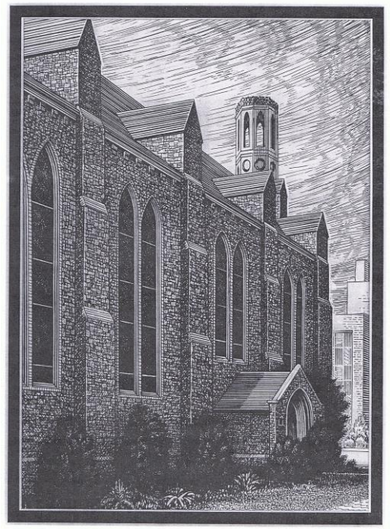


The First Week of Advent

Sunday, December 1, 2024

From Romans 13: *(The Message)*

But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ and be up and about!

The season of Advent and the approach of the return of Christ (casually referred to as 'the second coming') causes dread among some. Others, misinterpret the Christian season as some kind of religious 'run up' to Christmas festivities. It is much more than both simplifications.

The season of Advent is a season filled with a hope that defies our ultimate qualification or definition. Paul writes to his charges in Rome, assuring them that God has not finished with the work that began at creation. Paul sees a God who has acted in all of history and is continuing this work in bringing about the ultimate redemption and restoration of all creation. That which has been 'undone' by human sin will be restored by God's action in Jesus Christ.

Eugene Peterson put it this way: **Christ is coming again. History is not an endless repetition of the same old thing. Our Lord will finish his work in history, achieving victory in this creation and concluding his work of redemption. … The Second Coming means the overwhelming fact about the future is that God will accomplish his redemptive purposes. He will get done what he told us he wants to do.**

It is this hope that God is still actively at work in the midst of history that propels Paul to suggest that the Roman Christians ought to get off their backsides, stop bickering and fussing, and start seeking out and participating in God's redeeming work happening all around them. We ought to do the same!

Again, Peterson is helpful here: **Knowing this, we can go about our work in the present with calmness, peace, joy, and sureness. We know that the future holds not something foreign to the experience we already share in the gospel, but the completion of it.**

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

Heavenly Father, my faith is in thee, my expectation is from thee, and my love goes out toward thee. Amen.

Monday, December 2, 2024

From 1 Corinthians 7: *(The Message)*

I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is fading away.

The Corinthians are a mess! Yet, they remind me of any church that I have served, including FPC, Greensburg. We do not have our act together perfectly or purely. If we say that we do, we deceive only ourselves, for God (and our neighbors, consequently) know the truth about us. We are afloat on the grace of God and are yet weighed down by the very real conditions of our lives that seem to argue against the existence of such buoyant and resilient grace. Such was the case in Corinth as well; such is the case with the church.

Speaking of the Corinthians and their predicament, Peterson once said in a sermon: **All the same, I like these people. The new life of Christ was ablaze in them. They were up to their armpits in problems, but the problems didn't hold a candle to the mystery of the Christ that was ablaze in them. They knew their lives were being shaped for some grand and eternal purpose. The church was a mess, but God was cleaning up that mess, and they were willing to let God do it.**

There is something endearing about Peterson's appreciation of the people of Corinth. There is a reality that is related here from a pastor who had experienced the actual condition of Christ's church in this world. Peterson didn't rail against the 'messiness' of the congregation that he served, but rather with empathy and sympathy accepted the fact that the condition of human life IS messy and that salvation in Christ is about 'God cleaning up that mess'; not 'today' but someday …

Here's what Peterson said a little later in the same sermon: **God is in our lives, and the invisible God is more real than the visible problems. … Salvation is not some fragile, invisible thing going on in some secret part of your soul. It is an immense visible thing that involves every part of your life. He is the creator. He is the savior. And you are the one he is creating and saving.**

Enough said? I think so …

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 3, 2024

From 1 Corinthians 9: *(The Message)*

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

More today from Paul's dealings with the rather messy Corinthian church. The analogy used here should be familiar to us: a runner, a race, a winner, a prize. The commonalities between first-century Corinth and our own time and place are fascinating and instructive. Paul makes use of a common occurrence to paint a new picture; an image of a prize that defies our attempts to attain it. Paul makes sure the Corinthians know that it is not about their running that wins the ultimate prize, but rather the activity of God in their hearts and minds.

The season of Advent points us to look beyond ourselves and our well-honed and thoroughly trained abilities. The season calls us to look to the activity of God in our lives and model our 'training sessions' after that kind of new and creative action. The church then is about 'training sessions' that we experience both in the worship of the congregation and the living out of the faith in our own lives.

Eugene Peterson's description of the church, in his sermon on this text, has been helpful to my vision of these 'training sessions': **[The church] is not the place where a correct belief is set forth that forces everyone to know the right answers to all the God questions. Nor is it a place that defines the moral questions so that everyone knows exactly what is proper for Christians to do in our daily lives and what kinds of dress, language, associations are forbidden. Nor is it a sorting-out place where weak and useless people are cut from the roster so that we can have a winning team and make a revolutionary impact on the world. No, we are the church not of our answers or rules or strategy but because God is forming new life in us,**

shaping his will in us. It is slower going for some of us than for others, so we need to protect each person's free space where the creative word of grace and mercy occurs. What God is doing in you and in me is far more important than anything we are doing for God or for each other.

The emphasis is not upon perfection, but rather upon the God who is 'perfecting' us as any good training regime does for the runner. The regime is not exactly the same for each runner, for every runner is an individual creation and different from the next. Ultimately, however, the goal is the prize of a life lived in response to God's goodness, a race run in answer to the call to live fully and completely in the light of God's love. It is the 'race' that is worth running.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Lord, let it be day! Lord, shatter, break, destroy all the power of darkness! Heal us, Lord, then we shall be whole! – if this cannot be done entirely yet, then do it in small and passing things as a sign that you are alive and that we, in spite of everything, are your people! Amen.

Wednesday, December 4, 2024

From Psalm 31:
But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hand …

During our waking hours – and especially during our troubled sleep – we may experience anxiety about our life. How will we cope with what life throws our way? How are we to perceive the hours and the minutes, the days and the weeks, the months and the years that we have been given?

We don't know how to answer these questions fully and faithfully for – honestly – we know not when this life will end or how. How are we not to be anxious about this particular day since it could well be our last?

The psalmist's answer is this: trust in God … our time is secure in his hands. Easier said than done, we might think, placing ourselves in his fatherly care.

Karl Barth, in a sermon on this text, said this: **My time does not roll along like a skittle-ball hurled by some unseen hand. It does not tremble like an aspen leaf in the wind. It is secure. It is held. It is carried. It is safeguarded. It is not secure because I am perhaps such a steadfast fellow; after all, none of us is that. It is secure because it is in God's hands. What is in God's hands is secure. So my yesterday is secure, my today, and my tomorrow, with everything that belongs there, whether hidden or open to view. So my time, my life story, I myself have been secure by God's decree for a long time, from long before I was born and so from all eternity. And it will continue to be secure: not only until my death, but beyond it, forever. Nothing, nothing at all of what came then and still comes into existence and now is, will ever be lost, forgotten or obliterated. I am, I shall live, though I were dead, because my life is secure in God's hands.**

I hope that Barth's words struck you as they did me when I first read them. All that anxiety that tends to wash over me from time to time when I consider the immensity of the universe, and the smallness of my own individual life was abated. A calm and a trust in God's ultimate providence for me took its place. Such assurance is offered to us through the scriptures as they bear witness to what God has wrought in Jesus Christ and continues to work in our lives as well. We can trust ourselves and our 'piece' of life into his hands. Indeed, our time, the time that God has given us, is more secure in his hands than it is in our own. Thanks be to God.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
O Lord, our Father! You are telling us today as you did yesterday and will tell us tomorrow as you are telling us today: you have always loved us and so have drawn us towards you simply out of kindness. Amen.

Thursday, December 5, 2024

From Mark 9: *(The Message)*
Then he drove it home by saying, "This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some of you who are standing here are going to see it happen, see the kingdom of God arrive in full force."

Six days later, three of them *did* see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

Peter interrupted, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

For those familiar with the Bible, this passage is immediately recognizable as Mark's account of the Transfiguration. For those familiar with the church year, this is possibly a strange passage for an Advent devotional! Yet, I think it is absolutely appropriate for this time (and for this place). The rest of the story of the Transfiguration is that Jesus does not allow Peter to 'rest on his laurels' and memorialize the place of this divine intervention into the history of the world. Jesus propels his followers (including Peter) back out into the world to be about the work of reconciliation and redemption. This is at the very heart and soul of the Advent season: a conviction that God is at work to bring about the ultimate purposes of his kingdom.

Advent is a season that encourages us to consider how we might participate in God's work of bringing his purposes of reconciliation and redemption to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not about sitting back and taking it easy, idolizing the moment of our conversion or of our realization of Christ's lordship. Rather, it is about being active in this world, responding to God's grace and mercy with a life convinced of God's redemptive purposes in us and all around us.

Peterson is again helpful in our understanding of this with something he said in a sermon delivered to his own congregation some time ago: **We *must* learn to know that, because left to ourselves, we can take the Christian life much too seriously. We can grind it down into simple, grim responsibility, and it can't be that. At the same time, Jesus didn't let [the disciples] stay on the mountain very long. We don't know how long it took, but presumably it didn't take more than a day. And then they went down and were back on the road to Jerusalem.**

The movement of Advent is always and ever forward. It does consider the moment in which we live, but it points us ever forward to what God is doing and is *about to do* in Jesus Christ in the lives of those whom we know and do not yet know. Advent urges us always to be prepared as we can to the call of God to be at work of the redemption of everything. And so, we must be prepared …

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Dear Father in heaven! Preserve us from all stupidity, depression and thoughtlessness which might be temptations for us in the new year as they were in the old! Amen.

Friday, December 6, 2024

From Hebrews 12: *(The Message)*
You've come to Jesus, who presents us with a new covenant, a fresh charter from God. He is the Mediator of this covenant.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is filled with some rather arcane and difficult propositions about the relationship of God and God's creation. Still, it is worthy of our examination, careful reading, and devotion.

Here, in the twelfth chapter of the letter, the author makes a clear and definite assertion that in Jesus Christ we have received a new covenant, 'a fresh charter from God.' The difference between the Christian faith and all the other religions of the world might be summed up in this very passage: in Jesus Christ, we have a mediator and a friend.

Peterson, in a sermon on this text, makes this very point: **One thing we frequently forget is that outside the Christian gospel, religion is largely a matter of fear and mystery. The coming of Jesus Christ chased away the shadows of obscurity, vagueness, and mystery that are breeding grounds for fear and replaced them with a definite hope, a clear love, and a confident joy in relation to God.**

In Jesus Christ, we are assured that God hears us and, more than hearing, God has acted for us and not against us. This is indeed good news; it is at the very heart of the gospel itself. We can trust this God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ to be absolutely and resolutely for us and for all creation. Such knowledge leads us to entrust ourselves fully and completely to the God who has proven his love for us.

It reminds me of the opening of a hymn that has been a favorite for many generations:

What a Friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!

It is only the astounding news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ that could lead any of us to think such things as proclaimed in that hymn. May we all, during this holy season, find renewed within us, the conviction that in Jesus Christ, God has made it clear that he is absolutely and resolutely for us … for us all.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Dear Father in Jesus Christ, abide with us, we ask you, and accompany each one of us to his own place when we depart! Do not abandon anyone! Amen.

Saturday, December 7, 2024

From Acts 17: ***(The Message)***
So, Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them. "It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, to the god nobody knows. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with."

It was almost as if the Athenians were 'covering their bets' when it came to the idol to which Paul refers in this passage. Having attempted to be inclusive, the Athenians realized, with some humility no doubt, that they had not been able to 'cover the waterfront' with the great plethora of religions represented in their city. Just to be on the safe side (or in humility) they erected an idol to the god with no name.

Whatever the reasoning behind such actions by the Athenian city-fathers, Paul makes use of a rarity in the ancient world to speak to them directly about their 'unknown god.' Paul names the unnamed god -- Jesus of Nazareth. And he does so, in the reportage of the writer of Acts, so that they might 'worship intelligently' and to 'know who [they were] dealing with.'

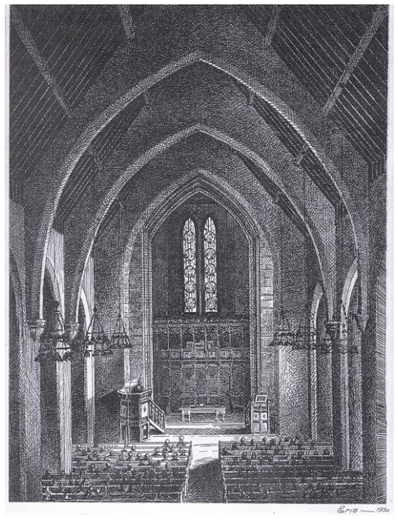
Strangely, this was anticipated in the Old Testament witness of Moses and his encounter with God in the wilderness. Moses, as we all well know, stumbles upon the Almighty in a burning bush and demands, at a high point in the interchange, to have the name of God. This was a well-known theological 'tactic' for the people of that time: determine the name of the god in question and you have some kind of a hold upon him.

There is no 'hold' that we have upon the God who is demonstrated in the actions of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, this God has a hold on us as we see God actively working out his redemptive purposes all around us and within us. We see this the most plainly in the love of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

Peterson writes of such in a sermon on the passage: **Love can become an event in Jesus Christ. It is specifically refined in what God did for me. We hear the gospel preached and find that love is always the center of an action – God does something to humankind in a great way. … Love is never abstract. It is never unconnected with the God who loves or the person he loves. There is a name at both ends of love.**

Paul was certainly right to perceive that that 'unknown god' that the Athenians worshipped was and is the God whom we know in Jesus Christ and his love.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Lord, our God, in your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you have made us your children. Be now among us and instruct us. Amen.



The Second Week of Advent

Sunday, December 8, 2024

From 1 Thessalonians 5: ***(The Message)***
But friends, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. People sleep at night and get drunk at night. But not us! Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.

Paul, the writer of the text for today, is convinced that God's presence in our lives gives us an insight into life itself. Peterson, in his translation of this passage, puts it this way: **We live under wide open skies and know where we stand.**

This is not to imply that we have 'a leg up' on others that we might manipulate to our advantage, like inside trading on the stock market. Instead, this means that in Jesus Christ, we have been given a perspective on life that invites us to see God's work all around us and live in grateful response to it – and in this is our life's very salvation.

I like very much what Peterson said in his sermon on the passage: **One unforgettable think we learned when God came in Jesus is that God comes into the everyday. He is God not merely of the big issues but also of the daily routine: bedding down in village stables, touching run-of-the-mill lepers, lunching with tax collectors, fishing with old friends, and so forth. Therefore, we stay awake lest we miss something significant.**

When traveling with my children, it is disconcerting to have them go to sleep and say, 'Wake me when we get there.' Don't they know that the journey is part of the reality? And they miss so much …

The season of Advent should teach us to 'raise our heads' and stay awake. In other words, we should ever be on the look out for the activity of God in the lives of others and in our life as well. We are not to be like the Peterson children, who preferred to spend the journey of a car ride asleep. Instead, we must live the journey of our lives with our eyes and hearts wide open, looking to see wherever God is at work and following along. At least this seems to be the message of Advent and our text for today.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Lord, our God, in your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you have made us your children. Be now among us and instruct us. Amen.

Monday, December 9, 2024

From 1 Corinthians 13: *(The Message)*
Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

The text for the day comes from a part of the Bible that is certainly well-known and oft quoted. Sometimes referred to as 'the love chapter', Paul's chapter-length treatise on the power and beauty of love has been utilized in weddings and funerals and other 'high' moments of celebrations of life. Paul's intent, however, was not to describe the love between two romantic partners or even parent and child, but rather the power of a love lodged in the reality of God and forged in the experience of a life lived with such an animating reality.

Yet, this animating power of love within us, gifted to us by God and imitative of Christ, can be soundly challenged by our relationships with others. Peterson, being a pastor to the very core, understood this and commented upon in a sermon on the text: **There is much in other people and in the world that displeases us and sometimes is repugnant to us. We often use these things as an excuse to stay away and avoid contact, especially in the cases of cultural crudity or economic misfortune. We don't care to associate with the person. We know there is no possibility of affection, friendliness, or romance, yet we forget there is a fourth kind of love. Irritants, faults, ignorance, immorality, and sin are decisive in blocking the three human loves; they cannot block the new love. The new love puts a roof over those things – doesn't consider these aspects of the situation or the person to be determining factors. They are no less present or real, but they are not permitted to blunt or deflect the activity of Christian love.**

It is the power of the 'new love' that has come to us in Jesus Christ and has been demonstrated in him that can empower us, as weak and challenged as we are, to live as if Paul's words are not just poetic, but also radically realized … even when it is most difficult indeed.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Lord, our God, we ask that you would always remain with your church, both here and everywhere. Amen.

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

From 1 Peter 2: *(The Message)*
So clean house! Make a clean sweep of malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. You've had a taste of God. Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of God's pure kindness. Then you'll grow up mature and whole in God.

The goal that Peter presented his readers in this part of his epistle is found in the final sentence: to 'grow up mature and whole in God.'

The goal is not to prove that we are righteous or necessarily filled with piety. The goal is not to produce evidence that we are somehow better than others, or morally superior because we have some inside knowledge or a closer personal relationship with Christ. No, here, the goal is plain: to grow up and become mature and whole in God.

If that is the goal, then what is the means by which this goal might be attained? The answer is found in the sentence that precedes the last: 'drink deep of God's pure kindness.' Peter asserted that it is in becoming more convinced of God's ultimate kindness in life that leads to growth, maturity, and wholeness in us as we drink deeply from that kindness. This is certainly something that we all should hear and consider.

The type of living that Peter recommended is not something that comes easily to us. It requires real sacrifice. In order to mature in the kindness of God, we must sacrifice some of those things that come to us, as it were, naturally. We must learn to let go of old grudges, forsake opportunities for vengeance, and learn that the quality of life is based more on kindness and grace rather than relentlessly seeking to 'outwit' or 'outdo' someone else. These are the sacrifices that we must make in this season of Advent and in every season, if we wish to grow, mature, and be made whole.

I think that this is exactly what Peter means in the opening of the simple little passage: 'So clean house!' It is not someone else's house we should seek to clean, but rather our own. Too often we are guilty at looking at others and thinking ourselves at least better or more spiritual or more loving than those others. No matter how we try to sugar-coat it, we are merely demonstrating our immaturity and our resistance to obey God's call to kindness when we do such things.

So, during this holy season, let us all consider what Peter has called his readers and all of us to do: Clean house and learn from the kindness of God how to really live. Thanks be to God.

Prayer for the Day: (From a prayer by Karl Barth)
Lord, our God, in your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you have made us your children. Be now among us and instruct us. Amen.

Wednesday, December 11, 2024

From 1 Peter 1: *(The Message)*
So, roll up your sleeves, get your head in the game, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then - you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

Eugene Peterson's translation of this particular passage is one of the reasons that I resonate so much with this great theological mind. Peterson makes it clear in this interpretive work that he understands the New Testament concept of holiness to be about something unconventional and unanticipated – unexpected and maybe even lusty.

Holiness, in biblical terms, is closer to passion than it is cold, solid, rule-following. The British writer, turned amateur theologian, G.K. Chesterton said: **Chastity does not mean abstention from sexual wrong; it means something flaming, like Joan of Arc.**

The above passage is not necessarily about chastity, but it is about holiness and holiness is, like passion, 'nothing but a burning light.' Holiness is related to Chesterton's quote in that it is an expression of a passionate embrace of God's will in this world. Being holy, in terms of the epistle writer, is to be passionate about what God is doing in this world in Jesus Christ.

I read the bible often, I tries to read it right
And far as I could understand, it's nuthin' but a burnin' light

I used the phrase 'nothing but a burning light' because I think this best explains what both Chesterton and the Canadian singer, Bruce Cockburn quoted above, meant about being embraced by purposes of God in life. We are called to be passionate about the things of God; to be wholly engaged in the pursuit of such things as justice, mercy, and humility. We become, in essence, 'nothing but a burning light.'

Peterson, for whom I am heavily indebted for this devotion, concludes his sermon on this text thusly: **For holy living is a 'flaming thing' in Chesterton's phrase. We can discard the gloomy associations that have collected like cobwebs around [holiness] and embrace it like Peter himself did – with a lusty exuberance, with an enthusiasm of free adventure.**

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship*)
God of creation, open our hearts that Christ, the King of glory, may enter and rule our lives. Amen.

Thursday, December 12, 2024

From 1 Timothy 2: *(The Message)*
The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Savior God wants us to live.

At the heart of the Christian life is prayer. We don't always know what to pray or even how to pray, but we know that we are called, as a people, to pray … especially for others.

I wish I had read this particular translation earlier this week. A member of the community, who often seeks assistance and solace from us at FPC, came to my office and rather plaintively laid out his concerns that he wasn't 'praying rightly'. I attempted to assure him that whatever he was praying and in whatever form his prayers were taking, he was doing what God calls us to do. The Peterson translation of this text makes it much clearer, I fear, was able to do for the poor man.

The writer of this epistle (it may or may not have been Paul), is clear that we are called to do is to pray … to pray in whatever manner that is comfortable for us, but to pray. The scope of our prayer, for the most part, is for others – including those in positions of authority in civic matters. This particular set of folks may not be personally or intimately known to us, yet the writer encourages us to pray for them. In short, we are called to pray for even those whom we have no idea what their challenges, difficulties, or joys may be. Our concern, according to the text, is to pray.

If that is the case (and indeed, it is!), then we are to pray for others without knowledge of particular concerns or joys. We are called to pray even if we do not fully know what we are praying for. We are called to pray because we believe that we are heard by God, who certainly knows the joys and concerns of the subjects of our prayers.

Eugene Peterson spoke cogently about such things in a sermon on this text: **God is good at dealing with people like us, people who don't pray very well. He knows how to listen to us. He knows how to respond to us. He knows how to help us, and since that's true, start there. That's where God wants us to begin so he can begin with us. First of all, pray.**

Peterson is right: start there – firstly pray -- and trust God to respond according to his will.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship*)
God of creation, open our hearts that Christ, the King of glory, may enter and rule our lives. Amen.

Friday, December 13, 2024

From 1 Peter 2: *(The Message)*
This is the kind of life you've been invited into, the kind of life Christ lived. He suffered everything that came his way so you would know that it could be done, and also know how to do it, step-by-step. … He used his servant body to carry our sins to the Cross so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way. His wounds became your healing. You were lost sheep with no idea who you were or where you were going. Now you're named and kept for good by the Shepherd of your souls.

Service is at the heart of the Christian expression of life. We are called to serve others in this life as an expression of our faith, an imitation of Christ, but also as an expression of our humanity, created by God as such.

I find great theological instruction and support in the words of a hymn from our own hymnal: 'Will You Let Me Be Your Servant', written by Richard Gillard. Here are few lines:

Will you let me be your servant?
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant too

We are pilgrims on the journey
We are travellers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night time of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through

Sometimes a hymn provides greater depth than anything else that might be written at the end of a devotion!

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)
Mighty God, fill me with an over-flowing ocean of compassion, the reign of love my motive, the law of love my rule. Amen.

Saturday, December 14, 2024

From 1 John 4: *(The Message)*
God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First, we were loved, now we love. He loved us, first.

Early in his sermon on this text, Peterson said: **Every god known to humankind had been a tyrant – capricious, willful, and terrifying. … And then Christ came and not only demonstrated that God loved but also exhibited a new kind of love. It was a new event in human life, and the early Christians saw it as the crucial event in their lives. They dated everything from the time when God first loved them. God loved, and history progressed from there.**

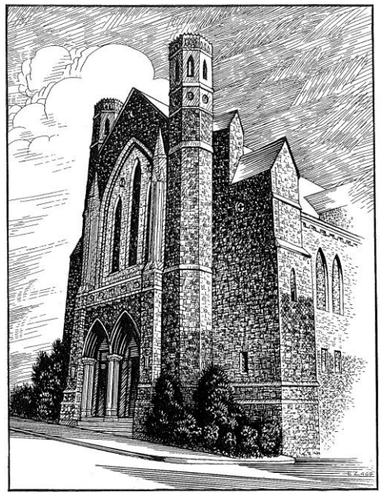
This is the amazingly unexpected nature of the gospel: God first loved us. Conventionally, humankind believes and operates upon a quid-pro-quo basis. Put bluntly: 'You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.' We shouldn't be surprised that people would enlarge such conventional thinking to apply it to the behavior of God. Since we act in this manner, surely God must as well. At least that is what many folks think.

However, the good news of God's activity in this world in Jesus Christ changes the landscape if we have ears to hears and eyes to see. It is God who initiates love, not us. The scriptures proclaim that it is God who first loves, and we love in response. God does not love us because we have loved him; rather we love because God has first loved!

This is at the heart of the Reformed doctrine of predestination: that God has acted first upon our lives. Peterson describes this in a paragraph about Augustine's realization of this that led to his conversion to the faith: **Before he was righteous, God loved him, planned his salvation, and poured grace into his life. God was previous to him.**

As we look to the return of Christ, let us not fear the approach of the final judgment. The testimony of scripture assures that us that God is love AND that God first loved us. We have nothing to fear from the love of God.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)
Mighty God, fill me with an over-flowing ocean of compassion, the reign of love my motive, the law of love my rule. Amen.



The Third Week of Advent

Sunday, December 15, 2024

From Colossians 1: *(The Message)*
We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—*everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

Paul is convinced of the centrality of the Son of God in all of life, not just in the salvific work of God amongst us sinners, but amid all creation.

Far too often, we hear that the Son was sent into the world as an 'emergency' operation of God in order to save humanity. The thinking goes a bit like this: God made everything good; humanity revolted and sinned. God attempted a series of 'dead-ends' to reclaim humanity: the great flood, the appointment of a people in the person of Abraham, the establishment of a nation in the form of Israel, the sending of kings and prophets and yet nothing worked. In the end, God was forced to send his Son. This, however, is not the biblical view at all. Jesus was no afterthought but was and is absolutely integral to human life. This understanding derived from the biblical witness is called the Doctrine of the Pre-existent Christ.

Peterson offered an engaging and faithful explanation of this doctrine in a sermon on our text: **Christ is not afterthought. He is not a kind of emergency measure designed to fix things up after the original plan goes wrong. He is not a kind of cosmic fireman called in a panic to try to keep the house (the world) from burning up. He is there from the beginning. The Christian gospel is an original plan, not an emergency provision. And that means, you see, that we need Christ simply because we are creatures, not because we are sinners. We are sinners, so we need him all the more. But before we were sinners, Christ was there, the 'image of the invisible God,' the evidence that God's first word was a word of love and grace bringing all creation into fellowship.**

As we await the final consummation of God's action in creation in the return of Christ, let us remember that before we ever realized our need for Christ, Christ was already there and even if we never realize this need, still Christ is always there …

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)
O Lord Jesus, come to me. O Divine Spirit, rest upon me. O Holy Father, look on me in mercy for the sake of the well-beloved. Amen.

Monday, December 16, 2024

From Romans 12: *(The Message)*

So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

The passage for today has been interpreted by two of my favorite theologians: Eugene Peterson and Karl Barth. I couldn't decide which direction to go, so I thought I would just offer you their thoughts unedited and hopefully profitable! First Peterson and then Barth …

Worship is not a religious performance we sit back and enjoy but an act in which we participate. As we participate, we are changed. Because our lethargy constantly threatens to turn us into mere spectators, it is necessary to emphasize the active part we play in worship: singing hymns with interest and enthusiasm, praying silently as the leader of worship prays and responding audibly with an affirmative 'Amen,' bringing our offerings as an act of sacrifice and dedication, listening to scripture and sermon to hear God's Word spoken to our condition. There must be a personal commitment to the act of worship for it to be alive. … We must never forget that God is more active in worship than we could ever be. And in contrast to ours, which is all response, his action is creative and formative. … As we worship, God acts among us and shapes our lives.

A wide reading of contemporary secular literature – especially of newspapers! – is therefore recommended to anyone desirous of understanding the Epistle to the Romans. If our thinking is not to be pseudo-thinking, we must think about life, we must penetrate its hidden corners, and steadily refuse to treat anything – however trivial or disgusting it may seem to be – as irrelevant. To be sincere, our thought must share in the tension of human life, in its criss-cross lines, and in its kaleidoscopic movements. And life is neither simple, nor straightforward, nor obvious. Things are simple and straightforward and obvious only when they are detached from their context and then treated superficially. The reality to which life bears witness must be disclosed in the deep things of all observable phenomena, in their whole context …

The common denominator between the two: God is with us whether in the sanctuary or in the street …

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

O Lord Jesus, come to me. O Divine Spirit, rest upon me. O Holy Father, look on me in mercy for the sake of the well-beloved. Amen.

Tuesday, December 17, 2024

From Colossians 2: *(The Message)*

Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.

Paul dealt with real problems, in real churches composed of real people. Paul was convinced, however, that though these realities were as concrete and obvious as other organizations, groupings, and gatherings of people, he was just as convinced that Christ was there with them … in them. And they were, most importantly, in Christ.

Too often folks think of faith or the Christian religion as something otherworldly. You can't really blame them, for there is enough talk around about heavenly visions, abstinence from the 'stain of the world,' and being somehow Godly minded as being equated with caring little for this world and this life. That is certainly the way some folks live their Christian life … or more accurately, the way they merely exist in their faith.

However, a biblical understanding of the Christian life, as conveyed to us by Paul in many of his letters, is a life that is lived in the heart of real life, accompanied, supported, and guided by the presence of the living God in Jesus Christ in our midst. Real people, living a real life in the world which God has made for which Jesus died.

I think that Eugene Peterson would have been in agreement with this assessment when he wrote: **Christians, then, are simultaneously 'in Christ' and 'at Colossae.' They are in Christ participating in the plans of God for their lives, open upward to grace; and they are in Colossae with their feet on the ground, living as creatures in a world God created and making no attempt to escape it. Their being 'in Christ' does not make them into mystical, heavenly-minded recluses who have nothing to do with the world. But at the same time, their living 'at Colossae' cannot be constituted as any kind of adequate existence in itself. No, it is precisely because you live in Colossae that you need to be in Christ. The Christian's life is open in both directions.**

We, as followers of Jesus Christ, are just that: open in both directions. We are open to what God is doing in Jesus Christ both in ourselves and in the world we inhabit. We are called to join in with God's purpose in this world and in the lives of others and ourselves. We are called to live fully: fully in Christ and fully in Colossae (or wherever we reside!).

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

Father of mercies may the Holy Spirit confirm my trust in thy promised help, and let me walk humbly in dependence upon thee, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

From Colossians 3: *(The Message)*

So, if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. … And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. … So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.

The Christian faith must be lived if it is to be genuine. We can talk about what we believe until we are blue in the face, but it really doesn't matter until it has affected the very core of our being, the very manner of our living.

This is not about avoiding hypocrisy; we should be motivated to live in a manner reflective of what we believe because we know it to be only right. Our hearts must be converted to the worthiness of this Jesus-way to live before we could ever begin to exhibit such grace and love and mercy in the public square or in the privacy of our own relationships with others. The challenge of the Christian faith is that it involves our daily life rather than just one morning a week.

Peterson, in a sermon on this text, put it this way: **So, we must finally talk about Christ in our ordinary lives; we need to think about Christ in our conduct. For if he doesn't get finally into our conduct, observers will begin raising serious doubts whether he even exists at all. And we ourselves, in all honesty, will not be**

satisfied for long with talking and imagining a doctrine that doesn't filter into the ordinariness of our living.

Peterson is correct in his assessment that we can't fool others with our conduct and even more so, we can't fool ourselves. We know what we think about faith and life and if we really don't believe that God has acted in Jesus Christ FOR us and NOT AGAINST us, then we will act accordingly. However, if our hearts and minds are convinced of God's activity in Jesus Christ for us and for the world, our conduct, bit by bit, will eventually demonstrate that belief … no matter how imperfectly.

Of course, such conduct does not really come naturally to us. It takes time and practice. This is one of the purposes of the church: that we might begin to practice living as if Christ were really with us and for us. We must practice it again and again, each and every Sunday, before we can really live it with any authenticity in the world. And it takes a lifetime to develop fully, but it is worth the lifetime's effort. Thanks be to God.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Valley of Vision*)
Father of mercies may the Holy Spirit confirm my trust in thy promised help, and let me walk humbly in dependence upon thee, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Thursday, December 19, 2024

From Mark 10: *(The Message)*
Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom." *That* got their attention. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked. Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."

The story is well-known. Jesus is about to set out on a journey when a rich young man confronts him with a question of dire concern: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' After some discourse back and forth, Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

The problem is not that the young man was wealthy, but rather in his belief that eternal life was something he could manage to achieve. In his defense, he made a point that he had kept all the commandments. Jesus knew that this young man thought eternal life was something to be earned, so Jesus gave him a tremendously difficult task to prove that no one is capable of earning eternal life. The testimony of Jesus of Nazareth all through the gospels is that what God grants to his creation, God gives not in response to what has been earned, but rather in response to the abundance that is in God himself.

Eugene Peterson rendered this view in his translation of this text: **"Then who has any chance at all?" they asked. Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."**

Earlier in his pastoral career, Peterson had preached on this very text, saying: **Christian living does not mean the achievement of every human potential but the breaking open of our lives in the activity of God. Eternal life is not the culmination of our possibilities but the invasion of God's grace. By our actions we can be moral and ethical and rich, but we cannot become gods. But God can become human – he did it in Jesus, and he continues to do so in the life of grace in the Christian. He invades our lives in word and sacrament and brings a genuine love, a rational meaning, and an eternal destiny.**

It is by the 'breaking open of our lives in the activity of God' that he graciously grants us an eternal destiny, nothing that we have done, but all that God has done.

Prayer for the Day: (From *The Book of Common Worship*)
Lord Jesus Christ, you are our way to life, justice, and peace. In you we are called to find our unity. Come into the brokenness of our lives and our land with your healing love. Amen.

Friday, December 20, 2024

From Mark 8: *(The Message)*
Jesus and his disciples headed out for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they walked, he asked, "Who do the people say I am?"

"Some say 'John the Baptizer,'" they said. "Others say 'Elijah.' Still others say, 'one of the prophets.'"

He then asked, "And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?" Peter gave the answer: "You are the Christ, the Messiah."

I found Peterson's sermon on this important text from the Gospel of Mark quite instructive. Here's some of what he said: **'Who do you say that I am?' 'You are the Christ.' God asks. We respond. When we get to the center of things, we find that it is God who asks that questions and we who make the responses. God questions, and we answer.**

The overwhelming witness of scripture is represented in Peterson's thoughts here. It is God who initiates all things in life: creation, providence, relationship, love … We are respondents to God's action in the world. We do not initiate a relationship with God, God has already established a relationship in his work of creation, providence, and redemption. We respond.

A bit further in the sermon, Peterson focused in on a truth about all this: **Yet how many times have you heard the statement, 'Christ is the answer'? That is wrong. Christ is the questioner. To say that Christ is the answer may seem like a harmless inaccuracy, but it is a massive mistake. It leads people to supposing that the main thing in life is getting answers to their questions and that if they get them, everything will be fine. They treat Christ like the information desk at an airport terminal; they run up breathlessly to ask a question and then run on to their next flight or appointment.**

Christ is no commodity that we acquire in life; nor is he an information source that we consult and then move on to our own agendas for life. Christ comes to us and by the manner of his gracious life, he questions our living and what we hold important in this life. Christ comes to us, and we respond. It makes all the difference in the meaning of our life just how we respond.

Peterson had more to say about such things: **God speaks. We answer. Our answer is an act of adoration. We wait before God, respond to the word of God, and sink ourselves into the immensity of God. … Life is not a matter of explaining or labeling. Life is being in the presence of God – a living personal God is the single great reality of our existence. We are most alive, most ourselves when we are personally responsive to him.**

That pretty much says it all! May we all respond to the One who initiates, questions, and calls …

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year C*)
Help me to be inspired and trusting in you as you guide my faithful living even in places that I cannot imagine. Amen.

Saturday, December 21, 2024

From Colossians 3: *(The Message)*
Servants, do what you're told by your earthly masters. And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't cover up bad work.

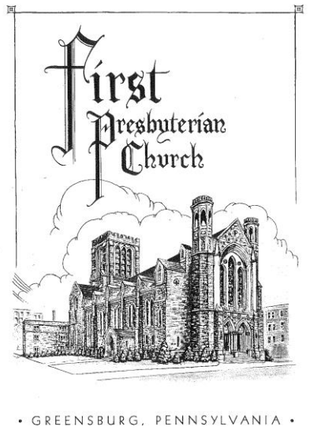
Dorothy Sayers, who wrote both detective stories and theological texts, took to task the prevalent view that our work of faith is limited to churchly activities: **The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church SHOULD be telling him is this: that the very first demand his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. Church, by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly – but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were by the same hand that made heaven and earth.**

The work of faith is not a specialized, religious act, but rather the very manner in which we live the life that God has given us in every aspect of life. In this life, we are graced by the love of God in Jesus Christ, and we must respond with our whole selves in every aspect in which we live. We dare not compartmentalize our faith to just what we do on a Sunday morning for an hour or so, but rather what we do on a dreary Tuesday afternoon as well.

Eugene Peterson, in a sermon on this text, said this: **The message of Christ was that the reality of God could and did become realized specifically in the everyday, material, twenty-four-hour-a-day world in which each person lives. There is no secret club that you must get into to experience God; there is no special vocation that you must join to do his work. He is everywhere, and he wills to become visible and manifest in both people and things. If someone says that she can serve God better as chair of a church committee than doing her job at work, she is denying the whole purpose of Christ for our lives, which among other things can be stated as 'Christ in our work.'**

I think both Sayers and Peterson are worthy of a re-read before we close today's devotion …

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year C*)
Help me to be inspired and trusting in you as you guide my faithful living even in places that I cannot imagine. Amen.



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 22, 2024

From Hebrews 1: *(The Message)*
Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words!

Peterson opens his sermon on this text with the following: **Christmas is the celebration of a conclusion. A baby who cannot yet talk is the divine Word of God spoken to humankind. A child lying in a manger on a dark night in a poor town completes thousands of years of sacred history. Mary's firstborn is God's last word.**

Most folks think of Christmas as celebrating or announcing a beginning: a birth! Every culture announces the birth of a child in some form. It's universally seen as a very good thing: the birth of a child … a new beginning in the midst of this old life.

Christmas and the first advent of the Son of God is truly a completion. It is the final piece of the revelation of God's activity in the world. Final not in the sense that all this is over and done, but rather final as in ultimate. In Jesus Christ, it is God who speaks to us in an ultimate fashion. Christ is not just the Word of God to us; he is the final word as well. There is nothing else to be said; nothing more to be addressed to the human situation – Jesus is the last word.

In Jesus Christ we see God fully and completely for us and for this world. God has visited our desertion not with vengeance, but with a forgiveness and mercy born of his action on our behalf in Christ. Grace has been delivered to this world where we had supplied only self-centered and shallow representations of life.

The great gift that we are about to celebrate liturgically in a few days is not so much a beginning but rather a completion. In the birth of this child, God spoke clearly and decisively to our situation – the fix that we were in. We had deserted God and the ways of God, but God had not given up on his creation. Through a long sacred history of revelation of his very self, God culminates it in the appearance of the Christ-child, God for us given in hope and as the very way of our salvation. This then, is the final word of God … Jesus himself.

Prayer for the Day: (From *Daily Feast, Year C*)
Help me to be inspired and trusting in you as you guide my faithful living even in places that I cannot imagine. Amen.

Monday, December 23, 2024

From 2 Corinthians 3: *(The Message)*
They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so, we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, profoundly wrote: 'The only constant in life is change.' And yet, though this truth has been recognized about human life for at least 2500 years, still change is a difficult element of life for most of us. We don't seem to like change.

Yet, at the heart of the gospel is the promise of change. God does not come to us in Jesus Christ in order to bless the status quo of human achievement or as some kind of reward for humanity's excellent performance of God's will and purposes. Quite the opposite: God comes to us in Jesus Christ to rescue us from ourselves and the condition of distance and estrangement that we have created.

The gospel holds the promise of a changed and changing life in Jesus Christ. God sent his Son into this world so that this estrangement, this self-induced distance from God on our part, ends and something new occurs. Change happens. Eugene Peterson addresses this in the sermon he delivered on this text: **Change is part of the gospel. The Christian life is not something we are handed already complete. … the gospel is inserted into our life like leaven in a loaf of bread dough and initiates a slow but inevitable process of expansion and rising.**

The change in life that the gospel brings us is not immediate nor thorough. It takes time to germinate within our heart and life like a seed in the soil of the garden or the leaven in the baking dough. Such slow alteration tends to frustrate people as much as the quick change of the daily news.

Advent is finally about such slow change. God has acted in Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection and the world is still grappling with this change. Advent reminds us that all creation has been redeemed, but we are moving toward that redemption rather than being immediate inheritors of its action. So, as the advent of Christ dawns, lift up your heads and your hearts and know: Change has happened, change is happening and change will come … in God's time.

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.

Tuesday, December 24, 2024 – Christmas Eve

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 hear 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.

Wednesday, December 25, Christmas Day 2024

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.

Join us in Worship during Advent & on Christmas Eve 2024

Sundays in Advent (10:00 a.m.):

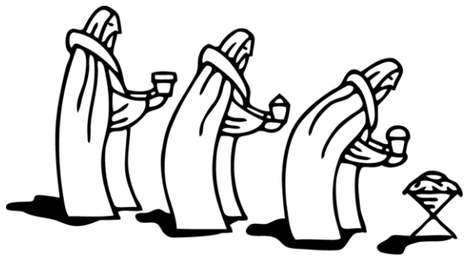
December 1 - '*Near*' - Communion Service
December 8 - '*In Time & Space*'
December 15 – '*Good News*'
December 22 – '*The Magnificat*

Wednesdays in Advent (Dec. 4, 11, & 18) – 7:00 p.m. – The Chapel

Christmas Eve, Tuesday, December 24:

5:00 PM – Children's Service in the Sanctuary
Join us for a simple expression of worship and adoration of the arrival of the Christ Child. God's children of all ages will delight in this worship experience!

9:00 PM – A Festival of Lessons and Carols & Communion
Patterned after the well-known service that originated at Kings College Chapel in Cambridge, England, this service takes place in the sanctuary and includes the celebration of Communion.



A Gift for the King
November 10 – December 31

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

At the birth of Jesus Christ, it is said the Magi came bearing gifts for the Christ child. This tradition has contributed to the origins of our current traditions of gift-giving at Christmas time. As children, we experienced great joy in receiving gifts on Christmas morning; as adults, we have grown to experience even greater joy in giving!

During this season, the Session of our church is asking that you prayerfully consider giving an additional gift to help our church meet the budget. Currently, we are projecting a shortfall for 2024 that tops $100,000. The results of such a shortfall can be avoided if we all commit together to follow the example of the Magi (the wise men) and offer an additional, over-and-above the pledge giving during the final weeks of this calendar year.

However, we have great news of a challenge matching pledge to this effort! A member of our congregation has pledged to match, dollar for dollar, (up to $50,000) the amount we raise through this special effort! This is amazing generosity that certainly is in keeping with fulfilling God's call upon our lives to share our resources for the sake of Christ's church in the world.

$100,000 is a big number. An old adage is remembered: "An elephant is best eaten in small bites!" Together, with God's help, we can retire this large deficit and preserve some of the reserves that the church has received from donors in the past. Only, we need YOUR help.

Won't you consider giving an extra amount during this season by marking your check 'Gift for the King' or donating through the electronic giving app? We ask you to prayerfully consider it.

On behalf of the Session,

The 2024 Stewardship Committee: David Cook, III & Jeff Hite, co-chairs; Steve Ross, Linda Dickson, Jaci Runco, and David Kemp; Dr. Martin R. Ankrum (ex officio)

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First Presbyterian Church
300 South Main Street – P.O. Box 1038
Greensburg, Pennsylvania 15601

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
300 SOUTH MAIN STREET
GREENSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2024

AMAZINGLY UNEXPECTED …

THE REV. DR. MARTIN R. ANKRUM