

Preparing the Year of the Lord's Favor

Advent 2000 Devotionals

Preface

Wisconsin United Methodist Federation for Social Action invites you to include these devotionals in your Advent 2000 spiritual preparation. It is fitting as we prepare to celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the coming of the Child, the one we call Jesus, that we reflect on how the witness and ministry of the Christ continues to daily call us to an actively engaged faith. The Incarnation is manifested as we allow the Spirit of the Lord to come upon us, and others experience the Good News through us. May these daily meditations help prepare you to be a proclamation so that those you touch with your life may indeed know that the Lord's favor is present at the dawn of the third millennium.

The writers for these meditations on *Luke 4: 16 – 30* are all members of the Wisconsin Annual Conference: Sandra Foley Gaylord, Waukesha (Week I); Amy DeLong, Grantsburg (Week II); Dale Hanaman, Wautoma (Week III); Jodi Arpke-Lone, Batavia (Week IV); and Steve Zekoff, Lake Mills (Christmas Eve/Day).

A special thank you goes to Wesley White, LaCrosse, Chapter President of the WUMFSA. Wesley's support and encouragement from the birthing of this project to its publication made it possible to turn an idea into reality. They are a direct outgrowth of the series of conversations on expansive Christianity that UMFSAs sponsored, and Wesley so ably and dedicatedly facilitated, early in the Year 2000.

Steve Zekoff
Editor

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BIG SISTER

She smiles at me from the magazine page:
matted hair,
ragged clothes,
perhaps 7 or 8 years old,
balancing a baby on her hip,
third-world child who is childcare provider,
too young not to have hope.

I think of another Big Sister:
who crouches on the riverbank,
carefully guarding the bulrush basket
with its forbidden cargo.
A royal party approaches,
the princess and her maids come for a bath;
chattering and splashing they enter the water,
enjoy the cooling wetness on their skin.
“Bring it to me,” commands the princess.
“It is a Hebrew child,” they say.
Miriam, thinking quickly,
steps out from the tall grass.
“Would you like me to find a nurse?” she offers.
The princess looks into her fear-filled eyes,
hands the baby to her and says,
“take him. Care for him. I will pay you.”
Miriam hugs Moses tightly all the way home.

Later people would remember Miriam,
the prophetess who led the liberation celebration,
Miriam, the sister of the liberator,
Miriam, the protector of the liberator,
Miriam, the agent of God.

Sweet child of the third-world:
protect your precious bundle.
Keep life, keep hope alive.
May you, modern-day Miriam,
See *your* liberation in *your* lifetime.

Sandra Foley Gaylord
May 10, 1990

GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

Monday, November 27, 2000

Read Luke 4: 16-21

“[God] has anointed me . . .”

Anointing was a means of investing someone with power, and/or to signify divine sanctification and approval. With these words of *Luke 4:18*, Jesus declared his authority for his ministry. The declaration was revolutionary and shocking. With this authority came power and holiness. Jesus' acts of healing and casting out demons were signs of his holiness and of his authority to forgive sins and reverse the established order of things – even to make poor people the ones favored by God. He restated his authority in the Great Commission (*Matthew 28:18-20*), and then invested his disciples with that authority.

As modern-day disciples we are heirs of that authority. We have to claim it and consider how we will be agents of healing and exorcism in our world. Walter Wink, in his book *Naming the Powers*, helps us to understand that evil is still alive and well in our institutions as well as in ourselves. The structures of present day economic systems are evil. They keep poor people in poverty to the advantage and enrichment of the privileged few. In addition to offering the “cup of cold water” services and caring that we extend to individuals, we need advocacy. We need to ask why these people are suffering. Why are there so many chronically mentally ill people on the streets begging? Why are our food pantries overwhelmed with requests? Why are our homeless shelters overflowing? Why are there so many people in poverty in our country when we have record levels of unemployment? Why are millions of people still living in refugee camps around the world years after the event that uprooted them? Why do so many countries suffer from underdevelopment? Economic injustice is an evil power that needs exorcism.

Let us claim the authority Jesus invested in us to carry on the work of “bringing good news to the poor.” Let us claim it, seize it, live it! SFG

Prayer: Dear God, prod us into meaningful action. **Amen**

Tuesday, November 28, 2000

Read Luke 1: 46-55

“To Bring Good News”

In *Isaiah 61:1*, the prophet speaks of the one who is to come who will bring good news to the poor. In *Luke 1*, Mary declares that God’s salvific act is commencing. We go from longing and hope to joyful anticipation of an event that is no longer just a promise: Get ready! The Savior is coming! After Jesus reads the Isaiah verse in the synagogue, the message is “The Savior is here!”

Hope is an essential quality for human survival. Hope and expectation can keep people going through dire circumstances. Many pastors and medical personnel have witnessed the phenomenon of the dying patient who holds on until a distant relative arrives to say goodbye, or until some unfinished business has been resolved or an important anniversary has been reached. Doctors who treat cancer patients agree that a key element in treatment is the patient’s will to live, a belief that there is hope for survival. After a recent death in our congregation someone said to me, “It was a mistake to think that he could have survived a transplant; the odds were stacked against him.” I replied, “But everyone has to have hope.” It was hope that kept the Israelites going for centuries; it was a hope that defined them as a nation.

Some times when we wait a long time for our hope to be fulfilled, it is hard to recognize when it is realized. That’s how I think it was for the Jews. They had waited so long, they had such fantasies about what the Messiah would be and do, that it was hard to recognize Jesus for who he was. The Pharisees were satisfied with the status quo, for they had power and authority. Mary’s words are a condemnation and a threat to them. Mary’s words are empowerment to the poor. SFG

Thoughts for Meditation: How satisfied are you with your status quo? Where is your hope? Where do you see Christ at work in the world today?

Wednesday, November 29, 2000

Read Luke 6:20-26

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

It's not any fun to be poor. Ask anyone who is. To be poor means not only to be without some of life's basic necessities; it also means there are barriers that keep you from becoming un-poor. Sharon is a woman with two small sons whom we first met when she moved from Milwaukee to Waukesha and was living in a battered women's shelter. She moved into transitional housing and was able to get a job within walking distance of her home, daycare, school and job. She had no car, and it was complicated getting the oldest one from daycare to afternoon kindergarten. She arranged that she would skip her morning and afternoon breaks and take a longer lunch break, enabling her to make the connections. This worked until we got into boot and snowsuit season; getting the child dressed for the outside and transferred took longer and longer, and she lost the job. Eventually she moved back to Milwaukee, and landed a factory job as a temporary worker. This paid well but had no benefits. She also had to work second shift, which meant some precarious child arrangements, as well as using public transportation late at night. She has finally worked her way into a full-time job with benefits. Her situation has improved. She has better living quarters and has managed to buy a car. Life for Sharon is better now, but it has taken her about five years to get stabilized. She was lucky. She had support from friends, relatives and a UMW circle to make it all happen. She had people who CARED about her. No one did it for her, but she had a hand to hold when she fell down, and a cheering section when she made it.

The barriers of transportation, available child care, access to health care, opportunities, and one's own demons are often more than an individual can surmount. Lack of education and lack of knowledge about opportunities are additional barriers. I am sure that Sharon would be the first to tell you that being poor is not easy. Still, she feels that God has been good to her.

God has a preferential option for the poor. “Blessed are the poor.” SFG

Suggestion for Meditation: What are the barriers to self-sufficiency that I see for people I know? What can I do about them?

Thursday, November 30, 2000

Read Luke 7:18-23

Signs of the Messiah

Is Jesus of Nazareth really the Messiah? This was the crucial question for John the Baptist. When asked this question directly, Jesus' reply was: Read the signs! Look at the evidence; what do you see? His words echo the quote from *Isaiah* in *Luke 4:18-19*, including, "the poor have good news preached to them." What were the poor hearing? They were hearing that they were not damned just because they were poor; there was *hope* for them. Indeed, there was more hope for them than there was for the rich!

In a culture where poverty was equated with sin, and wealth was equated with salvation, these words were liberation. They were radical! And they speak a word of judgment to us today. What is our attitude toward poor people? Toward our lifestyle? As a culture, as well as individuals, we seem to reflect these same first century attitudes. The sad thing is that we value ourselves by what we own (quantity and quality) instead of our relationship to God. Those who can put God above their possessions are the ones who will be saved. This was the hard lesson learned by the certain ruler in *Luke 18:18-25*. "He went away sad because he was very rich." Or perhaps we value ourselves by our moral or intellectual superiority. We demand that people be like us in some way – beliefs, race, sexual orientation, class – in order for us to value them. This is 21st century Pharisee-ism.

Can we bridge the gap between poor and rich? Do we want to be saved from our myopia? The way to God lies in identification with the poor. Wesley said it is not enough to give aid to the poor; we ought to go to be with the poor. Being with them gives us a new perspective on life – one that can see the good news that is happening. SFG

Prayer: Lord, help me to see you. **Amen.**

Friday, December 1, 2000

Read Isaiah 65:17-20

“No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days . . .”

William drove the car for our mission household. He lived in the servants' quarters on the school grounds with his wife, Mavis, and son James. When James was about three, Mavis became pregnant; we missionaries got a regular update on her condition as we were driven back and forth from home. She was very sick. My housemates and I made regular trips to see her and to take her nourishing food. When a second son was born, William was ecstatic. However, Joseph was small and sickly. I went with them to the clinic and to get the prescribed medicines. I held the baby and cuddled him and tried to will him back to health. But it was to no avail. He died when only a few weeks old. It was a hard lesson for a young missionary. The cumulative effects of poverty – the lack of prenatal care, of good nutrition for his mother, of adequate medical care, and his parents' lack of education – take their toll on the youngest and weakest. I also learned how callous institutions could be toward the plight of the poor, especially when they deal with so many who are so sick.

The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This document declares that all children have a right to love and security, healthy food to eat, a decent place to live, adequate medical care, protection from abuse, and good education. Although 135 nations have ratified it, the United States has not. I wonder how many babies still die for the same reasons as Joseph? How can we as citizens allow our country to be so callous toward the plight of the babies of the world? How can we personalize the statistics so that people will care?

In Advent we anticipate the birth of baby, a baby that was born in poverty, reared in humble circumstances, and became the hope of the world. Let us keep hope alive as we work for the rights of all the children of the world. SFG

Prayer: Lord, help me to love the children. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 2, 2000

Read Luke 16:19-31

Wealth Corrupts our Spirituality

The trouble with the rich man was that he forgot his religion. He was so wrapped up in the trappings of his wealth that he could not see the one needing help at his very own doorstep. He must have known he was there for he knew Lazarus' name. But did he have pity on him? Did he acknowledge him? Not while they were living.

The rich man de-personalized Lazarus, thus denying his humanity. This was his sin. This was evidence of the shallowness of his spirituality. Pride smothers concern for others. Pride convinces us that we have been favored by God and must have done something to deserve it. We magnify our own value and importance; in so doing we minimize or negate the value of those like Lazarus. Like the rich man we wallow in our status symbols, both material and intellectual. We succumb to the "more is better" mentality. We forget that the gospel mandate is to identify with and help the poor. This story warns us to heed the teachings of Jesus and focus on living out his precepts and principles NOW. The poor among us help us rich folk to understand what truly matters in Christ's eyes.

Where do we erect our gates? Where are the boundaries of our care? I think this parable challenges us to extend our boundaries and break down some of the dividing walls that separate us from those who are needy. The challenge is a spiritual one, not a material one. Gratitude for our blessings is not enough. We need to understand that those blessings are to be used to glorify God, to act on God's behalf in the world. The poor can bring good news to *us*. SFG

Prayer: O God, open my eyes, open my ears, open my mind and my heart, open the gate of my being that today I might grow in understanding of you as I recognize you in the Lazarus's I meet. **Amen.**

Sunday, December 3, 2000

Read Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Christ will Fulfill the Promise

These words of hope were written to a people in utter hopelessness: they were living in exile and wanted to go home. In a sense, that is our situation today. We are in a spiritual exile because we have gone to worshipping other gods – materialism, power, and fame. We have gone from gratitude to God for many blessings to a culture of entitlement. We have forgotten that our personal welfare is inextricably intertwined with the welfare of the rest of God's children. Many of us live in a state of unease about our selves, our situation, and our world. We long for a feeling of at-one-ness with God and with the world; we long for our spiritual home where peace and joy and love prevail, but we have given up hope of attaining it in our lifetime. Jeremiah says "Don't give up hope yet; it will happen.

There are so many contradictions in our world today. We hear we are in a time of unequaled prosperity, yet our food pantries are swamped with more requests than they can fill, and our homeless shelters are overflowing. The housing industry is booming, but many of the working poor cannot afford the housing that is available. Many families own three or more vehicles, yet many urban poor cannot get transportation to jobs that are available. There are more doctors and medical clinics than ever before, yet many people cannot get health care because they do not have insurance. The plight of the poor is the shame of the rich, but the rich just don't get it.

When this seems overwhelming, read *Jeremiah* again and remember: Christ was promised; Christ came. Christ promised he would come again; keep the faith. The days are surely coming. Are you hopeful? Are you ready? SFG

Prayer: O Christ, I believe; help my unbelief. Give me hope, give me power, give me love. **Amen.**