

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 3, 2023

Isaiah 54:10

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

The season of Advent in the Christian church is about God's bringing all things in creation to a close and ushering in a time of final and complete judgment. Many fear this judgment, but if one reads the scriptures closely and seriously, one might just learn that Advent and this indication of approaching judgment should be an assurance to the human heart.

At the center of this judgment is Jesus Christ. He is portrayed as the Judge on the Day of Judgment and in him is a mercy, grace, and forgiveness that cannot be fully plumbed by the human heart. However, such promise of judgment reminds all human hearts that we belong not to ourselves or some kind of 'world destiny', but rather wholly and completely to God.

Paul Tillich, in his great sermon, 'The Shaking of the Foundations', spoke to his generation about what God's ultimate judgment might mean. We would be wise to remember that Tillich's generation included those who lived through the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the rise of the specter of world annihilation through nuclear weaponry. He characterized his generation's loss of biblical imagination thusly: **In the language of the prophets, it is the Lord who shakes the mountains and melts the rocks. This is a language that modern man can not understand. ... There is no longer vision, it has become physics.**

Further, Tillich was convinced that the humanity of his time had lost all sense of God's overarching governance and providential care: **The future lies in man's hands, in our hands. If we should decide for constructiveness instead of destruction, why should we not be able to continue the creation? Why should we not become like God, at least in this aspect?**

Though we may stand in the successive generation to Tillich's, still we have the tendency or temptation to see all of life as somehow within the hands of human control and destiny. The scriptures and the season of Advent rightly cause us to lift our heads to perceive both our provenance and our destiny not in our own hands, but ultimately in the One who comes again for us and for all humanity with grace, mercy, and yes, even judgment.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

Lord, I belong to thee, make me worthy of thyself. Amen.

Monday, December 4, 2023

From Isaiah 40:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins. ...

A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people is grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

These words present both challenge and comfort to us in our Advent journey. We move from this moment in time toward the anticipation of a moment when God will make all things right in Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate day of redemption towards which we all move whether we are aware of it or not. However, it is best for us to live in awareness.

Tillich, in his sermon, 'We Live in Two Orders,' offered the following: **The human situation is one of finiteness – all flesh is grass and the grass withereth. It is one of sin – we receive double for all our sins. It is one of vanity and pride – we are brought to nothing and fall utterly. But in spite of his realistic knowledge of human nature and destiny the prophet gave comfort and consolation and hope to the exiled nation, to the exiles of all nations, to man who, as man, is exiled in this world.**

There are few of us who have not been encouraged by these words written by Isaiah, made almost universally known within Handel's 'Messiah.' Each time I have heard some community choir or church ensemble sing the words of 'Comfort Ye My People,' I have been moved by the great hope that lies at the very heart of the Advent season. This hope is lodged in the appearance of the One who is the Messiah, who gave his life for us and for all humanity and yet will be the Judge of all humanity in God's great moment of redemption and restoration. May these words penned so long ago be of comfort to you as well in this time and in this place.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

O God, the Author of all good, hold thou me up and I shall be safe. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

From Luke 6:

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied." ...

"Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.

"But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.

"Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

These words are from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, known as the Beatitudes. We are used to hearing about a Sermon on the Mount, but that is from the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Luke puts the delivery of this well-known sermon in a different locale, on a plain. Either way, they are words to be prayerfully heard and heeded.

Jesus uses a literary device familiar to his hearers: parallelism. One can note quite easily the parallels and the contrasts that are being drawn between the poor and the rich, the hungry and the full, the mourning and the

laughing. Jesus certainly intends to draw attention to something significant about the kingdom of God. The poor are lauded not because of their poverty, but because of the hope that they have that their situation will be altered by the very hand of God. The rich are cautioned not because they are rich, but because of their dependence upon their wealth rather than God.

Paul Tillich, in his sermon, ‘The Paradox of the Beatitudes’, sensed this very thing: **The Beatitudes do not glorify those who are poor and in misery, individuals or classes, because they are poor. The Woes are not promised to those who are rich and secure, classes or individuals, because they are rich. If this were so, Jesus could not have promised to the poor the reversal of their situation. He praises the poor in so far as they live in *two* worlds, the present world and the world to come. And He threatens the rich in so far as they live in one world alone.**

The season of Advent points us in the same direction of Jesus’ Beatitudes: dependence upon God for the real treasure, comfort, and assurance in life. Advent reminds us that this moment, this world, this existence, is not our ultimate destiny. Our ultimate destiny is found in God in Jesus Christ. We look to the day when God, by his work in Jesus Christ, will bring about full restoration and redemption to all those who are poor, who hunger and who mourn. As well, such restoration and redemption will come also for those who mistakenly trust only in this present moment. The lesson for us is to live not merely in this moment, but in the hope of the redemptive event.

**Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)
My God, give me a heart full of divine, heavenly love. Amen.**

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

From Isaiah 41:

Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
that we may consider them,
that we may know their outcome;
or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm,
that we may be dismayed and terrified.
Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is nought;
an abomination is he who chooses you.

The prophet Isaiah imagines a celestial scene in which the God of Israel, the true and everlasting God, calls upon the divine pretenders who are the regional and national gods of other peoples. He challenges them to prove their existence. Of course, this is a rhetorical scene and a rhetorical accusation: the God of Israel knows that there are no other gods than he himself. Yet, Isaiah offers the implied accusation that the people of the real God often follow the ways of gods of their own creation. These are the gods, the gods of our own creating, that are the greatest threat to our wholeness and peace.

The final solution of the query that God places before the false gods of human making is that God is himself the God of history. He knows what has passed and he knows what is happening AND he knows what will happen. History not in the sense of what is entirely passed, but rather in the continuity of time stretching from before, into our current moment and beyond the horizon that we cannot see or interpret.

Tillich, in his sermon, ‘Two Servants of Jahweh’, makes the point that whenever the people of Israel thought of God as only a national deity, belonging to them and them alone, they required such a reminder as Isaiah offers in his imaginative scene. Tillich likens our own situation as a ‘Christian’ nation and the mistakes we make in claiming God only for ourselves: **We receive so many oracles, but no prophecies, only because we refuse to turn to the source of prophecy, the God of history.**

Advent calls us to remember that it is this God who has come to us in Jesus Christ who has entered human history and found a space and time for his own humanly existence. His incarnation points us forward from what God has done and is doing to what God will do in the horizon beyond our sight. We are called to trust in what God has done and is doing as we cast our eyes to the future not just individually and not just as a nation, but as a world and as a people. Finally, this is the only ‘proof’ that can be offered in God’s challenge to us all.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

O Lord of Grace, the world is before me this day and I am weak and fearful, but I look to thee for strength.

Thursday, December 7, 2023

From Psalm 90:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.
Thou turnest man back to the dust,
and sayest, “Turn back, O children of men!”
For a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

Who says poetry can’t be truth? Here, in the poetic writings of the psalmist, comes a truth that plumbs the human experience, that strikes right to the heart of human pondering and dark reasoning ... how much time do we have? How many days do we need?

Paul Tillich, in a sermon on the mystery of time, quotes the great early theologian, Augustine, on this very subject: **Let us meditate on the mystery of time. Augustine points to the depth of this mystery, when he says, ‘If nobody asks me about it, I know. If I want to explain it to somebody who asks me about it, I do not know.’**

A little later, in the same sermon, he affirms a further truth about time: **Time is as inexhaustible as the ground of life itself. Even the greatest minds have each discovered only one aspect of it. But everyone, even the most simple mind, apprehends the meaning of time – namely, his own temporality. ... Time is our destiny. Time is our hope. Time is our despair. And time is the mirror in which we see eternity.**

Advent is the Christian season that is most about time – God’s time that has been given to creation. Time will not run on and on endlessly into eternity, says the Christian witness, rather it will end in God, just as it has begun. Advent points us toward the conclusions that God will draw about creation and all human life and not merely our own limited assessments.

Here’s how Tillich ends his sermon: **The eternal is the solution to the riddle of time. Time does not drive toward an endless self-repetition, nor to an empty return to its beginning. Time is not meaningless. It has**

a hidden meaning – salvation. It has a hidden goal – the Kingdom of God. It brings about a hidden reality – the new creation. The infinite significance of every moment of time is this: in it we decide, and are decided about, with respect to our eternal future.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

Lord God, thou art my divine treasury in whom all fulness dwells, my life, hope, joy, peace, glory, end.

Friday, December 8, 2023

From Psalm 139:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there thy hand shall lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, “Let only darkness cover me,

and the light about me be night,”

even the darkness is not dark to thee,

the night is bright as the day;

for darkness is as light with thee.

‘Where could I go from Thy Spirit, and where could I flee from Thy Face?’ These are the central words of the great 139th Psalm. They state in the form of a question the inescapable Presence of God. Let us consider this statement, and the powerful images in which the psalmist tries to express it. God is inescapable. He is God only because He is inescapable. And only that which is inescapable IS God.

These are the opening words of Paul Tillich’s great sermon on the text for the day. The sermon is entitled ‘Escape from God,’ and Tillich makes an impassioned appeal that the inescapability of God is what makes God, God for us. We cannot evade or avoid or even ignore God. God is ever with us, and this is both comfort and challenge to us. We cannot rid ourselves of God, nor should we want to. Ultimately, the inescapability of God becomes the challenge that brings comfort.

The confrontation of our sin or our desertion from God brings about an incredible desire to flee from God. The knowledge of our failed humanity contrasted with our fear of God’s supposed fierce righteousness causes our hearts not to rebel, but rather to flee. We think we are not of value to the One who is inescapably present. But the gospel proclaims to us that in God’s great mercy, God has come to us in Christ. We who have sought to flee have been pursued and found in Christ. This is the very heart of grace for us; though we know that we deserve the isolation of flight and hiding, God comes in Christ to reveal to us a love that goes beyond our faithlessness.

Tillich adds to this something helpful indeed: **The God Whom [humanity] cannot flee is the Ground of his being. And this being, his nature, soul, and body, is a work of infinite wisdom, awful and wonderful. ... It points to the friendly presence of an infinitely creative wisdom. ... There is a grace in life. Otherwise, we could not live.**

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

My God, I feel it is heaven to please thee, and to be what thou wouldst have me be. Amen.

Saturday, December 9, 2023

1 Corinthians 2:10

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

Psalm 130:1

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!

It is the depths that concern us today. The depths of our human existence matched by the depths of God’s grace and meaning for life. The psalmist and the apostle Paul alike understand that both humanity and God involve depth.

These two texts are the subject of Paul Tillich’s sermon, ‘The Depth of Existence.’ Here’s what Tillich says early in his sermon: **All visible things have a surface. Surface is that side of things which first appears to us. If we look at it, we know what things seem to be. Yet if we act according to what things and persons seem to be, we are disappointed. Our expectations are frustrated. And so we try to penetrate below the surfaces in order to learn what things really are. Why have men always asked for truth? Is it because they have been disappointed with the surfaces, and have known that the truth which does not disappoint dwells below the surfaces in the depth?**

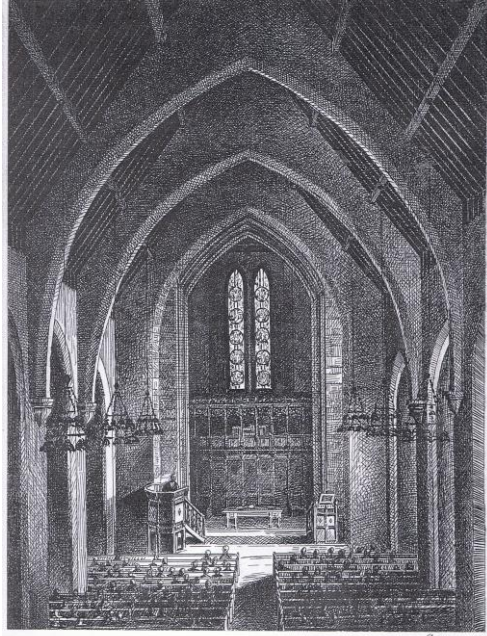
Tillich is exactly right here; we are disappointed with the experience of life ‘on the surface’ and so we seek something deeper, more profound ... something representative of truth. At the heart of our turning is God. We are made so that we might turn to God even after turning away from him. We are made not to be satisfied with the surfaces of life, but rather to seek the deeper things, the very depths of both our experience and the character of God. Much of scripture certainly speaks to this. This is why we are strangely turned to the ways of God, sometimes even despite our intentions or devices.

At the very end of the same sermon, Tillich closes with these words: **Eternal joy is the end of the ways of God. This is the message of all religions. The Kingdom of God is peace and joy. This is the message of Christianity. But eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God. The moment in which we reach the last depth of our lives is the moment in which we can experience the joy that has eternity within it, the hope that cannot be destroyed, and the truth on which life and death are built. For in the depth is the truth, and in the depth is hope, and in the depth its joy.**

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

O Lord, help me never to expect any happiness from the world, but only in thee. Amen.

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT



Sunday, December 10, 2023

From Psalm 90

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place
in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

Thou turnest man back to the dust,
and sayest, “Turn back, O children of men!”

For a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream,
like grass which is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;

in the evening it fades and withers.

If we take the witness of scripture seriously, we must admit that we are certainly not the equal of God. Sometimes lighter voices within the Christian faith urge us to equate God as our personal chum or bosom buddy. The writer of this psalm (some presume it be Moses) knew that God is not to be trifled with or causally dealt with. God is God and humanity is God’s creation.

Paul Tillich understood this and expressed similar sentiments in his sermon, ‘On the Transitoriness of Life’: **[The psalm is in] the mood of ancient mankind. Many of us are afraid of it. A shallow Christian idealism cannot stand the darkness of such a vision. Not so the Bible. The most universal of all books, it reveals the age-old wisdom about man’s transitoriness and misery. The Bible does not try to hide the truth about man’s life under facile statements about the immortality of the soul. Neither the Old nor the New Testament does so. They know the human situation and they take it seriously. They do not give us any easy comfort about ourselves.**

The psalmist pulls no punches. This is an honest portrayal of our human vulnerability: we are dust and to dust we shall return. The concept of an immortal soul is not scriptural, as Tillich points out, but rather comes to us from Greek philosophy or other sources. The scriptures do not represent immortality of the human soul, but rather dependence of the human soul upon the compassion and grace and mercy of God. Immortality would suggest that we were somehow equivalent to God, who is eternal, timeless, and immortal. We are mortal and our hope is found only and surely in God’s merciful grace. And that is even greater comfort than an immortal soul, for it is ultimately our hope in God himself.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)

Dear Lord, I depend wholly upon thee, wean me from all other dependences. Amen.

Monday, December 11, 2023

Revelation 21:1 and 22:1-2

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ...

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Last summer, as I was reading through Tillich’s sermons, it was his ‘Nature Mourns for a Lost Good’ that convinced me of the value of using his sermons as inspiration for this year’s Advent devotions. The sermon based on the text above and selections from Psalm 19 and Romans 8, is a wonderful encouragement to broaden our vision of God’s ultimate salvation and redemption from merely humankind to all of creation. Tillich is not being novel with this approach; such an understanding that the Final Judgment is about redemption and restoration for all of God’s creation is witnessed throughout the scriptures.

The witness of Advent as a Christian season is that God’s salvific concern extends beyond just humanity, as if the rest of creation had only been backdrop or a supporting cast to the drama of human life. Think of it this way, the opening saga of creation found in the first two chapters of Genesis is not played out in some neutral or non-specific space. The writers of Genesis, inspired by the very breath of God, spent much ink and narrative space on the creation of the world in its entirety, including the stars, the forces of nature such as the oceans and the hills, and the animals that populate the planet. It appears almost that the creation of humanity is either the pinnacle of creation or an afterthought, but either way, there is much more to God’s salvific concern than just the human species.

Tillich puts it rather simply: **The Bible speaks again and again of the salvation of the world, as it speaks of the creation of the world and the subjection of the world to anti-Divine forces. And world means nature as well as man.**

Tillich further ties our experience of nature and God’s desire that we, as part of creation, be in tune with the natural world through his experience of sacraments: **Let me ask you a question: are we still able to understand what a sacrament means? The more we are estranged from nature, the less we can answer affirmatively. That is why, in our time, the sacraments have lost so much of their significance for individuals and Churches. For in the sacraments, nature participates in the process of salvation. Bread and wine, water and light, and all the great elements of nature become the bearers of spiritual meaning and saving power.**

During this Advent season, let us remember that God is busily working redemption and restoration for us and for all creation too!

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year B*)

Dear Lord, show me the ways that I can be an agent of your praise in this world. Amen.

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

From Isaiah 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

I have always been fascinated by the imagery conjured by the scene that the prophet Isaiah paints here. The words cause the human imagination to be present in the temple on that very day ... a temple filled with smoke, vague figures of angelic beings, and the booming voice of God heard almost like a whisper. It is a moving piece of scripture.

The author of the text envisions this scene so vividly we cannot help but put ourselves in the picture. And this is precisely what the author intended. Isaiah wants us all to be drawn into the acknowledgement of the great distance and spectacular nearness of God to us. Such a distance causes us to consider the ultimate nature of God -- his greatness and his glory. Such nearness causes us to reflect upon our state and our 'unclean lips,' the very symbol of our faithlessness and desertion from the ways of God. Yet, this presence that Isaiah describes is not threatening, but inviting. The voice, heard a little later in the chapter, asks for one to go and bear witness. The implication is obvious; God includes us even with unclean lips and faithless hearts in his great work of redemption.

In the season of Advent, we are reminded that we are being moved toward a future that God's distance and nearness will be made one. The unclean lips will be healed and made useful to God only through the burning away of iniquity, something that God alone can affect in our lives rather than our own efforts or abilities. This is why we are told to raise our heads and look up, to anticipate the coming of the One who redeems and restores by his ultimate nearness. In his approach, all our vanity and human refusals will melt away and we will be what God has also meant us to be. This too is Advent.

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year B*)

Dear Lord, I struggle to be your child, knowing that believing and loving do emanate from a single grace. Amen.

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

From Matthew 11:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This passage presents a confusing quandary to me: What yoke could be easy and what burden could be light? The juxtaposition of the words makes little sense in terms of how we normally view the world, but what Jesus implies is something beyond the regularity of world occurrence.

Reading the sermon 'The Yoke of Religion', penned by Paul Tillich, helped to provide a bit of light and understanding to the text. Tillich reveals early in his sermon that this passage was the one he chose for his 'life verse' at the time of his Lutheran confirmation as a young adolescent. He was questioned about this choice and challenged by the elders of his church over the choice. How could an adolescent understand about burdens and labor? Yet, Tillich persisted, and his choice was accepted.

Tillich, in his sermon crafted decades after his adolescent choice, delivered these startling words: **Taking upon oneself His easy yoke does not mean taking sin more easily or taking guilt less seriously. He does not tell those who come to Him that their sins are not so important as they seemed to be. He does not give them an easier conscience about their failures and trespasses. On the contrary, He sharpens their conscience to the highest possible degree in practically every one of His words. ... The burden He wants to take from us is the burden of religion.**

Toward the end of the sermon, Tillich draws his points all together: **Jesus is not the creator of another religion, but the victor over religion; He is not the maker of another law, but the conqueror of law.**

Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden is indeed light when we realize that what God has done in Jesus Christ has been done for our liberation and our restoration. We are not called to fulfill a new law, but rather we are called to live a new life. This is the heart of the good news and it is the message of Advent as well

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year B*)

Dear Lord, your word is a lamp to my feet, a lamp to my path, and a light to the world! Amen.

Thursday, December 14, 2023

From Romans 8:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The season of Advent unveils the meaning of the doctrine of providence. In the Christian understanding, God does not create the world and all that is and then walks away from his creation. Providential care of creation is witnessed all through the scriptures. God continues to care for his creation, and he seeks the cooperation of his creatures in the living out of creaturely life. Advent reminds us that the God who has never been absent from creation will bring all creation to its final denouement and restoration.

The passage from Paul's Roman epistle provides a strong affirmation of God's providential care. Paul is utterly convinced that no experience in human life: no thought, no action, no miss step, or even good deed can separate us from God's great love for us found in Jesus Christ. Such an affirmation should belie any doubts we might have regarding God's broad reach. God is faithful even when we are faithless. If that were not true, God would be no different than we, for we believe that if one is faithless with us, we have reason to no longer be faithful to them. God, we are assured in scripture, does not act like us in this.

But what is the content of this providence? What does it mean for us? Paul Tillich offers this: **What is [providence's] content? It is certainly not a vague promise that, with the help of God, everything will come to a good end; there are many things that come to a bad end. And it is not the maintenance of hope in every situation; there are situations in which there can be no hope. Nor is it the anticipation of a period of history, in which divine Providence will be proved by human happiness and goodness; there is no generation in which divine Providence will be less paradoxical than it is in ours. But the content of the faith in Providence is this: when death rains from heaven as it does now, when cruelty wields power over nations and individuals as it does now, when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now, and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of men as they do now – we can boast in that time, and just in that time, that even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God.**

And that is a fine way to draw all of this to a close ... nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is worth remembering every morning and revisiting each evening. May it be so with you as well.

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year B*)

God, you are a mysterious presence in my life, one that continually is revealed in times and places that surprise me. Amen.

Friday, December 15, 2023

From 1 Corinthians 13:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The passage is often associated with wedding services and marital love. Paul's words here have more in common with the season Advent than with weddings and marital relationships! Paul encourages his readers to cast their minds and their eyes ahead to a time when their knowledge will be full and fulfilled. He poetically frames the truth about the current human condition: partial and fragmented existence.

In our current moment, within the bounds of the limitations of human existence, we live fragmented and partial lives. We are an abundance of internal fragments and thus are prone to live fragmented lives. Paul casts his vision ahead to a day when such fractures will be healed, and the partiality of this moment becomes complete. The cause of this completion and this healing is ultimately the power of love. Paul is clear that this not the kind of love that emanates from marriage or intimate relationships; this is the love that is rooted in the divine reality behind all of human existence. This gives Paul the impetus to keep on in faith.

Tillich concluded a sermon he delivered about this passage with the following: **How could Paul endure life, as it lay in fragments? He endured it because the fragments bore a new meaning to him. The pictures in the mirror pointed to something new for him: they anticipated the perfect, the reality of love. Through the pieces of his knowledge and morality, love appeared to him. And the power of love transformed the tormenting riddles into symbols of truth, the tragic fragments into symbols of the whole.**

May the gift of knowing the presence of God in Jesus Christ grant us all the encouragement to see the fragmentary nature of life here and now as pointing toward a completion and a wholeness that will come with the Day of the Lord; with God's ultimate judgment upon his own work of creation in the redemption of all things. May we see glimpses of this even now in our own lives and hearts.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Worshipbook*)

God of power, you work for good in the world, and you want us to work with you. Keep us from being divided, so that when you call, we may follow single-mindedly in the way of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Saturday, December 16, 2023

From John 3:

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

I would love to reproduce the sermon that Paul Tillich composed from this particular text; it was that good! However, due to space, I am reduced to share with you my thoughts on his thoughts on Jesus' words.

Jesus makes an interesting claim in this particular text – that those who ‘do’ the truth are those who are enlightened and fulfill the will of God. We usually think of ‘doing’ the truth as much as either ‘believing’ the

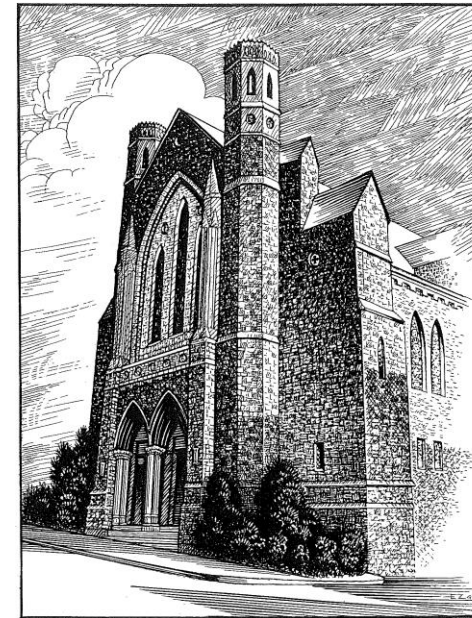
truth or ‘affirming’ the truth as in being the opposite of the believing what is false or claiming something that is a lie. Jesus was convinced that truth is something that his followers are to be about, to ‘do’.

Here's what Paul Tillich said about such distinctions: **In Christianity truth is the new creation realizing itself in history. Therefore, in Christianity the opposite of truth is a lie, and not – as it was in Greece – opinion. The decision for or against truth is *the* life-and-death decision, and this decision is identical with the decision in which Christ is accepted or rejected. You cannot have *opinion* about the Christ after you have faced Him. You can only do the truth by following Him, or do the lie by denying Him.**

The call of God in Jesus Christ is this challenge to accept God's work in Christ and live by it or to ignore, deny, or miss this work of God and attempt to live by our own lights in the world. This is not necessarily always a conscious decision, for there are many who have not been ‘enlightened’ as it were with the witness of God's love and grace in Christ. Rather, this is about how we choose to follow once we have seen the great work of God in Christ ... the truth as Tillich would see it. This ‘living’ the truth by the lights of God's love in Jesus Christ is indeed what Jesus meant by doing the truth ... and this doing will not change how God ‘feels’ about us or loves us, it will, rather, alter the way we ‘feel’ about life itself. It will provide the very light by which we can live.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Worshipbook*)

Eternal God, help us to watch and wait for the coming of your Son, so that when he comes, we may be found living in light, ready to celebrate the victory of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.



search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

God is not far from us, but rather in Jesus Christ, God has made himself near to all humanity in such a way that God's love and grace towards us can never again be really doubted. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, this ‘unknown’ God, this hidden God of scripture and distance, has come close and revealed himself as the One who is for us.

Such a defining act is proclaimed by the apostle Paul and is taken up in a sermon Paul Tillich delivered to a convention of theologians and theological students. Tillich was convinced that the act of incarnation makes non-belief inauthentic and less than an honest response: **Genuine atheism is not humanly possible, for God is**

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 17, 2023

From John 3:

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would

search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

God is not far from us, but rather in Jesus Christ, God has made himself near to all humanity in such a way that God's love and grace towards us can never again be really doubted. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, this ‘unknown’ God, this hidden God of scripture and distance, has come close and revealed himself as the One who is for us.

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nearer to a man than that man is to himself. ... God is nearer to us than we ourselves. We cannot find a place outside of Him; but we can *try* to find such a place. Although mankind is not strange to God, it is estranged from Him. Although mankind is never without God, it perverts the picture of God. Although mankind is never without the knowledge of God, it is ignorant of God.

In Jesus Christ, God has proclaimed and proven his proximity to humanity. We may not perceive it, or we may outrightly deny this truth by our refusal to live differently, yet the truth remains. This truth is not a threatening truth as some would have it said -- rather this truth about God's nearness in Jesus Christ is both a comfort and a challenge to us. It is a comfort to know that God is with us, as promised by the Old Testament prophets. It is a challenge to know that our world needs to be redeemed and restored, our lives need to exhibit more, and clearer grace and love. We cannot manufacture any of this on our own. The challenge is to place our trust in God's work in Jesus Christ in our lives and in this world to make a difference. The challenge is to both know that we are loved and that we are called to live that love out as Jesus did and would have us do. This is both the comfort and the challenge of the nearness of God. This is the comfort and challenge of the Advent season as well.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Worshipbook*)

O Lord, keep us awake and alert, watching for your kingdom. Make us strong in faith, so we may greet your Son when comes, and joyfully give him praise, with you, and with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Monday, December 18, 2023

From Romans 8:

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. ... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

It is the Spirit of the living God that inhabits our lives. This is the affirmation that Paul makes to the Roman congregation. It is God's very presence in our lives as the Holy Spirit, speaking with and encouraging our own spirit to follow the ways of Jesus Christ that makes all the difference in the world to how we live our lives. Such an affirmation should indeed be an encouragement to us.

Paul Tillich, in his sermon on this text, wrote: **To be a Christian means to have the Spirit, and any description of Christianity must be a description of the manifestations of the Spirit. ... 'The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.'** These words imply that our spirit is unable to give us such assurance. Our spirit, that is, our natural mind, our thought, our will, our emotions, the whole of our interior life, cannot give us the certainty that we are the children of God. This does not mean that Paul depreciates human nature and spirit. On the contrary, in speaking of our spirit, he acknowledges the creativity of man, his similarity to God Who is Spirit, his ability to free himself, and to liberate all nature, from vanity and the bondage of corruption by his own liberation.

The wonder or miracle of the gift of the Holy Spirit is that our own spirit, mind, and 'interior life' is not completely obliterated and replaced by the Spirit, but rather God's very Spirit participates in the life that we lead, guiding and instructing our very hearts in this life. Therefore, this life remains our own to live, but with the partnership and the leadership of God's very presence. This the Spirit does for us so that we might be assured that what God had done in Jesus Christ has been done for us all so that we live free from sin and the isolation from God. It is the Spirit that draws us continually towards the ultimate resolution to which Advent points.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Worshipbook*)

O Lord, keep us awake and alert, watching for your kingdom. Make us strong in faith, so we may greet your Son when comes, and joyfully give him praise, with you, and with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

From Mark 8:

And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Eli'jah; and others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he charged them to tell no one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men."

The opening lines of Paul Tillich's sermon on this passage from the Gospel of Mark speaks strongly of its importance: **This story is the center of Mark's Gospel. And in this story, we find the heart of the Christian message. The message is infinitely simple, yet rich and profound, and concentrated in four words: 'Thou art the Christ.'**

As Christians we affirm that Jesus is the Christ. We have been gifted by God with this assurance that what God has been doing in Jesus Christ, he has done in fulfillment of what had been promised from the beginning -- despite our desertion of God, God has bound himself to us and to all humankind. We have deserted God, but God has never deserted us.

This is found in Jesus' unique expression of Messiahship. Jesus is the Christ despite his failure to act as we would have predicted or wanted. We want a Messiah that utterly crushes his enemies and proves himself powerful by his mighty arm. Jesus defied such an expectation and demonstrated the true character of God's grace and love in being the Christ by his humility and his willingness to accept suffering and death on our behalf.

Paul Tillich put it this way, finding God's action in Jesus Christ as definitive to the nature of God: **Yet when the Divine is rejected, It takes the rejection upon Itself. It accepts our crucifixion, our pushing away, the defense of ourselves against It. It accepts our refusal to accept, and thus conquers us. That is the center of the mystery of the Christ. Let us try to imagine a Christ Who would not die, and Who would come in glory to impose upon us His power, His wisdom, His morality, and His piety. He would not be able to break our resistance by His strength, by His wonderful government, by His infallible wisdom, and by His irresistible perfection. But He would not be able to win our hearts.**

God could have imposed his divine will upon us but chose not to. Instead, God comes to us as a babe born in a manger, as the Christ through and through, but subject to human weakness and experience so that we might be won not by might or domination, but rather by the power of self-sacrifice and love. And this makes all the difference in the world.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship*)

Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

From Psalm 130:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

From Romans 8:

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

As the season of Advent winds down, we do well to remember that within this season we are urged to wait with hope. Advent is about such ‘holy waiting.’ We cannot force the hand of God nor the hands on the clock; we must await the fulfillment of God’s work with the hope that has been born into us in the appearance of Jesus the Christ.

Paul Tillich’s words are instructive here: **Waiting means *not* having and having at the same time. ... A religion in which that is forgotten, no matter how ecstatic or active or reasonable, replaces God by its own creation of an image of God. ... I think of the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within a doctrine. I think of the Biblical student who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in a book. I think of the churchman who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in an institution. I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within his own experience.**

Advent reminds us that we do not actually fully possess God, but rather, we are possessed by God in the hope that has been granted to us. We are the possessions of God and not the other way round. We are called to trust God in the hope that God is about his work in this world, pointing us and all creation to the day of his final restoration, resolution, and redemption. This is the very heart of the Advent message, that we would lift our heads in hope to the God who is coming to us and to all that is in Jesus Christ. Such a hope should breed within us a willingness to wait and not claim more than we should for ourselves, for we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.

And so, in Advent and in all times, we are called to go about the work and the life that has been placed before us, trusting that God is active in our midst and is leading and guiding us all the way along. We have not been abandoned; this would lead to despair. We have been called to wait and this waiting leads to hope, for we know that God has fulfilled his promises in the past and will fulfill the ultimate promise of redemption in the days yet to come. This is what we need to remember as Advent comes to a close ... for this year.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship*)

Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule. Amen.

Thursday, December 21, 2023

From Romans 5:

But law came in, so that the trespass might increase, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more ...

Paul affirms to his readers that though we certainly sin, grace is more powerful than even our trespass. God’s faithfulness assumes our faithlessness in grace, and we are granted a hope in God’s great mercy that enables us to live.

Another reading partner for me as of late is the late, great Dr. David H.C. Read, once pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. In a sermon on this text he said: **It is still a surprise for many people, even within the Church, when they really hear that the grace of God means that his love accepts them just as they are, that there is no scale of religious virtue to be climbed before they can know the grace of the Lord Jesus**

Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. So long as we retain one trace of self-justification, one little desire to earn our own salvation, we are at the mercy of those fears and victims of our pride.

As long as we hold on to our own efforts as somehow equalizing things between ourselves and God, we will live under the shadow of fear of punishment or the vanity of our own work. Neither way is the appropriate way to be human in the light of God’s gracious action in Jesus Christ. Dr. Read makes the point that grace is hard for folks, even Christians, to believe in as effectually restoring our relationship with God.

Paul Tillich, in possibly his most famous sermon, ‘You Are Accepted’, covered similar ground: **Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. There is something triumphant in the word ‘grace’: in spite of the abounding of sin grace abounds more. ... We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace.**

Once we realize that God’s grace has been given to us in the work of Jesus Christ, we can begin to live in the way that God has designed us to live; with confidence and trust in his goodness and the courage to take up the lives we have been given and live them to and for God’s purposes in this world. This grace then transforms us and the way we view and experience life. This transformation Tillich liked to call ‘the New Being’, which he takes from his own reading of Pauline literature in the New Testament.

As we move towards the advent of God’s gracious and merciful judgment, we can live our life confident not in our abilities to please God, but rather trusting in the merciful grace by which God enlightens our paths and straightens our ways.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship* – 1946 edition)

O Thou who has ordered this wonderous world and who knowest all things in earth and heaven: So fill our hearts with trust in Thee that by night and by day, at all times and in all seasons, we may without fear commit ourselves to Thy never-failing love, for this life and the life to come. Amen.

Friday, December 22, 2023

From Matthew 27:

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was himself a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

It may seem a bit odd to include a passage about Jesus’ burial in an Advent devotional, but it makes more sense than you might think. The story is from the Gospel of Matthew and includes the figure of Joseph of Arimathea who supposedly provided the tomb in which Christ’s crucified body was laid following his death.

Paul Tillich makes use of this passage to compare both Jesus’ earthly beginnings and his ending. The manger in which the newborn Christ was laid construes a parallel to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, at least in Tillich’s theological imagination: **It has been forgotten that the manger of Christmas was the expression of utter poverty and distress before it became the place where the angels appeared and to which the star pointed. And it has been forgotten that the tomb of Jesus was the end of His life and of His work before it became the place of His final triumph.**

If we learn anything from reading the scriptures generally and the gospels specifically, it is that the God of the universe has acted, is acting, and will act in surprising ways. The salutation of God’s great love and grace

comes to the world not from the rotunda of the great capital building of the imperial nation or from the portico of the great palace of the emperor, but rather it emanates in the cry of an infant, laid to rest in the feeding stall for common livestock in a tiny, out-of-the-way village.

In a like manner, the ultimate victory of God’s glorious work is not carried out on some blood-soaked battlefield or issued from some well-furnished laboratories of the greatest research institutions of academia, rather it comes out of a graveyard, out of a simple, cave-like, cold-as-death tomb with no human witnesses present at the moment of resurrection. Instead, this great miracle is conveyed by stories from women who would not be considered reliable witnesses in any law court of their time and place. This is the way that God works in this world and this surprising manner is the way he works in our hearts as well.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship* – 1946 edition)

O Savior of the world, who by Thy cross and precious blood hast redeemed us: Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech Thee, O Lord. Amen.

Saturday, December 23, 2023

From Hebrews 2:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

The name of the author of this epistle has been lost to history, but the point that he makes regarding the humanity of Jesus the Christ is essentially important. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, was born as we have been born and died, just as all human beings are bound to die. We dare not believe that we will escape death for Christ himself has suffered such for us. Since Christ did not seek to escape this human end we should not either.

Contemplation of the inevitability of death is avoided by most folks. We don’t like to contemplate the truth that we will, at some point and time in the future, die. We will cease to breathe, and we will lay down in the dust as the generations of our forebears have done. Yet, the promise of Christmas is that death will not have the final say about our life. Because of Jesus Christ, the babe born in far-away Bethlehem, death is not the end.

Paul Tillich took up this very affirmation in a marvelous sermon he penned entitled, ‘The Destruction of Death’ which opens with this: **The darkness into which the light of Christmas shines is above all the darkness of death.**

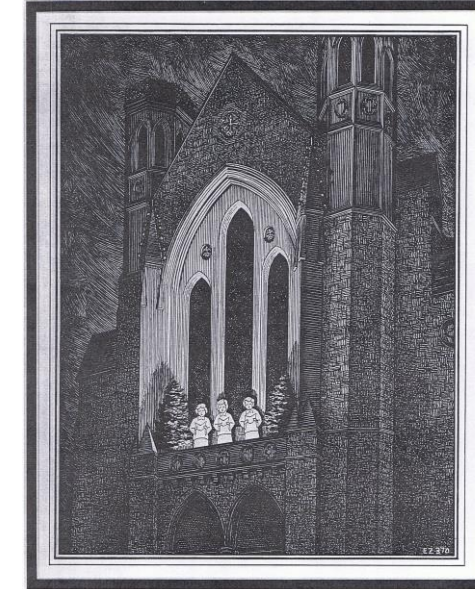
Fear of death clings closely to all of us. By our very nature, we cannot foresee what happens following death, but we can trust that the God who has given us life, sustained us through this life, will gather us in following our end. This too is part of the witness of scripture; not of some kind of immortality of the human soul, but rather the eternal and ongoing love of God for all creation and his work in Jesus Christ to save us from ourselves and our sin.

Tillich ended his sermon with these words: **If Christmas has any meaning, it has that meaning. Ask yourself, as you listen to the prophecies of Advent and to the stories of Christmas, whether your attitude toward death has changed; whether you are any longer in servitude to the fear of death; and whether you can stand the image of your own death. ... And within Christianity there is only one ‘argument’ against**

death: the forgiveness of sins, and the victory over him who has the power of death. It speaks of the coming of the Eternal to us, becoming temporal in order to restore our eternity.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship* – 1946 edition)

O Savior of the world, who by Thy cross and precious blood hast redeemed us: Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech Thee, O Lord. Amen.



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 24, Christmas Eve 2023

From the Gospel of Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)

O Lord, our God! When we are afraid, abandon us not to despair! When we are disappointed, let us not grow bitter! When we fall, leave us not lying there! When we are at our wit’s end and run out of strength, let us not perish! Grant us then the sense of your nearness and your love which you have promised to those with a humble and contrite heart who fear your word. Your dear Son has come to all men in despair. To overcome our plight he was born in a stable and died on the cross. Awaken us all, O Lord, and keep us awake to acknowledge and confess him! Amen.

Monday, December 25, Christmas Day 2023

From the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Prayer for the Day: (Karl Barth – Christmas 1954)

Dear heavenly Father! As we are gathered here to rejoice in your dear Son who became man and a brother for our sake, we ask you heartily – show us how great is the mercy, lovingkindness and help that you have prepared in him for us all!

Open our hearts and our understanding and we will grasp that in him is forgiveness of all our sins, is seed and growth for a new life, is comfort and counsel in life and death, is hope for the whole world!

Create in us a true spirit of freedom to go out humbly and courageously and meet your Son who comes to us!

Grant today to the whole Christian Church and to the world as well that many may break through the glitter and vanity of the holiday season and truly celebrate Christmas with us. Amen.