



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 17, 2023

Weekly Prayer

O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel. Amen.

Monday, December 18

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people!
says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,
that her penalty has been paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins!

A voice is crying out:

"Clear the LORD's way in the desert!

Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

Every valley will be raised up,
and every mountain and hill will be flattened.

Uneven ground will become level,
and rough terrain a valley plain.

The LORD's glory will appear,
and all humanity will see it together;
the LORD's mouth has commanded it."

Observation

This passage is traditionally read during Advent and has inspired carols and choir anthems. It calls for God's people to be given comfort, and a promise that God will be among us, "the Lord's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together" (v5).

Application

This passage is connected to Advent because it speaks of the promised Messiah to be among us. It draws an image for us of our world, where God *turns it upside down*, where "every valley will be raised up, every mountain will be flattened" (v4). This reminds me

that not only have God's people been seeking comfort and guidance from God for thousands of years, but that since creation, God has been *providing* that comfort and guidance to us. God promises to be present and care for us, and invites us to be part of caring for God's beloved world.

Prayer

Good and loving God, thank you for your faithfulness to me throughout time. Call to me again today, as always -- calling me yours, offering me comfort, and inviting me to follow you always. Amen.

PS. Here is one song based on Isaiah 40 that I particularly enjoy, setting the soundtrack for today's devotional: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJXPeBOEMtU>

Tuesday, December 19

Scripture: Mark 1:4-8

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Observation

John the Baptist, or *baptizer*, was known for being a preacher who called for confession and changed lives. No doubt, he has inspired many a street preacher over the years! Scripture tells us that the people responded to John's messages and found themselves experiencing transformed lives and hearts.

Application

Do you remember your baptism? I suspect many of you were baptized as infants and do not have a vivid memory of it. Some of you likely were older and are fortunate to have memories of this sacrament! One reason we, as Methodists, baptize as infants is as a reminder that baptism is an act of God's grace. God is the one who redeems, restores, and transforms us. It doesn't matter if you are an infant, a teen, or middle-aged, God is the one who acts upon you: saving and transforming your life. But as John the Baptist called to us, we are invited to respond to God's grace by living as ones transformed and freed. What difference does God's love and grace make in your life?

Prayer

Holy God, thank you for being at work in John's life, and in my own. Remind me today of my own belovedness, as one who has been loved and redeemed by you. Help me to love others as freely. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-6

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

Observation

John the Baptist's messages centered around two primary themes: confession and discipleship. Confession, which is the 'setting oneself right' with God by naming and asking forgiveness of sins. Then, committing to following God fully, with your heart, soul, and mind.

Application

Have you considered the way that your own confession supports your walk with God? Is confession, and seeking forgiveness, a regular part of your prayer life? Or relationships with others? If so, what kind of impact has this made on your heart and practices? And if not, what might it look like to spend intentional time seeking and making amends?

Prayer

Thank you God, for offering complete forgiveness of my sins. Give me courage to be vulnerable before you, in seeking forgiveness, and help me to live a transformed life. Amen.

Thursday, December 21

Scripture: Matthew 3:7-12

Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one

who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

Observation

Building upon yesterday, the third theme of John's messages is to point others to Christ, *preparing the way of the Lord*. By encouraging confession and discipleship, John then invites others to watch and wait for Jesus to be among them. "The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (v11).

Application

Have there been people in your life who have helped you to prepare for and follow Jesus? How did their words, actions, or encouragement draw you closer to God? What practices do you keep today, that help you "prepare the way of the Lord"?

Prayer

Holy God, you have promised us a Messiah to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. Thank you for the gift of Jesus. Help me to "keep watch" for the ways Christ is at work in my life today, and in times to come. And continue to invite and encourage me to follow you. Amen.

Friday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 3:1-14

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.*

All humanity will see God's salvation."

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit

that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire." The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect." Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?" He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

Observation

The story of John the Baptist is told in several Gospels. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke's Gospel tells us that John baptizes people and calls them to be transformed. But Luke also grounds John's message in a historical context that invites us to consider how we follow Jesus, not only generally, but also specifically in our own unique time and place.

Application

If you wrote the story of Jesus being present today, and to you, how would your unique setting influence the story you share? How is God uniquely present to you in 2023, through the real, day to day, realities of our lives?

Prayer

God of all time and space, thank you for your continued presence today. Help me to remember that the story of your Son is one that not only happened years ago in Bethlehem, but that continues to transform and save me, today. Guide me to share the story of your Good News with those around me. Make me proclaim, like John the Baptist, that the Lord is near. Amen.

Saturday, December 23

Scripture: Luke 3:15-18

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

Observation

The people were "filled with expectation" (v15). Some wondered if John might be the promised Messiah. Others wondered who this person was that John prepared them for. And some were critical of John's message. John "appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people" (vs 18).

Application

We, too, are a people filled with expectation. As we prepare for Christmas, we await the celebrations and wonder of Christ among us. (*And I hope you'll join us for one of our services online or in person tomorrow!*) The birth of Christ is God's gift of peace, love, joy, and peace among us -- for you, and for all people. In these final hours before celebrating Jesus' birth, how might you share the gift of Jesus with others?

Prayer

Holy Christ, you are the greatest gift. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for calling me to be transformed, and to be generous in my love, fervent in my hope, and faithful in my following of you. Help me to embody your gifts of this season, that I might share your love with others. Amen.