



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN NORTH PALM BEACH

ADVENT 2020

ADVENT 2020

Advent & Christmas

“Advent” means “coming,” or “arrival,” and marks the season of the year in which the Christian community reflects on Jesus’ arrivals in the world. The Church looks in two directions at once: behind us, to Jesus’ coming into the world at Christmas, and ahead, for the promised Day when Jesus will arrive among us again to make all things new.

The season of Advent is in one way a picture of what it’s like to be a follower of Jesus. Fleming Rutledge notices that *“In a very deep way, the entire Christian life in this world is lived in Advent, between the first and second comings of the Lord, in the midst of the tension between things the way they are and things the way they ought to be.”*¹

Seasons such as Advent and Christmas are ripe opportunities to begin or renew a life of Christian spiritual practices. This collection of Scripture, prayer, and reflections have been prepared with the hope that Advent and Christmas will be a time of renewal and transformation for you.

How to Use This Devotional

This devotional is laid out in an easy-to-use format; it will guide you day-by-day through the Advent and Christmas seasons. At the beginning of each week, there’s a short description of the theme for the week’s Scripture readings and a prayer for the week, meant to be prayed daily. Monday through Friday, there’s a simple pattern for prayer and Scripture reading, featuring an opening prayer, a passage of Scripture to read, space for meditation and prayer, and then the closing prayer. And each Saturday, you’ll find a brief reflection, written by someone in the First Presbyterian Church community, which expresses the longing and hope of Advent and joy of celebrating Christ at Christmas.

¹Fleming Rutledge, from “Advent Begins in the Dark,” in *The Bible and the New York Times*, p. 29



1st Week of Advent: Keep Awake!

Our challenge this first week of Advent is to keep awake to what God is doing in our hearts and in our world. Each day as you read the gospel text, ask yourself how it can help you stay awake to the work of God in and around you.

Prayer for the week:

Almighty God,
As your kingdom dawns,
turn us from the darkness of sin
to the light of holiness,
that we may be ready to meet you.
In our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
Amen.

**Opening Prayer**

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see. Awaken us to you!

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 20:1-8

¹One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders ²and said to him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?” ³He answered them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: ⁴Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” ⁵They discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” ⁷So they answered that they did not know where it came from. ⁸Then Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 1:1-9

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

God sent both Jesus and John the Baptist to speak truth, but the religious leaders wouldn't believe them. Have you ever seen people who won't believe someone who is telling the truth? Why do you think that is?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see. Awaken us to you!

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 20:9-18

⁹He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. ¹⁰When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. ¹²And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. ¹³Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Heaven forbid!" ¹⁷But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean:

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?"

¹⁸Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 1:10-20

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus told a story about a man who sent his servants to take care of his business. The servants were badly treated. How is God sending his servants to give you God's message right now? Do you ever find it difficult to accept the message God has for you?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see. Awaken us to you!

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 20:19-26

¹⁹When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. ²⁰So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. ²¹So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. ²²Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ²³But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ²⁴"Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." ²⁵He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²⁶And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 1:21-31

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

The religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus because they didn't like his message. But Jesus answered them with wisdom. Do you ever struggle to answer people who have questions about God? How do you think you might get help with those questions so you can answer wisely?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see. Awaken us to you!

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 20:27-40

²⁷Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man[a] shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

³⁴Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." ³⁹Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." ⁴⁰For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 2:1-11

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus tells the Sadducees who did not believe in life after death that to God "all of them are alive." Who do you know who has died? How do you feel hearing that God is not God "of the dead, but of the living?"

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see. Awaken us to you!

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 20:41-21:4

⁴¹Then he said to them, "How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? ⁴²For David himself says in the book of Psalms,
'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,
⁴³until I make your enemies your footstool."

⁴⁴David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?"

⁴⁵In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

¹He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ²he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 2:12-22

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus notices that people who think they are important are often cruel to the poor. But how does God think of the poor who love him? Who matters more to God?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

***Keep Awake!***

“However, no one knows the day or the hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don’t know when this will happen, stay alert and keep watch.”

Mark 13:32

Watchful expectancy is the spirit that characterizes the Season of Advent. It should also be the moral fiber of every believer’s life. As we prepare for and await the celebration of Christmas, we should also take into account our vigilance to God’s calling as well as our attentiveness to His Word. Where are we on our Christian walk? Are we in step with Jesus, or by our own orchestration, walking in darkness outside the light of Christ?

Advent gives us an opportunity to reflect upon our readiness to receive the gift of the Son of God, our Lord and Savior. What expressions of love, obedience, and grace are we practicing as followers of Christ for the good of God’s Kingdom? This Advent Season let us prepare to be wide awake – ready and worthy of the coming of Christ, the King of Glory. Our prayer of preparation requires us to keep the light on, and hope alive in and through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, our communal worship, loving service, and attentive obedience to the calling of a gospel driven life. Advent has come, and Jesus is calling.

Dear Father, This Advent Season, as we prepare for the celebration of the coming of Christ, we pray that You would guide us to humbly respond to Your call. Help us to faithfully stay alert, and obediently wait upon the Lord. We pray in the precious name of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Annie Dougherty



2nd Week of Advent: Repent!

Our challenge in the second week of Advent is to focus on examining our hearts. We were made to love and worship God above all else, but we naturally choose to love all kinds of things ahead of God. As we read about John the Baptist calling people to repent, let's ask ourselves how God may be calling us to reset our priorities.

Prayer for the week:

God for whom we watch and wait,
You sent John the Baptizer to prepare the way of your Son:
Give us courage to speak the truth, to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
With Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, you call us to love you above all else, but we struggle even to know our hearts. Show us what we need to know about ourselves and give us pure love for you.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 21:20-28

²⁰ “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; ²²for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. ²³Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; ²⁴they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 5:8-12

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

When scary things happen, Jesus teaches us not to despair, because he will come again one day to rescue his people. How does this promise make it easier to face hard times?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, you call us to love you above all else, but we struggle even to know our hearts. Show us what we need to know about ourselves and give us pure love for you.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 21:29-38

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

³⁷Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. ³⁸And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 5:13-17, 24-25

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus teaches that both the fun things and the hard things of life can distract us from what God is doing. How can you stay focused on God today?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, you call us to love you above all else, but we struggle even to know our hearts. Show us what we need to know about ourselves and give us pure love for you.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

John 7:53-8:11

⁵³Then each of them went home, ¹while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 6:1-13

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

When a woman was caught doing something sinful, the leaders wanted to punish her harshly, but Jesus asked the men to think about their own sins. Why do you think that changed the situation?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, you call us to love you above all else, but we struggle even to know our hearts. Show us what we need to know about ourselves and give us pure love for you.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 22:1-13

¹Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. ²The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.

³Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; ⁴he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. ⁵They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. ⁶So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.

⁷Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." ⁹They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" ¹⁰"Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters ¹¹and say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' ¹²He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." ¹³So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 7:1-9

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus sent his friends to do an errand for him. When they went, they found things were just as He had told them they would be. Where do you think Jesus is sending you today?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

***Opening Prayer***

O God, you call us to love you above all else, but we struggle even to know our hearts. Show us what we need to know about ourselves and give us pure love for you.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 22:14-30

¹⁴ When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹ But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²² For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" ²³ Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵ But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

²⁸ "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; ²⁹ and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 7:10-15

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus' friends were thinking that if they were important to Jesus, they would get to be in charge of something. But Jesus said that His kingdom works differently. How do leaders in Jesus' kingdom behave?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Isaiah 40:1-11*****How Do I Respond to Jesus? In My Soul.***

As a walker, when I look up into our beautiful Florida sky, my heart, my soul, my being responds to Jesus through music. It may not always be spiritual in nature, as my I-pod has a collection of about 500 pieces of music from different genre. I love the songs of the south, the college football fight songs, lullabies, love songs, the classic marches, the Broadway show tunes, the classical pieces, the praise and worship songs and the traditional hymns. Each piece of music speaks to me in different ways, but I am always inspired to have a good day as I walk and listen.

On one bright, clear, very cool morning as I looked at the sky, and thanked God for this beautiful place in which we live, my I-pod led me to "America the Beautiful." The perfect piece for a beautiful morning of thanking God.

In the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet, in poetry and prose, intends his words to comfort the people. What better way to give and add comfort than through music! Music is mainly poetry and prose put to music. People in many stages of their life need comfort and, more often than not, it comes from the work of God through music.

It is interesting how music touches the lives of folks in different ways. Some people do not need music in the same way as others do. For me, music makes me feel peppy, or peaceful, or calm, or emotional and at peace with what is going on about me. It can prepare me for my day.

When Handel put much of Isaiah chapter 40 to music in *The Messiah*, did he ever know it would speak to the whole world for eternity? Take time to read Isaiah 40:1-11 and focus on the words of comfort, a voice calling in the desert, good tidings to Jerusalem and lifting up your voice. "Here is your God!" Enjoy the Messiah and let Jesus respond to you as you respond to Him. It is known that people do respond to Jesus through music.

Beautiful Savior, We lift our voices as we sing your praises. May your words touch our hearts and may we share your love with all who come our way. As we sing your praise, may we sing of your love to others. In your precious name we pray, Amen.

Betty Percy



3rd Week of Advent: Make it Straight!

Our challenge in the third week of Advent is to put our hearts in order to receive Jesus. Each day as you read the text, ask yourself what God might be calling you to straighten out in your own life.

Prayer for the week:

Eternal God,
As Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for His coming in glory;
Bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation.
In Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 22:39-53

³⁹He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." [⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] ⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." [c]

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" ⁴⁹When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" ⁵⁰Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 8:16-9:1

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Jesus asked his followers to pray so they would not fall into temptation. What do you think that means? How can we pray against temptation today?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 22:54-69

⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.

⁶³Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" ⁶⁵They kept heaping many other insults on him.

⁶⁶When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. ⁶⁷They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Peter was afraid for people to know he was Jesus' companion because then he might also be arrested. Are you ever afraid for people to know you love Jesus? Why is that?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

Opening Prayer

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 9:8-17

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

John preached to prepare people to meet Jesus. He told them they should be sorry for their sins and choose to do things God’s way. What would that be like for you?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Matthew 11:2-15

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let anyone with ears listen!

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 9:18-10:4

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

John the Baptist was the prophet God sent to prepare the people to meet Jesus, but King Herod arrested him. What do you think it would be like to be arrested for doing what God told you to do?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 3:1-9

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 10:5-9

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

John preached that preparing for Jesus is like making a good smooth road. Have you ever tried to drive or ride a bike on loose sand or rough ground? How can you make a clear path for God in your heart?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

*Make Straight the Way**John 1:6-8, 19-28*

Throughout high school and college, I worked a part-time job at a professional photography studio in Palm City. My boring job title was “assistant to the main shooter,” but if you wanted to give it a fancier title it could have been “lighting technician.” Basically, my main job was to properly light all the photos and serve as the right hand-man to the main shooter. Finding this out for the first time, people often reply, “Wow, I didn’t know you are a photographer!” And that is when I emphasize the assistant part of the job. See, in the entire five years I worked for the studio, I never took a single photo. Not one! Though I never actually took a picture, I was told that my job was to make the company and main shooter look good. In fact, if my job didn’t exist, their photos would have turned out either too dark or overexposed. As necessary as my job was, the spotlight wasn’t on me; it was on the main shooter.

John the Baptist could probably empathize with my story above. In this Scripture, we see John clarify who he is, the purpose of his mission, and the person whom his mission is for. John makes it very clear; I myself am not the light, but simply a witness to the true light (v. 8).

As we continue to learn more about John the Baptizer in the text, we discover more about John’s unique witness to the light. In response to the suspicious religious leaders and in hopes of clarifying his role, John quotes from the prophet Isaiah saying, “I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (Jn 1:23; Isa. 40:3). Notice, John is simply a voice. In effect, the text de-elevates the one who is testifying and elevates the object of the witness. The Greek word used for witness is *martyria*, which is where we get the word martyr from. Like a modern-day martyr, the focus is not on their persecution, but on the object of which they are being persecuted for. Edward Klink in his commentary on John’s Gospel aptly puts it when he writes, “His [John’s] greatness can ‘only’ be seen as a derivative, entirely defined by the object to which he witnesses.” John sees his role as a witness similar to that of a slave. The one he testifies about is so much greater and grander that he is not even worthy to untie his shoes!

It is immensely challenging while also deeply humbling. John reminds us that we are simply meant to be a mirror that deflects attention off of ourselves and re-directs the attention onto the true light, Jesus the Messiah. Thus, our witness is a privilege, which graciously appoints to us a crucial role in God’s cosmic redemptive narrative.

On the one hand, if you are reading this and you wouldn’t consider yourself a Christian, I think this message strikes uncomfortably close. Throughout history, God has appointed people to act as faithful witnesses to His perfect and divine love. John the disciple, John the Baptizer, the Church, and yes...even that annoying Christian neighbor who constantly invites you to church events promising free food; these are the people whose lives are mirrors that point upward.

Though their witness may be imperfect, the hope is that you'd catch a glimpse of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace whom they testify about (Isa. 9:6). And further, our prayer is that this glimpse would turn into a true response (Jn 20:31).

On the other hand, if you are reading this and you consider yourself a devoted disciple of Christ, I would also suggest this text as a close companion. For the calling to be a witness is not reserved for John the disciple, nor John the Baptizer. Each of us as Christ followers are called to be a generous witness to the light and life which we have received through Jesus. The question this text is wanting to constantly poke at our side is, "How are you responding to Jesus as a faithful witness to His Word?"

What an honor that we get to serve as Jesus' lighting technicians. What a privilege it is to stand behind the light, pointing to the person of Jesus. Friends, there is no greater title in this life.

Josh Bartz



4th Week of Advent: Let it be!

Our challenge this fourth week of Advent is to welcome God's will into our lives. Each day as you read, ask yourself what it would look like to allow God complete freedom to do His will in your life.

Prayer for the week:

Lord Jesus Christ,
Your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder
at heaven touching earth.
Accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
Our Savior and our eternal God.
Amen.

***Opening Prayer***

O God who works all for things according to your good and gracious will, grant me the grace to welcome your will for me today.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day***Luke 1:1-25***

¹Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.

²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Bonus Reading: Zeephaniah 3:14-20

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Today we read the story of John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. What do you think it was like for them to have God answer their prayer for a child when they were old and had given up hope?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God who works all for things according to your good and gracious will, grant me the grace to welcome your will for me today.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you," ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Bonus Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1b-10

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Mary told the angel she was the Lord's servant. What do you think she meant by that? What would it mean for you to be the Lord's servant?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God who works all for things according to your good and gracious will, grant me the grace to welcome your will for me today.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 1:39-48

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

Bonus Reading: 1 Samuel 7:1-17

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Discussion Question

Mary was young and Elizabeth was old, but both were unexpectedly pregnant with special babies. Why do you think they were so happy to see each other?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.

**Opening Prayer**

O God, Make a straight way for Jesus in my heart. Remove the obstacles that I may know Him.

-silence-

Scripture Reading for the Day

Luke 1:67-80

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Bonus Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

-Silence for meditation or family discussion question-

Zechariah didn't believe the angel who told him about the son God was sending him, but when John was born, he praised God in this beautiful song. Why is he so excited about this baby boy?

Prayer

Pray for ourselves, our families, the church, our community and the world.



Let It Be
Luke 1:28-38

One of my favorite characters in the Christmas story is Mary, the mother of Jesus. I have always been amazed and challenged by Mary's response to God's call on her life. Mary, a young virgin girl of no status was chosen and called by God for a specific role in His long-range plan to save mankind by the coming of a Savior foretold in Isaiah 7:14. The angel said to Mary, "You will conceive and bear a son." When Mary asks, "How can this be?" the angel Gabriel explains that God's power will overshadow her and the child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Mary was in an extremely difficult position. Betrothed to Joseph, she faced the stigma of unwed motherhood. Joseph would obviously have known that the child was not his. She knew she would be accused of adultery, an offense punishable by stoning. Her decision would bring her sorrow and suffering, but she willingly and graciously submitted to the will of God responding, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38.

Like Mary, each of God's children has been set apart for divine purposes. That purpose may not be revealed to us as dramatically as it was to Mary, but God's Spirit lives and works in all who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. God is at work in His world controlling and guiding all history for His glory and our good and He uses humans to accomplish His plan. Mary's obedience to the will of God, should be our example.

The power we possess to live a life pleasing to God is directly related to how much control of our lives we give to the Holy Spirit. Surrendered and controlled by the Holy Spirit, our lives are transformed and we manifest the fruits of the Spirit and become salt and light to the culture around us. Only as we study God's Word and surrender fully to the Spirit's control, will we experience the power of God at work in us to fulfill His purpose and bring Him glory. This Christmas I'm reminded to daily listen for God's voice as He speaks through His Word and answer as Mary, "Let it be to me according to Your Word."

Ginger Bills

The One who holds the world in being was lying in a manger; he was simultaneously speechless infant and Word. The heavens cannot contain him, a woman carried him in her bosom. She was ruling our ruler, carrying the One in whom we are, suckling our Bread. O manifest infirmity and wondrous humility in which was thus concealed total divinity! ...May he bring his gifts to perfection in us, since he did not shrink from making his own our tiny beginnings; and may he make us into children of God, since for our sake he was willing to be made a child of man.

Augustine of Hippo, from a Christmas sermon, 4th cent



First Presbyterian Church in North Palm Beach
717 Prosperity Farms Rd., NPB, FL 33408
561-622-8818 / www.firstpresnpb.org