

November 28/29 TELL ME THE STROY

Title: Tell the Story of the Anticipation

Text: Isaiah 61:1-11 & Luke 4:16-21

Anticipation is defined as excitement, waiting eagerly for something you know is going to happen. It's a way of looking ahead, just like its Latin roots which mean "to take care of ahead of time." Some synonyms for anticipation are hope, joy, prospect, and expectancy.

What does anticipation mean to you?

When it comes to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Christ do you think that we enter into the Advent Season with an eager expectation? If not, why not?

What is our anticipation at Christmas time – preparing for parties, celebrations, decorating, baking and the like or is it centered on Jesus being born anew in our hearts?

What helps you to anticipate the coming of Jesus the Messiah?

What gets in the way of anticipating the coming of Jesus the Messiah?

Isaiah 61

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. 5 Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. 6 And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. 7 Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs. 8 "For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed." 10 I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. NIV

Isaiah was looking with eager expectation to the coming of the promised Messiah. It is important to understand the context of Isaiah's prophecy—God is using the prophet to send a word of hope to people who have had everything that identified them as children of God stripped away from them—Jerusalem—the Temple—the land—loved ones—and had been carted off and scattered among the Babylonians—yet God is promising a return and restoration for the tribe of Judah—the Jews.

As we look at and consider the text we will find that there are four things that the Jews anticipated and we can as well:

1) Comfort for the afflicted (61:1-4) The Messiah will bring GOOD NEWS and COMFORT

Isaiah, in these verses, speaks of healing, of restoration, of restored joy and hope.

In the midst of all that the Jews were going through and facing how do you think they felt as they heard these words of Isaiah?

In the midst of those times in our lives when everything seems as though it is being disrupted what comfort do these words bring to us?

2) Mending the broken (61:5-7) The Messiah will RESTORE and BLESS ALL PEOPLE

Isaiah here speaks of mending for those experiencing brokenness as well as restoration.

What does the promise of restoration mean to you?

Has there been a time in your life when you have experienced God bringing restoration either personally or in another's life?

God's Word gives us the promise that in the end God will restore all things when he ushers in His Kingdom. Do you think that we anticipate this and allow it to be an integral part of our faith?

3) Reestablishment of the Covenant (61:8-9) The Messiah will ESTABLISH JUSTICE and COVENANT

Isaiah reminds the Jews and us of God's covenant with His people. Through Christ we are a very real part of that covenant.

What does it mean to you to be part of God's covenant?

Do you think that we live our lives in such a way that they reflect that we believe we are part of God's covenant?

4) Restoration of holiness (61:10-11) The Messiah will SAVE and SANCTIFY his PEOPLE

Isaiah proclaims that through the coming of the Messiah, Jesus, we can be "clothed with the garments of salvation and arrayed in a robe of righteousness."

What do you think he means by that?

Do you think we live out our life of faith in a way that reflects the joy of our salvation?

Do you think we live out our life of faith in a way that anticipates our growing in God's grace becoming more and more like Jesus (sanctified)?

December 5/6 TELL ME THE STORY

Title: Tell the Story of the Announcement

Text: Luke 1:26-56

Luke 1:26-56

26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." 34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" 46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me — holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." 56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

NIV

As Gabriel makes his announcement to Mary concerning Jesus this breaks a 400 year silence of God to His people. This was actually Gabriel's second of three appearances in the Christmas story as he had already announced the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zechariah and would convince Joseph that God's hand was in Mary's subsequent pregnancy. But Gabriel had appeared before in the Bible. In the book of Daniel, he was the one used to reveal God's plan of Israel's future destruction and the promised coming of an anointed one—a Christ—a Messiah. The anointed one would reside in the womb of a poor, young peasant girl in Nazareth—after 400 years of silence—LIGHT was about to dawn again on God's people.

In the verses that follow, Mary moves from disbelief—to faithful acceptance—to magnificent praise—and as we walk through her story we will learn some important lessons for our own stories:

1. God finds favor in those you would never expect (1:26-28)

Mary was just a common girl that found favor in the eyes of God and He used her in a powerful way. Can you think of any examples of people God has used either in history or in your life? Have you ever sensed God calling you to allow Him to use you?

2. It's ok to be afraid and concerned with what God is doing (1:29)

We can only imagine the fear that Mary initially felt as she hears Gabriel's news. Has there ever been a time when God called you to a task that caused you to fear? How did you overcome that fear?

3. God's plan may not always make sense or fit with yours (1:30-34)

We can only imagine how puzzled Mary must have been by all of this. Do you think that at times we fail to follow God's plan because we don't think that it makes sense or perhaps it does not fit our plan?

4. God's plan is never just for you (1:35-37)

Do you think that we take into consideration the broader view of God's plan or do we fall into the trap of only looking at it from our perspective?

5. Humility is the perfect response to God (1:38)

Mary humbly submitted herself to God and His plan for her life. How difficult is it for us to do the same? What gets in the way?

6. God gives us reason to sing (1:46-56)

As Mary considers all that is taking place and what God is doing her "soul glorifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior." How might we approach this Advent and Christmas differently if we did the same?

December 12/13 TELL ME THE STORY

Title: Tell the Story of the Acceptance

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

It has been said about acceptance: **Acceptance** in human psychology is a person's assent to the reality of a situation, recognizing a process or condition (often a negative or uncomfortable situation) without attempting to change it or protest it. The concept is close in **meaning** to acquiescence, derived from the Latin *acquiescere* (to find rest in).

What does acceptance mean to you?

What makes it difficult for you to accept something? What makes it easy?

Matt 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. NIV

In our scripture passage for today we find Joseph being confronted by the angel of the Lord sharing with him the news concerning Mary. The verses of this story show us how Joseph's bad news—is confronted for the promise of God's good news and the result of his faithful acceptance, as a righteous and devout son of David, was the birth of the child he named "Jesus"—"God is our salvation." As we explore Joseph's story in the Story we will learn some important lessons for our own stories concerning acceptance:

1. Sometimes God's call and will is hard to comprehend and accept (1:18)

What makes it difficult for us to accept God's will?

Can you recall a time when you initially questioned God's will and then later came to understand His purpose?

2. God's dealing with our struggling is filled with truth and grace (1:19)

While Joseph was seeking to do the right thing by Mary, he unknowingly would have been going against God's will.

Do you think that there are times when we either ignore or miss God's will because we are dealing with a situation from our perspective? If so, how might we be missing God's truth and grace in the midst of what we are facing?

3. God will interrupt our lives if necessary (1:20-21)

Can you recall a time when God interrupted your life, your plans by calling you to some task or ministry?
Was it easy or difficult to accept this? How did you deal with it?

4. God's desire is to be with us (1:22-23)

Do you think that we fully understand the depth of the meaning of God with us?
What does "God with us" mean to you?

5. We can be faithful even if we don't fully understand (1:24-25)

Do you think we tend to miss opportunities that God places before us simply because we do not understand fully what He is asking of us?
How difficult is it to be faithful to God's call even when we do not fully understand?

December 19/20 TELL ME THE STORY

Title: Tell the Story of the Adoration

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Luke 2:1-20

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to 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. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. NIV

There is something significant and powerful about including shepherds in the Story.

- 1) They are a reminder that the Kingdom of God is not just for insiders—but for outsiders (like the shepherds and the poor—like Mary and Joseph).**

If we are not careful the Church and/or the Christian Community can become more like a club. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? Why or why not?

What are some things we need to guard against to make sure that this does not happen?

- 2) They remind us the Kingdom of God is often not made up of the noble and wise, but the underclass, those who have no business hanging out with royalty.**

Shepherds in Jesus day were looked down upon. They were not really considered to be part of polite society back then. They were required to tend their folks outside the city. The only reason they had any significance was because sheep were a valuable commodity, especially in Bethlehem which was only 6 miles from the Temple when Passover or the Day of Atonement was near. Yet they are the very ones that the angels appeared to and announced the Good News of Jesus birth. And there they are worshipping the prince of

heaven who has come to earth. It is Immanuel God with us who reminds us God came and resides with all classes of people not just the connected or well-resourced.

Do you think that there are times when we tend to forget that the Kingdom of God is for everyone? If so, what causes that to happen?

Talking about God's love for everyone can be rather easy, demonstrating it can be quite something else, especially when it comes to those we deem undeserving. Would you agree with that statement? Why or why not?

How can we be more intentional about sharing the Good News with everyone?

What are some ways that we can begin to break down the walls that tend to keep people on the outside?

3) Their presence tells us a little bit about just what kind of Messiah Jesus will be that he would come as a Savior, a King, a Lion, but also as a Shepherd.

What does it mean to you that Jesus is the King, the Savior of your life?

What does it mean to you that Jesus is a Shepherd/the Good Shepherd of your life?

4) They show us that we cannot keep the Good News to ourselves, but that it is to be shared.

We are told that the shepherds came and worshipped Jesus and gave thanks to God for the newborn King, but they didn't stop there. We are told that they went back and shared the Good News with all those they encountered. The shepherd's Christmas story reveals to us a story that when we come face to face with God's movement in the world we are compelled to worship and then we have to tell someone.

Do we share the Good News openly and joyously as the shepherds did or do we wait for opportunities to present themselves?

What hinders us at times from sharing the Good News?

December 26/27 TELL ME THE STORY

Title: Tell the Story of the Audience

Text: Luke 2:22-40

Luke 2:22-40

22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), **24** and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. **27** Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, **28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: **29** "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. **30** For my eyes have seen your salvation, **31** which you have prepared in the sight of all people, **32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. **34** Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, **35** so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, **37** and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. **38** Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. **39** When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. **40** And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. NIV

The prophet, Simeon, and the widow, Anna's Christmas story reveals to us a story that the audience that first received and recognized Jesus were poor, devout and deeply connected to God's heart and message.

Mary and Joseph carried with them two turtledoves as their offering. While a lamb would have been the usual offering, two turtledoves were all they could afford. In a very real sense there is an irony here in that they were carrying in their arms the very Lamb of God. The Kingdom breaks in not in the palaces or private estates of the powerful, but among the common, the meek, and the kind of people who had to dig deep in their pockets for enough shekels to afford two turtledoves.

How does this give us hope?

What we need to understand is that no one in the temple that day was looking for the Messiah. No one was seeking a Savior. Nobody expected that on this very ordinary day of all days there would be any reason to hope. There was heaviness in Jerusalem. It had been centuries since God had spoken to his people. They were reminded daily of their lost glory.

Do you think we live out our faith in a way that reflects a sense of expectancy? If not, why not?

Do you think that perhaps today we miss the glory of God because we have lost our sense of expectancy?

Both Simeon and Anna spent their lives devoted to looking for the promised Messiah. They studied the scriptures and knew what they said; they had a faith that was radical and unwavering and were unwavering in their watching for the Messiah.

How might our lives be different if we had the same commitment to studying the scriptures?

How might our lives be different if we held to the same kind of radical faith?

How might our lives be different if we showed the same kind of devotion?

What are some of the obstacles that get in the way of us showing that same devotion?

Do you think we look for the return of Jesus – His coming again – with the same expectancy and anticipation as that of Simeon and Anna?

When we read their stories within the Story—we get a glimpse of the nature of Jesus' Kingdom and the power of the blessing they gave to Mary, Joseph and Jesus:

1. Needs to include the poor (2:22-24)

Mary and Joseph carried with them two turtledoves as their offering. While a lamb would have been the usual offering, two turtledoves were all they could afford. In a very real sense there is an irony here in that they were carrying in their arms the very Lamb of God. The Kingdom breaks in not in the palaces or private estates of the powerful, but among the common, the meek, and the kind of people who had to dig deep in their pockets for enough shekels to afford two turtledoves.

How does this give us hope?

2. Needs to include the devoted (2:25-35)

Both Simeon and Anna spent their lives devoted to looking for the promised Messiah. What are some of the obstacles that get in the way of us showing that same devotion? How might our lives be different if we showed the same kind of devotion?

3. Needs to include the prophets (2:36-38)

4. Can help a family grow in wisdom and grace (2:39-40)

But among the crowd that day was a mysterious old man and woman. Unlike everyone else, Simeon and Anna held onto a seemingly improbable wish grounded in a radical faith, knowledge of the Scriptures and testified by the Spirit that the Messiah was coming. They had studied the scriptures and read the prophecies, but more than that they listened to the voice of God's Spirit

January 2/3 TELL ME THE STORY

Title: Tell the Story of the Arrival

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Matt 2:1-12

2 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 in the east and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. NIV

As we look at the Magi found in our scripture passage there are four important responses we see from the wise men and their quest to find and worship Jesus:

1) They sought the truth by following the star and reading ancient prophecies.

What is clear is that the magi were earnest in their desire to find the King of the Jews. They combined their knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures with their reliance on astrology. Scripture speaks pretty strongly against looking to the stars for meaning—but here is God meeting these non-Jewish/Gentile seekers where they are—utilizing his power over the stars to direct them to his Son. That doesn't mean the Bible condones astrology—it doesn't—but it does show us God is willing to meet those who genuinely seek him where they are.

Do you think we fully understand the importance of studying the scriptures, looking to them to lead us into God's truth and allowing them to help us both seek and find Him?

What tends to get in the way?

2) They obeyed the voice of the angel who told them not to return to Herod.

After beholding and worshipping Jesus God spoke to them in a dream telling them not to return to Herod who wanted to do harm to Jesus. God speaks to us in many ways – through His Word, through people, through situations and the like. God is always speaking to us.

The question becomes how willing are we to listen? How willing are we to respond?

Do we listen and follow or do we tend to wait to see if there might be another word?

3) They bowed and worshipped at the sight of Jesus.

Theirs was not a cheap worship. It was not a casual event. It was costly. Too often our worship is reduced to simply going through the motions, putting our time in for God. We sing our songs without excitement; we approach our weekly gathering with little or no enthusiasm. We too often find ourselves in the rut and routine and as such we rarely expect to encounter God. But if Jesus is the true KING, if Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies and covenant promises, if Jesus is the light of the world who saves people from their sins, then isn't he worthy of our whole selves—body, mind and soul in worship and devotion?

Do you think when it comes to worship we give it our all – body, mind and soul or do we simply tend to go through the motions?

What do you think tends to hold us back when it comes to worship?

What might we do to enthusiastically worship the Lord?

4) They gave precious gifts as an act of devotion and worship.

We are told that: ***“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”***

What gifts do we offer the Lord? Do we give Him our best or does He tend to get our leftovers?

Do we understand that the giving of our gifts is a very integral part of our worship?

When we read their stories within the Story—we learn some pretty important lessons about God’s love and how people respond to his offer of relationships.

1. Shows God’s love for the world (2:1-2)
2. Not all people want a king to arrive (2:3-6)
3. Not all people know how to worship Jesus as king (2:7-8)
4. Shows what humble worship looks like (2:9-11)
5. God is never done speaking and saving (2:12)