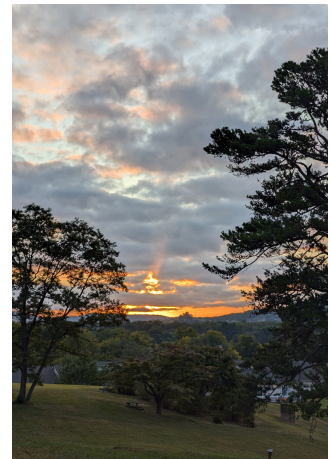




STRONG CONNECTIONS

Advent & Christmas Devotions 2024



Advent Blessings from the Virginia Synod Office of the Bishop!

This Revised Common Lectionary based devotion booklet combines the readings of the seasons with reflections from the rostered ministers of the Office of the Bishop. We hope these words can be an encouragement to you during this season of preparing, waiting, and hope.

Peace,

Bishop Milton

Pastor Bayer Derrick

Pastor Wertz

Pastor Delaney

Pastor Hetrick

Pastor Radtke

Sunday, December 1, 2024 - Bishop Phyllis Milton



Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Psalms 25:1-10

Luke 21:25-36

As we enter this time of Advent, we enter a season pregnant with promise.

We all know about promises. There are even promises we remember long after they have been made. For example, in 1987, during the Persian Gulf Crisis, I remember a promise that was made, as a young Navy spouse, sitting at a pre-deployment briefing.

We were listening to the Commodore tell us about the possible danger of their upcoming mission, but punctuating his final remarks with a promise, "I will bring every one of your husbands back."

A promise – someone declaring they will do what they say they will do. And to the person that received that promise, the right to expect it to be fulfilled.

In this Scripture, God through the prophet Jeremiah, makes the divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah a promise. This is a promise to provide them with someone they had always wanted: a King.

They were rejecting God's rule over their lives and wanted to replace God with a "flesh and blood" human authority.



God's people wanted to be like the other nations, to keep up with the "Joneses." So, God permitted them to have Kings, and it all went downhill from there.

Then, God makes them a promise to give them what they so earnestly desired, a King. And the promise would come through a new shoot, a new branch of the family line of David. We believe that promise has come true in Jesus Christ.

This is my favorite part of the scripture passage. The Voice says, "In those days, when the time is right, I (God) will cause a righteous Branch to sprout from the old stump of David's lineage."

As my children were growing up, I wanted to focus their attention on the "real meaning of Christmas." During Advent, we participated each evening in a family activity, the "Jesse Tree Devotions." My children colored the paper ornaments and punched a hole in each one, so that a piece of string could be attached, to put on the tree. The devotion included a scripture reading, an explanation of the scripture reading, a devotional thought and a closing prayer.

The "Stump of Jesse" was the very first ornament.

This ornament continues to remind us that God wants us to know that we can have confidence in God's Word. We can be certain God will keep God's promises.

Sunday, December 8, 2024 - The Rev. Dr. Dave Delaney



Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Until just a few years ago, whenever anyone stood on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and looked east on a clear day, it was possible to see all the way down to the hilltops just next to the Jordan River Valley - a 4200-foot drop over barely a dozen miles. I remember standing in the back lot of

Augusta Victoria, our Lutheran Hospital on Mt. Olives, and noticing what a desolate and difficult environment stretched out in front of me. When we hear that "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness," this is what is envisioned - not like our American wilderness that we think of as wild but forested and full of life. The Judean wilderness always lies near danger and death. It is no wonder that this is the place where Eve



and Adam were remembered as having been sent to die, where escapees always went, and where stories like Psalm 23 and the Good Samaritan are set. The dryness is intense and the shadows from the uneven hills are foreboding. Yet it is from this direction that Israel believed the Messiah would come, starting the journey at earth's lowest point near the north end of the Dead Sea, and making a way up to Jerusalem in triumph – just what Jesus would indeed do (Luke 19). When John proclaims his vision, he echoes Isaiah 40, which foresees such joy at the arrival of God's redeemer that even the land itself will participate in the celebration. All of these hills where bandits and predators hide and all of these valleys that create one dead-end after another will be flattened out to make one smooth ramp for the Messiah to come up from Jericho and God's merciful judgment will finally be realized. Even the most charmed of lives will have moments when nothing but rocky wilderness stretches out in front and one may have to squint pretty hard to see the Messiah coming, but that arrival is assured nevertheless, and the redemptive promises that come with it.

Sunday, December 15, 2024 – The Rev. Elizabeth Radtke



Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Anticipation. Expecting. Actively waiting for things to come. That is what Advent is all about, right? But what are we waiting for?

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” These words from John the

Baptist, in the midst of Advent, come on the heels of the proclamation that John is fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of declaring straightened paths, valleys being filled, mountains being laid low, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Wanting that, a crowd comes to be baptized, to be a part of this movement, this ministry. And what do the crowds get when they show up – instead a welcome, a straightened path, seeing salvation, they get ... “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Whoa – the wrath that is to come? They were just told that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Does that mean that God's salvation is a wrath?!?!?

Growing up, I was mischievous. I knew what I was doing – I knew where the lines were and I would, on a regular basis, try to skirt them. And I, most of the time, would either get caught trying to skirt these lines, or turn myself in if I actually got across one of these lines. And then the consequences would come. Talk about wanting to flee the wrath that is to come! But a



lot of the times the wrath didn't come - or at least not as badly as I anticipated, or as full as I deserved. I had done wrong, I deserved wrath, but a lot of the time I got grace, I got love, I got someone who knew me well enough to know that I wasn't bad, or a viper, but rather a beloved. My consequences came from ones who knew me fully, and still gave me grace.

God knows us fully, and gives us Jesus, gives us grace, gives us love, gives us community, and not the wrath that we deserve. God gives us a ministry where the outsiders are celebrated and the powers of the day are made low. God gives us a baptism of the Spirit that creates a community of named and claimed ones. God gives us a Savior who takes onto himself the wrath for our sins and the wrath of death.

In this Advent of anticipation I pray that your words and deeds proclaim to others the same salvation of God that you hope to see, that you are waiting for: the salvation of the one who is more powerful than our sins, the one who is more grace-filled, the one who loves us unconditionally and completely. The one who sees our mischief and viping, the one who knows us fully, the one who sees us as a beloved.

Sunday, December 22, 2024 - The Rev. Colleen Hetrick



Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:46b-55

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45

I'm an Advent ordination pastor, so when choosing a gospel text for the service, I knew I wanted the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45) and the Magnificat (Luke 1:45-55) to be at the heart of it all. The story of two women whose lives had been turned upside down by pregnancies and God's call for their lives and for their sons. Elizabeth is *finally* pregnant, her shame of not being a mother is finally gone, and her son will be a prophet of God. Mary is pregnant perhaps too soon,

her shame of being an unwed mother is fresh and heavy, and her son will be the Son of God. They are perhaps the only two people in the world who could understand each other, and they find one another. God blesses their encounter and sustains them.

Luke 1:45 has always been important to me in my pastoral journey: And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. The call I felt to pastoral ministry in the ninth grade was finally made real and a new chapter began. I began to look for God to fulfill new promises to me, new hopes, and new visions.

Ten years later, I find myself in a middle place. No longer as young Mary and not yet as old as Elizabeth. I see ways that God clearly fulfilled promises, hopes, and visions in my ministry and my life. At the same time, there is grief and gratitude for the way that my ministry and



life is vastly different from what I thought it would be. I become ever more aware that the promises God makes to us are grounded in grace, presence, and eternity, not in earthly status, wealth, or this life.

My first call commissioned a set of stoles for me. I received the first, the blue one, on the night of my ordination. Woven by a parishioner, they feature a rainbow running through almost all of them. A reminder of God's promise to not destroy and instead bring abundant life, even if only through death. So whether you are young like Mary, older like Elizabeth, or somewhere in between like me, I pray that you can hold onto God's promises for you. The promises of forgiveness, abundant love, hope in the wilderness, and eternal life.

Sunday, December 29, 2024 - The Rev. John Wertz Jr.



1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Psalm 148

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:41-52

I was the highly anxious parent when our two sons were small. My wife, Kris, was better at giving them space to explore. If they moved within five feet of the stairs as they learned to walk, I would go stand by the stairs. When we went to the beach, I mostly stood between them and the water. If we were

anywhere near an edge, my discomfort with heights had me pulling them back to a more comfortable distance for me. So as Mary and Joseph desperately searched for Jesus for three days in this story from Luke, I can almost hear the conversation they are having.

'I thought you checked to make sure he was with the group.

No, I thought you said you checked to make sure he was with the group.

He's old enough to know better than this. Where is he?

Do you think he's ok? He's got to be ok, right!'

After three days, thankfully, the worry and anxiety were replaced by relief tinged with anger and frustration. Jesus was in the temple. He was listening to teachers, asking insightful questions, and responding with unexpected wisdom. This moment, like the angel appearing to Mary, the star witnessed by the shepherds, and the travelers from the east, was a sign for Mary to ponder as she tried to get her mind around the special part her son was playing in



the story of God's relationship with God's people. Luke then says that Jesus then went back to Nazareth with them and "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2:51-52).

Our sons are now 25 and 24. Across the years, I learned that giving them the space they needed to explore, to ask questions, to take risks, to make mistakes, and to use their gifts was the healthiest way forward for them and for me. It allowed them to increase in wisdom as they increased in years.

I like to think that God takes the same approach with all of us. Thanks to the gift of Jesus, we have the promise of an eternal future with God, but in this in-between time, God gives us the space to explore, to ask questions, to take risks, to make mistakes, and to use our gifts to be God's people in the world. We won't be perfect. We may cause our family and friends a little stress along the way, but the promise we have as children of God and followers of Jesus is that no matter where we are or what we are doing, God will find us and be with us as we use our gifts to be God's hands and voice in the world.

Sunday, January 5, 2025 - The Rev. Kelly Bayer Derrick



Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 147:12-20
Ephesians 1:3-14 John 1:10-18

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God
 and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.

Everything came into being through the Word, and without the
 Word nothing came into being.

What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was
 the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't
 extinguish the light.

(John 1.1-5 CEB)

I love liminal light - that mysterious light of early morning and early evening that is both day and night, and also neither day nor night at the same time. That light which makes the whole world seem to glow. That light which makes it hard to focus on small things and instead invites a look at the awesomeness and fullness of all things. I love liminal light; it's such a mysterious time of day!



This image is a mid autumn sunrise in my backyard. When the light fills me with wonder and awe at the majesty and mystery of God. I just stand in my backyard, speechless. How is it that God has made such amazingness?! How big is the universe?! How small am I in the universe?!

This same feeling of awe overcomes me every time I ponder at Christmas the awesomeness of God born among us. The very same God who made the universe, who made me, who made you - has been born among us! The very same God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the source and ending of everything - of all that is now, has ever been, and will ever be - has been born among us. The very same God who was in the beginning, the Word moving over the waters has been born among us. Whoa! Wow!

My whole body hums with these holy mysteries of God whenever I sing *Of the Father's Love Begotten* (ELW 295). It is one of my very favorite Advent/ Christmas songs. It is more chant than hymn, inviting me to simply be present with the very same mysteries that I ponder in the awe of sunrise and which God's people have pondered for eons (the lyrics come from a poem written around 400CE!). For me, this chant - like liminal light - is peace and holiness, it is wonder and mystery. It also reminds me of singing this in worship as a child at Zion, Waynesboro, with the choir (including my mom's sublime alto) creating such peace.

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.

Of the Father's Love Begotten (ELW 295, verse 1)

Together, both mysterious light and this sacred chant invite me into a moment of liminal time and space, suspended in a moment of grace. Evermore and evermore. Amen.

