

Welcome to Wesley's Advent Devotionals. You may check in here every week-day for a shared devotional including scripture, reflection and a chance to respond. (Sunday's devotional will take place in the corporate worship of the church, and I invite you to be at Wesley or your own place of worship each of the 4 Sundays in Advent.) I invite you to "reflect out loud" by writing to me with your thoughts of the day. I may use some of your comments in future devotionals because it is all about being a community. If the thoughts you share with me need to remain confidential, please let me know. Otherwise, I will assume that you are willing to share if your words will be helpful to others.

When I have borrowed from other authors, I will give you references. **The various suggestions for celebrating Advent included in this week's devotions can be found in their larger work at: <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Everyday-Advent-Guide>.**

It is my prayer that this beginning of the Christian year will be a blessed one for you. Perhaps the daily discipline of sharing an Advent devotional with others will continue on after Christmas. Welcome! Following, please find the daily lectionary readings for Advent, Year B.

Watching and waiting. . . . Cheryl

Monday, November 28, 2011

Isaiah 40: 1-11

II Peter 3: 8-15a

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

At the first of anything, I am always so excited—so confident. THIS time, I will complete the course! THIS time, I will read every day's devotional for Advent/Lent/Disciple Bible Study etc. etc. And, sure enough, somewhere along the way I will miss a day. . . or two. And then it is a little harder to get back in the game since I have "messed up" and there is no way to make it perfect again. My original plan of getting it all done. . . all right. . . all by myself has never worked, even once. I have come close, but I have never had a perfect record on a long-term study of any kind. Matter of fact, the only way I have found to complete every day of something is to put myself in charge of composing it. . . then I HAVE to do it all. (You see my method here? You, dear parishioners, are my accountability partners for Advent!)

So take your time. . . don't aim for perfection. If you miss a day, then pick up with the next. If one day you only have time to read one of the three readings, then read that one. . . and offer that reading to God as your Advent gift. I promise you, God will more than richly reward you for any gift of study or prayer or devotion you make.

The Epistle reading for today, II Peter 3: 8-15a reminds us that time is a construct of our own limitations. Time, with God, does not exist. God is timeless. . . eternal. . . the same today as tomorrow. So let us not fret overly about whether we get it all done TODAY or whether we get it all together THIS WEEK. Chances are, you will not. Chances are, I will not. God understands this. "God. . . is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." (II Pet. 3: 9) So, friend, take the time to read, pray and be on your day. It is good to be linked with you through this devotion time.

Comments? Questions? Write me at cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org. This is an interactive devotion. No sense in me doing all the talking!

Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Anticipation

Turn Off the Christmas Music. The point of Christmas music is to celebrate the coming of Christ. During Advent, the Church is anticipating the coming of Christ, so singing about his coming is jumping the gun a bit! Not listening to Christmas music is a way to focus on the anticipation of Christ's coming and helps us to not take for granted the blessing of Christ's incarnation. An album called *Advent Songs* is available from Noisetrade.com to help you find some Advent appropriate music.

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 11:1-10

The words in the Isaiah reading for today ripple across our mind's ear with such a soothing, comforting rhythm. This biblical poetry expresses the hope and dream of anyone who has ever struggled with injustice or been unfairly criticized or just generally been disappointed in the world. The prophet Isaiah lifts up a vision of a time of peace and justice—a time when people are not judged by some arbitrary standard, but by the standard of the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

“The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.” (Isa. 11: 2)

We live in a time when this anointed One has not fully infiltrated our society. Worse yet, we have to admit that the anointed One has not fully infiltrated our own hearts. We spend ourselves on lesser pursuits than the pursuit of wisdom and understanding. (Remember the last time you had a choice between quietly studying the scriptures or turning on the TV?) We lay waste our energy on being fearful of all kinds of things—crime, each other, anyone who is different from us—when the only thing really worth commanding our fear is the mystery of God.

Might I suggest that today you give the spirit of the LORD a chance to cultivate these desirable things in you:

- Wisdom
- Understanding
- A spirit of counsel (this means listening more than talking!)
- A spirit of knowledge (this means stretching your mind. . . .really!)
- A healthy fear (awe) of the LORD

Ask God for these traits to be developed in you, and then by all means cooperate!

Want to share a question or a thought? Write me at: cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Advent Devotions. No matter whether your family does daily devotions or not, make it your Christian New Year's resolution to take some time out of the day to talk with your family about the coming of Christ. Maybe choose to focus on Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55 or make a Jesse Tree with your family - it's a craft and a devotional! (Instructions can be found here: <http://www.crivoice.org/jesse.html>.)

Wednesday, November 30 (St. Andrew's Day)

Matthew 4 18-22

John 1: 35-42

The story of the calling of Andrew is probably one you have heard since Sunday School days as a child. And I am afraid that most of us still hear this story as children might. I have to admit that I was a grown adult before I started imagining the nuances of the bible stories that I had seen as pretty black and white as a child. The text does not provide most of those nuances, but you know they were there. For instance, do you really suppose that everything about the calling of Andrew happened in the split second that it appears, for instance in Matthew 4? I suspect not. It's just that the stories were told with an economy of words, (remember not much paper, not many people who could write, no electronic communication available?) and anything that doesn't qualify as a necessary detail hits the cutting room floor.

Let's wonder about one of those nuances together. Do you really suppose that Andrew and Peter, like zombies, just turned from their nets, dropped the family's livelihood in a pile and walked away, never to be responsible for it again? (Matt. 4:20) I am not sure that if they did, it would have been a very adult thing to do. They were fishermen, for goodness sake. Their family owned a boat, and nets and bait. They had to take care of things, at least minimally.

The reason I think it is important for us to look for the nuance—the things not said, is that a concrete look at this story, or any story, makes it all too easy for us to separate ourselves from the story. After all, none of us have been called to drop it all, leave our responsibilities and follow, and so it becomes easy to see Andrew as something other than a regular guy who had to struggle and make decisions about how to handle his multiple responsibilities.

Andrew ultimately did walk away from the life he had to follow Jesus, but he didn't just desert his family—his life. We wouldn't respect him if he had. What he did do that is entirely possible for each of us was to let his passion for the message of Jesus make some changes in his life. He did not remain the same fisherman that he started out to be.

How is God calling you to be changed? God probably is not calling you to drastic measures like leaving your family or dropping your job. Perhaps God is calling you, however, to prioritize differently. . . .to value things differently. . . .to bring a different measure of grace to the tasks that are put before you. That is for you and God to discern in the nuances of your life.

Let me know what you think and where you are being led.

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Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Advent Wreath/Calendar. Kimberlee Conway Ireton, author of *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year*, suggests the following litany for families during Advent: "In our home, we begin our evening meal by lighting a candle and saying a short litany. For Advent we sing the first verse of 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' when we light the candle."

Candles for an Advent wreath are sold in packs at your nearest Hallmark store, or you can buy five candles (three purple, one pink, and one white). You can use any wreath you would prefer. The Advent Wreath is a tangible way for your family to learn to celebrate Advent together.

Advent Calendars are also a great way for younger children (or adults!) to learn to anticipate Christmas. Advent Calendars can be found at most food stores or ordered online.

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Malachi 3: 1-4

Philippians 1: 3-11

So did you have to hunt through the pages to find the book of Malachi? It's not a very often read book, and with it being located there right at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures, it's easy to miss. Once we get there, sometimes we are not sure we want to stay very long. It's not exactly a boost-your-mood communiqué. According to the commentary of the Harper Collins Study Bible, the two themes in this prophetic book are: 1.) God is displeased with the lack of piety in the community gathered around the temple, and 2.) God is about to send a messenger who will reunite and purify all of Israel, (2006, p. 1284.)

So, while we are thinking about the messenger—be that John or Jesus or one of many messengers we have today, let's take a look at that purifying business. We are to believe from this text that we need, ". . . a refiner and purifier," that we need to have impurities removed like ". . . gold and silver' have to have the dross burned off. (3:3)

I have no doubt that God's highest good for me involves some refining—some debriding—some cleansing. I also have no doubt that out of love for me, God will see to it that a fair amount of that happens. The only serious questions are, "How much am I willing to be pro-active with that process?" and "How will I cooperate with the process?"

I will spend some time today thinking about those things that are impure and dark in me. . . those things that are not pretty to myself or to God. I will ask God to shed light on the things growing like mushrooms in the dark that I may not even recognize. And then I will trust that God's Spirit will lead me to discern and confess. I will trust that since it is God's desire for me that I be refined and purified, I will receive help and support as I cooperate with God's purification.

May this be a day of discernment for us all, for v. 5 reminds us that God will ". . . draw near for judgment." We need not fear God's judgment, for it will come as loving correction or a

loving re-calculation deep within. May you be blessed as you consider what dross and impurity resides within you. Share your thoughts with me: cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Fasting. In America and much of the Western Church, Advent and Christmas are seasons of feasting. We joyously celebrate the season beginning with Thanksgiving feast and end with Christmas dinner with lots of parties and big meals in between. There are, however, some Christian denominations that fast instead of feast. They fast during the season of Advent so that they learn to anticipate the joy of Christmas (and all the food that goes with it) by abstaining from certain foods. We live in between the first Advent and second Advent of Christ, so we urge you to both feast and fast this Advent! Feast in the joy of Christ's coming, but also take some time this Advent season to fast in anticipation of Christ's second coming.

Friday, December 2, 2011

Luke 3: 1-6

Baruch 5: 1-9

I am willing to bet you could find Luke, but Baruch? Baruch? Where in the world is that? Baruch is one of the books in the Apocrypha, or that set of books written between the two testaments. These books are not considered scripture in Protestant tradition, but are found in all Catholic bibles. (Remember that there was no such thing as a Protestant tradition until the 16th century! Christians have used these texts for wisdom and learning longer than they haven't used them!)

For the benefit of those of you who do not have a copy of Baruch, I will share these verses with you:

- 1 Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
And put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
- 2 Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
Put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
- 3 For God will show your splendor
Everywhere under heaven,
- 4 For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."
- 5 Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
Look toward the east,
And see your children gathered from west and east
At the word of the Holy One,
Rejoicing that God has remembered them.

I am wondering today what it might be like to have God look at me and call me, "Righteous Peace," or "Godly Glory." I can't imagine. Most days I don't feel very righteous or

very glorious. But then it is time to remember that I don't have to, (and CAN'T) acquire those attributes all on my own. I might on occasion be considered righteous when I have done my work of cooperating with God in my re-construction. (Remember yesterday's emphasis on refining and purifying?) I might on occasion be considered glorious when I have emptied myself of myself and asked to be filled with something more glorious, (*i.e.*, Jesus.)

We're at day 6 on our Advent journey. How are we doing with discerning? Confessing? Repenting? Turning ourselves over to be re-made?

Luke 3: 4b quotes the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The end result of all this preparation? All flesh—that's you and me and those we love—will see the salvation of God. May God's Spirit be active within you this Advent saving you, cleansing you, transforming you, so that when God looks at you, Godly Glory will be your name.

Have something you want to say? cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Shopping. While the world spends vast amounts of money on Christmas gifts and even goes into debt buying the latest toys and fashions, we as Christians find our hope not in gifts but in Christ's coming to earth. For more information on how stopping the Christmas splurge is the best way to celebrate Advent, go to AdventConspiracy.org.

We aren't saying don't buy any presents though. There are many ways to shop for Christmas presents that give hope to others. Shop for Christmas presents this year at TenThousandVillages.com for fair trade clothing, furniture, and items, or at InvisibleChildren.com and LightGivesHeat.org for fashionable clothing that supports important organizations in Uganda. For information on Christmas shopping read: <http://julieclawson.com/2009/11/18/fair-trade-christmas/>

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Review first reading for Sunday worship: Mark 1: 1-8

Review the second reading for Sunday worship: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

In preparation for worship tomorrow, read and re-read these scriptures. Pay attention to how often peace and righteousness are mentioned together. More often than not, in our 21st Century world, any discussion of righteousness destroys peace. Why is that? Well, because various Christian groups seem to have grabbed a different corner of the cloth when they consider what righteousness might be. For some, righteousness is about pious behaviors such as prayer, bible study, kindness, benevolence etc. For others, righteousness has been focused on certain sexual behaviors and choices. For still others, righteousness has to do with believing the right things and knowing the right way.

What is righteousness to you? Does your understanding of righteousness lead to peace or to division? Think about it.

Tell me what you think. cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

Check this out! One possible way to enjoy Advent more this year:

Hold Off on the Decorations. Similar to Christmas music, decorating for Christmas during the Advent season does not allow us to fully anticipate Christmas Day. Make a new family tradition this year by decorating a little bit each week or by decorating everything on Christmas Eve or the last week of Advent (December 20th-24th).