



Advent Reflections
2013

Sunday, December 1, 2013

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

These are very powerful words from Jesus. They are scary to those hearing them and reading them, and yet they are comforting at the same time. When this Gospel was written, the Temple in Jerusalem had already fallen, and many Christians had indeed been persecuted and betrayed. The early followers already had experienced all that Jesus said they would.

So how can Jesus give hope to those that are suffering? Jesus never says that we will never suffer. In fact he tells us up front that life can be hard. We have seen this throughout history and we see it today.

Jesus is saying to us that God will be with us through it all, in good times and hard times. We will be redeemed by God's glory; a great comfort to those following Jesus then, and a great and calming comfort to those of us following Jesus now.

Monday, December 2, 2013

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Advent. This is the period in the church year when we think about Christ's coming: His coming thousands of years ago, His coming again in glory and His continual coming each day into our lives. Today is the story of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The children and the crowds of people proclaimed Him the Son of David, the one who is coming to claim His right to the throne of David. I suppose that His disciples and others were thinking: "At last! This is what we have been expecting all along. Now He will overthrow this Roman occupation and we will be ruled by a prophet who can heal the sick and feed thousands on very little. We will be put in important positions and be given power and authority as well. Hooray!"

But wait, what is this Kingdom? He is telling us to put away our swords. He is telling us that if we want to be great we should be the lowest. He is telling us not to accumulate wealth for ourselves, but to live simply so that we will have more to share. He is telling us to love those who are our enemies and forgive so many times that we lose count. He is telling us to feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the sick. And His throne is a cross? He is identifying Himself with criminals and with all those who have been treated unjustly! And He expects us to follow Him on that path?

Oh, Holy Lord, open our hearts to those in need today and help us to follow your path into the eternal Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Love. Amen.

Tuesday, December 3, 2013

Matthew 21:12-22

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.' The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?' He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

The money changers exchange foreign coins for the Hebrew shekel, the only currency permitted by the Temple authorities. They also collect the half-shekel Temple tax to preserve the customs and traditions held within the Temple. The half-shekel allows those present to purchase their impending sacrifice lining the market walls. Credit is offered for those who do not have enough to purchase the sacrifice equal to their sin.

It's not about the money changers. It's not about those offering credit. It's not about those selling their livestock. It is, however, about the fact that all was taking place within the temple walls - a house of prayer - that angered Jesus. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" It is about our prayer life; it is about our actions.

How many times have we, in the hustle and bustle of getting ready for our very own worship services, rush by those who were quietly present in prayer or in need of healing? All are called to be present in body and in spirit - to be transformed. Stop. Pray. Listen. Act. Our actions mirror our prayer life within the walls of the sanctuary. Our actions mirror our prayer life outside the walls of Trinity as well. It is about our prayer life; it is about our actions.

Our prayers may not guarantee the answers we seek. Our actions may not always be fruitful. We may be the one thrown into the sea or wither from a crisis that leaves us with nothing but the clothes on our back. Yet, we must persevere in both. Let not our conversation with God be interrupted by the hustle and bustle of the worldly market. Let not our being fall into the role of inaction - bearing no fruit. We must trust that God's grace will see us through - even in our doubts. 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God ... Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia'.

Wednesday, December 4, 2013

Matthew 21:33-27

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

The chief priests and the elders wanted to see Jesus' credentials, to see his resume, to make judgment by their own authority. Because what Jesus had been teaching and preaching challenged their understanding of the law. And they didn't like it - Who is this guy?

Jesus does not answer directly. Instead he responds to the question with a question – Did the baptism of John the Baptist come from heaven, or was it of human origin? In other words, was John an emissary of God's mission or was John simply a wild and crazy guy? The chief priests and elders refuse to answer – not because they don't have an opinion or know what they believe, but they do not want to acknowledge in any way that John or Jesus, for that matter, have any God-given authority. To do so would undermine their own authority and force them to confront truths they would rather not confront.

I wonder how often are we sure we 'know' how God works, in whom God puts trust but in truth, we can be deaf and blind to God at work in the unexpected here and now – in the one we assume has no authority.

Thursday, December 5, 2013

Matthew 21:33-46

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes"?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

This parable starts with the owner of a vineyard who loves and care for his farm. The tenants are those who say they work for God but who reject those whom God sends. It would be easy to point toward the Pharisees and shake our heads and pretend the story is just about them. Jesus makes it breathtakingly clear: Those who "get it" mock him and finally kill him. Thus, it behooves us to get the story right. It is not just something about back then, but about today.

God left us with this vineyard to tend and to make productive. When God gave it to us it was lush and beautiful. What kind of tenants have we been?

Think about all those who feel out of place as we open the doors and say: "Come." Think about the ones who have suffered rejection: the misfits, the marginalized, the ragamuffins. For Christians, it is the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone. Listen up!

Friday, December 6, 2013

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

To discover that not dressing properly was cause for banishment and harsh judgment is unsettling. This last piece of the story rubs against the grain of those of us who believe in a loving and inclusive God. The thought of one being rejected from the kingdom simply for not wearing the right clothes doesn't sit with us theologically. Commentators suggest a way to interpret this unsettling scene: We cannot expect to enter God's kingdom and not change. If you show up to the feast, the garment you need to wear is the garment of Christ – a life lived through not only accepting the invitation to the banquet, but through obedience, humility and honor of others.

I wonder how many times have you and I turned down the invitation to be a guest at God's banquet because we didn't want to change our plans.

This parable conveys an insistence on being ready when the invitation to the banquet is offered; readiness that allows a kind of spontaneity where one is free to attend at a moment's notice. All else can wait.

God desires a willingness to come into the party – to participate in this very life – here and now – this kingdom of heaven on earth that we've been given, with an open heart, ready and prepared - trusting God to provide for our deepest needs.

The invitations have been sent out;

The table is set;

You've been invited to come to the feast of the living God.

Are you ready?

Are you coming?

Saturday, December 7, 2013

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Jesus' teachings are relational, challenging us to draw closer to Him and to each other. Jesus always speaks of and honors his Heavenly Father. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were hyper-focused on following the rules no matter what. In this passage, at first, the Pharisees appeal to Jesus' ego through flattery, to try and catch Him off guard. Then they try and get Jesus to say that taxes shouldn't be paid to Caesar because they know that Jesus doesn't approve of people worshipping Caesar. They hope to get Jesus to say "no," so He would be put in jail, or worse.

But Jesus sees through their deception. His answer is not what they expect, because He differentiates between the tribute and obligation owed to Caesar as leader of state, versus the reverential awe and worship given to God, the creator of the universe.

In His answer to them, Jesus puts the Pharisees in their place and at the same time honors His Heavenly Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Sunday, December 8, 2013

Luke 1:57-68

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.*

"What then will this child become?" Each child born holds unlimited potential. John the Baptist was chosen for a specific role before he was born - even his name was chosen.

We all are chosen. Chosen perhaps not for greatness or to be martyrs; however, we all are chosen to love God and our neighbors - unconditionally. A hard role for many of us, but I believe that trying counts, and we all can try.

Monday, December 9, 2013

Matthew 22:23-33

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.'

Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Some Temple "wise guys" try to trap Jesus with a question about a woman who has married consecutively to seven brothers, the second after the first died etc. "In the resurrection, whom shall she be with?"

As He does always, Jesus dispenses with their question promptly. It seems, however, that the key part of His response is, that it doesn't matter. He says that in heaven, we shall not be anyone's spouse but "... as the angels of God."

On the passing of an elderly person who has spent their last years in a wheelchair, I once heard it said "... she'll be walking and dancing now!" The particulars of our life on this earth lose their significance when we become "... as angels of God." Jesus is telling us this so we can count on this. It is not that our loving relationships in this life are unimportant, but that they have one purpose, to reach perfect fruition in loving God for eternity. Our continuing relationship with our loved ones will be solidified in our unity with them in our loving God "as angels."

Truth is, as '... the angels of God,' we needn't be concerned about spouses, children, bills to pay, pains in the back, or even national security. All that will be attended to.

Tuesday, December 10, 2013

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet' " ? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Rabbi Hillel (the elder) lived at about the same time as Jesus. There is a famous story in the Talmud or the oral Torah that says that Rabbi Hillel said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — [and now] go study." Jesus answers a question but goes a little further than Hillel's "golden rule". Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This is really what Jesus' teachings boil down to. Love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Simple. Except it's not simple. It's radical and one might say, subversive. But imagine if we thought about this every day. What if we all did this? What if our leaders, our governments all did this? Where would this go, what would it lead to? The Prince of Peace was giving a ingenuous guide to living a Christian life, of following Jesus. So I challenge you to love God with all your entire being and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Chances are you will never be the same and neither will the world. Shalom.

Wednesday, December 11, 2013

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Tennis Avenue here in Ambler is a long, straight street. I drive it nearly every day. One side allows parking, the other does not. Down the middle run the yellow stripes, delineating “mine” from “not mine,” but not truly accommodating the space for parking.

When I drive down the side with parked cars, and a car comes the other way, I think to myself “Why don’t you hug the curb, make some room for me on your side of the yellow line?” But, oh, when I drive on the side without parking, and a car comes the other way, I think “You need to pull over and wait for me, because it is your side that is blocked by that parked car.” It took me years to notice this daily hypocrisy. Dear God, help me remember that the driver of the other car is your child, too!

Kindness, compassion, generosity. Respect, honor, deference. Where else in my life do I expect more from others than I do from myself? To receive more than I give?

Thursday, December 12, 2013

Matthew 23:13-26

‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

‘Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.” You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, “Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.” How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

The word "WOE" is repeated often in this chapter, and Jesus marks several things to highlight the hypocrisy that was especially blatant.

1. Their professing to be spiritual teachers, yet keeping the people from receiving spiritual truth.
2. Joining in devout prayers for desolate widows, while planning on how to seize their property and ruin them.
3. They made proselytes, to be righteous, but compelled them to be as bitter, base and uncharitable as themselves.
4. They made foolish distinctions, so not to hinder themselves.
5. They appeared to be scrupulous, but in their conduct they took license with their own human behavior.
6. They were supremely anxious about the look of things; they were wickedly indifferent about the real condition of things.
7. They wanted men to admire them in public, but dared not let any one see their private lives. It is easy enough to see that, for such men, a day of accountability must come and with it would come humiliation and woe indeed. It is woe for such men to be found out. It was the beginning of woe, for Jesus, to show them up before the people and make them objects of scorn and detest.

Where can I see myself in this reading? Have I given to much attention to minor details while neglecting the essential and more important one in my Christian life? Am I giving to much thought to the outward while neglecting giving the needed cleansing to my own thoughts and behavior?

Friday, December 13, 2013

Matthew 23:27-39

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was

coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

How many times have we heard someone say, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Typically, the saying is used to help people understand that what is found on the inside is better than on the outside. Unfortunately, if Jesus had used it in this passage, it would have been the opposite. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they may know exactly what to look like or what to say to make themselves look good, but in reality it is all for show. The Pharisees live lives that are anything but holy. They only care about themselves and their own interests. And Jesus is condemning them for it.

Let’s fast-forward two thousand years. Recently the government was shut down over party politics. Who was right or wrong is not important here. What is important is that just like in Jesus time, while the leaders are saying they are correct and acting special, the common person is suffering. The leaders are more concerned about saving face than helping the people they are leading. The politicians were only caring about how they sounded to the American people.

In the passage for today, Jesus is not only speaking to the Pharisees but is also speaking to us. We are called to act as Christians. To love one another as Jesus loved us. In this time of advent as we await the coming of the king, are we acting as a Pharisee? Are we more concerned about how people see us? Does our house have the best decorations, the brightest Christmas tree or the best presents under the tree? Or are we more concerned about those that are cold, hungry and homeless this night?

My prayer for this day is that we all can be less like the Pharisees and more like Christ, not worrying about who sees us but rather who we see. Amen.

Saturday, December 14, 2013

Matthew 24:1-14

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Messiah!” and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

‘Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the

increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

During this Advent season we look forward to the celebration of the forthcoming birth of our Lord. Jesus proclaims the signs that will herald His second coming on earth...representing the promise of being with our Lord in eternal life. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus predicts the many destructive forces that will be present on earth prior to that long awaited time.

Jesus informs us that preceding the end of time, there will be numerous wars, famines, floods, earthquakes, etc. that will occur but only represent the beginning of the movement toward the end of life on earth as we know it. The more recent tragedies of 9/11, Japan's nuclear disaster, the catastrophic tsunamis and typhoons destroying vast lands in Southeast Asia, the attacks on Christians in the Middle East, America's fire and flood occurrences in addition to destruction of nations by dictators, make us wonder where we are within the timeline of earthly demise.

All of us at some time, perhaps question God's love of man when we learn of the loss of life, housing, and livelihood through these disastrous occurrences. It is so difficult to remember that our existence is temporary on earth. We experience such inner pangs when we see the pain people experience when dying as a result of wars and other natural disasters. Through these most difficult and horrifying experiences – we must maintain our faith that God is in control. It is through the sacrifice of Christ and our acknowledgement of His love for us that we look forward to eternal life and salvation. It is our trust and our love of God and neighbor that will be the sustaining power despite agonizing hardships. And finally, Jesus tells us that when the good news of God's kingdom is proclaimed worldwide, that will be the sign that the end of time is near...and that His second coming is imminent. We look forward to that day of celebration!

Sunday, December 15, 2013

John 5:30-47

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?'

What was the proof that Jesus was the messiah? Who validated his claim? Under what authority was he acting and preaching? The Jewish leadership wanted to trap Jesus by demanding that he produce witnesses to his gospel, as required by the law. Jesus saw into the true heart of their question, though, and knew that nothing could give them enough proof. We all have proof that Jesus is the promised savior; it's clear in the scriptures and clear in his very life, death and resurrection. But this was so removed from what anyone was expecting that it was difficult for them to acknowledge the truth.

But really, this proof is often not enough for modern Christians, either. It's easy to say that we believe Jesus. It's easy to say that we accept Him as savior... but what is OUR proof? Christ's accusers were supposed to be the experts in the scriptures, but they did not live them out. Jesus reminded them (and us) that it is not enough to know the Word, the Word must abide in us. If we invite God into our hearts and attempt to use our every thought, word, and deed to His purposes, we will be giving the world proof of the risen savior in whom we claim to believe. Are we living out his teachings? What would it take for us to start?

Monday, December 16, 2013

Matthew 24:15-31

'So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "There he is!"—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Look! He is in the wilderness", do not go out. If they say, "Look! He is in the inner rooms", do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

*'Immediately after the suffering of those days
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from heaven,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.*

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Jesus is talking about the end of the World. The signs of the end of the world are many. In these few verses Jesus talks about how people should heed the warnings. Brother will rise up against brother, there will be false prophets, and there may be priests who may even perform miracles to get to God's chosen people. He refers to Judea and states "those who are in Judea, must run away to the hills, and leave at once and don't stop to take anything with you. The troubles that will be present at that time will be far more terrible than any there has ever been, from the beginning of the world to this very day."

Is this what we are to look forward to? No-- We are God's chosen- and as long as we have God in our hearts, we should not fear. For following these terrible things, will be the Second coming of Christ. The Bible states , 'when the Son of Man comes—it will be like the lightning flashing across the whole sky from east to west' The Son of Man will come down with great fanfare, trumpets sounding and angels surrounding Him. This is what believers wait for. And then what is more, he will send out his angels to the four corners of the earth to gather His chosen people. So be not afraid.

Are you one of God's chosen? "Love God and do what you like" This is my principle because I believe that if you love God, you will do what He likes. That includes loving your enemies as you love yourself.

God Bless You.

Tuesday, December 17, 2013

Matthew 24:32-44

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be

taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Hearing this I would be terrified. I know what happens when a fig tree changes from spring to summer (assuming it is anything like a tomato plant) and I know what to expect. There are no surprises here- I've got that one under control. However - it is the second part that makes me uncomfortable. That part seems to be all about sudden change, and I hate sudden change.

Sometimes change can be great, like a marriage proposal or a promotion or a pregnancy but most of time it is messy and uncomfortable and sometimes it can knock the wind right out of you. However, no matter how much we try to isolate ourselves from them, changes happen. Just like the fig tree that becomes tender and puts forth leaves in the summer we experience changes all throughout our lives.

But also like those mentioned later in the scripture passage on we also experience changes that we have no idea are coming and those are the ones that call us up short. They can be so sudden that we never see them coming and they are also the ones that provide us with the most opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. These sudden changes can be terrifying; the stuff that nightmares are made of. But, if we look deep inside ourselves they can enable us to see where God is calling us, even if it is someplace that seems awfully messy and uncomfortable because they are often the places we grow the most. And God clearly tells us that by prayer, grace, a loving faith community, and study we can be ready if not prepared to deal with whatever comes our way.

I would like to leave you with one of my favorite quotes from Anne Lamott, [Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith](#):

“When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility.”

Wednesday, December 18, 2013

Matthew 24:45-51

‘Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, “My master is delayed”, and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We spend a lot of time getting ready. We know when things are going to happen; there's almost always a deadline. Knowing the deadline informs our plans. Have you ever tried to plan for something when you didn't know exactly when it was going to happen? Not having a firm deadline to work towards can bring a lot of anxiety. How do you know what to do next if you don't know when you have to be ready?

It's not when that is important. In the last two verses before this section, Jesus tells the disciples, " the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." He has just described all the signs that will point towards the coming of the Son of Man, but he stresses each time that no one knows when this will happen - only God knows. So how can we be prepared? Jesus says it is important how the faithful and wise slave is conducting himself while the master is away: the slave is at work taking care of things just as if the master had always been there. It is important how we live while we're waiting. Live as though the Master has already arrived.

Thursday, December 19, 2013

Matthew 25:1-13

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Parables often overwhelm me. I feel challenged, and often feel unequal to the task. Jesus exhorts his apostles to be "wise," and goes on to elaborate that those who are wise both think ahead and prepare for its possibilities. When the bridegroom arrives, or, indeed, the kingdom of heaven, it will be the wise and the prepared who are welcomed into the feast. While I hope that I will be prepared, I feel uncertain.

I also cannot help but feel both sympathy and even guilt for those who are shut out of the wedding. What is this oil that could not be shared? Many believe that the oil is faith, and actions which spring from faith-based living. My challenge from the parable becomes, how do I fill my lamp, how do I prepare to welcome Christ to his banquet, how do I live the life Jesus wants me to? We must all find our own answers, but in asking such questions, we do move one step closer to discovering our answers.

Friday, December 20, 2013

Matthew 25:14-30

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

“...each to his own ability” What a beautiful phrase – what a beautiful thought. To think that our Master knows what He has given to each of us, even if we don't know ourselves. Our Master knows how much we can do – how much He can give us to handle, even if we don't know ourselves.

Dear Heavenly Father, I long to have you trust me with what you have given me. Help me trust that You know that I have the ability to handle it. Then, if you wish to entrust even more to me, I trust that You and I – together – can accomplish it together.

Saturday, December 21, 2013

Matthew 25: 31-46

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Wow! A powerfully written statement of judgment from a God of love. A black or white grading of our Earthly performance! Are there more goats than sheep? Does God mark on a curve? This is a stern warning as to our options for an eternal residence with a great disparity between neighborhoods. Is this a final sentence, or can we appeal after a portion of this has been served? Is there a higher court? This "Woe be to those who ..." admonition sounds like a listing of a heaven-entry exam that perhaps many of us "good Christians" would have a hard time passing. What happened to hating the sin and forgiving the sinner? But let's take a trip backward, and let's look for other criteria for getting past the guard at the gate.

The Jewish people of Jesus' time had accumulated a vast number of rules and regulations that were so severe, and nit-picky detailed to as eliminate most all of the people (except those deluded few who considered themselves free of sin). I trust that these laws were the creation of men and not of God, and He sent his Son to correct their burdensome notion. He sent him to apply the "Keep it simple?????" method of teaching. Without a committee, He shortened the rules to two simple directives. Love your God with your whole heart, mind, body, energy and soul. And an equally important statement of loving your neighbors in the manner that you desire to have your creator love you. Even though it might be a nice thought that you could gain entry, or accumulate high-value points, by doing good works, the truth remains that only if you accept the requirements of those two simple rules can you join the club. Adhering to the two Laws of Love will lead you to paradise, and you will make the judgment, of your own God-given free will. You will choose to be on the Goat team or the Sheep – He will know you by your uniform and direct you the proper side of the field.

Sunday, December 22, 2013

John 3:16-21

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

To many who recognize scripture passages just by the mention of chapter and verse, this stands out as one of the most known and oft quoted! However, through all this familiarity, have we ever stopped and stood back to contemplate what these words really mean to us?

God himself offers us His Only Son! Born of a human mother, born in a lowly stable, born to be our Savior. We are foretold that if we believe, we will not die, we will have everlasting life and be saved. How can we comprehend the enormity of this gift to us? Can we recognize in our own daily lives the love that comes to us through this Son - born to be the light of the world?

Recently I attended the funeral of a dear friend. We had shared many Monday evenings at bible study. It has occurred to me that this friend had recognized, indeed understood, the gift of living in the light, and with tender love, shared that light with all around him.

Let us rejoice, therefore, that the light and the truth are ours! by God's grace, let us strive to bring light to the world and to those around us! "For God so loved the world....."
Thanks be to God.

Monday, December 23, 2013

Luke 1:1-25

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

In 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. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With 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.' Zechariah 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.' The 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. But 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.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When 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. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

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

Luke 1: 1-25 's announcement of John the Baptist's birth is seen as the beginning of God's fulfillment of his promises; yet Elizabeth and Zechariah's fertility struggles resonated even deeper for me having just had a child. Throughout the Bible God blesses infertile women with children that will be important to the Holy Book's narrative. You have Sarah, mother of Isaac, the unnamed wife of Manoah, mother of Samson, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel. God is working here on a micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic level. He has answered a very human (dare I say) ordinary desire but at the same time is beginning to satisfy his bigger covenant. In this way God shows us that while he acts on a large scale he isn't ignoring the smaller needs and prayers of regular people.

Within this passage we start to look ahead for the coming of Jesus but the wider community has not been forgotten. No one looks upon infertility today as "not being in God's favor", yet Zechariah's line [the]"Lord has done this for me" undoubtedly conjures the deep seated feeling that every child born, regardless of their future role, is both miraculous and a miracle. Not all our prayers will be answered but God is good. As Romans 12:12 puts it "Let your Hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times".

Tuesday, December 24, 2013

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The 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. And 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then 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.

“Do not be afraid.”

Over 350 times those words are given in scripture.

“The Lord is with you.”

Perplexing indeed. Is it really true? The Lord is with ME?? How can that be?

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

How will I know? Then what do I do? Me holy??? What??

“Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Yea, but does God really know ME?? Does God really know who I am?

And then I wonder,

Do I have the courage to say those words “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” Then I hear:
“Do not be afraid. The Lord is indeed with you.”

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