
Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 3, 2017
The first Sunday in Advent

ADVENT REFLECTION

“Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” 1 Corinthians 1:7

Competition and comparison will get us EVERY SINGLE TIME. When we spend time comparing ourselves to some ridiculous standard; competing with our loved ones for being “first” - first to be noticed, first to be recognized, first to be rewarded; checking out other people’s outsides and comparing our insides to them, we always end up short. We lose the fact that we are all the work of God’s hand (Isaiah 64:8).

Paul writes to the Corinthians as they’ve all been given spiritual gifts and are arguing over who’s got the best one. Can’t you just see it?

“Well, I can speak in tongues - check it out,” says one.

“I’ve got the gift of prophesy,” says another.

“I’m more awesome than you!”

I know I can. I’ve done the same thing__not with speaking in tongues of course, but measuring myself against others. Paul assures them that they are, in fact, not lacking anything. Notice that he doesn’t help any of them figure out who’s got the best deal. He skips over that judgy part and tells ALL of them they’re just fine. Then he reminds them they’ve forgotten what they should instead be doing__“eagerly waiting.”

When we spend our time comparing and competing, we miss that we should be “eagerly waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” We miss the time for preparing and resting assured that we have everything we need for Jesus’ return.

Prayer for today: *Restore us from the sins of competition and comparison, O Lord God Almighty. Make your face shine upon us and remind us that we have all that we need from you, so we may be saved from ourselves.* Adapted from Psalm 80:19.

Martha Parker, originally from Southlake, TX, moved to Houston in 2003. Martha is a wife, mom, daughter, sister, friend, ergonomist (yes, it’s a thing), entrepreneur, fightin’ Texas Aggie, class of 1995, and a member of St. James’.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Advent Reflection for Monday, December 4, 2017

In Micah 4:1-5, the prophet reminds the Israelites (and us) of God's promise of future glory. In our current time of harsh political discourse, increasing selfishness and other negative behaviors, Micah's prophecy in this chapter offers comfort to us.

This chapter starts with the words, "In the last days." Many prophets used these words to draw attention to the glory ahead when the Messiah returns. At this time, the Israelites were in Babylonian captivity, so here Micah was trying to encourage the people to look past their current state of affairs to the future. Reading it reminds me that I should, like the Israelites, do my best to look past the current difficulties in my own life and in the world and pray for God's peace.

The prophet then describes how "many nations," not just Israel, will come to the Lord's temple on the mountain and look to Him. Micah tells us that God will judge us all, and I am always mindful of His final judgment. He then offers more promising words, speaking about the world- "*they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.*" I am frightened at times with all the belligerent war talk we hear today and can only pray for peace to come to us soon.

Micah offers God's promise of the life to come where there is no need for war, no need to covet or commit other sins. While he points out that others will worship their gods, Christians will all live by God's rules, and ultimately the world will as well.

Prayer for today: *Heavenly Father, as we celebrate Advent, we pray for your light to shine everywhere and give us your peace. Amen.*

Sam Dodson has been a member of St. James' since 1981. He has served in many roles in the parish and is currently on the Finance Committee and teaches Adult Bible Study.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8

Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 5, 2017

In Micah 4 the LORD gathers a remnant of His chosen: the lame, the harshly judged, the mocked, and the outcasts. His chosen were just beat up by the world. When we, as His chosen, sit around and lament that God has left us, or that we lack the strength, or that there's no defense that blocks every attack, we are focused exclusively on ourselves. We are not exercising faith in God. We are disregarding the hope from Him that allows us to conquer the very challenges before us.

God did not create us, His beloved chosen, to be passive participants of change. The people of Judea, of whom Micah is prophesying, were writhing and wailing in their laborious pain thinking they were all alone and useless. However, we are not forgotten. We are chosen. So, we must push through! Micah reminds them and us to push until the appointed time guided by our Divine Labor Coach. Rest. Then push again, at the appointed time. At the hope-filled end, we glory in being delivered from our laborious tribulation. God carried us all along the way.

Beloved, how often do we move from one struggle to the next, forgetting to stop, take account of what we've overcome and express gratitude? Let us learn from our Judean faith cousins' mistakes and be present with God through our challenges, seeking Him through active listening in prayer, following His guidance as we push through the laborious pains to prevail. Practice gratitude. Gratitude employs the strength and sustaining tools that we've developed through the labor pains, thereby maturing our faith. Gratitude that says, "Thanks be to God!" when coupled with the tireless pushing of God's appointed time that says, "Not my will, but Thy will!" enables us to build the skills we need to overcome that next challenge.

Prayer for today: *O Father of light, shine your light upon our paths, that the way before us will be illumined by your brightness. Lift from our hearts all anxiety and fear; teach us to trust you both for what we see and for what is hidden from us. Evermore, lead us in your way and keep us in your peace. Amen.* (Source: *Prayers for All Occasions*, Forward Movement)

Michele Parker-Schauer is a Yankee by birth, a Trinidadian by heritage and a Texan by adoption. She takes her love for God and the care of others seriously, herself not so much.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13; Revelation 18:1-10

Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 6, 2017

In Luke 21:34-38, Our Lord forewarns us concerning overindulgence of things that can often create darkness. *“And take heed to yourselves...”* (v. 34) The Lord is clearly providing instruction for us to not be **caught up** in excess so that we are not **caught off guard** when darkness comes. *“For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth”* (v. 35).

The Lord is reminding us that darkness comes like a thief, setting a trap for us to fall into darkness. If we are to survive, we must pray without ceasing *“watch ye therefore, and pray always”* (v.36). We must hold fast, day and night, to the teachings of our Lord and Savior so that no matter the test or trial, we are able to stand worthy and acceptable before the Son of Man. 2nd Corinthians 4:17 tells us that our light and these temporary distractions are creating Glory that outshines any darkness that is brought upon us. In this Advent season, let us operate in the light of God and not succumb to the darkness.

Prayer for today: *Lord, in the midst of these times, where darkness never ceases in its attempt to cover us, continue reminding us that You are the Light of the world. Amen.*

David Jones has been a member of St. James’ since 2006 and is active in the music ministry. He loves to read and enjoys scripture telling. He is thankful that God uses him in unexpected ways and is thankful for his St. James’ Family.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21:34-38

Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 7, 2017

“How are you doing?”
“How do you feel?”
“How’s it going?”

These are the common courtesies and questions we extend to one another every day, and typically the response is “Fine;” “I’m good;” or “All is well.” We give and accept those replies without a second thought as to what’s *really* going on in our lives and in our world.

As we examine the state of affairs in our country and in the global community, a lot of us are feeling apprehensive, worried and fearful of what the future holds. We do not truthfully think we are fine or are doing good, and we certainly do not believe that all is well. Couple those broad concerns with the ones closer to our particular circumstances: our health, our jobs, our children, our relationships, and we could easily succumb to the malaise of hopelessness.

Thankfully, as Christians, we can circumvent the intimidations of hopelessness by resting on the assurances of God. We have seen and we KNOW what God can do! *“You, Lord showed favor to your land, you restored the fortunes of Jacob”* (Psalm 85:1). We have heard God’s truth spoken through His word and heard it echoing through our lives and circumstances. Therefore, we can stand firmly in declaring with the Psalmist, *“I will listen to what God the Lord says; He promises peace to his people, his faithful servants--but let them not turn to folly”* (Psalm 85:8). When we recognize that what God has done before, He can certainly do again, we can respond to the world’s troubles and our anxieties with confidence that all is indeed well. Perhaps that is why we can spontaneously answer the queries posed above, knowing that, *“The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest”* (Psalm 85:12).

Prayer for today: *Lord, thank you for your forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of our souls. Thank you for the blessing of salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ, and the promises of your steadfast love and faithfulness. Keep your hand on us, Lord, that we may know your perfect peace and do your perfect will. Amen.*

Karen M. Jenkins is a longstanding member of St. James’ Episcopal Church and has been blessed by God in countless ways. Her faith and her family are the sources of her joy, and she strives to be a good steward of God’s favor.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Hosea 6:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Advent Reflection for Friday, December 8, 2017

“Don’t Make Excuses When God Comes Calling”

You know, as humans, we are very good with making excuses. I, for one, resemble that comment. When I was first approached with the consideration of writing a meditative/reflective piece regarding one of three scripture passages, my immediate response was, “I am not a writer. I like to read, but I absolutely do not like to write.” In my mind, I had other excuses going such as “I don’t know how to write a meditation.” “I don’t have the time.” “I don’t have the energy.” “What could I possibly say?” The list as you can see is endless, and all of this was going on before I even opened my Bible to see the passages I was asked to consider! Well, imagine my surprise when Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10 was one for contemplation and the one that resonated with me.

The Lord called on Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1: 5). Jeremiah saw the task as one that was daunting and had his excuses ready. *“Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth”* (Jeremiah 1:6). While Jeremiah’s response clearly had him disobeying God’s command, Jeremiah did not want to disappoint God should he fall short in his appointed position. Like him, I did not want to disappoint either.

However, God countered every excuse that Jeremiah had formulated (Jeremiah 1: 5, 7). God knew Jeremiah. God knew Jeremiah’s name, and He knew Jeremiah’s talents and capabilities. Whatever Jeremiah lacked, God provided. Not only had God equipped Jeremiah for his appointed role, but Jeremiah also had the promise of God’s presence (Jeremiah 1: 7 – 9). As I write this, I, too, have God with me on this journey. Whatever I am lacking, God is providing. I take comfort in knowing that He is right beside me in all that I undertake to lead me and guide me to fulfill His purpose.

Prayer: Dear Lord, let me not lose sight that you are with me always to ready me for all that I encounter in order to fulfill your mission and purpose. Amen.

Jeanine Wilkins is a native Texan where she still resides with her husband and three daughters. She works as an educator in the Texas Public School System and is an active member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated and St. James’ Episcopal Church.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26

Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 9, 2017

Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, so our land will be filled with his glory. Yes, the LORD pours down his blessings. Our land will yield its bountiful harvest. Righteousness goes as a herald before him, preparing the way for his steps. Psalm 85:9, 12-13

Advent is the season of preparedness and high expectations that something miraculous is about to occur. When I was younger, I always looked forward to hearing and attending performances of George Frederick Handel's *Messiah* at this time of year. The oratorios and chorales shaped and built anticipation of something great that was yet to occur. From the Prelude to the Hallelujah Chorus, this work is masterful in presenting the individual (solo) voice in a recitative proclamation and is answered by harmonic choruses sung by "Big" Choirs. Scripture put to music, or music put to scripture, has a profound way of delivering a message of faith and hope. It challenges us to be attentive and responsive to what God is calling us to do through His word, to "prepare ye the way of the Lord," as we ourselves are being prepared.

The recitative, "The people that walketh in darkness have seen a great light" is one of my favorites in the *Messiah*, in that it speaks to the awakening of those who had walked in the darkness, being awakened by the glory of the light of the Messiah. This reminds us that the light has already come into the world, and because He has, this same hope remains for us.

Psalm 85 offers that same message of hope as is inspired by Handel's work. It speaks of a God who has come into the darkness of a sinful world and restored the light, of a God who has come to restore the fortunes of His people. Advent reminds us that what the Messiah came to do before, He will come to do again. We who have put our trust in God may find comfort in knowing that the salvation of the Lord is "near to those who fear him." It is a gift that is available to all who put their trust in Him. We can be comforted knowing that we, in the words of another of my favorites, the *Nunc Dimittis*, or the "Song of Simeon," like Simeon, can "depart in peace, according to thy Word. For mine eyes have seen your salvation."

So, stay alert, be watchful and be prepared, so that you too can see God's salvation and that you can be a beacon of light in this life.

Prayer for today: *Gracious Lord, dwell in our hearts, minds and souls as we live spiritually this Advent season. Help us to be a light to others we meet, share and live with, that we might demonstrate your love and grace and draw them closer to You. Amen.*

John Culmer, born and raised in Miami, Florida, is a graduate of Bethune Cookman College and Atlanta University. He spent his professional Career in Marketing and Asset Management with Cargill, Inc.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Mark 11:27-33

Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 10, 2017
The Second Sunday in Advent

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah 40:8

Christmas music is in the air. Christmas lights are everywhere. Poinsettia leaves turn bloody red. Christmas trees have stars overhead. But only for a season! Soon the lights will be taken down, the flowers will wither, and the Christmas trees will be dragged to the curb. Decorations will be packed away for another year.

Likewise, seasons change in our life's journey. We experience ups and downs, mountain tops and valleys, periods of darkness and periods of light. How can we navigate these challenges? Who can make the paths smooth? Where is there a beacon to light our steps to higher ground? Who will be our anchor in the storm? The answers lie in the enduring word of God. Guiding our path is the light of God's steadfast love, His patience, the gentleness of His leading, the comfort of His arms. The trials and triumphs of this world are transient; only God's love and faithfulness last forever. In the midst of a changing world, we can trust in the permanence of God's Word.

We can stand on God's promises because His word is true and everlasting. God's promises speak of love and peace, repentance and blessings. They declare the good news of eternal life to those who believe. Do not be afraid, for I am with you, God assures us. So let us draw close to Him. Let us share the good tidings, proclaiming the glory of the Lord. Let us show God's love by the way we live and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Prayer for today: *God of our salvation, open our eyes to see your light and to reflect it in our daily interaction with others. Open our hearts to spread the good news of your promises and bear witness to your saving grace. Cover us with your peace as we sing your praises: Great is Thy faithfulness, O God our Father... As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be. Amen.*

Paula Cox, an Anglican from the Province of the West Indies, has been an active member of St. James' Episcopal Church since her family moved to Houston 27 years ago. She is a retiree and a grandmother.

Today's Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8**

Advent Reflection for Monday, December 11, 2017

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" Psalm 27:1

As a child, I was always afraid to ride across bridges. I would close my eyes and hide under the car seat. This was before seat belts. Growing up in Florida, this occurred often. Even now as an adult, bridges are still a challenge for me but now that I am driving, I can't close my eyes or hide. Instead I call out to the Lord. Whether I am a passenger or the driver, I recite the first two lines of this psalm. It has become my constant prayer not only when crossing a bridge, but whenever I am overcome with fear. It calms me down and changes my focus to the Light that is guiding me safely, and gives me the strength that is needed.

Through the years, God's light has guided me over many "bridges" in life. Whether it was school, marriage, children, grandchildren or work that caused my anxiety, the words of this psalm have been my comfort, my prayer, the hand that I have held onto, the hand that has held me, and the one that has led me through the darkness back into the light.

Prayer for Today: Dear Lord, thank you for being the strength of our lives. Continue to be our light and salvation. Guide us over the many bridges of fear we may face and give us peace. Amen.

Toni Simmons, storyteller, author, and librarian brings stories to life with the use of rhythms, songs and audience participation. She is a selected artist on the Texas Commission on the Arts Touring Roster and was designated by the National Endowment for the Arts as an American Masterpiece.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 27; Isaiah 26:7-15; Acts 2:37-42

Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 12, 2017

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Psalm 27: 1

Fear. FEAR. **FEAR.** It is so easy these days to slip into fear mode. We fear the dreaded diseases around us: fear of losing a job; fear of a random act of violence; fear of losing someone we love. Fear is in our DNA, and it is there to save us from reckless behavior and help us to survive in this chaotic world. But if fear consumes us or our mind gets stuck on irrational fears, then we can feel hopeless and powerless. Psalm 27 reminds us not to let fear get in the way of walking the path God has planned for us.

How easily we doubt ourselves, others, the news, and the future! We all stumble; we all slip into fear and doubt. The negative thoughts in our head can repeat endlessly. When we get these thoughts, perhaps that is when we can make wrong decisions or be paralyzed by indecision.

Verse 9 implores us, *"Do not turn your servant away in anger...Do not cast me off, do not forsake me."* This sounds like someone who feels unworthy of God's grace yet seeks forgiveness. And so in Verse 11, the contrite psalmist asks *"Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path..."* He went from focusing on feelings of abandonment to switching his mindset to asking God for help.

Like a child reaching up to the strong hand of a grownup before crossing the street, we must return our gaze to the Lord, reach out toward Him and have faith that He will care for us. Verse 14 joyfully, confidently tells us all to *"be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"*

Prayer for today: *Dear Lord, teach us to reach out for you and wait for Your guidance. Help us up from the darkness of fear into the light of the path you have chosen for us. Amen*

Judy Adams Foelber is a wife, mother of two young-adult children, and a self-employed artist/teacher/gallery owner. "It's a hectic life but I am blessed," she says.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 27; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18

Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 13, 2017

*“The Lord is **my light** and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
... My adversaries and foes, **they shall stumble and fall.**
Though a host encamp against me, **my heart shall not fear**” Ps 27:1-3 (RSV)*

Jesus is the Light come into the world to strike out darkness. What a comforting thought that is. All we are called to do is have faith in a God whose unfailing promise is to be with us, through everything ... to have faith. It is impossible to have faith and entertain fear. Put another way, if we live in any kind of fear, we are not living into our faith.

Of course, in everyday life, some of the time, fear will arise in our hearts. Situations that we have to live through, witness or experience drive us to moments of fear. Sometimes, our natural tendency is to worry about the things that beset us in life, and we fear that we might not get through a hard situation, that a loved one might be lost to a crippling disease, or that our children will suffer or fail in some way.

At those times, all we have is our Lord. God has promised us that if we believe, if we have even the smallest amount of faith, He will see us through. First, we seek out His promises by reading the Scriptures. Then we stand on those promises and bring the concern to God in prayer. Finally, we gird ourselves with the love, strength and grace of God to go out and face whatever we must, knowing that the outcome is in God’s hands, and that our God is much greater than any adversity that may come. *“Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world”* (1 John 4:4).

Prayer for today: *Heavenly Father, thank You for the promise of Your loving presence that gives us endurance and courage to finish the race. Help us to be ever mindful of Your omnipresent grace embedded in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Help us to live into the faith You have called us to, so that we may seek out and know Your will, and we may do Your will, each according to our calling. In Jesus Christ’s name we pray, Amen.*

Ayesha Mutope-Johnson is a long-time member of St. James’ Episcopal Church, who has continued to seek God’s will while worshiping in this place. She is a retired civil rights attorney, a licensed professional counselor, and currently serves as a social justice activist managing, organizing and hosting racial reconciliation events and programs in Dioceses from New Mexico to Western Louisiana, and from Kansas to the Texas Valley. Her daily prayer is for the faith to discern and the courage to carry out God’s call on her life, living into His will by doing service to others.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 27; Malachi 2:10-3:1; Luke 1:5-17

Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 14, 2017

Psalm 126 is a prayer of gratitude, preparation and hope. One of the Songs of Ascent, the psalm was thought to have been sung by pilgrims making the long ascent to Jerusalem. Gratefully acknowledging God's hand in times of better fortune, the verses express hope that our difficult and painful efforts today will build or yield a joyful harvest tomorrow. *"He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him (Psalm 126:6)."*

Outside my backdoor stands a raised bed, anchored in the center by a sprawling rose bush that blooms every couple of months. Over the past several years, my family and I have dabbled with tomatoes, cucumbers, beans and herbs. At present, the bed lies fallow because we never got around to planting mustard greens and the other "cool weather" plants. Beyond skirmishes with pests, gentle battles to coax or contain a surprisingly vigorous eggplant or sheepish efforts to remediate plants that were doomed from the start by poor placement or soil preparation, the truth is that the garden is "work."

Additionally, the garden bed distracts and diverts. Too often, hours set aside to finish a promised report or bookkeeping tasks (yuck) have sneaked by while I pruned away at a truly indifferent rose bush. That essay was supposed to be done last Wednesday. Bookkeeping ranks below oral surgery and only just ahead of the flu, but the task is not optional. And what about all those other things that get in the way of our tending our gardens? Consciously or not, each of us faces choices and takes actions with only delusions of control or influence on the outcome and with no promise that we will live to recognize any outcome at all. The stakes may be different, but the struggle is real.

Each year, when the nights are longest and darkest, Advent marks a season for anticipation and preparation. How do we bide our time? Where do we find motivation to persist in our work, however defined? The psalm opens with grateful acknowledgement of past blessings. *The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad (Psalm 126:3)*. Perhaps joyful memories can be fuel for today's labors. Perhaps the better way forward is to remain alert and ever-ready to acknowledge the little crumbs of joy and collect the little drops of beauty each of us encounters daily, even as we fret over the work that lies before us. That rose bush never really announces that it's about to bloom; only those who remember to glance in that direction now and again get to experience the bursts of color and fragrance. This Advent, I plan to count and celebrate blessings, past and present, as I keep to my work and to be vigilant for the next harvest, no matter the size.

Prayer for today: *Help us, O God, in our time of waiting to not grow weary, thinking You will not come or come soon enough, but to wait patiently and confidently on You. Give us grace to breathe deeply, experience moments of beauty, and enjoy peaceful rest, so that when time comes we may be awakened with faith renewed and souls restored. Amen.*

Phyllis Griffin Epps, a member of the St. James' Vestry, is married to Howard Epps and the mother of Griffin and Campbell.

Today's lectionary readings: Psalm 126; Habakkuk 2:1-5; Philippians 3:7-11

Advent Reflection for Friday, December 15, 2017

***When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion;
The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.***

Psalm 126: 1, 3

America has seen better days. We suffer from racism, sexism, nativism, and ageism. We the People are a divided nation. I have interpreted worse moments in U.S. history for undergraduates. Europeans massacred Native Americans who got here first. The Civil War unshackled slaves, leaving their freed children to fear the Klan and their grandchildren to endure Jim Crow Laws. I have taught about James Buchanan and Warren G. Harding—who remain our worst presidents, so far. Then we move on to the Robber Barons.

Despite our fervent pleas and patriotic gore, The Lord never set about to restore our American Dream. And yet we remain a promised land for waves of immigrants, for youth with hope, and all others with grit. Our pursuit of happiness sometimes falters, but U.S. history affords us many moments to rejoice.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord....

***Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.***

Psalm 126: 4, 6

Rather than presume deliverance, we should gather together as a people of faith, anticipating with joy the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord. St. James' Episcopal Church calls us to be children of God, a community receiving communion while working humbly in maturity to serve our neighbors and to care for strangers. Cherishing each Advent moment together gives us joy as we give thanks for life.

Prayer for today: *We thank you, Lord God, for all things and relationships necessary for our common life as a parish family. May we, the people of St. James', pray and work together as we engage in communities far and near in a spirit of faith, hope, and love illuminated by each Advent moment. Amen.*

Andy Achenbaum and his wife, The Rev. Barbara Lewis, agree that they found their church home in this welcoming community. Andy retired this May after fifty years of tutoring and teaching, the last seventeen at the University of Houston. He has an office at the Institute for Spirituality and Health, where he meditates and writes about aging—only looking in the mirror when absolutely necessary.

Today's Lectionary readings: Psalm 26, Habakkuk 3:2-6, Philippians, 3:12-16

Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 16, 2017

*The LORD God is my strength. He will set my feet like the deer.
He will let me walk upon the heights. Habakkuk 3:19*

Mountain climbing is not an easy thing to do. Our feet simply were not made for climbing big rocks. Not without help, anyway. Rocks will hurt your feet. They will get in your way. They can cause you to stumble and fall. We are not made for scaling mountains. The heights are too great, the terrain too rugged, the conditions unbearable at certain altitudes, and there is the ever-present risk of falling.

Most of us will never climb an actual mountain, but we will certainly be faced with many mountains throughout the journey of our lives. There will be obstacles that seem insurmountable. There will be summits that seem unreachable. The height will simply seem too great. The climb too difficult. Our footing too unsure. But, the promise of the One who inspired the Psalmist is that, *“He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places (Psalms 18:33 NIV).* He will make me to run where I could not even walk. He will make me to glide past the impassable. He will give me new feet to scale the heights for which I was not made in the flesh to climb, but to which I ever aspire. He will give me all that I need to make the climb and to make it without fail.

It is no accident that the mountain is there. It is a part of God’s plan for creation. Though we think of those mountain-sized obstacles that we face in terms of the hardship that they cause, the mountain is not there to defeat us or to make us turn back. Nor is it there to hinder or block the way, but perhaps to call us to a higher way, to incline our gaze towards the heavens and to stretch us as only looking and grasping upwards can do. In so doing, it reminds us of our dependence on a power greater than ourselves and of the vastness of our world, and, ultimately, it takes us to unimaginable heights. As insurmountable as it may at first appear, the mountain is as majestic as it is daunting. Though the terrain is rugged and the climb steep, it becomes far more navigable when we believe God and trust His promises. He gives us feet to climb and makes our footing sure so we will reach our “high places” __places that will allow us to see clearer and farther and draw us closer to our God.

Prayer for today: *In the face of all our mountains, O Lord, give us the surefootedness to climb, to scale the heights, and give us the steadfastness to stand...that we may dwell on our high places with You. With thanksgiving we pray, O God. Amen.*

Kathy Culmer, long-time member of St. James’, serves there as Director of Religious Education.

Today’s Lectionary readings: Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19; Matthew 21:28-32

Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 17, 2017
The Third Sunday in Advent

The book of Isaiah is a collection of oracles, prophecies and reports presented with a recurring message of hope, healing, peace and comfort. It is written about people who at the time were enslaved unto themselves, thinking that they had the power to, on their own, overcome without God.

In Isaiah 61:1-4, God is showing His favor over people who are in a bad way. The Lord has anointed Isaiah to bring good news to the poor, free the captives and to comfort the mourners. In many ways, the story of the people in the scripture is analogous to the world today. There are many enduring losses that are experiencing a sense of hopelessness, doubt and darkness. But Isaiah helps us to take a step back and be assured that there is still good to come. There is light. The scripture says that God will heal devastation of many generations. I see the book of Isaiah as a bold testament to just how able God is as His mercy and might are on full display.

Isaiah 61:11 says: *“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.”*

In this Advent season, let us take comfort in knowing that God is able to deliver us from whatever our darkness with His might. He is the light.

Prayer for today: *Most merciful Father, I thank you for your light. It is how I know that you are there. On dark days, I search for your light to sustain me, and it is always there. I know your power, your grace, your mercy and your might. So, I trust that on my dark days, your light will find me. It's the bright days Lord, where I sometimes lose focus and think that it's my light out there shining so brightly. Help me to know that when your light is shining through me, it is indeed your light. All glory and honor is yours. Amen.*

Miriam Barrett is an active participant in the Women of Wonder Bible Study and Fellowship Group and has attended St. James' the past three years with her husband, Kenneth.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 **or** Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent Reflection for Monday, December 18, 2017

When my uncle married in 1947, his mother insisted that the mother of the bride wear a gown for the occasion. When guests were going through the receiving line, they complimented Mrs. Gray on her appearance. She responded "I feel like a regular Jezebel."

Jezebel is a relatively minor character in the reading from 1 Kings: 1-18 but she seems to have had a hold on popular imagination with her supposed lascivious ways—especially in years past when scripture was more widely known. More important in the story is Ahab confronting Elijah with, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah responded "*I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.*" This means, of course, the false deities of the Canaanites rather than Lord God Almighty whose prophets Jezebel had killed.

It's interesting to me that Jezebel was more associated with dressing in finery and putting on makeup than for her imposition of the worship of Baal on the house of Israel. Now don't get me wrong, Jezebel was a wicked woman but is she perceived as wicked because of her ways rather than her works.

Maybe we are a little like Jezebel and have our own Baals that we worship—money, power, privilege, status. In the words of the magnificent Anglican hymn, let us this Advent "Cast away the works of darkness, O ye children of the day!" and fully embrace Ephesians 6:11 "Put on the whole armor of God."

Prayer for today: *O Lord, this Advent make us walk in light and put away that which is dark. Help us see your Son Jesus Christ's coming with great humility and love. Amen.*

Mark Praigg is a member of St. James' vestry. A native of Pasadena, California, he has lived in Houston since 2007. He is a Business Advisor with the Houston Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) Business Center, which is operated by Houston Community College.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 125; 1 Kings 18:1-18; Ephesians 6:10-17

Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 19, 2017

We thank the Lord for His love. We trust He will be with us forever, even when we fall short in our own weaknesses and selfish evil ways. This is the season we try to be better people and be a beacon of light to all people. Wickedness still abounds, bringing the darkness, but we still ask the Lord to forgive us and not abandon us.

God is with us every day, everywhere. Those who are strong in faith will be surrounded by the Lord and will endure forever. He wants us to be good and righteous, a light for all to see that we are His, and He is ours. All we have to do is stay on His path of righteousness and not do evil. Like a child, we act selfish and forget what we learned about helping others. When we serve those at the Jubilee service or those still suffering from Hurricane Harvey via the distribution center, we show how God is using us to be that beacon of light shining and showing how much He loves us all. God gives us all we need without us asking. Who can ask for more?

Prayer for today: *Heavenly Father, this Advent season may we all see the light as we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Open our hearts and our eyes to see a brighter day so we may love one another as you love us and bring peace and joy. Help us to be the light that brightens someone's day this season and always. Amen.*

Kathleen Davis has been a member of St. James' since she her teen years. She was married in this church and their son was christened and brought up in this church and school. Kathleen has served on the vestry and is a member of several ministries including the Daughters of the King, Altar Guild, Fellowship & Diversity, Greeters, Althea Gibson Memorial Scholarship Committee, and Vacation Bible School.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 125; 2 Kings 2:9-22; Acts 3:17-4:4

Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 20, 2017

Songs That Break the Darkness

In those moments before sunrise, we overhear songbirds greeting the dawn. Despite the gloom, all life knows that radiant sunbeams are coming soon. Although she developed blindness as a young child, Fanny Crosby wrote hymns that speak to the certainty of our salvation and future home in eternity. Fanny dreamt repeatedly of a splendidly bright heaven full of hosts of angels and saints, and we see this idea reflected in many of her songs. Fanny managed to write over 8,000 hymns before the time of her passing. Many of Fanny's hymns are still sung in church to this day, including "He Hideth My Soul" and "To God Be the Glory."

Zacharias looked forward to a spiritual sunrise when he praised God in the temple, awaiting the birth of his son, John the Baptist, as well as the birth of the Messiah. Quoting Malachi 4:2, Zacharias declared: *"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"* (Luke 1:78-79). This blessed Messiah did come to earth, bore our sins and pain, died in our place, conquered death by rising again victorious, greeted His disciples in love, and vowed to return again in glorious might.

Do you feel overwhelmed by dark and confusing situations? Has the darkness of these uncertain days greatly troubled your heart? The dawn is coming. Like the songbird who greets the dawn despite the darkness, lift up your praises to God. What a gloriously bright future awaits us when we shall see Jesus face to face. Allow Fanny Crosby's beloved hymn "Blessed Assurance" to embolden your heart as we await His glorious appearance. *"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood."*

Prayer for today: *God of Grace, let the light of your countenance shine upon us now. Help us to embrace the purifying fire of your love, despite the darkness that surrounds. Fill our minds and hearts with the knowledge that the dark sorrows of earth will one day be changed into the bright songs of heaven. Accept these our prayers, O Christ. ~Amen.*

Isaiah G. Schauer and his wife, Michele have been members of St. James' since 2014. Isaiah and Michele love everything about St. James'. Isaiah serves St. James' as a member of the Vestry and by writing the weekly "Sermon Seconds," as well as through singing in our splendid choir. His vocation is teaching Biology, Genetics, and Environmental Science to students as an Assistant Professor at Brazosport College in Lake Jackson.

Today's Lectionary Readings: Psalm 125; Malachi 3:16-4:6; Mark 9:9-13

Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 21, 2017

In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways.

²In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. Hebrews 4:1-2

In this age of technology and electronic communication, we have multiple ways of communicating with one another. We can email or text, Facetime or Skype, call and leave messages via cell phone or landline. In a world where often we live apart from our loved ones, these options are used for sharing news or our needs or our feelings, for letting people know we care about them, are thinking about them, or are there for them. None, however, can take the place of personal interaction.

While accessible, electronic communication can be fallible and on occasion unreliable. Messages can be ignored, calls can go unreturned or be misunderstood. Some messages can be delayed or intercepted. In the end, there is no form of communication more reliable, more personable, or that can be more comforting or reassuring than a face-to-face encounter. On a day to day basis, I will use any one of these ways to get in touch with loved ones, but when the need is most urgent, I may just have to go there. Because I care about them, I may have to show up in person to see them for myself and to let them see me.

Throughout the Old Testament, God communicated with His people through prophets, visions, dreams, even using a donkey, a burning bush and a whirlwind. But for the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, God was silent. There was neither prophet nor inspired writer in Israel or Judah. It was a time of silence and darkness.

“Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair shall not go on forever” (Isaiah 9:1). But God would not leave His people in darkness. The coming of the long-awaited Messiah ushered in the return of light and hope to those despairing under Roman rule and a legacy of sin. God would do for them what no prophet or other intermediary before could do. He would show up – in person. Taking on the garment of all of humankind’s sins, He would “go there” Himself.

Advent is a reminder to us that no matter how dark and how long the night may seem, the light has come and will come again -- In person.

Prayer for today: *Help us, O God, to see and comprehend Your Light, even when darkness appears to be all about us. May Your eternal Light, fueled by a love that will never die, glow in us and go out from us as we walk daily with You. Amen.*

Kathy Culmer, long-time member of St. James’, serves there as Director of Religious Education.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4

Advent Reflection for Friday, December 22, 2017

“Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might...” 2 Samuel 6:14

Praise means to EXALT, that is, to lift high. It means to EXTOL, that is, to celebrate. To MAGNIFY, that is, to make bigger. To GLORIFY, that is, to honor. And to THANK, that is, to show deep appreciation. In the Ancient Hebrew mind, God was praised by looking at Him as the guiding star that shines to show God’s people their direction. The first letter in the Hebrew word for praise is a picture of a man with his arms raised up as pointing toward something of greatness. The second two letters are pictures of a shepherd’s staff, used by the shepherd to move his flock toward a particular direction.

For us, praise has no particular look or expression, but is the genuine outpouring from the depths of our being with an overwhelming gratitude towards God, for who God is and what God has done for us. Praise is not just a matter of saying or posturing, but a way of living__looking upwards and living upwards. It can be sung or spoken or expressed without words at all__lying prostrate or standing tall. However expressed, praise is communicated in a language spoken by the heart that God will surely understand.

After more than 70 years of absence, the Ark of God was returned to Jerusalem. The ark represented the presence of God in the midst of His people. David wanted Israel to be alive once more with a sense of the near presence and glory of God. His joy at its long-awaited return caused David to break out in spontaneous celebration. David danced. He lay aside his kingly garments, put on the garments of a priest and danced his thanksgiving and praise to the Lord. The laying aside of David’s royal robes perhaps represents the laying aside of those things that could have held him back from complete worship in the language spoken most truthfully by his heart and being.

What is it that hinders your worship? What might you do well to lay aside in order to worship God more fully and more truthfully? Is it Fear? Doubt? Dignity?

David celebrated the return of God’s presence to rest among the people of Israel. But since the coming of Jesus into the world and the gift of the Holy Spirit to remain with us and in us while we await his return, God has remained present with us. How much more of a reason, then, do we have to rejoice, now knowing that God is with us in all of the circumstances of our lives and in whatever the condition of our world...knowing that God is with us always and everywhere?

“Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” Advent – A time of rejoicing for God’s ever-presence among us.

Prayer for today: Help us, O God, to be confident that when you promised you would never leave us or forsake us that you meant it and that you are fully present with us even when we cannot see you. Amen.

Kathy Culmer, long-time member of St. James’, serves there as Director of Religious Education.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:12-19; Hebrews 1:5-14

Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 23, 2017

“Advent: The Long Wait”

Growing up in Jamaica, my favorite holidays were Christmas and Easter. We would make preparations, buy presents and wait expectantly for the days to come. Advent was not so. Of course, there were no commercial advertisements to remind us how many days were left, and in some churches it was treated as part of the preparations for the Yuletide season. As I grew up and matured spiritually, I came to realize that Advent is a very special time, not only to remind us of the coming Nativity scene, but of the promised return of our Savior and Lord.

The first coming of our Lord was foretold centuries before His appearance. In Isaiah 9:6, the prophet said, *“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.”* The Jewish leaders expected the Savior, but not the one who came. They expected a Prince of the Realm, born in the palace, but instead, they got the Prince of Peace, born in a stable and placed in a manger. They argued among themselves, and anyone who had a different opinion (like Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night) was branded a traitor. They plotted against Him, and finally, one of His own betrayed Him. He was tried, found guilty, and was put to death. He rose from the dead and went back to be with His Father.

Before He left, He charged to His disciples (which now includes us) to preach the Gospel and to demonstrate the love which He had shown them. He promised to send a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to be with us until His return. The date of His return is the best kept secret in all of Christendom. Recent signs of the times, however, would suggest that the day of reckoning is fast approaching.

“Come, thou long expected Jesus.” Amen.

Prayer for today: *Heavenly Father, we pause to give you thanks for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, who observed your will and gave himself as a ransom for our sins. Please prepare our hearts to love one another, as He has loved us, and to prepare ourselves for his return.”*

The Rev. Aston G. Brown is a recent graduate of the IONA School for ministry and joined the staff of St. James’ Episcopal Church in September of 2016. Deacon Brown is a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW), with over forty years of experience in the fields of Social Service and Community Development in his home country of Jamaica and the Foster Care System of New York State.

Today’s Lectionary Readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Judges 13:2-24; John 7:40-52

Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 24, 2017
The Fourth Sunday in Advent – Christmas Eve

There's something about Mary. The Archangel Gabriel, God's own messenger, declares her to be the "favored one" (Lk. 1:28). All of us, I suspect, want to know ourselves as favored and blessed by God. I wonder whether Mary felt favored and blessed. Did Mary feel favored walking through town with her unwed pregnancy, the subject of stares and judgment? And what about when Joseph planned to quietly leave her and avoid the scandal?

Mary understands that her favoring and blessing by God are not dependent upon or determined by the circumstances of life. So often we look at what is going on around us, the circumstances of our lives, and then declare ourselves or another to be blessed or not. Mary, however, teaches us to look and live more deeply, to look beyond the circumstance of life and see God within us.

It means trusting that God sees more for and about us than we often see for ourselves. That's what Mary did even as she asked, "How can this be?" She trusted God more than her life's situation.

The favoring and blessing of God wasn't around her. It was within her. It is who she is. It is also who we are. We too are favored and blessed, but we must look deeper than the changing circumstances of our lives. Even when we do not see it or understand it, God is deep within us, working secretly, creating new life where we thought there could be none. "*For nothing will be impossible with God*" (Lk. 1:37). Nothing. Like Mary, we must go to that deep place where we ponder and treasure.

Pondering and treasuring ask us to wait, to be quiet and listen, to be still and receptive, to be open and vulnerable to God's life in our own. This is how we "let it be." This is not passivity or giving up. It is actively participating in our own salvation. The Annunciation to Mary is nothing less than God's invitation for us to participate in God's favoring and blessing of our lives. Yes, there's something about Mary. There's also something about us.

Prayer for today: *Father, you have made us in your likeness by the gifts of understanding and freewill. May we, like Mary, respond to your love and generosity by always saying yes to Your divine will. Amen.*

Gloria Rose has been a member of St. James for about 30 years. She is actively involved in the LEM/Lector and Health ministries.

Today's Lectionary Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55 **or** Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

A Christmas Day Reflection for Monday, December 25, 2017

I have vivid memories of when my oldest son, Christopher, was born. I was younger than I certainly should have been to be a father and had no concept of the depth of what was about to happen. My son's mother had a craving for spicy Mexican food when she was pregnant. About three weeks before she was due, she had an unusually strong desire to fulfill her craving for spicy Tex-Mex despite my pleadings to do otherwise.

About 3:00 am she got up with low back pain and a stomach ache. Being tired, young and stupid, I told her to go back to sleep. However, a few minutes later I heard her water break. She was three weeks early!!! I was not prepared, and her baby shower wasn't for another week. Panicked and in reactive mode, I got her down the stairs and into the back seat of a small two door car. As we rushed frantically to the hospital, she screamed she couldn't make it to the hospital where we were scheduled for her to deliver.

I did a Batman U Turn in the middle of the street and made it to St. Luke's Hospital emergency room. I slammed on the breaks and ran inside and screamed; "Somebody help me. My wife is having a baby!!!!" I ran back outside to the aid of my wife; however, no one emerged from the doors of the emergency room.

There I was, alone, young, dumb and afraid. There was chaos, blood, screaming and me jammed into the back seat of that small car trying to figure out what to do next. It all happened fast. Suddenly my son's head emerged, then his shoulders, and then the rest of his tiny body. As I held him amidst the chaos, all time seemed to stand still. Love had broken through! I knew in that instant that my life, and his, had forever changed. Neither one of us would ever be the same.

When the light of Christ broke through in the chaos of that first century stable amongst the blood, pain, screams and joy, Jesus's parents lives, all of our lives and all of eternity would be forever changed. No one could have calculated in the midst of that moment all that would be forever different. No one could have predicted the responses of the people or calculated the cost. No one could have predicted or understood the overwhelming power of love breaking into human history.

When the light of Christ breaks into our lives it can be a messy affair. The light exposes our incompleteness, our sin and frailty, but the light also casts its beam of hope and redemption and reminds us that out of the chaos comes new creation. Life is forever changed.

Prayer for today: *Wondrous light of God in the face of your Son, Jesus, you have forever changed us. Give us the space within ourselves to ponder what the intervention of His life and light means for us. Amen.*

Rev. Will Hood former, a former Navy Chaplain and veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, currently serves as Assisting Priest here at St James'. He, his wife Martha and daughter, Freweini joined the St. James' family in 2016.