

2017 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM

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ADVENT & ATTENTIVENESS

Advent is a season of expectant waiting and preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus. It begins four Sundays before Christmas day. In Advent, we practice waiting as Israel and the world waited for the Messiah: the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver and restore His people. In Advent, we focus on the holy mystery that changed the course of history: the incarnation of God as a human. In Advent, we look forward to Jesus' promised return. Advent is meant to be a time of focus for us as disciples.

The reality of Advent for most of us however, is that we are harried and distracted. That's why our church-wide practice this season is attentiveness. But before talking about attentiveness it's important to get our bearings around practices before assuming that they just add to the Christmas to-do list!

Discipleship is the process of being transformed into the image of Jesus, growing to love the Triune God above all else and loving others and creation as Jesus does. It involves the totality of life: all of our choices, attitudes, actions, thoughts, and habits. While discipleship cannot be limited to a program, there are ways that we can order our lives together, and individually, that will create room for the Holy Spirit to transform us. We call these the "building blocks" of discipleship. One of these building blocks is practice. Practices help us open our lives to the Holy Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Jesus.

Practices are not ways in which we get God to listen to us, earn God's favor, add to our "to-do" lists, or in any way try to be in control. Practices are offered to God with no strings attached, as a way to offer ourselves to God and let God transform us by the Holy Spirit's power. This means, if you don't "feel" anything while you practice that is okay, even normal. No matter what we feel, we can trust that God will do good work in and through us. Far from another thing "to do" before Christmas, practices are ways we posture our lives to receive more fully the miracle of the incarnation!

God is with us, all the time. Through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, we can walk through our days with Jesus. It's an amazing gift that we often ignore or cannot hear because our lives are busy and noisy. We are accustomed to being distracted - by work, by cell phones, by entertainment and media. Our preoccupation and distraction keeps us from paying attention to the most important aspects of our lives. Our distractions have even become addictive, which threatens our ability to pay attention to the Lord. Practices of attentiveness give the Spirit room in our lives to make us aware of, thankful for, and responsive to Jesus' presence with us.

Each week, after Sunday's reflection, you will find another way to practice attentiveness. You may decide to try out the different practices each week of Advent, and then stick with the one that resonated with you the most through January. Or, you may find one that resonates right away and stick with that practice for a couple of months. Any way you do it, remember that the goal of a practice is not to master the practice, or build one upon the other, but to open yourself to the Spirit's work. Listen to the Spirit's leading and enjoy holding

*“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.”*

PSALM 27:4

ADVENT WEEK 1

WEEKLY PRACTICE: SLOWING

It is difficult to be attentive to the Lord by hearing His voice and witnessing His work when we are always in a hurry, moving from one event or task to another. It's difficult to nurture any important and God-given relationship when we are in a rush. We are so addicted to hurry that even when we aren't busy, our attitude is still one of rushing. When John Ortberg asked renowned spiritual leader Dallas Willard for advice about nurturing his relationship with the Lord, Dallas gave him one instruction: "ruthlessly eliminate hurry."

This week, practice at least one way of slowing down. Below are a handful of practical ways to slow down. As you engage in these practices, talk to the Lord. Ask Him to enable you to relish His presence and teach you the fruit of receiving life as a gift instead of a task to be accomplished.

- *If you are able, and the Lord makes the way clear, say "no" to an event or meeting.*
- *Plan time between your appointments or tasks.*
- *Spend time lingering at a meal.*
- *Be attentive to what people are saying, instead of planning your response in your mind.*
- *Drive in the slow lane.*
- *Walk, talk, and act more slowly.*
- *In your small group, Sunday school, or other gathering, give people a moment of silence at the beginning of your time together for people to slow, center, and become attentive to the Lord and each other. Remind each other that the Lord is with you.*

WEEKLY PRACTICE: MINDFULNESS REMINDER

Lists, sticky notes on the car dash, putting something in front of the door, setting an alarm, a tie around finger - we use various methods to remember something important. This week, choose a visual or audial reminder. Whenever you see or hear the reminder, say a short prayer of awareness: "Lord, you are with me and I am with you. We are here together."

WEEKLY PRACTICE: LECTIO VISIO

Consider the early Renaissance fresco, *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico. What jumps to your attention? What in the image stands out? What feelings or thoughts does the image evoke? What aspects of Scripture (see *Scripture readings for Week 1 Advent*) are drawn out in the image?



Annunciation

by Fra Angelico (ca. 1450)

REFLECTION

Does your mind start to wander when you read Jesus' genealogy? Mine often does. I either start thinking about something else entirely (what should we eat for dinner tonight?) or I start skimming the list quickly to "get to the good stuff." There are at least two things we miss when we skim, skip, or mindlessly read through Jesus' genealogy.

First, we miss the scandal. Or, rather, scandals! Matthew makes a point to let us know that adultery, murder, incest, conspiracy, and favoritism are a part of Jesus' family tree, not to mention those considered lesser-than by the dominant culture. After reading through the tree of famous, infamous, and unknown ancestors, Matthew wants us to think: "No matter who I am, or what I have done, I can be a part of Jesus' family too."

The second thing we miss when we skim or skip this passage is thoughtful reflection on why we skim or skip. We like movement, action, and instant understanding. In fact, I would dare to say our culture is addicted to speed and distraction. God however, often works with the long-view in mind: slowly and deliberately with a beautiful end in sight. Generation after generation after generation. To some, it might have seemed that God was not working. To some, it might have appeared that God had forgotten. Some may have been tempted to figure out their own plan. But slowly and surely, God unfolded His of incarnation; a plan no human would ever dream of.

Does your tendency to skim, skip, or mindlessly go through your day prevent you from noticing God's slow, deliberate work in the ordinary? How often has our rush from event to event blinded our eyes to God's gifts and deafened our ears to hear His voice? Read the genealogy again - slowly. As you do, ask the Lord to begin untangling your addiction to speed and results so that you can attend more fully to His love.

WEEK ONE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

MATTHEW 1:1-17

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah,

Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,

Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah,

Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz,

Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,

Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah,

and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers

at the time of the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,

Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,

Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor,

Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim,

Akim the father of Elihud, Elihud the father of Eleazar,

Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob,

and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary,

and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

FLESH BECOME WORD

On the way to becoming Word,

he remembered hands:

the planning, piecing together bones,

sketching creases on palms.

And hands, pointing, naming,

azalea, edelweiss, rose;

hands shadowing eyes,

hands stained with soil.

He remembered the midwives' hands

tugging Boaz, Solomon, Joram into light,

and his own: fingers translucent in the womb.

For a moment, he again mixed clay,

beckoned children,

drew letters in the sand,

until the hammer struck again.

- by Marjorie Maddox Phiifer -

PRAYER

Everlasting God, it's Advent once again.

We've eagerly waited for change, but it appears little has happened.

Expand in me the great hope that one day I will be raised from this broken earth

- changed in the blink of an eye -

and everything bent and bruised, curdled and corrupted, in me and this world, will be

transformed into lasting goodness, righteousness,

and truth. In Jesus' name,

Amen.

- from Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year

written and collected by Philip Reinders -

WEEK ONE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

LUKE 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Then the angel left her.

TOO MUCH TO ASK

*it seemed too much to ask
of one small virgin
that she should stake shame
against the will of God.
all she had to hold to
were those soft, inward
flutterings
and the remembered sting
of a brief junction--spirit
with flesh.
who would think it
more than a dream wish?
an implausible, laughable
defence.*

*and it seems much
too much to ask me
to be part of the
different thing--
God's shocking, unorthodox,
unheard of Thing
to further heaven's hopes
and summon God's glory.*

- by Luci Shaw -

WEEK ONE

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

GALATIANS 4:4-7 (CEB)

But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.

PRAYER

*O God, who comes to us in humility,
eclipse my doubts and questions with the brightness of Your presence.
You have redeemed me through Your Son.
Visit me now by Your Spirit, pierce the darkness of my fear,
and assure me of my place in Your family as Your beloved child. Amen.*

WEEK ONE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

LUKE 1:39-45

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,
where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.*

*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

In a loud voice she exclaimed:

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!
But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*

*As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears,
the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Nothing is mentioned in the text to indicate that Elizabeth had been informed about Mary's pregnancy. According to the text, what drew Elizabeth's attention to the child in Mary's womb?

The description of the unborn baby John leaping inside Elizabeth's womb is surprising and full of delight. How might God be working to get your attention, perhaps in surprising ways? How do you respond?

WEEK ONE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

LUKE 1:46-56

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

MAGNIFYING GLASS

*We hear that down is up and up is down
rich empty and poor, poverty steeped with riches
and nothing will ever be the same*

*Our pride is exposed as shame and
shame inverted becomes pride
and nothing will ever be the same*

*The kings beg in the street for coins and
the street junkies take eucalyptus steam showers all day
and nothing will ever be the same*

*You come into this gunning, shot-up world
Mary sings of your power and peace
and your only weapon a willing womb*

*You magnify us with your round looking glass
and see our microscopic lives as large
and our greatness you smoke out with focused light*

*In turn our souls magnify you, you unexpected world flipper,
as we look up through the lens of goodness and mercy
and just your eye fills up the monacle of the sky*

- by Michael Coffey -

WEEK ONE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

LUKE 1:57-66

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said,

“No! He is to be called John.”

They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote,

“His name is John.”

Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?”

For the Lord’s hand was with him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How did Elizabeth demonstrate awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit within her family?

Consider how Zechariah's hardness of heart and sin (described earlier in chapter 1) led to attentiveness and responsiveness to God later in the story, which we read here. How did this responsiveness impact Zechariah? How did it impact those around him?

The neighbors in the hill country of Judea noticed that something powerful had occurred for and within Zechariah. What prompted their attentiveness, and ensuing awe? What ideas or questions might have been turning over in their own minds as they asked each other, "What do you think this child will grow up to be?"

WEEK ONE
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

LUKE 1:67-80

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),*

*salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors*

*and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*

*to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation*

*through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

*And the child grew and became strong in spirit;
and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.*

PRAYER

*Sure to come Savior,
I believe Your coming again will mean the righting of all that is wrong,
victory over the powers of darkness;
it will complete Your rescue plan and fully carry out Your redemption.
But that sweet comfort makes the waiting all that much harder.
Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and redeem Your people.
Come quickly and rescue us. Amen.*

- from *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year*
written and collected by Philip Reinders -

ADVENT WEEK 2

WEEKLY PRACTICE: THE EXAMEN

The Examen is prayerful reflection for discerning God's presence and work in the ordinary of our days. It was developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century and disciples of many traditions have found it a helpful way to become aware of and thankful for the Lord. This week, take 15 minutes at the end of each day (or as many as you are able) to pray the Examen at the end of the day. The steps of the Examen can vary, but here is one simple way to engage:

Step 1 - Become aware of the Lord's presence. Ask the Lord to help you see your day through His eyes.

Step 2 - Review your day with the Lord. For what moment(s) are you most grateful? When did you receive and give the most love? Talk to the Lord about what it was like for you to be in that moment. Share your thanksgiving and let it lead you into prayer.

Step 3 - Continue to review your day with the Lord by considering the low points. For what moment(s) are you least grateful? When did you receive and give the least love? Try to attend to your thoughts and emotions without cleaning them up. Offer your thoughts and emotions to the Lord and let it lead you into prayer.

Step 4 - Pray about the day to come. Imagine the things you will be doing, the people you will be interacting with, and the decisions that may need to be made. Ask the Lord to make you aware of His presence through the day, and to give you His wisdom and strength especially in those places which did not go well today.

Step 5 - Rest in God's grace.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: I SPY GOD

This is a great way to teach children the practice of finding God in their “ordinary” lives. When you sit down for a meal together, or are riding together in the car, encourage each person to share where they have seen God’s presence and work in their day.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: LECTIO VISIO

Consider the painting of the Holy Family by Michael D. O’Brien entitled *The Presentation*. What jumps to your attention? What in the image stands out? What feelings or thoughts does the image evoke? What do you see in Joseph? What do you see in Mary?



The Presentation (Holy Family)

by Michael D. O'Brien

REFLECTION

In Advent, it's easy to lock in on certain aspects of the Big Story of the incarnation. We cling to verses that remind us of who Jesus is and what He comes to accomplish, such as these two references from Matthew 1:

"Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins..."

"They will call him Immanuel (which means *God with us*)..."

How we love these verses! They are meaty, meaningful statements about the identity of Christ, and it's no wonder they ensnare our attention. But sometimes we gloss over other aspects of the narrative because of our focus on the exceptionally beautiful and powerful statements like these.

Embedded in the same section of Matthew 1 that describes Jesus as Savior and Immanuel is the story of Joseph, which is the Scripture reading and sermon text for the second Sunday in Advent. Joseph's attentiveness to God's Spirit is one of those things that's easy to miss in this chapter, even though he demonstrates attentiveness in multiple ways. Matthew describes Joseph as being "faithful to the law." In other words, Joseph is attentive and responsive to the guidelines for living that God has given His people. Matthew also describes Joseph's attentiveness to Mary's needs, writing that "he did not want to expose her to public disgrace." In this circumstance, a quiet divorce was certainly not something Joseph would have been expected to do. And yet Matthew intentionally notes Joseph's desire to avoid bringing Mary extra shame in an already shameful situation. Additionally, Joseph pays attention to the voice of the Holy Spirit, responding in obedience even when it meant risking his own reputation and character.

Imagine how this story might have played out had Joseph followed through with his plan to divorce Mary. His attentiveness to the Spirit is a lynchpin in this story! And not only his attentiveness, and but his obedience. In a patriarchal society

such as first century Paletine, it would have been the father's prerogative to name a child, and that name would often have been a family name, perhaps the name of the father himself, or the grandfather. It may not have been easy for Joseph - the perceived father in this story - to relinquish the expectation to name the first son. And yet Joseph's obedience enables the Lord to be called two of the most foundational names in our understanding of who Jesus is: God's Salvation (*Jesus*) who represents God's Presence (*Immanuel*) on earth. Joseph's attentiveness and ensuing obedience are elements in how this story unfolds.

How are you practicing attentiveness to the way God is calling you to live?

How are you practicing attentiveness toward the needs of others?

How are you practicing attentiveness to God's own voice, which may even be calling you into something that seems risky or dangerous?

O Lord, give us eyes to see and ears to hear Your voice!

WEEK TWO

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about:

*His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together,
she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.*

*Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law,
and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace,
he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered 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 home as your wife,
because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son,
and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

*"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"
(which means "God with us").*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took
Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage
until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

PRAYER

*Lord, grant me the courage of Mary and of Joseph: the strength to "yes"
to what You call me to do, even when it is strange or scary.*

*Grant me discernment, and ears to hear Your voice as the Spirit speaks like the whisper of
the wind. Bring Your promises to fulfillment in my life,
even as You are fulfilling Your promises to Your people.*

In the name of Christ, the Savior, Amen.

A CHRISTMAS SONG

*In the cold of night
as Mary held her baby tight,
O, warm us, hold us
in your love, God with us, in Christ.*

*In the lonely night
as Mary calmed her baby's fright,
O, still us, comfort us
in your love, God with us, in Christ.*

*In the peaceful night
as Mary trusted all was right
O, guide us, hearten us,
with your love, God with us, in Christ.*

*In the dark night
as Mary saw her baby's light,
O, shine on, shine on us
with your love, God with us, in Christ.*

- by Michael Coffey -

WEEK TWO

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

ISAIAH 7:10-14

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz,

“Ask the Lord your God for a sign,

whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:

*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,
(which means God with us).*

PRAYER

*Incarnate Lord, why do we easily consider our bodies as shameful
or something to get beyond, when You're quite fond of them?*

Forgive us for trying to be more spiritual than You are by denying our human earthiness.

*Overtake us with joy that You have come physically to this world, taking a face and
sharing our flesh, for truly being our Immanuel,*

“God with us.” Amen.

*- from Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year
written and collected by Philip Reinders -*

WEEK TWO

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

PSALM 85:1-4, 7-11

You, Lord, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.

You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger.

Restore us again, God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us.

Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation.

I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus' name literally means "YHWH (Israel's God) is salvation." Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to save His people, and to bring salvation and restoration not only to Israel, but to the whole world.

How have you experienced this restoration, and the nearness of God's salvation? In what ways might you still be longing for righteousness and peace to embrace each other in your own life?

WEEK TWO

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

TITUS 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

PRAYER

*God of all hope, in Jesus Your salvation broke into our world,
and His return gives purpose to our living in this broken world.*

*Make me ready for that day when He comes again with great glory and majesty to judge
the living and the dead, renewing and cleansing this tired world, making everything new.*

*Make me ready for that future day by living hopefully today. In the name of our
soon-arriving Savior, Amen.*

- from *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year*
written and collected by Philip Reinders -

WEEK TWO

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

TITUS 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When you think of salvation, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

According to Titus, it should be *mercy*. Because of God's *mercy* in Christ we are saved. And, according to Titus, this salvation takes the form of kindness and love.

Describe your concept of the God who saves. What comes to mind?

Does the God who saves appear in the form of kindness and love, as Titus says?

And what does "salvation" mean in your life?

How are you experiencing the gifts of renewal and hope accomplished by God's salvation?

WEEK TWO

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

PSALM 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion we were like those who dreamed.

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

*Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.*

WITHIN THIS STRANGE AND QUICKENED DUST

O God, within this strange and quickened dust

The beating heart controls the coursing blood

In discipline that holds in check the flood

But cannot stem corrosion and dark rust.

In flesh's solitude I count it blest

That only you, my Lord, can see my heart

With passion's darkness tearing it apart

With storms of self, and tempests of unrest.

But your love breaks through blackness, bursts with light;

We separate ourselves, but you rebind

In Dayspring all our fragments: body, mind,

And spirit join, unite against the night.

Healed by your love, corruption and decay

Are turned, and whole, we greet the light of day.

- by Madeleine L'Engle -

WEEK TWO

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

ISAIAH 61:1-4

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, Deliverer, as You anointed Jesus at His baptism to proclaim good news to the poor, so You call me to this same purpose. Inspire me to be a bearer of good news wherever there is distress, to bind up the brokenhearted, to be a light in dark places, and to be a comforter in times of mourning. Strengthen me to be someone who restores and rebuilds, rather than tears down. Come, Almighty, to deliver us all, and let us all receive Your life, promised in Jesus. Amen.

ADVENT WEEK 3

WEEKLY PRACTICE: UNPLUGGING

A recent study revealed that the average person swipes, taps, or clicks on their phone an average of 2617 times a day. Pause and let that sink in. Now add the number of hours you use any other device that needs to be plugged in. Now compare that to the time you spend, uninterrupted, with people and the Lord. It is difficult to be attentive to the Lord, or anyone else for that matter, when we are constantly plugged in. Unplugging is a practice that “recognizes that personal beings are created for personal interaction by a personal God” (Adele Calhoun).

This week, practice unplugging in at least one way. As you do, attend to the feelings and impulses raised within you, and share them with the Lord. What do you learn about yourself? What might God be trying to say to you? Here are some practical ways to unplug:

- *Specify non-digital hours: turn off the internet, phone, gaming etc, at the same time each night, during dinner, or another time agreed upon by those in your household. If you worry that others will need to reach you, let them know ahead of time, or set up an automatic response.*
- *Don't check email on your day off.*
- *Give up some other form(s) of electronic communication or entertainment this week (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, video games, etc).*
- *Whenever you have the opportunity, choose to communicate face-to-face instead of electronically or by phone.*

Week 3 PRACTICES continued on page 33

WEEKLY PRACTICE: LECTIO VISIO

Consider the painting, *The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids* by James B. Janknegt. Notice the use of dark and bright colors. What jumps to your attention? What in the image stands out? What feelings or thoughts does the image evoke? How does this painting draw out aspects of the parable in Matthew 25 that you wouldn't otherwise have paid attention to?



The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids

by James B. Janknegt

REFLECTION

For what are you watchful? Maybe the safety of your children, or your aging parents? A big enough balance in your checking account? Opportunities to spend time with people you care about? Or, how about this one: what do you watch? The clock? Your phone? The TV screen?

Our scripture reading is about watchfulness. As evening darkens, ten women in a wedding party are waiting for the arrival of the groom. The women grab their lamps and head to the outskirts of town and set up camp. But the groom is late in arriving (surprise!) and the women are getting drowsier and drowsier, until at the stroke of midnight, a voice cries in the dark that the groom is coming! Startled awake, the women realize that their lamps have burned much longer than they expected, and they need to replenish the oil in order to keep the lamps burning long enough to greet the groom. But only half the women brought refills of their oil, so the other five rush back into town to get more oil. While they're gone, the groom appears and ushers the remaining five women - the ones who were prepared with extra oil - to the celebration. When the other women return, the door is shut. They have missed the wedding altogether.

All ten of these women were watching for the groom. During Advent, we watch for the coming of Jesus, who has promised to return and fully establish God's kingdom on earth. And we, the Church, have been watching for the return of the King for thousands of years. This requires great patience. What distractions prevent you from watching for the return of Christ? In what ways do you see the inbreaking of the Kingdom? How might you be distracted from seeing it? Watchfulness also requires preparation. In an essay entitled *The World's Last Night*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Precisely because we cannot predict the moment, we must be ready at all moments ...". In the parable from Matthew 25, only half the women were prepared for the arrival of the groom.

What practices do you engage to help you prepare to be in the presence of the Lord? Whether in gathered worship, in personal time of prayer and study, or in the daily grind of life, how do you prepare to be in God's presence?

WEEK THREE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17

MATTHEW 25:1-13 (CEB)

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps but didn’t bring oil for them. But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

“When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.’

“Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.’

“But the wise bridesmaids replied, ‘No, because if we share with you, there won’t be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.

“Later the other bridesmaids came and said, ‘Lord, lord, open the door for us.’

“But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

“Therefore, keep alert, because you don’t know the day or the hour.”

FIRST COMING

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.*

*He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

*He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

He did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

*To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.*

*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,*

He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

- by Madeleine L'Engle -

PRAYER

*Unexpected Savior, You are coming again,
but this date, already marked down by the Father,
isn't for me to know.
But I'm curious, Lord, desiring a timeline or diagram,
wanting to nail down a future that's out of my hands.
In place of my faithless need to control,
give me a watchful heart full of expectation and wonder. Amen.*

- from *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year*
written and collected by Philip Reinders -

WEEK THREE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

MARK 13:32-37

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven,
nor the Son, but only the Father.*

Be on guard! Be alert!

You do not know when that time will come.

*It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge,
each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

*“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come
back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.*

If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.

What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus uses the metaphor of watching and sleeping to encourage us to look forward to His return and live in light of that promise.

What are ways that we “sleep,” or fail to live in light of the Savior’s return?

What are ways that we “watch,” or live in anticipation of the Kingdom’s fulfillment when Christ returns?

What are the “assigned tasks” that the Lord has given you in this season of your life?

WEEK THREE

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

ROMANS 8:18-25 (CEB)

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

PRAYER

*Sure to come Savior, I believe Your coming again will mean the righting of all that is wrong; it will complete Your rescue plan and fully carry out Your redemption. But that sweet comfort makes the waiting all that much harder. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and redeem Your people;
Come quickly and rescue us. Amen.*

- from *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year*
written and collected by Philip Reinders -

WEEK THREE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

PRAYER

How long, O Lord, must we suffer under evil and darkness?

*How long, O Dayspring, before the light of Your kingdom
pierces the gloom of our sin?*

How long, O Sun of Righteousness? Rise with Your healing rays to awaken us.

How long, Almighty King?

*Though we do not know the hour or date,
we await the coming Day of Your justice, truth and love. Amen.*

WEEK THREE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

JAMES 5:7-11

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.

The Judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

THIS ADVENT

*You light candles and you wait,
not like waiting at the bus stop
with the rain soaking your day
and the time passing like tree growth.*

*You light candles and you wait,
not like standing in line at the grocery store
with your parsley dripping on your shoe
and the woman in front of you
writing a check like a novel.*

*You light candles
as you sing songs of joy in minor keys,
and you wait
like a man sitting at the restaurant table
with the calla lilies in his hand
and the diamond ring inside
the death-by-chocolate dessert,
looking every direction every moment
to see his beloved appear.*

*You wait like this
even without anyone coming
to take your flowers,
year after year
war after war
death after death,
lighting candles one by one.*

- by Michael Coffey -

WEEK THREE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

ISAIAH 52:1, 8-12

Awake, awake, Zion,

clothe yourself with strength!

Put on your garments of splendor,

Jerusalem, the holy city.

Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;

together they shout for joy.

When the Lord returns to Zion,

they will see it with their own eyes.

Burst into songs of joy together,

you ruins of Jerusalem,

for the Lord has comforted his people,

he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord will lay bare his holy arm

in the sight of all the nations,

and all the ends of the earth will see

the salvation of our God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This is a picture of our future with God: jubilant song, comfort, redemption, salvation, God's strength revealed. All this is possible because of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and promised return.

How does this picture of the future encourage you today?

What areas of your life, or this groaning world, do you need God to assure you that He will redeem?

WEEK THREE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

LUKE 2:25-32, 36-38

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.*

*For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:*

*a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."*

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

WAIT AND SEE ***(Simeon and Anna)***

*In the drab waiting-room
the failed travellers, resigned,
sleep on the hard benches,
inured to postponement and foul coffee.
Hope has given up on them.*

*There are also the impatient,
pacing platforms, and the driven,
purple with frustration, abusing
their mobiles, for the hardest part
of waiting is the not-doing.*

*Truly to wait is pure dependence.
But waiting too long the heart
grows sclerotic. Will it still
be fit to leap when the time comes?
Prayer is waiting with desire.*

*Two aged lives incarnate
century on century
of waiting for God, their waiting-room
his temple, waiting on his presence,
marking time by practising
the cycle of the sacrifices,
ferial and festival,
circling onward, spiralling
towards a centre out ahead,
seasons of revolving hope.*

*Holding out for God who cannot
be given up for dead, holding
him to his promises - not now,
not just yet, but soon, surely,
eyes will see what hearts await.*

- by Richard Bauckham -

ADVENT WEEK 4

WEEKLY PRACTICE: FIXED-HOUR PRAYER

Fixed-hour prayer, or Praying the Hours, is a way to regularly attend to God throughout the day. It involves specifying time when we turn from our work and pray, either spontaneously, using Scripture, or using a written liturgy. Fixed-hour prayer was used by devout Jews, including Jesus, the early disciples, and our church fathers and mothers (most notably the Benedictines). The prayer doesn't need to be long. It is a way of remembering that God is with us and that our work, play, and prayer belong to God and can be acts of worship.

This week, try out fixed-prayer. If you already have 1 or 2 set times you pray, try adding just one more. It may be helpful to set a reminder on your calendar, or set an alarm. If you aren't sure what to pray, try praying each day's Scripture selection listed in the devotional.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: LECTIO VISIO

As you read the Scripture selections for this week, consider the Ethiopian painting, Adoration of the Magi. What jumps to your attention? What in the image stands out? What feelings or thoughts does the image evoke? What aspects of Scripture are drawn out in the image?



Adoration of the Magi
by unknown Ethiopian artist

REFLECTION

The Magi were on the lookout for God. They waited and watched, and then they saw: God reaching out to them through His word, written in the heavens, beckoning them to Jesus. I wonder how many miles they plodded, how many weeks they traveled, and how many stares they endured as outsiders to get to Jesus. All to come and worship Him, laying their treasure at His feet.

It seems like the whole gospel is in this short story. We are caught breathless by the wideness of God's grace: the Magi, considered outsiders by God's people, have been drawn to Jesus. We are confronted and comforted by the focus of God's grace: God draws them to a particular One. We are invited to respond in the same way as did the Magi: at the miracle of God's greatest gift we worship and lay open our treasures and lives.

The Magi ask us questions:

Are we on the lookout for God? God may not light a bright star in the sky for us to see, but God is sharing His Word nonetheless, drawing us closer to Jesus. God speaks to us through joy, sorrow, trouble, contentment, and even the ordinary and routines of life.

Are we caught breathless by the wideness of God's grace, that God loves and is drawing to Himself people that are not like us? Or, like Herod, does God's inclusiveness threaten our identity and sense of belonging?

How will we respond to Christ? Will we bow down and worship with gratefulness, or treat the miracle of the incarnation as a story to put away along with the tree and garland?

The Magis traveled from afar to worship Jesus. Through the Spirit, the born and risen Christ is with us every day. May we worship Him every day and every moment, in all that we do with thankfulness in our hearts.

WEEK FOUR

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

MATTHEW 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod,

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law,

he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler

who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod,

they returned to their country by another route.

A MAZE OF MAGI

Lord

We come

Through buyers bundle-bent

We never meant ...

We carved our names

On bridges

Built by Carrier and Ives

“Over the river and through the woods”

(The sleigh never arrives)

We flattered father’s daughters

Mirroring

Holiday frocks:

Stoics disregarding

Their abundant cookie crocks

We combed through tinsel forests

Tangling

In artificial lights

Tracing nothing so electric

As the vacuum of your nights ...

And we say

We have not found

Him paled

In a small nest

Magi

Even Magi

Come slowly

At best

- by Sandra R. Duguid -

PRAYER

*Lord God, You defy all our tidy categories for understanding You,
especially at Christmas. What a paradox the incarnation is - true God and authentic
humanity knit together in the sweet-smelling skin of a baby.*

*We worship You for this marvelous mystery: the Conqueror of Death swaddled and
nursing; the Creator of the Cosmos cradled in the quaking arms of a girl. Today, honored
and awed, we remember the dust and the straw and the sweat and the blood,
and Your infant cry that pierced the night.*

Come now and pierce our souls with Your love. Amen.

WEEK FOUR

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

LUKE 2:4-14

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

LIKE EVERY NEWBORN

*Like every newborn, he has come from very far.
His eyes are closed against the brilliance of the star.
So glorious is he, he goes to this immoderate length
To show his love for us, discarding power and strength.
Girded for war, humility his mighty dress,
He moves into the battle wholly weaponless.*

- by Madeleine L'Engle -

WEEK FOUR

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26

ISAIAH 9:2, 6-7

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

PRAYER

Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, I celebrate Your coming to save, becoming a servant, and being made in human likeness. While it's easy to believe this was really good camouflage, I rejoice that this was no disguise, but Your delight. Quiet me with Your love that knows the vulnerability of human life - You've been through it all, taking to Yourself a real human nature with all its weakness, all but the sin. Amen.

- from *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year*
written and collected by Philip Reinders -

WEEK FOUR

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27

JOHN 1:1-13

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What enables the ability of sight?

When you're in a dark room and you turn on a lamp, what happens?

From the very beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is described as the Light of the world; in other words, Jesus illumines all things and enables sight.

How ironic that the world, according to this passage, is blind to the very thing that enables sight!

According to John's Gospel, what enables a person to know Jesus?

What does it mean in your life that you have been given the "right" or the power to become a child of God?

WEEK FOUR

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28

ISAIAH 11:1-10

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;

from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him —

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

the Spirit of counsel and of might,

the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord —

and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears;

but with righteousness he will judge the needy,

with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt

and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,

the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;

and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,

their young will lie down together,

and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the cobra's den,

and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy

on all my holy mountain,

for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;

the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Reflection Questions continued on page 59

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When you think of “justice” what comes to mind?

How does this text depict justice?

Consider verse 4; what does it mean that justice is “for” the “poor of the earth”?

This passage paints a picture of what God’s kingdom will look like.

According to Isaiah 11, what are the foundational elements of God’s kingdom?

How are you participating in the justice, reconciliation, and peace-making that distinguish God’s coming Kingdom?

WEEK FOUR

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29

PSALM 98

*Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.*

*The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.*

*He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn —
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.*

*Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;*

let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

PRAYER

Joy to the world! The King, the righteous Judge has come!

Ready my ears to hear the jubilant song of Your creation, my heart to learn the ways of

Your righteousness, and my eyes to see the beauty of Your salvation,

revealed to all the world. Amen.

WEEK FOUR

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30

ISAIAH 60:1-3, 16-20

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*

*See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.*

*Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*When you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.*

*Instead of bronze I will bring you gold,
and silver in place of iron.*

*Instead of wood I will bring you bronze,
and iron in place of stones.*

*I will make peace your governor
and well-being your ruler.*

*No longer will violence be heard in your land,
nor ruin or destruction within your borders,
but you will call your walls Salvation
and your gates Praise.*

*The sun will no more be your light by day,
nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.*

*Your sun will never set again,
and your moon will wane no more;
the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of sorrow will end.*

THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

*When the star in the sky is gone,
when the Kings and Princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins.*

*To find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to teach the nations,
to bring Christ to all,
to make music in the heart.*

- by Howard Thurman -



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