



ADVENT 2017

So What Do You Expect? Daily Readings

Week 1: Expect Goodness

Sunday, December 3

Expect Goodness by Reverend Bill Denham

Come back in time with me. Hear Burl Ives singing, *“He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.”*

I was probably five years old when I first heard this song. I was in a department store, Christmas shopping with my mother. The words struck home because I really wanted Santa to bring me an electric train for Christmas—a Lionel train with a switchbox to make the train go forward and backward and “smoke tablets.” You dropped those white aspirin-like tablets in the engine smokestack and they produced real smoke as the train chugged along. Yes, Santa was expecting me to be good. OK. I got that. But I had high expectations of him, too. If I were good, he was to do his part—deliver an electric train on Christmas Eve.

At that age it was hard for me to distinguish between Santa Claus and God. Often the two seemed to be one and the same. Certainly, God knew when I was sleeping or awake. He knew when I’d been bad or good. God knows everything. Right? Apparently, Santa did too. That was many years ago.

It’s now Christmas of 2017. I’m an adult. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I really should find it easy to expect goodness, especially during Advent. After all, I know that Jehovah God is about to do something spectacular. From the realms of glory, God is going to throw open the gates of heaven and send His Son into the world, not to condemn but to save. Heaven is reaching down, boldly and lovingly, like never before.

As Methodists, we celebrate Advent to give us time to come to expect goodness, days to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child. But how do we do that?

In an uncertain world, sometimes it is hard to have an “expect goodness” mindset. How can we live out our lives expecting goodness when there are tragic accidents, devastating hurricanes, ghastly medical diagnoses, betrayals within families, and so on? How can we bring ourselves to expect goodness?

To begin with, we worship a triune God who loves each of us, loves us with a fierce, unrelenting love. As God said in Jeremiah 31:3, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”* Joshua reminds us, *“God will never leave you or forsake you.”* Paul wrote, *“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* This kind of love isn’t come-and-go. It isn’t conditional on our being good. It is here... forever.

I see repeatedly proof that the followers of the Babe of Bethlehem are responding to God's goodness. We witness it in our church. I see it in the herculean efforts of our members for Hurricane Harvey victims. I see it in the faces of the children in their activities. I see it in the transformation of our youth as they come to know our Savior. I see it in hospital visits by our laity. I see it over and over and over. Because we worship and follow a loving God, we should expect goodness. God has proven His goodness in the past—God, Immanuel, God with us and for us.

Today I know the difference between God and Santa. Santa puts conditions on our expectations. God does not. We can expect goodness from God every day. We can give thanks to God in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us.

We expect goodness when we practice our five habits: We pray. We study our Bible. We make friends. We tell our stories. We give ourselves away in generosity and service.

During this month let's join the angel choirs. Let's sing along with them, "*Glory to God. Glory to God. Glory to God in the highest.*"

Monday, December 4

Catherine Washington

Psalm 23:6a (NLT)

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life.

When I was in junior high theater class, everyone had to memorize a monologue to present to the class. Being the good little church girl that I was (am), I chose the 23rd Psalm. When the day came to present, I was nervous, but I stood up and began my presentation. It occurred to me as I spoke that others might take issue with me reciting a Bible passage or that they would make fun of me. Remember, middle school is hard on everyone. I grew increasingly nervous, but as I finished speaking, the very words I spoke told me I had no need to be.

It's not easy or natural to "expect goodness". We are taught from a very young age to be cautious of strangers, be prepared for any eventuality, and be ready for the worst. Even as I spoke those words in junior high, I convinced myself that others would mock me and ridicule me. I was mentally steeling myself even in the middle of my monologue. But David reminds us that God promises us His goodness and mercy, if we only trust Him.

Tuesday, December 5

Steve Lufburrow

Jeremiah 29:11 (Life Application Bible)

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I have always been an optimistic guy. I was fortunate to have parents that loved me and encouraged me, but they also taught me to work hard and to not expect things to come my way easily. They explained that with strong faith, a positive attitude, and hard work, great things will happen in your life. When my grandfather would visit us on the holidays when I was a young boy, he challenged my sister, brother and me to memorize one of his favorite phrases. He would say, "Seek out the good in every man and speak of all the best you can. Then we'll all speak well of thee and say how good and kind is he". His words obviously stuck and his message of seeking out the good still remains a key ingredient in my life.

With those words as a backdrop, it helped build my foundation of who I wanted to be. I've always been confident in the things I've done and with that confidence, along with the guidance, love and support of my family, especially my wife Joan, I've learned to expect goodness in life.

That doesn't mean that all parts of life are always wonderful. Like many of you, I've experienced the deaths of my mom and dad along with many loved ones and friends. I have also experienced and fought those difficult and very personal family health battles. Through it all, I have always tried to keep focused on better days. My faith allows that to happen.

As a result of my relationship with Christ and encouragement from my wife, I really do expect goodness in my life. When God opens a door in your life, go through it!

On those days when I am down and I'm feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders, Joan says to me, "Don't worry. God continues to have a plan for you and will direct your path."

Thankfully, my path through my faith continues to lead me to expect goodness in life. This Advent season, I hope you will join me in focusing on the positives and expecting goodness as a result of our faith journeys.

Wednesday, December 6

Vicki Keiser

Philippians 4:8-9 (ESV)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me- practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul communicated a high standard of living to the people of Philippi; he wanted them to be good so that they could really know God. But Paul did more than just communicate how they should live; he modeled it as well. Paul followed Jesus' model of living.

For each of us goodness is not passive; it is deliberate. Sometimes it is just plain hard work. But we have an opportunity each day to deliberately live in a Christ-like manner- to show goodness in all that we do so we can know God better, so that we can feel God's love in our lives and, so we can give others the chance to see God's goodness through us.

Advent is a reminder that God's gift of his son Jesus Christ was a gift of goodness. Let's make sure we share that this year!

Thursday, December 7

Joel Mohrman

Luke 10:30-36 (RSV)

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

A Flat Tire Filled with Grace

We are bombarded by bad news and examples of people committing evil acts. Yet, I am constantly encouraged by my encounters with people as I go about my day. From friendly greetings in downtown elevators to family gatherings I see folks treating one another with respect and small kindnesses.

Recently I had a great example of the kindnesses of strangers. As I was driving home from downtown one evening my front left tire hit a piece of concrete sticking out from the curb. The tire low pressure warning light came on and I could feel the tire deflating. I was on Memorial and so I pulled off on a side street in the Sixth Ward. It was getting dark. I got the jack, spare and other equipment out of the trunk to change the tire.

I had not been working long (soaking through my work clothes) when a man came up and said, "Can I change that tire for you? You are in nice clothes and I'd be happy to do it." I thanked him and said I would do it myself. As I continued to work four other men who were walking by offered to help. While I appreciated their offers I began to wonder if I looked particularly inept or infirm.

As I started to mount the spare onto the hub it was getting really dark and very difficult to see how to thread the bolt through the wheel and into the hub. At that time a woman pulling out of a parking lot behind me saw my predicament and shined her headlights on the tire. She stayed there for many minutes while I finished securing the tire. I thanked her and got ready to drive home. As I considered the evening I saw that God was present, even in the changing of a tire. Unlike the story of the Good Samaritan virtually everyone stopped to offer me help. This experience reaffirmed for me that we should expect goodness, for God is good all the time and he sends help when we need it.

Friday, December 8

Seth McNew

Psalm 27:13 (ESV)

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

I have to confess; too often as the Christmas season approaches I allow my mind to be filled with the stress and worry that often accompany the end of the year. If I'm being honest, it's almost like I expect something to go wrong. What if I don't get all of this work done before I have to leave for vacation? What if I get a last-minute project that threatens to ruin the holidays? As the saying goes, "If you look for trouble, you're sure to find it."

This year, as we enter the season of Advent and anxiously await the birth of Christ, what if, instead, I expect the goodness of God and believe I will experience it? What if I choose to focus on the love and hope that are also present during the holiday season—in family coming together, friends sharing meals, kids nearly exploding with the anticipation of Christmas morning.

There's no doubt that when you see the good in your own life, you are more likely to pay it forward. That is my prayer this Advent season: to be so in tune with God's goodness in my life, that I am stirred to share that love, hope, and joy with others.

Week 2: Expect Transformation

Sunday, December 10

Expect Transformation by Rev. Katie Montgomery Mears

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

These lyrics from my favorite Christmas hymn, O Holy Night, feel especially poignant this year. The world feels so full of sin and so, so weary. Shootings, wildfires, hurricanes, and earthquakes have delivered devastation to a countless number of communities and families this year. I'll admit, there are days when it feels like a dream I cannot wake up from—so real and yet so unbelievable.

We're speechless in the face of such horror, yet we know that these tragedies do not have the final word. After the rain came the rescues—thousands of them, by neighbors and strangers. After the earthquake came hundreds of people forming human chains to remove rubble and search for missing children. After the shooting in Las Vegas came people throwing themselves on one another to protect them. The presence of God was palpable in the love and compassion offered in each of these situations.

As we enter this season of Advent, we are desperately in need of this love and compassion that comes from God. Advent means "arrival" or "coming." We know that what is coming is the presence of Christ that brings transformation to the world, so we wait expectantly and hopefully.

When Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago, he transformed everything – political authority, religious rules, cultural norms. He transformed the diseased into the healed and the outcasts into the celebrated guests. For the lepers who were healed and the marginalized who were included, it was a new and glorious morn. For those of us today who are weary and broken and left out, there is a new and glorious morn for us as well. The power of Christ transforms our lives, bringing about hope and wholeness.

In Romans, Paul writes, *"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."* (Romans 12:2, The Message) Christian transformation isn't about making small edits to our lives, but about complete renewal. The Greek word for transformation is *metamorphoō*, which is where we get the word metamorphosis. The caterpillar that changes into a butterfly offers us an image of the way in which God transforms our lives – we completely transcend our previous form in order to become a new creature.

It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are reshaped so that we are no longer molded, or attached, to the brokenness of sin. This Advent, ask God to transform you from the inside out, creating in you a new heart that bears the likeness of Christ and beats for the transformation of the world. God can, and does, take a weary world and bring about a new and glorious morn.

Monday, December 11

Cindy Donaldson

Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Who among us hasn't written a list of New Year's resolutions, hoping for transformation into an improved version of yourself? Fortunately, the real work and transformation in our lives is already underway, as we read in Paul's letter to the Philippians, and as we witness throughout the Bible. Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us through subtle transformation, and at other times a transformation that is magnificent and dramatic. So dramatic at times that names are changed to mark the transformation, such as Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel and Saul to Paul. Then there is Mary, who was in anticipation of a new life stage, about to marry. However, she was likely not seeking unimaginable transformation, as she certainly experienced in becoming the mother of the Son of God.

Advent is a time of preparation and expectancy. During Advent, consider those who received divine transformation in the Bible. We learn from them to expect transformation, whether seeking it or not. Be open to God's transformational work in your life, and you may end up like Mary—going peacefully in one direction until the Lord uproots your plans and blesses you more richly than you could ever imagine.

Tuesday, December 12

Gene Graham

1 John 3:1 (The Message)

"What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God!"

I believe God is love and that love is THE transforming agent of our lives. How do we release the power of this love? More than give it lip service, we have to actually accept it and then let it loose in our hearts.

In his essay "You are Accepted," the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace," and we are transformed.

In 1985, Sally Fields won her second Oscar for the drama *Places in the Heart*. Blinded by a flashing red light alerting her to conclude her speech, Fields blurted out, "The first time [receiving an Oscar] I didn't feel it, but this time I feel it—and I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you really like me."

Tillich might call this a moment when "a wave of lightness breaks into our darkness." Sally Fields said later that her career had been riddled with personal and professional setbacks and she had learned to suppress her emotions to get by. But that night, at the Academy Awards, something inside of her broke. Was dismantled. She allowed herself to feel, to accept, the admiration of her peers.

This Christmas season, I pray we allow a "wave of lightness" to break into our hearts and wash over our anxious spirits. I pray we open up and accept wholeheartedly God's gift of love so that it fills our hearts to overflowing, spilling over and flowing back into the world in radical generosity. We are accepted, my friends. Believe it!

Wednesday, December 13

Chrissie Vandevere

Philippians 3:12-16 (NIV)

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

I recently assumed a new role with my employer and had the opportunity to attend several "Transformational Leadership" workshops. The goal of these workshops is to "transform" our ability as leaders to empower others and tackle complex challenges. While these sessions have been very informative and professionally beneficial, two things have really stuck with me. First, transformation, defined by Merriam Webster as "a change in composition,

character, or condition,” is hard work! And second, despite the hard work required, as humans, we have a strong desire for transformation, for improvement.

How amazing is it then to realize that as Christians, we’ve already been transformed! The hard work was done by Jesus! We might feel continuous pressure in our daily lives to change this or be better at that, but in this Holy Season let us pause to remember that we have been transformed by Christ. Of course, we continue striving toward God’s upward call in Jesus Christ (Phil 3:13-14), but we’ve been given the gift of transformation through faith. We have attained it (Phil 3:16). I can almost feel the weight being lifted off my shoulders! Thank you, Jesus, for doing the hard work for us, for giving us the priceless gift of transformation.

Thursday, December 14

Rachel Fisher

Ezekiel 36:26 (NIV)

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

What a year it’s been. 2017 has been marked by unprecedented natural disasters, national discord, and all-around suffering for so many. Sure, we’ve had our ups to counteract the downs; I don’t think anyone in this city will soon forget the kindness shown in the aftermath of Harvey, nor the recent celebration and comradery of our Astros World Series win. Speaking frankly, though, I think more than anything we’re all just exhausted.

It’s been said a thousand times before that Americans really miss the mark on the true meaning of Christmas. We’re worn thin and stressed out; we each have, in our own unique way, a heart of stone. But 2017 is not the same as its predecessors. This season marks the culmination of an extraordinary year, the good and the bad unlike anything we’ve ever experienced. Our usual gripes about the hustle and bustle of the holidays have been replaced (or at least muffled) by our newfound appreciation for what really matters.

God calls us to constantly throw out the old and accept a new spirit in Christ. Yes, our circumstances have certainly changed dramatically, but it is our hearts – our new, pure, motivated, vulnerable, accepting, grateful hearts of flesh – which only we can choose to embrace this Advent.

Friday, December 15

Craig LaFollette

2 Corinthians 3:18 (RSV)

And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another: for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

I grew up in a Christian home and was baptized at age 14. However, I did not have a strong personal relationship with Jesus for several years. My life and faith drifted. I didn’t understand that LOVE is a verb. I loved Christ in my head but not in my actions.

Well, the Holy Spirit really started to work on me in 1977, when I married a strong Christian woman, Chris. I prayed for someone like her and God put Chris in my midst as a living, breathing example of true Christian living. Other than Jesus, Chris is my greatest gift from God. Being with and around Chris led me to a desire to know more about God. In the fall of 1984, in the midst of a real estate crash, I started a 13-year journey with Bible Study Fellowship. I studied scripture almost daily and my prayer life strengthened significantly. Then my career got in the way of my walk with Christ. Starting in 1997, my work became all-encompassing and my relationship with Jesus was, once again, taking a backseat.

However, the Holy Spirit has been very patient with me. Praying and reading scripture has long been a part of my life, but serving God and his people has come more slowly. The last 10 years also coincides with the arrival of Dr. Tom Pace at St. Luke's, and a strong emphasis on "Inside-out Habits". I believe this commitment within St. Luke's has led me to a stronger, richer relationship with Jesus. I love Tom's weekly reminders of "Inside-Out Habits". The Holy Spirit has opened up so many opportunities for me to serve God's people. The simple act of making sandwiches for Kid's Meals with my Emmaus brothers, visiting members and friends of members who are patients in the Medical Center, being more generous with our resources, and participating in the governance of our great church is so rewarding. My faith in and love of Jesus has never been stronger.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for being patient with me and transforming me towards your likeness. Without you, I am nothing.

Week 3: Expect Wonder

Sunday, December 17

Expect Wonder by Rev. David Horton

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:20

It's better to be a shepherd than an angel.

You remember the angels. They're the glowing, larger-than-life mysteries who showed up in the middle of the night and scared a bunch of shepherds out of their pajamas. In a second, they formed the best choir that anyone ever heard. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!" They had news to share, news that would spread across the earth, news that would become our standardized measure of time—it either happened before this news or after this news—but news that would have to start with shepherd boys and shepherd girls—and, of course, the sheep. Don't forget the sheep.

The news? There's a savior been born. He's the one your heart has been looking for while you were too busy to notice. He wears newborn diapers, and he's lying in a manger in Bethlehem. You'll find him if you go looking for him.

And the shepherds do go looking for him. They find him; and Mary and Joseph, the otherworldly sound of the angels still ringing in their ears, their hands shaking as Mary folds back the scraps of an old dress that keeps her son warm. They see that baby's face. Can you imagine? It's the face that said, "Let there be light!" and saw the first sunrise on the first day. It's the face that will hang on a tree, looking down on the pain of this world and the everyday cruelty of you and me, and say, "It is finished." It's the face that knows nothing at all except a mother's love, and for now, on this silent night, that's enough. That face will grace the shepherds' memory forever. No matter what troubles await them in the future, they will never unlearn the face of God.

The shepherds leave the holy family, Mary nursing, Joseph fumbling with breakfast, and they are full to bursting with all they have heard and seen! The angels, the heavenly choir, the midnight shock of aliens in their tent, the mother, the baby, the face, the manger, the news—oh the news! All these wonders have happened to them. It's the best kind of overwhelming.

But the angels get the lesser end of the deal. You see, they miss out on the wonder of seeing and hearing these things for themselves. They are messengers of a message that hasn't happened to them. It's sad, when you think about it. They are the storytellers of secondhand wonder: they tell someone else's story, the shepherd's story, our story, but not their story. They don't get to be blown away by all these wonders like the shepherds have.

It's better to be a shepherd. They are the storytellers of firsthand wonder. It's the difference between hearing you're going to be a father and telling of that wonder happening to you, and telling the story of someone else hearing he's going to be a father. It's still good news, but it's not wonder.

Christmas is about wonder. It's about being blown away by the miracles God is working around you, if you will disenchant your eyes and go looking for them. Christmas is about becoming shepherd boys and shepherd girls again, innocent recipients of God's marvels, trembling with excitement at what God is doing, captivated by what feels like magic and what looks like love.

Where is God captivating you by what feels like magic and looks like love? Let that story happen to you. Be overwhelmed by it. Be changed by it. Be born anew by it. Become a messenger of a message that is happening to you, a storyteller of firsthand wonders that make the angels jealous.

Monday, December 18

Louise McEvoy

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7 (NRSV)

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Yes, I know that this passage is about the aftermath of Assyria's total destruction of the Northern Kingdom. Yes, I know the original audience was scared out of their minds, feeling lost and hopeless. Dark times indeed.

Yet, I too have been in darkness during my life. Darkness when my grandmother who raised me passed away. Darkness mixed with loneliness and depression. Darkness when I had my miscarriage. Darkness when I first heard the words, "You have cancer." Darkness again when my dad died. Those were tough times and it was very difficult to see the light. It has been said that sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you look up. In those moments, when you get that glimpse of His light, when you feel the Spirit working through you and whispering, "I've got you," you can experience wonder. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines wonder as "a cause of astonishment or admiration, a marvel."

Thank you, Isaiah, for being the messenger, but when I read this passage, I know God is talking to me. Directly. I hear Him telling me that He loves me so much and that I should expect His wonder in all aspects of my life. The child born FOR us... a son given TO us... That He IS Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. For Christians, all signs point to Jesus. Be in awe and expect wonder, everyone. Expect it every day.

Tuesday, December 19

Nancy Walker

Luke 2:8-15 (NKJV)

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men." So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go into Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."

Peel away the layers of today's frantic preparations for Christmas: shopping until you are exhausted, mountains of presents, yards of wrapping paper and ribbons, boxes of decorations, endless errands, cooking, addressing Christmas cards, party after party and more. Then sit quietly to contemplate the real wonder of Christmas.

Over 2,000 years ago, our Savior was born humbly in a stable, surrounded by barn animals. His birth was joyously heralded to shepherds by a choir of angels. Those simple men could never have imagined the impact His birth would make on the whole world. Close your eyes. Shut out the hectic world and listen to that choir of angels. You will feel the wonder, the awe, the love and joy that tiny baby brought to all the world. Welcome Him again into your heart and share the real gift of Christmas...God's only Son, Jesus, our Lord and Savior!

Wednesday, December 20

Warren Fisher

Matthew 2:1-2 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Whenever I'm in a dark place with clear skies I love to go out at night and gaze up at the stars. I am always filled with wonder at the glory of God's creation spectacularly displayed in the vast night sky. I've lived all of my life in the city, however, where most of the stars are lost in the constant glow of electric lights. The few brightest stars that manage to burn through the city glare do still fill me with awe.

The wise men of Matthew 2 saw the star marking Jesus' birth and were so filled with wonder that they set out to find and worship him. They recognized the significance of the star and refused to be distracted or deterred in their quest to find the King whose birth it marked. I pray that in this Advent season and beyond we can block out some of the glaring and distracting lights that fill our world and instead focus on Christ as the guiding light for our lives, seeking Him as diligently as the Magi did.

Thursday, December 21

Kristin Reynolds

Isaiah 11:1 (NIV)

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."

Every year the twinkling lights on houses and the familiar carols on the radio renew a sense of hope and wonder in my soul. Just as Isaiah spoke of a dead branch that would bear fruit, the birth of Jesus Christ gives us hope in tomorrow where we might only see impossibility. Throughout the Bible and in our daily lives we have seen numerous instances where Christ has taken a hopeless situation and allowed it to bear fruit for the glory of God. This holy season should remind us of the hopeful and wondrous love God has for each of us in Jesus. Each day offers opportunities to bear fruit and I pray that we keep our eyes open to see them, and our hearts open to receive them during this wondrous Christmas season and all year through.

Friday, December 22

Ken McKay

Matthew 18:1-5 (NRSV)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

When I was a boy, my family would frequently find me just sitting in the living room looking at the Christmas tree. There was something about the tree that was mesmerizing and that put me in the Christmas spirit. Now, decades later, I still find myself in front of our Christmas tree marveling at it just the way I did as a child.

In J. Ellsworth Kalas' book "What I Learned When I Was Ten: Lessons That Shaped My Life and Faith," he recounts events from his youth and their lifelong effects. Kalas notes that children often see wonder in things that adults dismiss as mundane and that if we take the time to see things through a child's eyes, we realize just how awesome those things are.

Jesus said, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I know that I spend too much time trying to gain academic understanding when the marvel of the Christmas story is that it is straightforward. Children recite the Christmas story with absolute understanding. Sure, it is meaningful to study those events from the perspective of the characters in the story, but it sometimes obfuscates the big picture of just what a wonder the miracle of the story itself is. Maybe it's time for all of us to become like children, grab some "tree time" and look at Christmas with children's eyes marveling at the amazing gift of the baby Jesus.

Christmas Eve

Sunday, December 24

Expect Love by Rev. Eric Huffman

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails.
1 Corinthians 13:4-8

On June 5, 1999, my wife and I stood trembling inside a church. We were getting married at the age of 20. Half the people there thought we were crazy for getting married at 20. The other half just thought we were pregnant. But we thought we were in love. Walking down the aisle, she was a vision. We stared into each other's eyes. We swore before God and everybody that we would love and cherish each other until death do us part. We acted like we knew what we were doing, but we had no idea. We had such a romanticized view of love back then, we could not have known what we were saying when we said, "I love you."

What we really felt was lust, mostly, a desire to live together and sleep together and grow up before we were ready. And those feelings were real feelings, but we didn't know what love was. We thought love was a feeling, like in the movies, but 15 years of marriage has taught us that love, more than a feeling, is a choice.

My dad is a pastor, and he was the officiant for our wedding. Just before we were supposed to walk out together to take our places for the ceremony, he turned to me and basically tried to talk me out of it. I thought he was crazy. I thought that, with love, there's no changing your mind, because love was a feeling. But my dad, who had been married for 24 years, knew better. He knew that loving someone—even that special someone—is a choice you can make or not.

Our challenge as Christians is to reorient our lives around the virtue of love. It's hard to do, isn't it? Even when I think about my marriage—the woman I love most—my love can't measure up to the love Paul talks about in this passage. Love is not irritable or resentful? When you're married for 18 years, that gets to be a problem. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing? Yeah, except when I insisted on taking a shortcut and we got stuck in traffic for an hour. She should have been upset about the traffic, but she was just so happy she was right...I could feel her over there, rejoicing in my wrongdoing! I can't love the way Paul says to love, and that's with my wife; don't even get me started on how hard it is to love my enemies.

But if you really read 1 Corinthians 13, it's clear that Paul isn't just defining love; he's describing a person. This is not a definition, but a description - a description of Jesus. You could replace every word "love" in this passage with "Jesus," and it would still make sense. Paul is describing Jesus. And this is the good news we need to hear this Christmas. The choice we have to make isn't to love like the bible says, or not to. We could make the choice to love like the bible says, and we would fail every time. No one here is up to the task of loving like the bible says to love. We're incapable, and that's fine, because that's not the choice that matters.

The choice that matters is whether or not you let yourself receive God's love in Jesus. Will you choose to believe that the One who knows you best loves you most? Letting the love of God fill your heart is all that matters. When you do that, what will invariably happen is that the love of God will overwhelm you, because no one's heart is big enough to contain God's love, and there will be an overflow in your life, an outpouring of God's love in your home, with your family, friends, and even your enemies. Because once you make the decision to receive God's love, there's no stopping it. And for people who follow Jesus, nothing is more important.