

Prepare the Way



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An Advent Meditational Guide

2019

Westover Hills Presbyterian Church

Little Rock, Arkansas

Acknowledgements

Sally Browder provided the Advent booklet text.

H. K. Stewart designed the booklet and cover.

Nancy Griffin created the banner.

Note: The initial Scripture reading each week is the Sunday reading from the three-year Revised Common Lectionary. The weekly reading is taken from the Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Clear a Path Straight to the Heart and Mind

Everyone has a story. In family gatherings, in job interviews, on social occasions, in psychotherapy, we share those stories, explaining to others and reminding ourselves how we came to be who we are. Stories ground us and give us meaning. And sometimes, in the retelling they provide us an opening for something new to happen or be discovered.

Christians have a story as well. The church's telling of this story is spread out over the course of a year, the narrative reflected in readings, in songs, in color-coded paraments, and in liturgy. That year starts now, in Advent, where we begin with the account of Jesus' arrival in the world. Advent is a season of preparation, peculiar in that it prepares us to celebrate God's entering human life and at the same time to anticipate God's doing this again and again. What has been and is yet to be.

God's becoming incarnate upsets the expectations of the world every time. And each year, as we follow the events of the life of Jesus over the course of the church year, we rediscover that Jesus turns upside-down the expectations not only of the world but of the religious community as well regarding what God is all about. What we call the Kingdom of God.

And in the living out of our story, both acting out its details in worship and translating its messages in everyday life, we are continually discovering what God means for us in being human. The Word made flesh. An opening for something new to happen or be discovered.

In both the Isaiah and Matthew passages that make up much of the lectionary readings for Advent we are urged to put aside what we think we know and what we've been taught by the world about God and what life is supposed to be. We've got to think differently about how God works in the world and what God wants of us. Prepare to walk a different path.

Notes

(Use these note pages for your own reflections on Advent, prompted by the lectionary passages or meditations. Write or draw; compose a prayer or poem, make a list of your ideas. And consider sharing some of your responses at the end of Advent, so they can be used during the season of Epiphany.)

Prepare to Walk a Different Path

So how do we prepare to do that?

When I think of preparing, I think of all the occasions in which we prepare: We prepare for company, we prepare meals, we prepare for exams or presentations or parties or events. And in all these instances, we change something. We make plans and collect what we need, we clean up, we put things in order. We make meals. We study up. We get dressed. We practice.

Can we apply these same methods, then, to how we prepare for Christ's entrance into the world? How we prepare to be who we are created to be?

Here are some steps we could consider:

1. We prepare by holding onto the big picture. We anticipate the end point and keep in mind where we are going.
2. We prepare by paying attention to detail. We identify specifics that need addressing.
3. We prepare by considering what we need in order to get there. We gather our resources.
4. We prepare by prioritizing. We make a plan, keeping in mind the most important things.

Each week during Advent we will consider in more detail each of these steps in preparing ourselves for Christ in the world. We will use the lectionary readings to offer guidance in this process. We will pray about it. We will offer creative responses. And we will carry out activities that prompt us to think about our actions and how they relate to this preparation.

And if you look to the back of this booklet you will find a schedule of Sunday afternoon activities planned for Advent in which you are invited to participate (**All Good Gifts Around Us**).

Notes

Prompts: How do Isaiah's words apply in our lifetime?

In their haunting song "Lay Me Down," David Crosby and Graham Nash capture the uncertainty and weariness of what we may be feeling now.

Even though it's hard to know
Just how the story ends
The road is long and takes its time
On that you can depend.

What song captures what you feel now in your life?

Week One

*1. Hold onto the big picture. Anticipate the end point.
Think about where you are headed.*

**Sunday, December 1, readings: Isaiah 2:1–5 •
Romans 13:11–14 • Matthew 24:36–44**

How We Can Be in the World

Things are tense in the world right now. It feels like we are caught in, to use the words of the poet Barrie Shepherd, “a wilderness bereft of alleluias.” What a perfect time to read the prophets, writing about judgment for how their people were going about things in the wrong ways and at the same time, about hope for restoration and return to God’s covenant relationship. (Or it’s a perfect time, perhaps, assuming we can explore the ways we ourselves are involved in the wrong ways!)

In Isaiah’s prophetic passage, he talks of a mountain, the mountain of the Lord’s house. He is not really talking about a place, of course. Just as Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, it is not a place but a way of being. To walk in God’s path is to live a certain way. To be on the higher mountain. What would that look like? The swords-into-plowshares passage gives us one idea.

It is a hard life to live or hard in that it calls for us to respond in the world in a way that sometimes runs counter to what we would really want to do. “I’ll show them” can feel so comfortable. So natural.

Consider, for example, this response to the Isaiah 2 passage:

A Different Path

This sword is easier to wield;
The satisfying swing,
Its shining arc of swift vengeance;
A thrill of certainty,
A rush of angry truth;
The strength of metal held tight,
Bringing down
The satisfying weight of quick judgment.

How much harder this clumsy blade;
The slow burrowing
Into hard, unforgiving earth;
The slow turning, yielding,
The play of water that works its way like tears;
The loosening of resistant clumps.
Coaxing up of frail shoots of green,
The promise of crops to come.

It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; put on Jesus.

—Romans 13:11–12

What is this way of being to which we are called? The biblical writers speak of a movement from night to day, from darkness to light. A call to walk in the light.

These are all expressions that carry encouragement, hopefulness and ... a lack of specificity. How like life: a series of discrete, definable moments and no specific instructions for each. We are going to need a little more, then, in the way of example. Can we find that in Jesus? And the first thing Jesus did was to surround himself with a small community of twelve. So why don't we work out the details together.

Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ. On this presupposition rests everything that the Scriptures provide in the way of directions and precepts for the communal life of Christians.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Anticipating change can provoke fear or anxiety. But when we know generally where we are going, anxiety can turn to excitement, fear to faith.

Notes

Where do you find yourself in the story? When do we tear down/when do we build up?

Day by Day

December 2–7

Week One's Lectionary Reading: Matthew 21–22

The Kingdom of God: The different way proposed by Jesus

Many of the Gospel readings for this Advent season are from Matthew. They start where we end up—with Jesus nearing the end of his life. There is a kind of urgency in these passages: his arrival in Jerusalem, his teachings about the end of the present age, the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus speaks with authority and claims authority. And he encourages his followers to claim the same faith. He acts in ways that reflect the prophetic words he grew up hearing and reading in the synagogue. He gets angry, then turns and heals the sick. He tells simple stories to convey what God intends for the world. He confounds the religious authorities, exposing their cynical concerns for appearances and power and their cowardice.

Where do you find yourself in the story? I think of Jesus growing up and hearing or reading the words of the prophets and thinking “this is about me.” Could it be that we might have felt the same way? What happens to you if you read Scripture in this most personal way possible—“this is talking about me.” Would we be other Jesuses?

In these passages, Jesus is addressing challenges to his authority. He is claiming a right to speak. Jesus is not claiming anything we can't claim as well. “I know where I have come from, and I know where I am going.” The source of his authority is his relationship with God.

Of course, we can think of many examples of people who claim authority by virtue of their relationship with God. Some are delusional, some self-serving and predatory. Our standard of judgment is whether the message is consistent with a God who acts in the interests of creation and who brings the world back into loving relationship.

The Gospel readings seem to be asserting this about Jesus: That he is a true representation of what God intends for the world.

Notes

Think of a familiar story about you or your family. A story told over and over in your life. Tell it again to yourself, paying attention to its details, and see if it opens itself up to some new insight or possibility. Here are some other helpful words on this matter:

The ordinary acts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest.

— Thomas Moore

The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.

— Julian of Norwich

Week Two

2. Pay attention to the details. Identify specifics that need addressing.

**Sunday, December 8, Readings: Isaiah 11:1–10 •
Romans 15:–413 • Matthew 3:1–12**

Making Sense

Last week, I referred to our faith as reflected in story. Today feels more about poetry, for in poetry we employ the senses, experiencing the world in its exquisite detail. We need poets to open our senses and bring the world into our hearts.

Take the Isaiah passage. Beautiful poetry and powerful imagery describe the shape of hope for the future of Judah. The kind of leader portrayed would usher in a new type of world, one that would encompass a moral attitude toward the poor, fairness to the meek and long-suffering, and a world in which assumed enemies would no longer threaten each other.

But how is this to be? The messy details we call them. As astute spouse David observed, “People often say the devil is in the details, but the details are where God’s work is done.”

Attention to the details starts with attention. And it is surprising how difficult it is for us to pay attention. We are bombarded with so much information and stimulation around us, we stop taking it in.

In the church we talk about observance. We observe Advent. What a lovely expression. To notice. To register as important. We observe communion. We observe the church calendar. My Jewish friends talk about being observant Jews. I wish it were a common thing to refer to observant Presbyterians.

Let us begin our ushering in of the Kingdom of God by paying attention. Being observant, present in the world and with the people who populate it. Let us hone our skills at recognizing the holy in the ordinary events of daily life. Listen for the grace notes.

Notes

Prayer: A prayer for baking bread. (Or soup. Or casserole.)

*All our meals and all our living
Make as sacraments of Thee.
That by caring, helping, giving
We may true disciples be.*

—Percy Dearmer (1867-1936)

Prompt: Write a prayer for making your bed: e.g., “God, help me bring order to the world. Or to be thankful for the ways my life is comfortable. Or for the safety of a bed, a home. I pray for those who do not have that. Make them more visible to me in ways I can help.”

Day by Day

December 9–14

Week Two's Daily Lectionary Readings: Matt 22:23–24:14

Take It All In

Jesus' harshest words were for those who most wanted to appear right and religious. They separated their religious identities from their care for the community around them. Their adherence to religious rules and the prestige they acquired in maintaining the rules took precedence over the reason for being religious in the first place. They missed the point.

So, when the religious leaders tried to expose Jesus as a theological lightweight he turned the tables on them – he exposed them as hypocrites. When asked what the greatest commandments were, Jesus answered: to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And to love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus confronts them for failing to pay attention to what they were inside, instead of how they attempted to appear to others. He went on to argue that righteousness was not a performance but a persistent way of being in the world, of being careful not to get in the way of those who need to experience God's love.

Pay attention. Don't get distracted by worry about appearances. Attend to what is around you.

How do we get the idea that what we do in church is ever separated from what we do through the week? Prayerful attention to the details that surround our lives enhances our ability to see the elements of worship in all we do. And when we come together to worship, we bring the same attentiveness and consecrate all our actions. The "sanctification of time" perhaps.

Make a spiritual discipline. Or better yet, make what you do already a spiritual discipline.

Notes

To be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less. Gratitude is the root of all virtue. It lies at the base of love and charity.

— Ronald Rolheiser

Week Three

3. *Think about what you need in order to get there. What resources are necessary.*

**Sunday, December 15, Readings: Isaiah 35:1–10 •
Luke 1:47–55 • Matthew 11:2–11**

Being Magnificent

This is Gaudete Sunday. The Sunday for Joy, in the Advent scheme of things. It isn't joy for everybody. If you're happy and you know it, don't bother with church today. (Does that sound too harsh?) The reading for this Sunday always included the Magnificat, one of the most powerful passages of praise and prophecy in Scripture.

Is this poem meant for us? When we are comfortably ensconced in church, happy with how things are going, satisfied with our lives, well, that's that. We make our meals, and we make our investments. We don't go looking for a call to turn our lives around.

This is a Sunday that speaks to what is in the human spirit. When we are forced to let go of the control we think we have (because we always have less than we think we do), we can come to church today. When our own insights clue us in to how close to the edge of vulnerability we are, we can open ourselves to identify with the lowly, the poor, those in need of a home, those in need of meaning.

That's who gets the message today.—the humbled one given the strength to conquer; the teenaged girl who calls out the powerful. And what is the result? Like the Isaiah passage for today: Water where there wasn't any. Blind eyes that see, deaf ears that hear, lame legs a'leapin', and speechless tongues that sing. If you see yourself as this story, it is because you remember God meets us in our weakness.

So, am I really suggesting that you not come to church? Naw. Not really. But if you are feeling off balance, on the losing side of justice, shaken about the future and unsure of yourself, then you get to sit on the front row and sing the loudest today.

Notes

You don't have to understand everything to believe the essential thing. God's love has come to you in Jesus. What happened to Nicodemus could indeed happen to you.

—Mark Cumpler, Peachtree Presbyterian Church

What are you watching for?

Keep asking questions.

Day by Day

December 16–21

Week Three Lectionary Readings: Matt. 24:15–44 •
John 3:16–21 • Luke 1:1–56

Joy is essential. And gratitude.

My goodness. This week, we've got 1) Luke's offering: "Ok. I've carefully thought through everything and now I'm going to offer an orderly account of how Jesus came to be." 2) We have the unsettling and disturbing words of Matthew's passage about the terrible end of Jerusalem and Jesus' attempts to help his frightened disciples understand that they would not be abandoned ("when are you coming back?") and words about the second coming of Christ. 3) And then there is John. The sweet and poignant story of Nicodemus, the Temple leader who struggled to understand Jesus. I say sweet because Jesus was so kind to him and offered what has become perhaps the best-known words from the Bible: For God so loved the world ..."

All in varying ways efforts to convey that Jesus is indeed a true representation of what God intends for the world. It is summarized in that earlier verse that we all memorized in Sunday school as kids: God so loved the world.

This is what Jesus is about: To live like Jesus is to understand like Jesus what God is like and what God intends. We come from God and we have within us a light, a compelling pull to move toward God. And to the extent that we don't resist it, we, too, become Light. Able to convey God's love and to recognize it in others.

What does it look like, this life that is the light of humankind? What it looks like is both profound and simple. In the Gospel of John, we are presented with example after example of Jesus confronting difficult circumstances in life: Sickness, disability, and death; exploitation (prostitution); prejudice; rigid moralistic and rule-bound thinking. And in each case, he extends hospitality, healing, acceptance, kindness.

Notes

*Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that,
because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*

—Howard Thurman

*If you want to make progress on the path and ascend to the
places you have longed for, the important thing is not to think
much but to love much, and so to do whatever best awakens you
to love.*

—St. Teresa of Avila

Week Four

4. Prioritize. Act. Make a plan.

What is the most important thing to keep in mind?

**Sunday, December 22, Readings: Isaiah 7:10–16 •
Matthew 1:18–25**

Start Looking for Evidence of the Kingdom of God.

Looking for signs in bad times. The prophet Isaiah encouraged the ruler of Judah, Ahaz, to look to God for signs of rescue in a dangerous situation. And we should as well. The sign of God's care and intervention in the Isaiah story came in the form of a child who would be born during Ahaz' reign. But this passage is quoted for its prescience of a later sign of God's intervention in the form of another baby: Jesus.

Perhaps a child is always a sign of God's intervention in the world. Children are symbols of newness, hopefulness. But children are weak and helpless as well. How could anyone be rescued by a child? Unlikely heroes, children.

Is this God turning our expectations upside down? As in: God is with us, all right, but not in the ways we expect.

And poor Joseph, who Matthew calls "a righteous man," and who is going to do the right and kind thing and quietly dismiss Mary rather than expose her to public ridicule, has his assumptions up-ended as well. Stay with it, Joseph. God is with you.

Our reflections this year are about preparing. Preparing to walk a different way, "the way of the Lord." And in every case, this means being open, being receptive, to something different from our expectations. Allowing ourselves to be surprised.

One message of Advent is that the good we seek, the success we achieve, while not bad, may not be the best expressions of who God is. Jesus replaces all of it. If you want to be part of the

Kingdom of God, if you want to help people change in the way they need to change, save them in the way they need saving, it won't be by offering a Sunday school class, increasing attendance at church, packing the pew, offering a daycare program or any THING or PROGRAM at all, good though those things may be.

You change people by loving them. And that is it. This building is either the icing on the cake or it's a hindrance. You change people by knowing them first of all and you get to know people by loving them. Love is the only way we can know someone else. And Jesus was very good at this.

Spread the news.

God is with us.

Day by Day

December 22–25

Week Four Lectionary Readings: Micah 4:1–5 •
Isaiah 60:1–6 • Matt. 1:1–25 • Luke 2:1–20

Prepared for Good News?

We return to the same prophetic message with which we began, only this time from the prophet Micah instead of Isaiah: “They will beat their swords into plowshares We will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.”

Are you prepared for good news?

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Something old and new. Because what this passage does is tie the present to the past. God is still ABOUT to be about what God has ALWAYS BEEN about (note the Isaiah reference).

The beginning of the good news. God. In the wilderness, in the dark corners and at the margins of our lives, where we are on the edge.

Are we prepared to hear it? Do we wake up in the morning thinking “what good has happened since I read the paper yesterday?”

I suspect I have a little Grandma Sewell in me. This great grandmother died before I was old enough to know who she was. She was bent on the negative. A scout for misbehavior, particularly distrusting of anything having to do with the big city. So, when my mother, at 17, moved to Houston to work and go to school, Grandma Sewell met her each Friday upon her return home with, “So, Wilma, what bad has happened in Houston this week?”

The problem here is not in recognizing bad things. We should take evil seriously. The problem is that we allow these troubling things to confound us, to be the last word. We let them get in the way of

hope. And this is a pretty good definition of “sin”: we stop believing that God has the ultimate last word and we become inactive and apathetic.

What is God up to, and what is it that God has been about all along? It is that God is present, God is in charge, and God is for us.

“God so loved the world.” We know where we have come from. Let’s help each other as we move to where we are going.

Prayer

(offered by Gordon Garlington)

May God bless you

With a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart;

With holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people;

With the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hands to comfort them and transform their pain into joy;

With enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you can, with God's grace, do what others claim cannot be done. Amen!

—Adapted from a Franciscan blessing

Notes

Look back through your reflections this Advent season and find insights and material you are willing to share with others. Send them to Sally Browder (sally.browder@sbcglobal.net) or H. K. Stewart (hks@hkstewart.com) and they will become part of the Epiphany service. Gifts and instances of insight. Perfect for celebrating Epiphany.

All Good Gifts Around Us

Communal Events for Advent

Fellowship Hall After Sunday Service

Sunday, December 1: Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Join Westover friends in the Fellowship Hall after the service for a light lunch and discussion of the neighborhood in which we find ourselves. Who are our neighbors? How much do you know about those around us? We will have a brief presentation of the kinds of development and changes going on in the adjacent neighborhoods, the kinds of needs and interests of those closest to our church, and how we can relate as well to those closest to where we live ourselves.

Sunday, December 8: Chrismon Cookies

Come see how the cookie crumbles after the morning service. We will have snacks and music and tables of sugar cookies (in the shape of Chrismons) for you to decorate and take to give as holiday treats.

Sunday, December 15: Come Sing with Me!

You don't have to know a thing about singing to join in the singing circle in the Fellowship Hall after the service. Pick your part or sit by someone who sings louder than you and let your voice take flight. Music and words for carols will be provided. There will be joy and refreshments.

Singing has always seemed to me the most perfect means of expression. It is so spontaneous Since I cannot sing, I paint.

—Georgia O'Keeffe

Open to all! Brings friends and family

Advent Season 2019

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