

2022 Advent

Devotional



The Greendale Ecumenical Group

Sunday, November 27, 2022
First Sunday of Advent
“A New Kind of Watchfulness”
Scripture Reference: Matthew 24:36-44

Every Advent begins with these awful texts of the destruction of the temple, of being led astray, darkness, and vultures, lightning bolts (see beginning of chapter) and then the plucking up of this person and that one while leaving others “left behind”. I don’t buy dispensationalism and rapture theology (it seems such predicting and plodding of time is exactly what Jesus is telling his disciples not to do) but I do support this larger theme of readiness and of living one’s life awake to God’s actions among us.

We live in very pregnant days. The pandemic has shaken the world from any kind of “life as usual.” Our nation is changing, the world is changing, culture is shifting like tectonic plates, the Church finds itself in a time of crisis and change the likes of which we haven’t seen since Martin Luther’s crisis that split everything wide open. And we do not know how it will all turn out. There are aspects of Advent that are scary and poke at our fears but know this, God just might be in on all of it. Walter Brueggemann once wrote, “The world you have been so carefully prepared for is being taken away from you by the grace of God.” What might he be saying here? The Spirit is on the move again. I need to be awake, ready, and alert to how God is calling me to be faithful in the new world God is creating. Welcome Advent with all its disruption.

Rev. Mark Nilson
Salem Covenant Church

Monday, November 28, 2022
2nd Day of Advent
“Now What?”
Scripture Reference: Psalm 124; Genesis 8:1-19; Romans 6:1-11

I see a line running through the cry of the Psalmist, the Story of Noah, and the end of the great flood as well as the words of Paul to the Church in Rome.

Maybe it’s just me, but coming out of the most intense experience of the pandemics which continue to challenge us, I witness the Psalmist’s words of thanksgiving that the community has come through a time of travail,

along with the experience of opening up the ark and walking out into a world shaken by disaster, and the admonition of the Apostle that in moments like these when we are witness to life continuing, after times of tremendous hardship, it is not enough to simply exclaim our faith and thanksgiving.

Now live with a new consciousness, having experienced a time of deathly consequence, we are now bidden to live a life in service to, and as a reflection of, the divine light which shone through the darkness. The question then is now why are we not dead? The question is, because we are alive, how then shall we live? Now what is the path toward the life we have been gifted to experience? As a people of faith, it is not enough to simply survive, but to serve life so that all may thrive.

Rev. Aaron Payson
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Worcester

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

3rd Day of Advent

“Everything was perfect. But was it really?”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 124:8; Genesis 9: 11; Hebrews 11: 32, 39

We may have all declared, “Everything was perfect” about something, but was it? Was it really?

Today’s scriptures refer to Covenant and Promises and Faith. The premise we accept as believers is this, God is Perfect. God being Perfect, for there are no comparisons by which to judge this premise, and what God does and conceives is therefore, Perfect. A Covenant relationship and its promised benefits, we understand, is binding on both/all parties. Our Covenant with God ensures us that this Perfect God, perfectly holds up and fulfills God’s part in it while finite and perfecting, “now and not yet”, as Luther theologizes, we with whom God has made covenant, may find ourselves stumbling a bit to uphold our part.

The Psalmist reminds us that “our help is in the name of the Lord, maker of heaven and earth”. Just check out the mind-blowing images from the J.D. Webb space telescope that are published for all of us to see as they come in. So yes, that God. The Genesis reading quotes God as saying, “I establish my covenant with you”, check the Webb images again, look into the eyes of a little child. Yes, that God. Paul then puts a “stamp on it”

reminding the Hebrew church that, “God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they (many OT patriarchs and prophets are listed) be made perfect”. Count on it. Believe it.

Prayer invitation: O God in Christ, we give you thanks and praise for helping us along the Way to lean into our part of the Perfect Covenant which you have made with each of us. Come Lord Jesus. Amen Musical suggestion: “Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.” (<https://youtu.be/Ouxtq-7PNMQ>)

Pam Sutton
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

4th Day of Advent

“Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

Have you ever watched the weather channel when a storm is approaching? There was a time before weather channels and radar, when in order to survive nature’s harsh realities it was incumbent upon people to be able to read the signs of the time. Old farmers tales like “A wooly caterpillar is wooliest before a bad winter.” Sailors learned “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky at dawn, sailors warn.” Human beings have been trying to predict the future since we became conscious of a reality larger than ourselves.

What the scriptures for this day have in common is the admonition that to be faithful is not to spend your spiritual energy trying to predict the end of history and time, but to trust that the covenant between human kind and the Divine is one of steadfast love. With this we are given the freedom to release ourselves from being troubled about ultimate endings and spend our time in service to the relationship with have with each other, the Spirit of Love from which we are created, and the planet that sustains us.

Rev, Aaron Payson
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Worcester

Thursday, December 1, 2022

5th Day of Advent

“Branches”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 72:1-7,18-19; Isaiah 4:2-6

Psalm 72 is a Royal Psalm—a prayer for guidance and support. God’s blessing on the King, as God’s representative, the king is expected to rule in light of God’s will—with righteousness & justice. For the first time in 70 years, on May 6, 2023, the world will witness the coronation of His Majesty King Charles of England. We will consider this Psalm of Solomon as King Charles III is crowned.

However, the reading in Isaiah 4:2-6 tells us that it is the forthcoming of our Savior—the King of Kings—that the Old Testament Scriptures are preparing for us to welcome. “On that day the branch of the Lord shall be glorious and beautiful”. “Behold the days are coming...when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as King and deal wisely & shall execute justice and righteousness” (Jeremiah 25:5). This is an image of hope---our Messiah---He is the Vine, and we are the branches. Amen and Amen

Jackie Walsh

Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Friday, December 2, 2022

6th Day of Advent

“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25

One of the popular chants published in the latest hymnal supplement of the Unitarian Universalist Association is entitled, “Where Do We Come From?” The chant is in four lines and is meant to be sung in a round.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Where do we come from?

Mystery, Mystery, Life is a riddle and a mystery.

Where do we come from? Where are we going?

(Link to Youtube version of the song: <https://youtu.be/s7zEwa1XqUk>)

The questions that make up this song are foundational to a life of the spirit. Especially in times of turmoil when the future seems unclear. The answer given is to accept that life itself is a riddle and a mystery. What isn’t said,

but what I think is fundamental to understanding the meaning behind this charming chant is that while we may not know the future, we are bidden to sing and to join our voices, bodies, hearts and minds together, as a faith rooted in a lineage which draws inspiration and energy from many sources, including, historically, Christianity. And that root is bound to the lineage of prophetic people and communities that responded to the riddle and mystery of life through a covenant with each other and the Divine, promises made that would shape the ways in which we would serve a life larger than ourselves alone.

The scriptures for today all point toward that larger lineage of life and covenant through promises felt by Hebraic ancestors, those who paved the way for the coming of Jesus, and Jesus himself, a supreme manifestation of the love that permeates the promises made and the life given to faithful people. In days when the mystery of life and the riddle of existence itself might seem murky, at best, may we all remember the history of our deepest connections to the source of life itself and all those who illumined its path since time immemorial.

Rev. Aaron Payson
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Worcester

Saturday, December 3, 2022

7th Day of Advent

“The Voice Calling in the Wilderness: Herald of Good News”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 72:18-19, Isaiah 40:1-11, John 1:19-28

“Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her sin has been paid for,
that her hard service has been completed,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.
A voice of one calling:
“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.” Isaiah 40:1-3

As I reflect on these words from chapter 40 from the book of Isaiah, I can't help but think about the world we live in today and how we need an extra measure of comfort. Like the Babylonian exiles to whom these words were spoken, we too are living in perilous times where our world is crushed by our iniquity, and we are all in need of Divine mercy. We are entering that time of year when the darkness of nighttime lengthens and the light grows dimmer, leaving many in a state of what is called "the winter doldrums." In this darkened state, we become more acutely aware of our pain and vulnerability, and our desperate need of a Savior. Advent is a season of hope, and these words of the prophet Isaiah, speak of a herald of good news, of a time when God will comfort us, meeting us where we are; in our wilderness, and in the deepest and darkest corners of life.

The prophet speaks of a voice of one crying in the wilderness; the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. We read in the Gospel of John, that the "voice" of the one prophesied in Isaiah is John the Baptist. John prepared the way by calling people to acknowledge their transgression and their need for salvation, preparing their hearts to receive Christ their Savior.

This is the story for all generations. We too are called to be a voice crying in the wilderness when we encounter people in need of hearing the Gospel message. May we share the good news with humble hearts and with eternity in mind. May the words we share point others to Christ, who is merciful, and full of grace and truth. "Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen."

Marie Sturdevant
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Sunday, December 4, 2022

2nd Sunday of Advent

"Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord"

Scripture Reference: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7,18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord" words that I remember scripture and I hear in the song which opens the musical Godspell. Attributed in the former to John the Baptist and in the latter, sung by Judas. The irony is not

lost on me there. The scriptures for this day all speak with anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, and the peace that shall prevail upon the arrival of the one upon whom the spirit of wisdom and understanding shall rest.

Moreover, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, the qualities of the one who saves are to be made manifest in the communities that gather to remember and reflect the wisdom and ways of the Divine presence. “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

And the author of the Gospel of Matthew, in recalling the ministry of John the Baptist, warns of the waste of trying to restrain the Spirit within the confines of one’s own understanding, against the message of liberation that the Spirit of Love has for all people. And, that in the end, such efforts burn up in their own fury for control of a truth that will not be confined or governed by human means.

For the faithful, participation in the Spirit of Love and Life is far more important than tending the gate which separates the faithful from those who are different from us.

Rev. Aaron Payson
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Worcester

Monday, December 5, 2022
9th Day of Advent
“Earnestness of Grace”
Scripture Reference: Luke 21:34

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpected! (Luke 21:34 NRSVUE Translation)

At funeral services I most always include the words attributed to Jesus from Saint John concerning the dwelling places set aside for after this life is through. Basically, the interpretation in the primary instance is for our comfort that we might not be weighed down and overcome.

This gospel piece for this day cautions us not to let anything distract us, weigh us down, take us over, because it is then that we miss out on what the Spirit is trying to work in us in the moment.

I love cars and own a limited-edition Grand Prix that for most people would be a nuisance to own; it is finicky with its DoD (displacement on demand) system for its front-wheel drive V8 setup. This leads to difficulties with the yearly sticker as the emissions are usually “off” and I have to time getting one precisely when “all the stars align” with regards to the cats sniffing rightly, evap components happy, etc. So, the perfect combination for passing has come and gone a couple times when I should have driven straight-away to my garage for them to run it in quick to catch the moment of bliss for a pass. But I was distracted by other things...

Okay, cars shouldn't distract us from real-life stuff, I get that. However, the example lifts up how we can forget some things we should be keeping an eye on. And the Lukan passage this day makes that point so that we might not find ourselves distracted when God has something for us to know so to help us out...on any given day, at any hour...

May we take the time daily to focus time with God and remember the earnestness of Grace in coming to remind us in the ministry of the Incarnation how we are sought out to be whole even as distractions blow this way and that.

Pastor Andrew Borden
Grace Ministries

Tuesday, December 6, 2022
10th Day of Advent
“The Gift of Water”
Scripture Reference: Isaiah 41:17-20

I imagine this text from the prophet will be magnified hundreds of times over as we move forward experiencing both the loss of water sources in some areas of the world, while other areas, through hurricanes and under the deluges of their submerging rainy seasons suffer water's saturating affects. Most say that water will become today's oil and we will fight over water rights and water restrictions.

Everything we do – matters, and in terms of earth care, we must get at it “now”. No longer can we afford to think of environmental issues as peripheral. Those days are long gone. The damaging effects of our negligence are everywhere present. What can we do, what can I do “today” to partner with God in caring for the earth I inhabit. God’s intention was that the waters of the earth would cool the parched tongue, be fountains for the growth of the valley’s vegetation, and be the sure sign of God’s good creation. Let us in this Advent season give thanks to God for creation and plan our days around the good stewardship of this incredible gift.

Rev. Mark Nilson
Salem Covenant Church

Thursday, December 8, 2022
12th Day of Advent
“The Promise of the Lord’s Coming Again”
Scripture Reference: 2 Peter 3:1-10

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. 2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through you apostles.

3 Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 4 They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

We all know when we see a rainbow in the sky, it is God's gift and sign God will never destroy the world through water and floods again. I love that story and am reminded of what it means every time I see those beautiful rainbows.

Peter reminds us through this reading that God is coming again. However, we know not what hour or day or year this will be. God is giving us time to change our sinful ways and to repent and to be ready. God loves us all so very much God wants each and every one of us to be saved through God's Love, Grace, and Forgiveness. God is waiting for the right time.

Do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul and our neighbor as ourselves?

Jesus is coming again the same way Jesus left. The world eventually will be destroyed through fire this time. Are we ready for God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the three in one and the one in three?

Jesus also said, "Love one another, even as I have loved you." Amen

Roberta F. Briggs
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Friday, December 9, 2022

13th Day of Advent

"Growth"

Scripture Reference: Psalm 146:5-10; 2 Peter 3:11-18

Psalm 146 is a hymn of praise for God's help. The Lord gives help to all who need it. Think of it as a security blanket and quietly trust in God's faithfulness. This is made known to us through the justice God works to establish on earth by building a community of faith based on God's word. Our communities of faith share in this mission. And the goal of all who share in these communities of faith must be growth. We grow through regular prayer, study, giving and fellowship.

As we prepare to go to the manger and embrace the infant Savior, “let us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

Jackie Walsh
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

Monday, December 12, 2022

16th Day of Advent

“Reflections”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 42; Isaiah 29:17-24; Acts 5:12-16

Psalm 42: Loving God, you are the source of all life ... We look to you knowing we cannot live without you. As we read of the deer panting for streams of water, we thirst for your presence in our lives...craving your protection and the sound of your song in the night. In the darkness of these days, we will remember your Light. We praise and thank you for memories that carry us through the worst of times and dispel our fear... memories carried forward by Love through the DNA of faith through all time. You are Love...the essence of who you are lives within us by the Holy Spirit. We will remind ourselves again and again of who you are and have always been... Emmanuel... God with Us.

Isaiah 29: 17-24: Isaiah’s words set forth the contrast between two Lebanons – the national (“uncultivated wilderness”) and the spiritual (“fruitful field”), speaking to us of opposites that will be turned around by God’s reformation. In our lives, realization of inner transformation that is possible when we seek God’s wisdom and justice and lean not to our own understanding. Creator God, you have given us life by your Breath... turning us from dust to clay and molding, and then remolding us in your image to incorporate potential and possibility innately enabling us to become your people. Your justice will stand. Your understanding will prevail. You will turn the tide and reverse the path we are on... set things upright according to the plan you have for us... the cycle of life that you have given to us will turn as the tides, and turn again, so there is a time for all things under heaven... by your Spirit, we are transformed. Holy Lord, awesome God, we are the work of your hands. Teach us to learn who we truly are and to emanate your Love.

Acts 5:12-16: Healing balm flows from you, to restore us to health and wholeness. We want to be faithful witnesses, to spread your Love where the need is great. We see the destruction and death in all directions but are overwhelmed in our human frailty. We wait upon you and stand ready to hear when you call and to go where and when the time is right. Lead us toward those opportunities... to people and places where we can treat the deep internal wounds that only you can see. Lord, we believe; grant us grace to walk by faith. Strengthen your people and fill us with unending Love to care for each other and to partake of true Holy Communion by sharing your restorative Spirit among us in life giving remembrance.

Lynn Orsted
Salem Covenant Church

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

17th Day of Advent

“Reflections”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Jude 17-25

Psalm 42: Holy God, we long for your help in our time of distress. Every day, we see such evil working its way in the world around us. Children are murdered in their classrooms and no one can save them or answer the cries of their loved ones... people are dying by random and intentional violence for no reason at all... there is ill will and vicious hatred spewing day and night as if terror and destruction have full reign. What on earth is going on? How should we answer when people ask us where you are? We know you are here with us in our suffering and that you will never leave us, but there is no explanation that makes sense in human understanding. How do we defend our faith and speak the Truth? We have ears to hear but cannot translate to those who press for answers in desperation. It is so frustrating to feel as though we are at the Tower of Babel... everyone talking at once in a multitude of languages, no one listening or comprehending. We Hope for your Spirit to interpret our incomprehensible distress and lead us in our common humanity to a new place of understanding. Please answer us in the silence of our hearts, where your law of Love is written and bears witness with the Truth – someday answering our prayers so all will understand and praise you with One Voice.

Ezekiel 47:1-12: The words of Ezekiel seem to me to be a vision of God's healing waters pouring forth in every direction, over all people, for all time. This blessing of the earth and its people by the healing river waters of the temple of God does not seem to be a one-time event but, rather, a healing, restorative process taking place over time, expanding and increasing to be more and more far reaching and inclusive, unrestrained, to encompass abundant numbers of fish and fruitful trees full of healing and salvation – seemingly enough for all people everywhere. Yes, we see the vision clearly...for God so loved the World...

Jude 17-25: Remember, remember, remember! We will tell our stories and share many memories of people and times past that stay with us and shape who we are for all of our days. In old age, we will lose track of some things we thought we would never forget. Yet, it is a comfort to know that God holds those memories for us and will never forget. Remembrance is integral to our faith, in communion and in living out our days. Memories bring together the past and the present, so that we combine life's lessons in the moment and blend into a new perspective. Each of us sees life through our own lens, so we should bear in mind that everyone is one of a kind – although cliché, it is true that just like a snowflake, none of us is an exact copy of another. We need each other! Our collective memory respects all of life and sustains our faith that God's Spirit is the source of all life. God, we seek your presence among us. Give us eyes to see so we may glimpse bits of you within our neighbor... the hidden light of your glory, majesty, power and authority shining beneath the surface. Thank you, God, for valuing our diversity more than we can comprehend. Teach us to love each other. Keep reminding us of your promises and the power of your Spirit among us... we want to hear the story over and over, from beginning to end...help us to envision your words so we see that when we are fitted together at the end of the story, we will be made whole. Holy Lord, we rejoice in the Mystery and wait in anticipation as we celebrate the birth of Jesus... the fulfillment of your promise in the fullness of time.

Lynn Orsted
Salem Covenant Church

Thursday, December 15, 2022

19th Day of Advent

“King of Resurrection”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Restoration is the theme of this wonderful Psalm. God’s dream for his people is that we be made new and are continually fed so that we might be nourished and grow.

In Brian McLaren’s book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, one of the themes that he identifies for Christianity if we are to survive as a vital religion during this time of significant change and movement away from the organized church is that we must move from the concept of “a violent God of domination to a nonviolent God of liberation.” One of the ways this is achieved is to do the hard work of addressing and confessing Christianity’s violent and abusive past. From inherent anti-Semitism, white and Christian privilege and supremacy, Christian nationalism, and oppressive colonialism, we have done much to increase the pain of the world. If we are to move forward from such darkness in healthy and whole ways, we must confront our history head on and lean heavy on the mercy and grace of a “nonviolent God of liberation” for all people.

Often we think of God as a horrible judge. Yes, God is a judge but not in the punitive and vengeful stream of thought. God exercises judgement in the Hebrew understanding of the restorative judge. The biblical judge is one who “sets things right for the land.” God is not about punishment but restoration and growth. Israel was sent off on a Babylonian exile not as punishment but to be restored as his people. If you struggle with a harsh understanding of God’s judgement, think about the loving God who restores us to life and whose face shines upon us.

Rev. Mark Nilson
Salem Covenant Church

Friday, December 16, 2022

20th Day of Advent

“Persistent Love”

Scripture Reference: Psalm 80:1-7 (God’s Word Translation)

80 Open your ears, O Shepherd of Israel, the one who leads the descendants of Joseph like sheep, the one who is enthroned over the

angels. 2 Appear in front of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. Wake up Your power, and come to save us. 3 O God, restore us and smile on us so that we may be saved. 4 O Lord God, commander of armies, how long will You smolder in anger against the prayer of Your people? 5 You made them eat tears as food. You often made them drink their own tears. 6 You made us a source of conflict to our neighbors, and our enemies made fun of us. 7 O God, commander of armies, restore us and smile on us so that we may be saved.

God is always smiling upon us...at least when not crying when we act discouragingly in light of the Love showered upon us like rain.

The psalmist' tone and writing can be misunderstood to mean God leaves us alone in our mess at times, “,,,how long will You smolder in anger against the prayer of Your people?”

It's a writing technique to make us reflect upon where our heads are at; are we close to God, or far off?

Many-times life overcomes our sensibilities, and we might not be as in-tune with the Divine as we should be. In these instances, we might wallow in anger and wonder why things are the way they are, forgetting the reality that stuff does just happen, but that God is here to help us find our way through it all; not that God causes stuff, but walks with us, supporting us persistently.

We wonder at the coming Incarnation celebration, at the Blessedness that has come down and is all-around us, which we take for granted at times but is persistent towards us, none-the-less!

May we practice intentional leaning towards God and away from distractions, positioning our hearts and minds in the stream of persistent Love that is God and walks among us!

Pastor Andrew Borden
Grace Ministries

Sunday, December 18, 2022

4th Sunday of Advent

“Miracles”

Scripture Reference: Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV – Updated Ed.)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Technically, a miracle is something that’s not supposed to happen. Think about this familiar story of Joseph for a moment; did it ever occur to us how this piece of the Nativity story, kind of buried in the unfolding Incarnation focus of the season, really “cuts to the chase” for us all that God can work a change for us when things look bleak?

Joseph was faced with a situation that by Hebrew moral codes would see him denounce Mary’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy and expose her to likely death by stoning, or at best, being shunned and having to leave the comfort of her family.

Do we pray well? Do we routinely ask God’s leading of our hearts each day and hour through decisions small and great? Do we trust by faith?

In this wonderful piece of the Nativity narrative, we find the obvious faith of Joseph revealed to us as he wrestled with doing the right thing in the face of outside pressure. The Incarnation brought “God with us”, Emanuel, to

meet us with teaching including this encouragement for our faith in sticking with and trusting God in all things.

Let us trust our Lord and walk by faith every day, especially when it might be difficult!

Pastor Andrew Borden
Grace Ministries

Thursday, December 22, 2022
26th Day of Advent
“What do you Magnify?”
Scripture Reference: Luke 1:46b-55

“I wonder as I wander. . .” is one of my favorite Christmas songs. I remember times when I was gifted with the opportunity to sing it at holiday services. It is a melancholy tune, but more so it is contemplative. Unlike so many Christmas tunes which are robust and joyous, this song carries with it an element of sorrow and a spark of curiosity, like the contemplation of a couple sojourning through an unknown land, pondering their future, that of their child, and what might become of him, and them. It is something that gives me pause in the midst of all the festive moments of the season.

What leavens the uncertainty of this tune and its lyrics is the nature of wonder itself, which is captured by the author of the Gospel of Luke who describes Mary’s reaction to the news of her pregnancy. One of the roots for the word “wonder” is to magnify. In other words, the act of wondering is not so much about being caught up in the unknowable, but that in the face of all that is not known yet, we have the courage to make a commitment and to treat each opportunity to reflect love and life back into an uncertain world. This is the essence of Mary’s Magnificat to me. And I wonder, what do you magnify?

Rev. Aaron Payson
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Worcester

Friday, December 23, 2022

27th Day of Advent

“Energize my Faith and Bless my Yes!”

Scripture Reference: Luke 1: 46b-55; 2 Samuel 7: 18, 23-29; Galatians 3: 6-14

Imagine, just imagine! You and I are called by God, the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of the Multiverse into personal relationship! There is a “knowing”, isn’t there, when the Presence of God comes over us. It may bring us to tears and even to our knees. Each one of us has a call, a purpose, built into our lives with inherent gifts and talents to be developed for service to this God and God’s Creation. We may not consider ourselves particularly worthy, but a healthy humility helps us to accept that nothing we do or do not do, can ever make us worthy or unworthy. Faith in God’s Covenant promises, however, does energize us and open us up to respond to God’s Presence and our relational part, purpose, calling in God’s ongoing Creative process. God’s Presence is as near to us as our breath, the Author of our breath. The question that I pose, then, is this. When we experience God’s Call on our lives having been energized and opened up by our Faith in God’s promises to be ever with us, do we trust that God will expand our finite “yes” into an Infinite result for good, for humanity, for Creation itself? Do we trust that God in Christ will indeed finish in and through us what was started, providing all that is needed?

Mary encourages us to “rejoice”. King David sounds like we do when he speaks with God saying, “Who am I”.....”You are God”. Paul is credited with reminding us that “Abraham manifested “righteousness when he ‘believed God’ and that “through Christ Jesus...by Faith, we might receive the promises of the Spirit” through Whom and with Whom all things are possible. They should know!

Prayer invitation: God of my breath, energize my Faith and Bless my Yes!
Amen

Musical suggestion: “Earth and All Stars” (<https://youtu.be/3ZwRQmjXsik>)

Pamela Sutton
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

December 24, 2022

Christmas Eve

“Shivers of Love”

Scripture Reference: Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV – Updated Ed.)

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

⁸ Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, ¹⁹ and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

What is it that warms our hearts?

My wife and I take Saturday evenings as a stay-at-home movie night most weeks. She makes gorgeous pizza and we settle into some story and lose ourselves in the narrative and action.

I can be a sentimental guy at times, so when a beautiful scene of humanity shows-up I can tear-up as my heart is warmed.

When I read scripture, my heart is warmed many times, too. And especially as the intent of the Nativity narrative unfolds, revealing God's purpose to meet each of us in-person, loving us despite our seemingly endless potential to disappoint with actions and speech, though we might profess to "believe" and "trust in God by faith."

Parents are expected to be patient with their children, loving them into who they can be, taking much time and effort. There are times of joy, and times of sorrow. But there is a dedication to the life we are responsible for in helping hope and wholeness be made known.

This is the same for our Creator, but magnified by the "grains of sand", the numbers of humanity from all-time, and I would add all sentient beings from all space and dimension, to reveal a Love that is staggering. And that love came down to this small planet in the 'verse to help our race, our family of earth, know Grace and Mercy first-hand, so to save us and provide centering for life!

With this I shiver, as my heart is warmed, yea, as my soul is stirred to magnify the Lord of hosts, the Incarnation, for ever and ever. Amen.

Pastor Andrew Borden
Grace Ministries

Sunday, December 25, 2022
Christmas Day
“It’s All About Love”

NATIVITY OF THE LORD

Today is what it is all about, love shining on the world steaming from this tremendous gift of God’s presence in human flesh and blood. God chose to engage and work with imperfect people through this incarnational event. It was shepherds, it was a young, inexperienced couple, neighbors, fellow travelers, an unaware motel operator. God uses us all in telling God’s story over and over again. Be particularly aware of those who will, unbeknownst to them, carry the gospel message to you and your network of friends and family. Part of the Christmas miracle is the joy in discovering the messengers that will be employed to do God’s broadcast of good news.

AND, plan to go to church this morning. The Greendale Ecumenical Fellowship will be worshipping together at Bethel Lutheran Church, 90 Bryn Mawr Ave, Auburn at 10:00 AM. If it means coming in slippers with your hair tussled from a night of active dreaming – “It’s OK!” We all know that the carols are richer and more robust when the house is full. If you come, I promise the three pastors will sing a trio. That’s my promise – but only if YOU come.

Merry Christmas!

Rev. Mark Nilson
Salem Covenant Church

Participating Congregations

Salem Covenant Church
Grace Ministries: Zion & Bethel Lutheran Churches
The Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester