

We are half-way through Advent at the beginning of this week. As with every year, we are sailing right along, finding that the culture mixes a lot of Christmas into our Advent—struggling to let our “preparation” not ruin the main event what with over-loaded schedules and deadlines approaching.

The daily readings and devotions of this Advent are here for some moments of reflection—hopefully for some moments of wonder. Certainly, there are many other places where you can get more knowledge and a broader range of spiritual enrichment. But for these moments that we spend together, let’s let the scriptures read us rather than thinking that we read them. Let them hold up a mirror to your spirit and take away what you need to take away for this season.

So, enjoy this week. . .we did light the pink candle for the week of JOY this past Sunday. May you find joy at every turn and return that joy to God with prayers of gratitude!

## **Monday, December 12, 2011**

II Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

Luke 1: 26-38

Luke 1: 46-55

Today’s scriptures are aligned for the purpose of giving us a glimpse of the common thread running through the centuries and the lore of the Jewish people who awaited the Messiah. One thousand years before the birth of Jesus, the king, David, was promised that his throne would never be empty. He believed, and the Jewish people believed, that God had promised them a continuing throne and a continuing kingdom with a son of David always ruling over them. Their belief harks back to a previous promise to Abraham which the Jews considered their fundamental reason for existing.

If you know even a bit of Jewish history, you know that the Jewish story did not play out quite the way they expected. They became a conquered country, an occupied country, and eventually an exiled people living in another country. They had to re-make and re-interpret that prophecy about the son of David many times. But re-interpret it they did. In what seems rather fantastical to the modern mind, we can trace through the Hebrew scriptures a thousand year love affair with the promise of an anointed one—the Messiah. They never gave up hoping and they never gave up expecting.

We couldn’t hold on to the dream that long today, could we? By contrast, we appear more than a little fickle. And yet, if you were a Jew, there was a common hope toward which ALL JEWS lived. That may be why in The Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55, the scripture does not say that Mary fainted or ran away or went crazy. Later in the week when we will read about Joseph’s visitation from the angel, it doesn’t say the Joseph threw a fit or left town or denounced Mary. The scripture indicates a level of joy and eager participation on the part of these two peasant people whose lives had been unexpectedly derailed “for higher purposes.”

I know that in events much less significant than the ones that overtook Mary and Joseph, I have railed against what I saw to be an interruption in my plans. I have questioned God and spent

hours/days/weeks in discomfort as I have tried to adjust to circumstances that were not what I wanted. I have been far less gracious than Mary. I have been far less trusting than Joseph. When I have born shame and embarrassment, it has not been pretty like it appears it was for the Holy Family.

If this were a face-to-face conversation, I would ask you to tell me about some of the times in your life you have received a big change of plans. Maybe then you could tell me about a time when God's plan came through in a powerful way even though it wasn't what you wanted to begin with. Why don't you just write me and tell me some of your story anyway. I will be a good listener, and I will also know you are out there. Is anybody listening?

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## **Tuesday, December 13, 2011**

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 1-17

Today's scriptures continue with making the connection—connecting the dots, so to speak. This story of Jesus which we Christians are oh-so-happy to co-opt as our story, is actually a Jewish story. The roots of this story go back 1000 years before Jesus was born. If you read that genealogy in Matthew, you see that it even divides the history of "The Story" up into generations. That first set of generations (Abraham to David,) took 750 years to unfold. The next set of generations, (David to Babylon) took place over 400 years. From Babylon to the birth of Jesus was 600 years.

Just think of it. Our country has not even been in existence for 250 years yet! We are SO lacking any kind of perspective on the Jewish mind and the time-line over which their hope had survived.

One dream—one hope that spanned almost two millennia. It makes our "instant or quicker" mindset appear rather shallow, doesn't it? It also makes me think of the importance of passing something of our heritage and religious hope to our children. The Jews told stories by the fireside for generations. The hope of the Messiah was born across centuries as parent told child and rabbi reminded student. If that transmission had not happened, we would not have the scriptures. We would not have The Story, and we would not have the rich context into which Jesus was born. That tapestry of hope and expectation that took place in Jewish families was necessary for "the right time" to come so that our Savior could be born.

Is there someone in your family or your neighborhood to whom you need to share your hope? Since God depends upon us to weave the context for the story, I want to try and add my threads to the cloth. Tell me about the threads you bring. For what do you hope? What keeps hope alive in dark times? What is the end-point toward which you live?

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## Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Matthew 1: 18-25

When you read the Isaiah passage for today, does your bible have a footnote for the words, “young woman?” My study bible tells me that when this passage was translated into Greek, and then into English, the word for young woman was translated as “the virgin.” But remember—the Hebrew scriptures were not written in Greek.

When I read my copy of the TANAKH, the Hebrew scriptures translated into English that are used by Jews today, I read, “Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel.”

Not until we get to Matthew do we find the word virgin used to describe the mother of Jesus. This makes sense because the New Testament was written in *koine* Greek.

Why all this talk about a word? Well, I guess it seems worth talking about because the use of the word virgin in the telling of the Christmas story has caused no small amount of conflict over the years. In the last 150 years, a group of people defined what they thought were the “Fundamentals” of Christianity, and one of those “Fundamentals” was that a person, to be a Christian, had to believe in the virgin birth. What is generally meant by that is that a person had to believe the conception of Jesus took place by immaculate conception and that no sexual intercourse took place.

Whatever attachment you have or don't have to the virgin birth, I would like to suggest that getting overly invested in any one word, especially when that word was used in a certain way centuries ago and has been translated before we read it, is contrary to the purpose of scripture.

Scripture has been preserved and passed down to us through thousands of years for the purpose of telling us a story—acquainting us with God—bringing us into knowledge of Jesus the Christ. This, then, is the reason we study Hebrew scripture passages and see in them the preparation for our Christian story. When I see people arguing over the virgin birth and dividing into groups of “righteous” and “unrighteous” over where they stand on the issue, I just have to sigh.

I am thankful to be able to read these scriptures without having to analyze them in the same way I analyze a dress pattern if I am making a dress. I do not read the scriptures with the same analytical eye that I use when putting together a “some assembly required” table I bought at Target. The words of scripture are beautiful. They “sing” to me with words both loved and familiar. They are the words that make up my story. . . .and your story.

May we read about a young woman who was with child in the days of Ahaz and a virgin who was with child in the days of Caesar Augustus and find in those texts a story that goes beyond words, beyond argument, beyond mere human understanding.

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## Thursday, December 15, 2011

Micah 5: 2-5a

Hebrews 10:4-10

All of the readings this week might be gathered under the rubric of “Ancient History Week,” or perhaps, in a more modern variation, “Six Degrees of Separation Week.” Six degrees of separation? This is coming from the claim that you can take two people from anywhere on the face of the earth and they are likely to be connected to each other through knowing people by no more than six separations or six steps. Don’t you get that feeling while reading the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for this week? There is this back and forth—a kind of set-up and fulfillment that the lectionary writers were eager for us to see. These writers want to spell out the connections between ancient events and 1<sup>st</sup> century events just so we don’t miss them.

From the prophet Micah, a prophet living before the Northern kingdom was conquered in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, we hear that lowly Bethlehem will bring forth a ruler. This would be tantamount to our being told that Phelps or Shiro would be the place that the world would look to for a president. Not impossible, you say, but perhaps unlikely.

The New Testament reading emphasizes the need for something other than sacrifice. Sacrifice did not accomplish a release, but merely kept the sins of the people before their eyes. Interesting, isn’t it, that this Hebrews passage emphasizes the sanctification that is available to us through the body. We understand that to mean the incarnation—the taking on of a body by God. It is in the incarnation, the en-fleshment, that we are saved.

Now you will find that our culture has emphasized the salvation that came from Christ’s death almost to the exclusion of the salvation that came just by his showing up—the incarnation. This passage in Hebrews goes a long way toward correcting that distortion. It is the entire life of Jesus that saves, heals, and makes us whole. Read verse 10 again with an eye toward the offering of the body including the birth and not just the death. How does this change things for you? Does it give added meaning to the incarnation?

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## Friday, December 16, 2011

Zechariah 9:9-10

John 3: 16-2

The time when Zechariah was written was post-exile-after the time of captivity for the Jewish nation. Don’t you know just how hopeful they were to be free and to have all those possibilities ahead of them! If you think back over your life, you may recognize several of those times in which everything has looked new again. Everything has seemed possible. There is rejoicing in our hearts! And then, inevitably, life does not support the high that we have been on, and we find ourselves facing the reality that while some things may be possible, everything is definitely NOT possible. There is often-times a period of discouragement when coming down from a “the sky’s the limit,” period.

What I find interesting about the Zechariah passage is that it says the cause for rejoicing would be the arrival of their King who would bring peace. Now the Jews, along with us, always want to reach for the big peace—world peace. And wouldn't it be nice?! But not ever in the history of the world has there been world peace. I am thinking that if we read this passage and think about inner peace, we actually do see more possibilities than if we want it all. . . .today!

While the roots of world peace are far beyond me, I actually have within my grasp, today and every day, the roots of inner peace. I have the Spirit living in me. I am a child of God who walks with the Son on a human path. I have everything I need to be at peace. Perhaps if I tend to the things over which I do have control, that will make a small contribution to the world which so longs to be at peace and just can't seem to manage. Rejoice! Shout aloud! Peace is entirely possible. . . one person at a time. Today, let me do my part to maintain the peace that is possible to me. And if you do the same, then there will be at least two people walking around rejoicing and serene today. I hope I run into you. . .we might just glow!

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## Saturday, December 17, 2011

Jeremiah 23: 5-6

Luke 3:23-38

If you have been reading the lectionary texts each day, you may be having the same response that I have had. "Alright already! We've got it! We got the genealogy. We got the history. We got the connection. Enough!"

I must admit that when I came to the Luke text and saw it was yet another genealogy, I rolled my eyes! I began skipping over some of those names, because whatever they meant to the Jews 2000 years ago, they don't, individually, mean much to me now. (Now don't tell me you didn't skip over them—I know you did!) But then I was struck by the way it all ended. ". . .son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God."

This is not a genealogy of some rarified, divine being. This is the genealogy of a real person. Someone with a grandfather and a history and a race. And I thought, well, if I knew all the names to put in the blanks, I could state my own history too and it would end with, ". . .daughter of Eve, daughter of God."

I have to admit—it gave me a new way of thinking about it all. Jesus had ancestors. I have ancestors. You have ancestors, and the end of every genealogy we might construct will end the same way. ". . .daughter of Eve, daughter of God," or ". . .son of Adam, son of God."

Here's an assignment, just for today, (unless, of course, you want to try it tomorrow too.) Walk around all day with your head held high and your shoulders held back, and remind yourself fairly often, "My genealogy goes all the way back to God. With an unbroken line, God can trace the family tree back to Godself." Somewhere on that family tree, you will encounter someone famous, someone who died an early death, someone who did a noble deed, someone who knew God, someone who was searching for God, and on and on and on until the tree winds its way down to the tap root, and there you will find God.

We are made in a beautiful image. We have been born from noble stock. We are children of the Most High. May you feel that down to your toes today, and may you give you Ancestor thanks.

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