

GREATER THAN OUR EXPECTATIONS

By Brian Mock

Matthew 11:2-11

So what exactly is going through John's head when he requests his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah? Is this the same John that was told by God "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17) and then later baptize Jesus? It is indeed. At this time in John's life, he has been imprisoned and we know he will later be put to death by Herod. Not a good situation. Could it be possible that like many Jews, John the Baptist had expectations of a different kind of Messiah? One that would deliver a worldly solution to the problem? Enter mighty Jesus the Warrior who will perish all enemies of Israel – including Herod.

We have the benefit of knowing how the events unfolded during Jesus' time on earth – John did not. How is John to know God's plan and in the meantime not insert his own narrative? We know Jesus was not put here to solve worldly problems with worldly solutions but to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to live in us. Does John's misplaced expectation diminish Jesus' regard for him? Absolutely not. Jesus proclaims, "I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist."

As I reflect on this passage it helps me understand that even the mightiest of us cannot resist seeing God as we want to and letting our expectations take hold. After all – we are wonderfully human and with that we're given two incredible gifts (1) the holy spirit that lives within us and (2) free will. I pray that God will give us grace and peace when his plans deviate from our worldly vision and understanding.

FROM TEARS TO JOY

By Liz McKee

Psalm 126

Do great things come to us without tears? Of course, they do. However, it is often through our tears that we can see the path God has chosen for us. When you think about it, without the sorrow of Christ's crucifixion, we would not experience the joy of the resurrection. When I think of the Jews returning to Jerusalem following their long exile in Babylon, it reminds me that even in hard times, brighter days are coming. If we did not experience times of sorrow, would moments of joy be as meaningful? Joy is mentioned three times in Psalm 126. Although I have never been held captive in a foreign land, I do not think it would make me joyful. I would feel scared, lonely, and hopeless – the opposite of joy.

While reading this Psalm, I asked myself two questions: Do my friends and neighbors know what God has done for me? Do I share the wonder of God's grace on a regular basis? Sadly, and admittedly, I do neither as often as I should. There is great joy in this season of Advent as we await the birth of Jesus. It is good to celebrate that joy. To those of you who are grieving or feel lonely or isolated, please remember that God sees you no matter where you are on the spectrum of happiness. Remember the love of God and allow it to give you joy and strength.

“They that sow with tears shall reap with songs of joy.”

- Psalm 126:5

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

By Ryan Eves

Isaiah 11:1-10

For Advent each year, we wrap books for our girls to unwrap each night. Every night, a different tale of the joy and meaning of Christmas.

One of the books our girls love is *The Littlest Watchman*. It's a story of a young boy who's charged with watching the stump of Jesse (in this case a literal stump) to alert the people when the new growth appears.

The young boy isn't a fan of his job. His friends are shepherds, and he longs to do something that has more purpose than staring at an old stump. The story will be familiar as characters we know well make appearances as the boy watches the stump. Of course, the tale ends with a green shoot rising from the dead wood. The boy runs to tell his father and finds him with Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus, the long-awaited king.

Isaiah 11:1-10 describes a beautiful, peaceful kingdom where a child will lead the way. While the story of the watchmen and the stump can't be found in our holy scriptures, it demonstrates perfectly the way we can see the Kingdom of God through children's eyes.

It's a little bit boring at times and it's hard to understand all the deep mysteries of waiting.

*"Can we get to the presents already?"
"Why does Christmas take so long to come?"
"Do I have to get all dressed up for church?"*

As an adult (most of the time), I have trouble waiting for the peaceful kingdom to arrive. I long for conflict and strife to end. Sometimes I find myself staring at my Bible just wishing for a miracle.

And then I return to the beginning words of the 11th chapter of Isaiah. There's work to be done to bring God's peaceful kingdom to fruition on earth as it is in Heaven.

So, as we wait patiently or impatiently for the coming of Christ, may we ponder how we might act righteously towards the poor, build equity for the meek and speak truth to all the earth.

In God's unending grace and provision, Amen.

DROPPING KEYS

By Linda Robinson

Psalm 146:5-10

Psalm 146: 5-10 is packed with powerful images of a just and merciful God who models for us what our lives should represent. As the daughter of a judge, I am drawn to verse 7: “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free...”

After the death of my parents in 2015, a young lawyer in my south Mississippi hometown revealed that he had been given a copy of my father’s 1951 closing argument in one of his first trials where he was appointed to represent a young black woman who shot a young white man. A portion reads as follows:

“We are patriotic people – proud of our past and to deny this Defendant the full measure of her rights and the complete protection of our constitution would bring dishonor to our flag, disrespect for the law, and desecration to the grave of every fighting man who has paid the supreme sacrifice to guarantee such rights even to this Defendant...Your Honor, this is your moment to decide whether to grow old stooped trying to stay on the level of people who want you to be one of them... or to stand erect and have them look up to you with respect for having known and followed the high road.”

Such is our choice. God makes the decision clear. I keep the following poem from a 14th century Sufi poet named Hafiz on my classroom wall:

“The small man builds cages for everyone he knows, while the sage, who has to duck his head when the moon is low, keeps dropping keys all night long for the beautiful rowdy prisoners.”

So this Advent, let us do justice, love mercy, walk humbly, and drop keys.

BLOOMING IN THE DESERT

By Nan Hannah

Isaiah 35:1-10

“**T**he desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom.”
– Isaiah 35:1 (NIV)

In the Spring of 2013, I finally gave myself permission to travel and unplug from the world. My mother had moved into a memory care unit having held out until Dad finished his earthly journey, which included almost five years with dementia. I picked the “red rock” parks of western Colorado and southern Utah for a week in God’s creation to re-energize and prepare for Mom’s long, slow decline.

As I drove through and hiked around the high desert moonscapes, I became fascinated by the signs of life in the inhospitable lands. I have photograph after photograph of trees gaining a foothold in the tiniest crevices and growing towards the sun. I have photographs of flowers blooming in the desert.

As we travel through Advent and journey towards Bethlehem, I reflect upon that trip. As was promised in Isaiah 35:1, God sent his son to shine the light and fulfill the promise of love and life even in the harshest environments. In uncertain times such as those in which we live, be mindful and seek out those signs of God’s enduring love. It might be a flower or a tree in the most unlikely location.

GOOD NEWS!

By Wynn Dorsett

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

As in the time of the prophet Isaiah, we wait for good news in the midst of a troubled world. In Isaiah 61, the prophet proclaims the Lord's favor and promises a wonderful list of encouragements to his people who have suffered terribly through a time of exile.

This good news includes comfort to the broken-hearted, beauty instead of ashes, praise instead of despair, righteousness, justice, and salvation. The poetic language goes on to proclaim renewal, restoration, release, reward, rejoicing, replanting and resounding songs of praise.

Our Glory to God hymnal lists no less than 19 hymns that make reference to these themes in Isaiah 61 (see page 982 in the scriptural index).

In Luke 4:18, Jesus reiterates these promises from Isaiah as he announces his ministry of preaching and healing. Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and liberation from sin and its consequences.

Many of our Advent hymns echo these themes. One of my favorites is Hymn #82...

Come thou long-expected Jesus. Born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Good news indeed!

PEACE WHICH SURPASSES UNDERSTANDING

By Bill White

Philippians 4:4-7

This is one of my favorite passages and I reflect on it often, probably because it's my nature to be somewhat anxious at times. The last three years have given most if not all of us plenty to be anxious about. Paul was speaking to the people of Philippi but could have just as easily been speaking to us. His words were an aspiration to growing closer to God and to a greater maturity.

We often do not have answers for why things happen, and I have never heard a perfect answer as to why bad things happen to good people. One thing that is true is that God is our rock and wants us to lean on Him. The roads we travel can be difficult; I think Paul understood this and is giving advice as to how we should navigate such roads. This vision transformed Paul's life and his hope is that it would transform the lives of others. Perhaps Paul is also saying that we need to remember how much God has done for us including the blessings that we have. If we keep that in mind and take our petitions to Him, we will have a Peace only He can provide.