

PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD

By Ray Watson

Matthew 3:1-12

As someone who was in high school in the 1970s, my initial thought when I hear this title is the opening song to the musical *Godspell*, which is based on the Gospel of Matthew. I imagine John the Baptist blowing a horn, blowing a whistle, etc. then singing without musical accompaniment “Pre-e-e-pare Ye the Way of the Lord” four times as people pass by doing their normal activities. Gradually a small group hear John’s call and follow him and are baptized. *Godspell* ends with a combination of two songs sung together “Long Live God” and “Prepare Ye.”

Preparation comes in many forms, usually preparation for a test, a meeting, a party, a game or some other type of short-term activity. Advent preparation is a different form of preparation. Former WMPC Pastor Art Ross would talk about “human *beings*” versus “human *doings*.” Advent preparation is about *being*, not doing. Doing is easier – shopping lists completed, assignments of who brings what to the group dinner, which events get attended, who gets visited, etc. Being means slowing down, less doing, more reflections on various aspects of life, relationships, health, and the popular “work-life balance” debate. Reflection also means time spent on those who are not gathered, either through death or by separations and distances that involve more than just miles.

Advent preparation requires that we, as Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God!” Advent preparation cannot be checked off the list and on to the next item. Advent preparation involves wondering what it means, individually and as a congregation, that the “Kingdom of God has come near.” What does it mean to live here and now in the Kingdom of God not just as if it were some future event?

WE NEED A HERO

By DeLana Anderson

Isaiah 12:2-6

“I need a hero. He’s gotta be sure, and it’s gotta be soon, and he’s gotta be larger than life.” I’m not sure why I read Isaiah 12:2-6 and a Bonnie Tyler song comes to mind. We like our heroes to be strong, to swoop in and save the day, that is why Marvel and superhero movies are so popular. A vulnerable infant born in a manger is not what was expected to save humankind, but that is indeed what happens.

Not unlike the people of Judah, our world can be scary, and we face uncertainties. We turn on the news and hear of gun violence in schools and even here in our own beloved city. We know and love people who are dealing with illness, with loss, and we pray for them but feel helpless. We take food to food banks, we support causes that hope to eliminate homelessness, but sometimes it seems it will never all be done. However, here in Isaiah we are told, we are not alone. God is our salvation. Trust and do not be afraid, because God is with us. He comforts us and shows up in the most unexpected ways. Whether it is the volunteer at the food bank, the friend that listens and gives us hope, the parents who stand up against gun violence, God is showing up on our behalf.

I think of a night I was driving home from Roanoke, VA. My flight, along with all other flights on the East coast had been grounded due to fog. I decided to rent a car and drive home because I was anxious to make it back to my family. It was late, I did not have GPS and my phone was almost dead. I was anxious and relying on my very poor sense of direction, I prayed. I must have seen 10 shooting stars that cold dark night. God was with me. When these moments happen, you can just feel it and, yes, we want to sing God’s praises. We are a people who choose to trust God. As we light the Advent candles each week, we know our hero is coming. He comes into the world humble and vulnerable. His very existence angers those in power. It doesn’t matter, he comes anyway, and, yes, the infant is larger than this life.

While we wait for the birth, let us continue to trust that it will happen. Let us sing “Joy to the World” loudly on Christmas Eve. Let us exalt the Christ Child. Let us sing our praises for the birth that changes the world.

ACT ON JOY

By Karl Rectanus

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The Book of Zephaniah speaks vigorously about the day of the Lord – a time of judgment and of restoration – but in this passage, he bridges a path from one's own personal joy to that warm feeling we often idealize during the holiday season, a shared reconciliation around the world.

First, we are encouraged to unashamedly and loudly pronounce our joy:

“Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!”

We are called to action – first through giving our joy a voice – and we know action is more powerful than a mere thought or feeling. By announcing our happiness, we both share that joy with others, and we amplify our own joy. Try it today... whether by yourself, or by sharing with someone you see, speak out loud any joy you feel today.

The verse goes on to reinforce that we should take action (“don’t let your hands hang limp”), just as our God (“a Mighty Warrior”) takes action on our behalf. We should not fear, but we should sing these songs and do these acts with the confidence and belief that our joy is not singular, nor is it felt in spite of others, but that it is and will be shared. That the gifts of our God are shared across nations, across the oppressed and shamed, and we will share in the restorative power of the Lord together.

Within a few verses, we are encouraged to not only sing loudly of our own happiness, but act on it, and feel confident that all of God’s people will share in that joy.

How blessed are we to feel joy, and to act on that joy today? As God does, we must first say it and then actively share it with others, regardless of their circumstance, situation or background.

STAY ALERT!

By Diane Britt

Mark 13:24-37

With both of my children involved in musical theatre, I self-identify as a “Drama Mama.” As I write this devotion, I am anxiously awaiting a cast list to be posted after my youngest child’s audition for the school play. I’m sure we’ve all been there— waiting for the tryout list, the job offer, the test results. While this situation is out of my hands, I’m still hopeful, and I am refreshing the theatre website A LOT.

Jesus’ apocalyptic teaching from Mark 13 is rather depressing as a whole, but today’s passage from verses 24-37 offers us some light. While the world may seem in chaos, we are still called to be hopeful and to stay alert. This is especially true during the waiting season of Advent when it is so easy to get caught up in the cards, parties and gifts, yet so hard to focus on the good news that Christ is coming.

In addition to “Beware, keep alert,” the NRSV version of verse 33 includes a footnote that indicates “other ancient authorities add ‘and pray.’” With that extra directive, I feel like today’s verses are calling us to action during our period of watchfulness. Not only should we eagerly await Christ’s coming, but we can help enact God’s Kingdom in the here and now. Eternal life doesn’t just have to be some future glimmer of hope—I think God wants us to experience God’s presence now and to share that peace with the world around us. Couldn’t we all use a little light in the midst of today’s news headlines and busyness?

More than just refreshing a web page, our actions of sharing Jesus’ compassion and God’s unconditional love can help us and those around us remember that there is still hope in the world.

Eternal God, during this season of Advent, help us to feel your presence as we await the Prince of Peace. Open our eyes to ways that we can contribute to your kingdom on earth. Amen.

LIVING IN UNITY AND HARMONY AS GOD'S HUMAN FAMILY

By Karen Fox

Romans 15:4-13

Following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, his conversion and spiritual transformation, the apostle Paul traveled extensively as instructed to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and peoples, Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) alike. Paul believed that to live according to the “Way” of Jesus, one must live by the Law of the Spirit, which is love for God and love for each other, especially concerned with care for the poor and oppressed, to bring about justice, peace and joy for all. In chapter 8 of his epistle to the Romans, where also is found the mantra we affirm, “In life and in death we belong to God,” Paul writes of the hope of salvation for the children of God. Here in chapter 15, he references passages of Old Testament scripture that show from the beginning of creation how God has been instructing and encouraging all to live in hope that yields all of humanity joined as one in peace.

May we in this season of Advent welcome one another as Christ welcomed all. In the spirit of Paul may we joyfully reach out to all whom we encounter, encourage hope, and strengthen belief through the power of the Holy Spirit. May we see and respect all people as beloved children of God. May we accept and live in unity and harmony as God's human family, abounding in HOPE, loving and serving one another as Jesus taught, lifting our voices as one, praising, glorifying and thanking God for the gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

By Tricia Willoughby

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

As I studied this passage, three verses began to guide my reflection: “rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

During the Advent season, it is easy to rejoice and pray and give thanks in the anticipation of this joyful time. But wait—the scripture says rejoice *always*, pray constantly and give thanks in all circumstances. That is a much harder assignment. In our human understanding, some days it seems like there are few reasons to rejoice. There are people dear to us who are sick, or grieving, or out of work or facing other adversity. Yet the scripture tells us to rejoice always. And prayers are easier when we are communicating our gratitude to God for our many blessings... but what about praying when we are struggling? Giving thanks is easy some days... but when we feel hopeless in our circumstances or events in the world, gratitude comes less easily.

Rejoicing, prayer and gratitude can be hard sometimes because we only understand God in a limited human way. We know and trust that God always provides for us. In spite of all the hurrying and rushing of daily life, we must find times to pause, to remind ourselves that God is steadfast in helping us do His will in the world—whether we understand it or not. And in those quiet times, we constantly find many reasons to rejoice and pray and give thanks.

As we consider this scripture and light the candles of Advent, I am reminded of a poem written by theologian Howard Thurman:

*“I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of love to inspire all my living
Candles that will burn all year long.”*

WAIT WITH PATIENCE

By Carolyn Younger

James 5:7-10

Don't you think that the phrase "be patient" is certainly relevant to us today? My own patience seems to be in short supply these days. I grew up with "snail-mail" but now I get impatient if an email takes more than a few seconds. When I need something and place an order for it, I expect it to be delivered by the next day, if not within a few hours time. I expect "Siri" to answer my questions immediately if not sooner. I want it and I want it now!

What is it to be patient? To be patient allows us to live a life of deferred gratification. And it does seem to be in short supply. In this chapter, James is addressing his 1st century Christian readers who are suffering under extreme oppression and persecution. He tells them to be patient and uses the example of a farmer who must have patience as he waits for his land to produce crops. For a farmer, the circumstances regarding the weather, the rain or the economy are uncontrollable. The farmer has no guarantees. But, he hopes, he plants, he waits in expectation. Why? Because he has learned to trust in the reliability of God to supply the needs for his crops. Patience, kindness, gentleness, and other fruits of the Holy Spirit could mature in our own lives if we would take the time (patience) to cultivate them.

To read these verses in the season of Advent is to take the time to pause, reflect and recognize where our lives are unprepared to simply wait to welcome Christ anew. If Christ can come once, teach us how to live, be crucified, resurrected, then ascended, Christ can surely come again. Are we ready for him? During this season of Advent, let's prepare to wait and do so patiently through prayers, words of encouragement and acts of kindness.