks as it goes. But know this, the events of 2020 are not secondary to God's kingdom bursting forth. They are not a detour on the path to God's plan for your life, for our church, or for the Church. They are a part of the story that God has been unfolding before his creation from the very beginning. And so we wait, held together by his love, watching with expectation as he works all things together for our good and for his glory!

Prayer: Sovereign Lord, we thank you that nothing is beyond your redemptive touch. You have taught your church some valuable lessons in this season; Holy Spirit, help us to hold fast to them. At the same time, Lord, please keep our eyes and ears open to see, hear, and perceive the new things that will spring forth in the next season as we wait expectantly for you. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen!

Pastor Michelle Dodson *didn't start feeling stir crazy during this pandemic until late October. Interpret that as you will.*