



Daily Devotional Readings for Advent and Epiphany 2004-2005

Wisconsin Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action

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Theme for Advent-Epiphany, 2004-2005

11/28/04 - 01/08/05

“See, I am making all things new.”

Revelation 21:7 (see Isaiah 65:17)

**The two seasons are joined because we believe
God’s Good News cannot be fully heard until it is boldly shared.**

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Week One - Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14

(note: Meditations are based on Matthew 4:4:16a. Reprinted from 2002.

Week Two - Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Week Three - Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:47-55; Matthew 11:2-11; James 5:7-10

Week Four - Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

Week Five - Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Matthew 2:13-23; Hebrews 2:10-18

Week Six - Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Perspective: In a world torn by wars and other suffering often beyond our imagination and a nation and a Church torn by differences seemingly beyond repair, it is difficult to maintain our hope, nourish our faith, and deepen our love. **Advent-Epiphany invites us to expect and to prepare for God to “make something new”** in our personal lives, in our church and community relationships and in our actions as citizens of our nation and the whole world.

Questions which may lead us to Reflect - Pray - Study - Act - Reflect - Pray etc.!

Where do we see God’s new things in our lives and our world today?

Which peoples and powers receive and affirm God’s activity?

What peoples and powers ignore or oppose God’s activity?

How do individual & group decisions make a difference?

Sunday, November 28, 2004

Week One, Day One

WE BEG TO DIFFER

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

Retired pastor and bishop Peter Storey of South Africa tells of a congregation he served where some members were connected with the ruling authorities of apartheid and other members were those being attacked and even killed by the police. During prayer time one family would ask for prayers for their white son who was an officer. Another family would invite prayers for their black sons who had been shot in the past week. Feelings were raw. The heartache, fear and anguish were visible on the faces of worshippers.

Peter Storey says they would then light a candle on the altar. The candle was surrounded by barbed wire. In lighting the candle, these words were shared:

*A candle light is a protest at midnight
It is a nonconformist.*

It says to the darkness:

"I beg to differ." (Samuel Rayan)

When the voice of hatred and despair is loud, when violence and greed turn our hearts away from compassion, when we are seduced into believing the discomfort of darkness is as bright as it gets: in these times we need to stop and regroup. We need to find and take the handholds about us and speak the word of conviction and the truth that we have come to know.

With hands joined and eyes uplifted, we can say, "We beg to differ." Love and hope last longer. Kindness and generosity breed compassion. The light has come...and it keeps getting brighter.

In this Advent time we are reminded of a daily truth: the light of God's presence is yet coming. This light, no darkness can overcome.

To the claims of evil and injustice in this world, in whatever forms they present themselves, we say, "We beg to differ."

Monday, November 29, 2004
Week One, Day Two

THE SUFFERING AND THE WONDER

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

At a conference entitled "*Spiritual Formation in a Broken World: How Then Shall We Live?*" Susan Deloz Parks was one of the presenters. The focus of the conference came as a response to the events of September 11, 2001. Presenters and conference participants sat in Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street, three to four blocks from Ground Zero on Manhattan's south side. Most of us had never sat in a place of such *darkness*.

The radical change in how we experience life, imposed upon us by September 11th, was evident, though sometimes impossible to articulate. The searching for a firm foundation in which to drop the anchor of one's soul amid this unimaginable storm appeared common to all. How then shall we live in such encompassing darkness?

Dr. Parks invited us to do two things.

First: Stay close to the suffering. Her words call us to step next to those who sit in darkness. She calls us to listen. To just stand. To work beside. To weep. To feel. In so doing we have the hope of being "burned through to compassion."

Second: Stay close to the wonder. Her words call us also to rejoice. To see the flower above the debris and dust. To be awed by the sunrise. Stay close to the suffering and to the wonder.

To avoid one and cling to the other will give us frivolity unseasoned by the sorrows of the human heart; or, we will fall to the depths of despair and finally apathy.

The One whose coming we rehearse in this Advent season will keep us close to the suffering. Of this we can be sure. But fear not, for wonder as of a star-lit night is ours to behold as well.

Tuesday, November 20, 2004
Week One, Day Three

A KINGDOM SIGN

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

Verse 17 of this Matthew text points us to a "kingdom sign." And the sign it points us to is in verse 16. It would appear that when folks are sitting deep in darkness and they see a great light... that's a sign of the kingdom!

Interesting. I suspect most often we look for the absence of darkness as a kingdom sign. We look for no more tears. We look for all sunshine.

But this Gospel writing suggests that the people weighed down *in darkness* see a great light; when those bent over and burdened have the light shine on them *in their darkness, the kingdom has come near!* It's a kingdom sign.

We shall forever be puzzled by this "in our midst but not yet" part of the experience of God's presence. We want it all but we never get it all. How can it be in our midst...but not be here – all at the same time?

Someone has said, "Folks may get so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." Perhaps we miss the kingdom

signs because we are looking too far ahead. Perhaps we sacrifice peace and justice now because we look too far ahead. Or perhaps we look only at the darkness (our accommodation of the Gospel) and decide to settle.

The gift in the darkness is the brightness of the light. We dare not welcome darkness just so the light can shine any more than we would welcome sin so grace can abound.

But in the reality of darkness we need not turn away to see the light. In the reality of suffering we need not turn away to know healing. In the reality of fear we need not turn away to see hope.

Right there: in the darkness, in the suffering, in the fear, right there: light and healing and hope break through. Right there. God is doing a new thing.

Can we see it? Right there. An unlikely place. Unlikely people. Surprising God who gives us kingdom signs...right in the darkness.

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**Wednesday, December 1, 2004**  
**Week One, Day Four**

**WHEN THE CENTER HOLDS**

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

I would often see Katherine and her dog Carter walk by my house. One winter day I stepped out on the porch and invited them to come in for a chat and some coffee. We sat and visited, enjoying the fire in the fireplace and the fresh coffee. My neighbor Katherine is blind and Carter is her Seeing Eye dog. Katherine knows the number of steps from her home to her place of work. She knows the number of steps from her office to her classroom.

Katherine began to tell me about Carter – at which time he returned to the living room and sat up very tall, knowing we were talking about him. Carter's training has given him "intelligent disobedience." That means that when a squirrel runs across the sidewalk, Carter ignores his dog brain that says, "Get the squirrel?" and listens to his trained brain that says, "Stay with Katherine."

As I read this text from Matthew and pondered different experiences of darkness, Katherine and Carter came to my mind. But mostly, I found myself thinking about Carter. "Get the squirrel!" "Stay with Katherine."

Chasing after squirrels often takes us into our own experiences of *darkness*. It can feel like such a natural thing. It can look so attractive. It can feel so

comfortable but not because it *is* comfortable. Rather, because it is a known. We often will tolerate known discomfort rather than reach for unknown comfort.

So we, like Carter, need to be familiar with our trained, or disciplined, center. We need to listen to our core. We need to rehearse whose we are and what we are about. We need to recite what we know to be good and kind and generous.

We need to listen, as Christians, to the Jesus story and where that presence settles into our lives. We need to go to the spirit at our center. For it is this spirit, this God presence, that holds.

From this place, then, when we are tempted to "Get the squirrel," "Chase the darkness" our center will hold and another voice will come:

*"Stay with Katherine." "Walk in the Light"*

The darkness then does not consume us. In fact, it is the darkness into which we carry the light.

And those who sit in darkness will say, "Surely the kingdom of God is shining upon us."

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Thursday, December 2, 2004
Week One, Day Five

PATROLLING THE DARKNESS

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

In the dark, it is hard to be a believer. Finding our way through the darkness, we will need markers along the way. We will need signs that remind us we are not alone. We will need to hold within us, for quick recall, word and song that speak and sing of the endurance of love and the goodness of life itself.

One such sign was found in a small home in Germany after World War II. The home had been a place of hiding for Jews trying to flee the horrors of the German death camps. These words had been scratched into the baseboard in one of the bedrooms.

*I believe in the sun when it does not shine
I believe in love when I cannot feel it.
I believe in God when God does not speak.*

It is ironic that the very markers we need, if we are to navigate the darkness, often come to us from the darkness itself. The word that inspires us, the witness that steadies us, the marker that points the way: the most profound of these comes to us from the darkness itself.

Perhaps our own "dark night of the soul" will morph into a handhold, a marker,

and a sign along the way for another who travels the darkness.

One of the assurances of Advent is that God yet comes into the darkness of human lives and the events of this world. Advent does not celebrate an historical event (Jesus' birth) but proclaims a timeless truth: God yet comes. God's presence named love and grace, compassion and justice, still come to Carl and Tom and Marsha and Bill and Susan and Mark. This presence of God changes lives and calls forth love, even in the darkness.

Our best sense of this transforming presence, as Christians, has come to us through Jesus the Christ. This witness and experience of God we claim to saving for our lives. This witness the darkness cannot overcome.

So, those of us who can; those of us who have done our own time in the darkness; those of us who have felt saved by the light; those of us who have found it hard to believe in the dark; we will patrol the darkness. We will bear this light, for though there is no way around the darkness, we have learned that there is a way through it.

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**Friday, December 3, 2004**  
**Week One, Day Six**

**CREATED FOR THE DARKNESS**

Matthew 4:16a: "...*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...*"

We were at Aunt Pearl and Uncle Charlie's cabin. Supper was done and the adults were deep into conversation. The gang of five cousins decided to head to Vivio's for pizza. The trip would be exciting for three reasons: 1) Vivio's pizza was awesome 2) The winding rough road through the deep forest was beautiful – and adventuresome in the dark of night and 3) Cousin Charlene had just gotten her driver's license. Off we drove with great excitement, chattering all the way.

Sweeping a bit wide on one close turn, the right rear tire of the car slid off the road and settled into the rain-soaked soft shoulder. Cousin Charlene assured us we'd be out in no time. After running the gas tank dry while spinning the rear *and front* tires hub-deep into the mud, we determined we needed to walk back to the cabin for help. Of course, there was no flashlight.

So, we joined hands, stretched ourselves across the road and began walking very slowly. Step after step. Then someone looked up. Above the road the trees were thin. And though the night was dark we could see the stars above the

road. Holding hands and guided by the stars, we found our way back to the cabin.

We all have our experiences of being lost, broken down and fearful. Yet it seems that in just such times, community can shine. In such times we are called to circle around, join hands and stand next to those who are overwhelmed with grief and loss; those who can't get out of the grip of depression; those who struggle to stay sober. We are called to live out the promise of Advent next to people in times when hearing about it is not enough.

Where will we go and by whom will we stand?

Who will we invite to our side? How will we be safe harbor?

How far will we reach? Will we need courage? Compassion? A Listening heart? Our own repentance?

And how will we receive all of this?

It is Advent, friends. Look up. Join hands. God yet comes.

**Saturday, December 4, 2004**  
**Week One, Day Seven**

**ON THE OTHER SIDE OF DARKNESS**

Matthew 4:16a: *"...The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light..."*

When leaving her office building one evening, Carol noticed a man in the far corner of the parking lot. He was bent over, looking at the ground and pacing back and forth. Curious, Carol approached the man and asked, "Are you alright?" "Yes," he said, "I'm fine but I have lost my car keys."

Being in no hurry, Carol volunteered to help in the search for the missing keys. Back and forth they walked, systematically searching the corner of the parking lot. No keys were found.

Carol then inquired, "So, you are sure you dropped the keys in this area?" "Oh, no," came the reply, "I think I dropped them over there where my car is." "Then why are you looking here?" questioned Carol. "Because the light is better here," was the response.

What is it we will sacrifice to the darkness?

We fear the unknown, the required risk or the possible criticism of others.

We fear the language, color, sexuality, economics or education of others that is not like our own.

We fear that we will fail, that we will look silly or that we will be wrong.

We sometimes become the fear we carry. When we do, we sacrifice so much to the darkness.

We sacrifice shared wisdom and shared capacity, the joy of partnership, the joy of an excellent try, the courage of a good risk, the ecstasy of being surprised. For all of this resides on the other side of darkness. It is fear that steals it from us.

Advent comes with the greeting, "Be not afraid." God in Jesus Christ is moving among us. This is the good news of Advent. God yet come.

Therefore we shall not fear.

**Sunday, December 5, 2004**  
**Week Two, Day One**

**A NEW DIRECTION**

Isaiah 11:1-11: *“The Peaceful Kingdom”*

What a wild prediction! “A shoot shall grow from the stock of Jesse, and a branch will spring from his roots.” How idealistic and unbelievable!

It is much like the “far-out” voices today calling out, “NO MORE VIOLENCE! NO MORE TORTURE! NO MORE BUILDING AND STOCKPILING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION!”

It is the same deep longing for a new direction expressed then as it is by some today. People then had a hard time believing Isaiah – just as many scoff at the prophetic voices today. But still – people could hope. And so can we.

Our hope rests in the Spirit of the Lord – the active, creative presence of God. Now, as then, we seek for a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and power (to do good), of knowledge and fear (the kind that leads to obedience) of the Lord. Not the fear of the terrorists – the fear of the Lord! A new direction.

Isaiah’s description of what is to come was radical, hopeful and incomprehensible to people then (just as it is to the more literally-minded among us today). They must have been incredulous. Then, as now, the words are intended to shock and jolt us into a new vision!

Not a vision that’s just **a little** different – just **a little** better than life as it now exists. But a vision of a world made over – where love and justice and wisdom abound – a world truly at peace.

What must we do to move in that direction? It has been said, “Without a vision, the people perish!” Perhaps that is our problem today. We have no vision, or our vision is too small – and too boringly ‘practical.’ Isaiah was bold and unafraid.

We, too, must be bold and unafraid – and visualize our highest hopes. We may be ‘the remnant’ that God is working with today.

A new vision can make us bold and unafraid: are we willing to trust?

**Monday, December 6, 2004**  
**Week Two, Day Two**

**BE NOT AFRAID**

Isaiah 11:1-11: *“They will not hurt or destroy...”*

Isaiah lived in a time of crisis and fear! We live in a time of crisis and fear. Where shall we turn? Whom shall we trust?

For Isaiah, the great longing is for new leadership. The kings and heads of state had blundered and led the people in the wrong direction. Isaiah’s vision is of ‘the world turned upside down’ – just as Jesus’ words and stories often move us to turn our first reactions to him upside down.

Isaiah sees a world where enemies become friends; where those whom we fear no longer seem a threat; and where God’s way leads us “not to hurt or destroy in all God’s holy mountain.”

The earth – this planet – is God’s – and it is holy. Yet, fear pervaded people in Isaiah’s day – as fear pervades many of us today. How to live in a world where fear is rampant – that is our challenge. Isaiah gives us a

vision – and we need a vision – a vision of another way of being.

I am reminded of my experience in Nicaragua during the Contra War. Our mantra was the hymn, “Be Not Afraid.” Towards the end of the trip, we were high in the mountains – planning to take a rocky road north to a beaten and battered village called Patio Grande. Contra mercenaries were hiding in the forest. We knew that. We could be attacked. We knew that. We might not ever get home. We knew that. But we had solidarity – and we had a vision.

And after an evening of sharing concerns, we got up on a beautiful, sunny morning, piled into the back of an old dump truck and sang our way up the mountain. From ‘fear’ the night before, a sense of compassion and hope transformed us in the morning.

God’s way of justice was in our vision, in our songs, and in our faces. I have never been the same.

**Tuesday, December 7, 2004**  
**Week Two, Day Three**

**ISAIAH SPEAKS AGAIN**

Matthew 3:1-12: “A voice crying out...”

As we hear John the Baptist quoting Isaiah, we know Isaiah’s message is being carried down through the ages!

The picture of John is clear – and what a sight he must have been, with his coat of camel’s hair held together simply with a leather belt. I see his wild-looking long hair and the fiery determination in his eyes. The image seems to say – what you look like doesn’t matter! It’s who you are: are you real? are you authentic? do your words reach my heart? is there truth in what you say?

I suspect the crowd really resonated with John’s denunciation of the Pharisees and Sadducees (much as some crowds in Iraq resonate with the denunciation of the U.S. occupation). The crowds then may have been sick and tired of being ‘lorded over,’ and pressured to follow the infinitesimal laws those religious leaders enforced day after day.

John’s message is harsh and radical. He pulls no punches: “every tree that fails to produce good fruit will be cut down – and

thrown into the fire!” There will be no hedging – no alibis – no second chances. He says we must confess our sins, do our best, use our gifts and talents in living up to the high standards set by God!

I believe that John is proclaiming the Truth for his day just as Isaiah did. It is the same Truth that is soon to be modeled by ‘the One who is to come’ – the One who keeps coming – to show us and tell us who we are – and whose we are – and how we are to be.

An Israeli soldier discovered his real self one day when he came face to face with an armed Arab on a lonely stretch of road. They were just ten feet apart, pointing their guns at each other. But, he discovered he could not shoot. So he asked,  
“Do you have a family?”  
“Yes,” the Arab replied.

How could he shoot now? He couldn’t kill a father. Amazingly, the Arab then asked the same question – and received the same answer.

They both put down their guns and walked away.

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Wednesday, December 8, 2004
Week Two, Day Four

WHO IS YOUR PROPHET?

Matthew 3:1-12: *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

The prophet Isaiah has influenced other prophets who have in turn influenced one another. Elijah was one. John the Baptist is another. Who are our prophets? Who speaks to us today? Are we listening?

John’s clothing was counter-cultural, as was Elijah’s (2 Kings 1:8). But more shocking was his message! Pointed and clear, he spoke (as Jesus did) with visual images the people could understand: a shovel; a winnowing fork; and ‘people are like wheat,’ which can be useful, nourishing and enriching – or not worth ‘a pinch of salt’ – just useless and worthy only to be destroyed.

John speaks of judgment and a heavy price to pay for failing to listen and obey God by living with faith and compassion all day, every day.

I am reminded of the way our military exerted horrendous force against the people of Baghdad – and called it a campaign of ‘**shock and awe.**’ John’s message was a

message of **shock and awe**, too. But he didn’t kill anyone. He woke people up with his shocking words. And they listened! He touched a place in their hearts that had been fogged over – found a truth buried deep inside – and opened people up to the folly of their ways. Thus moved, they repented – they made a U-turn. They recognized their need for a new direction in life.

Who is a prophet for you, today? Who touches your heart? Mine has been, for a long time, William Sloane Coffin. In *Passion for the Possible* (p. 25) he says,

“What is clear is that henceforth nations are called to confer, not to conquer; to discuss, not destroy; to extend olive branches, not their missile ranges. The new era already upon us reminds us that God is not mocked: we have to be merciful when we live at each other’s mercy; we have to learn to be meek or there will be no earth to inherit.”

Thursday, December 9, 2004
Week Two, Day Five

TO BE TRULY INCLUSIVE

Romans 15: 4-13: *“Welcome one another just as Christ welcomed you.”*

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, we find the fullest and most balanced statement of his theology. And we see how pertinent it is in our present time.

Both Paul and Jesus were Jews – steeped in the knowledge of Old Testament scriptures and the promises and predictions embodied therein. Through them – Isaiah speaks again, this time of hope, of inclusiveness and of the Gentiles. How can we follow Jesus if we are not ourselves truly inclusive?

Often it is helpful to ‘walk in the other person’s shoes.’ If we imagine ourselves being in the 1st Century, we are – without a doubt – the Gentiles. We are not in the first line of acceptance. We are the rejected ones. We are the ones who are often not allowed to sit at the table.

There are people in our country today who have received or are receiving similar treatment. I remember my first teaching experience. It was at an inner-city middle school. 99% of the students were Afro-

American. “Black is Beautiful” was the theme of the year – on all the blackboards, in all the hallways. The kids were exuberant – and assertive!

I learned a lot that year. Suddenly believing they could be included and accepted, these young people flaunted their new-found freedom. And from being people I had only read about, they became interesting, unique individuals – with potential galore, and sometimes too much creativity. But, knowing them, I came to realize they were my sisters and brothers in every way. Never to be excluded again!

It is this hope for inclusiveness, even ‘to put others first,’ that Paul is proclaiming. It takes fortitude (courage; strength of mind) to maintain this hope – and live it out! Christ is our model. Obedient to the prophets, Jesus lived a life of inclusiveness. This passage exudes hope – for the way of acceptance for all – of rejection for no one!

What a new thing that could be!

**Friday, December 10, 2004:
Week Two, Day Six**

A NEW KIND OF LEADER

Psalm 72:1-7: *“Guidance and prayer for Solomon”*

This is a Royal Psalm, a ‘Psalm of Solomon’ (though some sources name it a ‘Prayer of David’). In either case, it qualifies as being created by ‘a branch from the root of Jesse,’ David’s father. Reading it, one hears the longing for a great and just leader – full of wisdom and good judgment. I believe this is a universal longing, as appropriate today as it was 3,000 years ago.

The psalm opens up for us the opportunity to look at leadership and perhaps begin to see the psalm as a kind of plumb-line for our experiences with our own leaders. The standards are high: good judgment; justice, especially for the poor and suffering; peace and prosperity (not just for the few); and rescuing the oppressed and down-trodden.

Do our leaders meet standards like that? Or even consider them? It seems we talk and read more about injustice and evil than about justice and good judgment.

I love the water imagery. For a leader to be “like rain falling on early crops” – like

showers watering the earth” – gives us a glimpse of the good feeling, the nurturing and strength and encouragement a leader can provide. It makes a real difference to ‘the people,’ who then – like the image in Isaiah 58:11 “will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” How important wise leadership truly is! It even extends its influence far beyond the boundaries it serves.

Where are the oppressed, the suffering, the innocent victims today? Everywhere! They are in our communities, our cities, the countryside; in Columbia, Sudan, Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Central America, and on and on. .

To come to grips with the longing of so many for a new direction, this psalm pictures for us a new kind of leader. If the leader is just, compassionate, more concerned with ‘others’ (even in other lands) than him or herself – will that not also affect the citizens who serve and offer their allegiance? It will.

Saturday, December 11, 2004
Week Two, Day Seven

WE WILL PLANT OLIVE TREES

Isaiah 11:1-11; Matthew 3:1-12: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

This is a time of darkness for many. Yet Isaiah and Matthew inspire us to go on in our attempts to make the world new, to make the vision new, and to make ourselves new. When it seems hopeless, new life will come! There is hope. Sometimes it comes from the mouths of babes....

A friend and her six-year old daughter, Lily, were attending a meeting in downtown Washington. As they left the meeting and headed to the car, they passed a man sleeping on a sidewalk grate. “It makes me very sad to see someone sleeping on the street,” said Lily. “Yes, that is sad,” my friend replied.

As they got into the car and headed home, Lily continued. “Mommy, why did God make poor people?” “Well, Lily, God didn’t make poor people. God made people. And

it’s up to us to take care of one another and to make sure that no one is poor.”

“Well, then we need to go back and give that man some of our money.”

“That’s a good idea, Lily, but you know that man needs more than money.” My friend was planning to go on and tell Lily that he also needed a house, and a job and the other things that allow one to sustain oneself.

“You’re right, Mommy,” said Lily. “That man needs love and he needs hope.”

What is hope? We all need it. How do we contribute to it?

Pederico Mayor, the Spanish Director General of UNESCO, expresses it this way:

We will plant olive trees
 where before
 there were thorns.

All of us the same
 each one of us different,
 we will walk hand in hand
 with a new song
 of love on our lips.

We will plant olive trees
 where before
 there were thorns.

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**Sunday, December 12, 2004**  
**Week Three, Day One**

**THE PLACE OF NEW BEGINNING**

Isaiah 35:1-4

In their new book, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, p. 20) Shawchuck and Job say this about the message Advent proclaims to believers: "We get another chance! The Season of Advent gives the church the opportunity to begin again. Once more the full story of God's grace is awaiting our discovery."

Thank God the church in its divinely inspired wisdom has given us a Season that surrounds us with songs, symbols, prayer practices and Scriptures that remind us "we do get another chance!" For, a recurring fact of our lives is that "many dangers, toils, and snares" have come our way in the past year. Sometimes we have faced these challenges with "amazing grace", and sometimes we have gotten entangled in dangers and snares that pulled us into dark places in our hearts.

We come to the end of the calendar year hoping for another chance, and Advent, the beginning of the church year, proclaims that there is, there is... there always will be another chance. Because of Christ's birth, we are people who can claim the promise of new beginnings in our lives.

Where do we look to find God's new beginning? Isaiah invites us to look in the wilderness place of our lives. When he dared to seek God there, he found gladness, rejoicing, joy and singing. He writes this after he and his nation have endured a barren, wilderness time.

I have a hunch that most of us know in our heads that the place for us to discover a new beginning is in the wilderness, the barren place in our lives. So what is the rub? If we

know where to go to discover and claim the gift of God's second chance for us, why does this promise of Advent elude us so often?

Speaking personally, I confess I am **afraid** to go there. My hands feel weak. My knees feel feeble. Uncontrollable fear confronts me and immobilizes my steps. I hesitate to venture from my comfort zone of half-living and half-truth of self.

Yet you and I -- celebrants of Christ's birth -- know something more convincing than our fear. We have been shown in Christ Jesus: "the light has come into (our) darkness and (our) darkness did not overcome it." (*John 1:5 NRSV*) That light creates faith in us to overcome our fears. When our hearts reclaim this truth and in faith we dare, led by Christ's grace, to proceed into the dark places, we discover our hands slowly strengthen, our knees grow firm, and our fear melts.

As we go deeper, hope dislodges despair, and we do meet in our wilderness place gladness, rejoicing, blossoming, joy and singing.

We realize anew that God indeed has given us a second chance, a new beginning, and we know when the holy day of Christmas arrives that we have sound reason to sing "Joy to the world...He comes to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found"!

**Prayer:** God, thank you for this divine love that strengthens our hands and melts the fear in the dark places of our hearts. Amen

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Monday, December 13, 2004
Week Three, Day Two

SEEING ANEW

Isaiah 35:5-10

Yesterday, we talked about finding a good reason to sing “Joy to the World.” Those who venture in faith into the wilderness do find rejoicing, blossoming, and a new beginning. Isaiah 35:5 gives us the reason that occasions this divine joy: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped”. God gives us a new way of seeing and hearing. Let’s explore together this new seeing and hearing.

Those of us who persevere in our wilderness trek are taught a painful truth. We discover how addicted we are to seeing only what we want to see and hearing what we want to hear. We **know what** is right and wrong. And we **know who** is right and wrong. We see and hear and judge everything from standards we thought were God’s – when in fact they are our own. An unbearable pain hits when we realize that everything and everyone is found wanting by these standards. God is found wanting or absent or non-existent. Others are found wanting.

When it strikes us that we are also found wanting before our own godlike standards, we experience one of the things that makes a wilderness the dark place it is. We despair. We despair of everything and everyone.

Yet hope and promise can reach us in such a place. It comes as a Divine Whisper that may reach us through a prayer, a reading, a Scripture story, or the love of a spouse and/or loyal friend. In a tone of merciful understanding, we hear the Divine Whisper say: “Could it be that the problem lies with the standard you have used which finds Me, others, and yourself wanting?”

When we heed this Whisper and let It become the defining Word in our lives, a mysterious transformation takes place in us.

We are given new sight and new hearing. The grand gift God gives to us in Christ’s birth in our wilderness place is the capacity to see and hear as God sees and hears. It is truly not our standard, yet it truly is in us. We are given a new a capacity to see those around us and, especially ourselves, with eyes of mercy and compassion. We are surprised to see that there is a Holy Way in the wilderness where we can join other faithful pilgrims who have found the new sight and hearing with which God is now gracing us.

This time of new seeing and hearing certainly does not end our trek. Our old way of seeing and hearing does return. But seeing the Holy Way and joining fellow pilgrims on it does mark a new chapter. Isaiah tells us “the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people, no traveler, not even fools shall go astray.”(vs. 8b) With our newfound capacity to see anew, the truth of God has gained a foothold in us that pulls us back when we go astray.

When our old standards arise in us, we see how foolish they are in the light of the divine love that is ours on God’s Holy Way. With Isaiah we sing: (v. 10)

“The ransomed of the LORD shall return
 And come to Zion singing;
 Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.
 They shall obtain joy and gladness
 And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

That is the promise to and the reality of those graced by God with new sight and new hearing.

Prayer: Thank you God for the new sight that comes from the mercy and healing You pour into our hearts through Christ. Amen.

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**Tuesday, December 14, 2004**  
**Week Three, Day Three**

**MARY'S SONG PART I – "DIVINE MERCY'S JOY"**

Luke 1:46-50

Mary's words are on Luke's page before us. But how are we to hear and be reached by what God is saying to us through this song, appropriately named "The Magnificat"?

First, we need to remember that we are listening to a spiritual conversation. Mary is responding to what her older cousin and spiritual friend, Elizabeth, has just said to her. (cf. 1:39-45) Elizabeth's words were inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk. 1:41). They are words of affirmation that have encouraged Mary to disclose the divine truth she is carrying in her womb.

What a relief that must have been to her to know Elizabeth was receptive and intensely interested in the secret Mary had come to share...needed to share. Because of the deeply spiritual nature of this conversation, we need to hear Mary's words with our sacred ear, the one the Holy Spirit gives us.

That brings us to the second thing we need to note about this passage. Both women were filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary's words are both song and prayer. They have to be, because what she is disclosing to Elizabeth and to us is beyond description and beyond rational comprehension alone. Awe and mystery has filled the room and is laced through the verses of this passage. We need to approach this passage with humble, prayerful hearts.

We also need to listen with a stillness of heart. Alfred Brendel wrote in the 4/1/96 issue of the *New Yorker* of what happens in a concert hall. "I like the fact that 'listen' is an anagram for 'silent'. Silence is not something that is there before the music begins and after it stops. It is the essence of the music itself, the vital ingredient that makes it possible for the music to exist at all. It's wonderful when the audience is part of this productive silence." (quoted in *Friends Of Silence Newsletter*, June 2004)

Listening with a stilled, prayerful heart, we can begin to hear the eternal joy in Mary's spirit as she "magnifies the Lord" and "rejoices in God my savior" and let this eternal joy reach us. We are able to marvel with Mary as she tells us that in her lowly estate she has found divine favor and realize the same can be true for us in our lowly estate. As we let Mary sing to us of the awe and mystery of "the Mighty One," our hearts can awaken to God's majestic holiness in and around us. Truly, this is a song for all generations to bless Mary and the Divine Son in her womb.

Mary's song is filled with beauty and blessing to all who take the time to hear. It also contains profound spiritual wisdom. Mary states clearly the way God works in human life. God comes to and blesses those of low estate. God offers hope to the poor. I do not believe that means God can only be found in the poor sections of town and not in affluent communities. However, I do believe while they offer hope for the poor, Mary's words are a warning to the affluent. Affluence, as I have experienced it, numbs us from feeling the utter dependency we have on God for our lives and creates in us a false sense of what truly makes us secure.

Mary's words in vs. 50 are for rich and poor alike: "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation". However, material things, status, privilege, and intellectual knowledge easily blind us "the affluent" to our need for divine mercy and hide from our awareness our capacity for fear filled reverence for "the Might One". Therefore, I think that we "the affluent" need to work harder to cultivate the humble spirit and contrite heart necessary to receive the divine mercy that makes us whole.

**Prayer:** God, humble our hearts and open them so we can join in Mary's song of praise and rejoicing for the gift of your Son in our lives. Amen

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Wednesday, December 15, 2004

Week Three, Day Four

MARY'S SONG PART II - WHEN THE WORLD IS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Luke 1:51-55

Yesterday, we saw how Mary's song shows us the way God works in human life. God comes to and blesses those of low estate. Today's verses expand that theme. The proud are scattered by God's strong arm. (vs. 51). God has toppled the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. (vs. 52) The hunger of the poor is fed and the rich are sent away empty. (vs. 53) Fred Craddock points out that all the verbs are in the past tense. Thus, what the song is describing is accomplished fact.

But I believe before any of us can accept the truth this song reveals, we need to ask the unavoidable question our world lays on our hearts. Is this song true? I believe we only see its truth when our world is turned upside down... I mean really turned upside down to the point where we are brought to a despair in which we then experience a surprising embracing of the divine truth in Mary's song.

In her doctoral dissertation, the late Rev. Dr. Lee Morical gives an honest and beautiful account of what happened to her when her world was turned upside down. Lee was an ordained United Church of Christ pastor and a popular professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. She was a sought after speaker and published author. She was a rising star in her field, as well as happily married. Her world turned on its head when her husband was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and given only a year to live. Months later her own cancer, long in remission, came back in a virulent form. It forced her to give up all that her world was offering her.

When she hit the bottom side of her world, she found that "Forced to sit down in the back of the boat, because I no longer had the legs to stand, I learned that it is not in the getting and "having it all" but in "letting go" that we begin to find the "peace which passes all understanding."

And it is only when we realize that life has no safety nets – never had, never will – that we begin to know that 'out of God's love we cannot fall.' Forced to sit down and shut up because I

no longer had the strength to speak, I received the gifts that come only when we sit with God in the silence and listen. And wait."

When God meets us in the bottom place of our world as God met Lee Morical, the world's promises and allures come up wanting while Mary's words ring as profoundly true. Just as Jesus showed us long ago, it is in the desert places we see the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. It is in the desert places, when we maintain our faith in God, we see the world's promises of material abundance, power, and prestige tumble away before the divine love from which we cannot fall.

Going to a Third World Nation is a way for many of us to find the divine truth that lives in the wilderness. Rev. Elizabeth Canham in *Weavings (Sept./Oct., 2004 issue, pp.19-26)* describes what God showed her on a recent trip to Egypt. She found it to be a judgment on her affluent life style and a call to change to ways that would connect her more with the lives of the poor. She writes "When we toured a monastery in the morning, I was challenged by the utter simplicity of life of the monks and the deep contentment that radiated from their faces..." She then recalled Bible verses she learned as a child: "'Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for (God) has said, 'I will never leave or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'" Fasting from discontent is (now for me) an ever growing challenge."

Canham also advocates our fasting from consumerism and our world of privilege. Yes, it is through our letting go of what binds and blinds us and letting in God's love that we will see just how true Mary's song is!

Prayer: God we thank you for the divine truth that comes to us in poetry, song, and holy silence. Guide us to always be humble of heart and open to the mercy that brings wholeness and holiness to our lives. Amen..

Thursday, December 16, 2004
Week Three, Day Five

JAMES' CALL FOR PATIENCE

James 5:7-10(11)

I begin with verse 5:11. It offers the context to understand James' repeated pleas to "be patient". James writes: "...you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." (5:11b) He is reminding his readers of something they once knew but have seemingly forgotten – the divine compassion and mercy believers receive through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Trouble had hit James' faith community. People had reduced "faith" to a matter of believing in grace without doing grace-filled deeds. The more well to do people were treating poorer members badly. Grumbling and a negative spirit was present. They had forgotten who they were, whose they were, and what they were called to be about. They had drifted from the faith and were adrift in spiritually troubled waters.

Thus, it is important for us to hear James' call "Be patient" not just as moral but as spiritual counsel. Certainly, he wants to correct bad behaviors. But his real aim is to restore faith and spiritual well-being at a personal and communal level. It is clear, from his illustration of a farmer waiting patiently for his crops, this is a group of believers who have grown impatient with God as well as each other.

This passage has taught me the crucial role patience plays in the cultivation of healthy faith and spiritual living.

Think for a moment about just how toxic impatience is. It arises as a destroyer of faith when we let anxiety capture us. When that happens, grumbling, relationship breakdown and loss of hope are sure to follow.

By being patient, we allow God's love to do its work in our hearts and in the soul of our faith community. Patience guards and nurtures both our faith and our spirits. The Greek word for "patience" can also be rendered as "endurance", "steadfastness", "perseverance", or "patient endurance". An attitude of patience, when understood in this broader sense, is a requirement for spiritual growth

In the New Testament, patience is more than a human virtue. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit – "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience** (emphasis mine), kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control". (Gal. 5:22) Patience is not something we can expect our egos to master, but it certainly is available to us through faithful prayer.

We live in a high-speed culture that by its very nature stirs impatience in us. I suggest if every time we feel impatient, we would use it as a call to prayer at the earliest possible moment. What would happen? Stress would decrease in our lives and love, joy, peace, patience, etc. would increase. Wouldn't that be a grand Christmas gift to us and to others!

May James encourage us to set time aside for prayerful waiting so that the Holy Spirit will give us patience to guard our faith and let the grace of Christ's mercy and compassion feed our souls and guide our lives!

Prayer: At all times but especially in these arduous and busy times, grant us the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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**Friday, December 17, 2004**  
**Week Three, Day Six**

**“THE QUESTION THAT CAN’T BE PUT TO REST”**

Matthew 11:2-6

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him: ‘Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?’ ” (11:2-3)

This question of who Jesus is seems to grow legs in each generation...and it can grow legs in different moments of our lives. There is a healthy dimension to this question’s recurring. It challenges us as believers to ask: “Upon what basis do I claim that Jesus is my Messiah?”

Matthew offers us the basis to which believers continually return. Jesus answers John’s question by telling John’s disciples *stories*. He tells them about times when the blind received their sight, the lame walked, lepers were cleansed, the deaf could hear, the dead were raised to life, and the poor had good news brought to them. The implication is that the Messiah is one who brings healing and renewing love to the afflicted and lost - and that is exactly what Jesus has been doing!

It is through stories – Bible stories, other peoples’ stories, and especially our own stories that we come to know Jesus as the/our Messiah.

Florence Wuellner tells this story in her book *Forgiveness, The Passionate Journey*. A friend tells her: “I felt drowned. I had made a mess of my own life. I had let everybody down. I had made every mistake in the book. I felt my life was ruined, and the despair was cold and horrible. Then I saw him. He was standing at the end of the room

between me and the window, wearing a brown robe with a rope tied around his waist, and thong sandals on his feet. I couldn’t see his actual features, but the love, and above all, the warmth that flowed from him was beyond anything I had ever imagined possible. Everything changed for me that moment.”

This story is neither proof nor prototype; for the ways Jesus appears as the Christ (Savior) are both varied and always steeped in divine mystery.

Jesus may come to us:

...when we experience a deeply needed Love that no human being can offer us.

...when we become vulnerable to a deep inner loneliness and are met with Divine Companionship.

...when we realize that we have no way of fixing a recurring life-destroying flaw...and experience Divine Forgiveness.

...when Healing Love reaches and calms an affliction beyond the reach of human touch. ...when we are caught in the dark place of death and find a Resurrecting Love.

It is this Love, first told in Scripture stories about Jesus, then told by others, and now alive in us that gives us a sound basis to say: **“Jesus is the Christ!”**

**Prayer:** Christ, continue to nurture our faith through Scripture stories, stories told by others, and those holy, life-defining moments when we meet your love in our hearts. Amen

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Saturday, December 18, 2004
Week Three, Day Seven

THE LOWLIEST AND THE LEAST IN THE REIGN OF GOD

Matthew 11:7-15

In yesterday's passage in Matthew, Jesus is speaking to John's disciples about his own identity as the Christ. Now he turns to the crowd to speak of John the Baptist's identity.

Jesus uses strong words of praise for John as a prophet. He says: "That's right a prophet! Probably the best prophet you will ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, 'I'm sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.'" (*The Message*)

Then Jesus turns his attention to the broader context of both John's and his message and ministry, namely the Reign of God. What he says about those who are least in the Reign of God in comparison to John the Baptist is startling and puzzling. "Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him." (*The Message*)

What does Jesus mean "that the lowliest person is ahead of him (John)"? It is pretty heady stuff for us followers of Jesus. Well, if it means what I think it means, what Jesus has said is both joyous and humbling to his followers whom he wants to lead into the glories of God's Reign.

I want to share what this verse means to me by turning to a story Malcom Muggeridge told in his book about Mother Teresa, *Something Beautiful For God*. He writes:

"Accompanying Mother Teresa, as we did, to these different activities for the purpose of filming them – to the Home for the Dying, to the lepers and unwanted children, I found I went through three phases. The first was horror mixed with pity, the second compassion pure and simple, and the third, reaching far beyond

compassion, something I had never experienced before – an awareness that these dying and derelict men and women, these lepers with stumps instead of hands, these unwanted children, were not pitiable, repulsive or forlorn, but rather dear and delightful; as might be, friends of long standing, brothers and sisters. How is it to be explained – the very heart and mystery of the Christian faith?" (*The Healing Fountain, ed. Betty Thompson, Education Division UMC Bd. Of Global Ministries, 1973, pp.27-8*)

I believe that through the ministry of Mother Teresa, Christ drew Malcom Muggeridge into the mystery of God's Reign alive in a Calcutta slum. He must have felt he was simultaneously lowly and richly blessed in this strange world of God's Reign of love. Those familiar with Malcom Muggeridge know it changed him and his purpose in life. He went as an atheist and left as a Christian.

That brings us to something else operating in this passage. With his concluding words: "Are you listening to me? Really listening?" Jesus is asking us who we are. Are we those who choose to live as blessed, lowly members in God's Beloved Community in which derelict men and women, unwanted children, and lepers are seen as brothers and sisters? For after all, Jesus can't be Messiah to us unless we choose to be with him and follow where he leads us.

PRAYER – Blessed Christ, help us to take sufficient time to listen to and heed your voice that we too shall see and serve the glory of God's Reign. Amen

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**Sunday, December 19, 2004**  
**Week Four, Day One**

**GOD WITH US**

Isaiah 7:14: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*

“I’m expecting,” an old woman announced to a visitor one day. She was strapped in a wheelchair and a bib was tied around her neck. “The baby is coming any day now,” she said, patting her midsection.

“Pay no attention to her,” an aide told the visitor, as she moved to wheel the old woman back to her room, “she says that all the time. Shame on you Lucille, you are no more expecting than the man in the moon. Why don’t you stop all this silly talk?”

“I am too expecting,” Lucille insisted, “the doctor told me I am.”

That was the day Cindy began working in the nursing home and about three months before she learned that she was pregnant. By then she and Lucille had become fast friends. Cindy worked in housekeeping so she got into all of the residents’ rooms every day. She visited with each one as she cleaned. Lucille soon became her favorite. Aside from her imaginary pregnancy she seemed very much in touch with the real world, and she was a delightful conversationalist. She had been a hairdresser before she retired, and so had much to tell about all the people who had come into her shop over the years.

As Cindy began to show, she and Lucille talked more and more about babies. Lucille had never had a child of her own. “This would be her first,” she said. Cindy never knew quite what to say when she came out with things like that. She didn’t encourage her but she didn’t argue with her either.

Each day when Cindy came to work, Lucille would ask her how she was feeling and what the baby had been doing. Cindy would tell her about the baby’s kicking and somersaults and hiccups. Sometimes, when the baby was especially active she would allow Lucille to put her hand on her stomach and feel the baby’s movements.

A few weeks after the baby was born Cindy brought him to the nursing home to show everyone. She took him to Lucille’s room first and triumphantly handed him into Lucille’s waiting arms. Lucille cuddled him for a while, asked his name and insisted that Cindy tell her all about the delivery. When she was finished telling all that she could remember, Cindy asked Lucille if she would like to hold the baby as she showed him around. Lucille beamed with delight.

“He’s here, He’s here! The baby’s here,” Lucille called out as Cindy wheeled them down the hallway. Everyone stopped what they were doing and hurried over to see the baby. “He’s here at last,” Lucille told them, “And his name is Immanuel.”

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Monday, December 20, 2004
Week Four, Day Two

JUDGMENT

Isaiah 7:16-17 *“For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that E’phraim departed from Judah - the king of Assyria.”*

The small boy was often seen down by the lake with his cane pole. Every evening, just before the supper hour, he would pass by the store fronts in the town with his catch of the day. Sometimes there would be a bass or a northern pike, but usually it was a big carp or a string of suckers. His mother, who relied on the fish to supplement the groceries she was able to buy with their family’s allotment of food stamps, was glad for whatever he brought. Filleted, soaked overnight in salt water, fried in beer batter or baked in butter and cornmeal, they tasted as good as trout in the finest restaurant.

It was mid-July when the Chamber of Commerce announced that it was time to seine the rough fish out of the lake. The tourists were beginning to complain that they weren’t catching enough game fish. Something had to be done before they went elsewhere to fish and spend their tourist dollars. Seining day was set for August 1, a Saturday when all the men would be free to help. The dam was opened a few days before, so that the water level would be low, allowing easy access to the fish. They started early in

the morning, about 30 men with a dozen boats and nets they had borrowed from the Department of Natural Resources. By evening almost 9,000 pounds of rough fish, carp, redhorse and suckers had been removed from the 45-acre lake and packed into hundred pound boxes for shipment to a fertilizer company in Des Moines. A much smaller amount of game fish, northern pike, large mouth bass, blue gills and crappies, were thrown back. Now there would be good fishing for the tourists.

Late that night the small boy got an old bucket from under the porch and dipped it into a milk tank behind the shed in the back yard. The tank was swimming full of carp, redhorse and suckers. He filled his pail with water and fish and carried it through the town and down to the lake. Before the sun came up he had made over a dozen trips, stopping only to watch as the fish made their way through the shallows to the deep.

The next day he was back at the lake with his cane pole, fishing in his usual spot.

Tuesday, December 21, 2004
Week Four, Day Three

RESTORATION

Psalm 80: 6 & 7: *“You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved”.*

The boy didn't know what to do. Dad was drunk again. Mom was at work. How was he going to get to the game? Coach said he was going to start him at forward again tonight. It was his big opportunity to win a permanent spot in the starting line-up. Mom had forbidden him to drive the pickup until he got his driver's license. He would have to take the snowmobile. There was no other way. If he cut across the lake and followed the ditch along the back road into town he would save 20 minutes and almost make it on time. He put on his down leggings and coat, pushed the snowmobile out of the garage, started the engine, jumped onto the seat, edged slowly down the hill in the backyard and then out onto the ice. It appeared to be solid all the way across.

He opened up the throttle and felt the power of the machine as it surged beneath him, thrusting him out over the hard level surface. He hunched himself down behind the windshield. The night air was bitter cold on his face but he liked the feel of it. This must be what it feels like to pilot a jet, he thought to himself as his craft began to pick up speed. He didn't see the hole in the ice until it was too late. It was too wide to swerve around and he was going too fast to stop. His last thoughts were of the team gathering for the game - and of his mom coming home along in the dark. What would she do without him?

When the woman came into the house she found her husband asleep in his usual spot on the couch. There were empty bottles all around, and she could smell the beer on his breath, so she didn't try to wake him. Her son was nowhere to be seen. Where could he be? The game would

have been over hours ago. There was a message on the answering machine. It was the coach asking why Jimmy hadn't been at the game. That's when she really began to worry. She went outside to look for him and quickly spotted the snowmobile tracks leading down to the lake. She knew what had happened before she walked out onto the ice, and it was in that terrible, excruciating moment that she made up her mind to do what she knew she should have done years before.

She waited to tell him until the day after the funeral. He pleaded with her to stay, as he had always done before and said that he would stop drinking and go into the treatment program. And then he cried, as he always did, and told her he couldn't live without her. But she didn't listen this time. “I can't help you,” she said. “I thought I could, but I can't. And now Jimmy is dead because I haven't been strong enough to leave you.” Then she picked up the phone and called her brother, and he came with his pickup truck and helped her move her things to the apartment she had rented in town.

The man drank three beers after his wife left and then walked out onto the ice to the hole where his son had died. He fully intended to end his life there, too, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Something inside of him said “no.” He walked back to the house, got into the pickup and drove straight to the treatment center in town. He climbed up the steps of the front entrance and rang the bell. When they opened the door to let him in, he said, “I don't know if there is any hope for me, but I have nowhere else to go.”

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**Wednesday, December 22, 2004**  
**Week Four, Day Four**

**GIFT OF THE SPIRIT**

Matthew 1:18 *“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”*

Emily was in a hurry to be done with her visiting. There was just one last call to be made and then she could take her maternity leave and forget about her pastoral duties for a while. She entered the old woman's room somewhat hesitantly. She never knew quite what to expect from Maude Brown. Maude had never known a “woman preacher,” in all of her 98 years. And she made it very clear that she didn't like the idea one bit. She would never call Emily “Reverend” or “Pastor.” It was always “Mrs. Sheldon.”

As Emily approached the bed, the old woman raised her head and struggled to make out who she was. “It's Emily, Miss Brown, Emily Sheldon, your pastor from the church. How are you today?”

“Why I'm just fine for an old woman. And how are you, Mrs. Sheldon? You look like you need to sit down and take a load off your feet. You shouldn't be out running around in your condition. You should be home with your husband. Let him do the running.”

Emily sat down, and as she sat she felt the baby leap in her womb. Maude saw her wince and reach for her stomach. She asked Emily if she would allow her to feel the baby. Emily was a little taken aback. This was the first time this had ever happened to her during a pastoral visit. She told Maude to go ahead. It would be perfectly all right.

Emily pulled her chair over closer to the bed. Maude stretched out a wrinkled hand and placed it gently on her swollen middle.

The two women waited in silence until the baby stirred again. Maude sighed and removed her hand. The silence continued for several moments. Then, in a low voice and with eyes looking off into the distance, Maude began to speak.

“I was expecting once. It happened when I was very young. The hired man had his way with me in the haymow one day when Mama and Papa were gone. He made me promise not to tell them. When I started to get big about three months later, Mama said, “Girl, what are we going to do with you?” She didn't ask me who or why. She didn't even get angry with me. She simply said, “Maude, you must ride the horse every day for a half hour.”

I didn't much like riding the horse, but I didn't argue with her. Mama watched me closely after that but it wasn't until about two weeks later that the bleeding started. Mama put me in bed and told me to push until it was all out. She took it away. I don't know what she did with it. We never spoke of it, and I never rode the horse again.”

Emily reached out and took hold of Maude's hand. “It's okay,” she said. “I'm glad you told me. May I sit with you for a little while? We don't have to talk if you don't want to.” “I'd like that,” Maude said.

When Emily got up to leave about an hour later, Maude opened her eyes and said, “Thank you, Reverend, I'm glad you came.”

**Thursday, December 23, 2004**  
**Week Four, Day Five**

**RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Matthew 1:19-20 *“Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”*

Mary didn't know what to do. How would she break the news to Joe? They had only been dating for six weeks, but she knew that he loved her. She could see it in his eyes. And she knew that she loved him. He was so gentle and understanding. There weren't many men in the world like Joe.

Mary had met Joe in the emergency room on the very night of the assault, and they had been together every day since, as if it was meant to be. Joe was there waiting for a friend who had twisted an ankle in a softball game. She sat next to him in the waiting room before they took her in to be examined.

Mary had been too upset to talk, and Joe hadn't tried to make conversation. He didn't even ask what had happened. He simply looked at her with tenderness and said, “It will be okay. They will take care of you.” Even those few words had been enough to create a bond between them. And Joe had come back later, after he took his friend home, to see if she was all right. By then Mary was able to talk a little bit about the rape:

the horror she had felt during the attack and the humiliation and anger that were still growing within her. She was grateful for his presence. Somehow it was easier to talk about it with him than with the counselor who had been assigned to her case. Joe had listened quietly for several hours that night, and had called or come to keep her company every night since, gradually coaxing her out of her small apartment into the world again.

Joe had never once tried to touch her, and Mary loved him for that. He seemed to know without her saying it that she couldn't stand to be touched - not yet. Soon, maybe. She had found herself longing for that moment and wondering what it would be like during the past couple of weeks. Mary knew that Joe would wait until she gave him a sign, and she had thought that it might be tonight.

But, when she let him know what the doctor had told her today, would Joe want to touch her? Was this the end of her hope that their love would lead to marriage and a family? What would Joe do when she told him about the baby?

**Friday, December 24, 2004**  
**Week Four, Day Six**

**PACKING CHRISTMAS**

Matthew 1:21: *"She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

There was once an old woman who lived in a big, old Victorian house filled with the many treasures she had collected over her eighty-nine years. When the time came that she could no longer care for herself, her relatives arranged for her to have an estate sale. They told her that everything had to go, since there wasn't going to be much room in the nursing home.

After almost all of the old woman's lovely things had been sold, they packed her few remaining clothes and possessions into an old chest of drawers that she had inherited from her grandmother. The woman also insisted on taking a very large wooden trunk which she said her father had crafted from scrap lumber. It had been a Christmas gift to her mother in 1913, the year before she was born. They put the chest of drawers, the trunk, and the old woman into the minivan and set out for her new home.

When they arrived at the nursing home they expected that she would be very sad; that this would be a difficult day with many tears. But the old woman was smiling as they walked in the door behind the cart that carried the old chest of drawers and the cherished trunk. She was absolutely beaming, as if this was one of the happiest days of her life.

Just then the load on the cart shifted and the contents of the trunk spilled out onto the floor. There were packets of bright-colored wrapping paper, bundles of aged Christmas

cards, a carolers songbook, hand-knit Christmas stockings, a string of colored lights, a porcelain angel in a yellowed plastic bag, dozens Christmas ornaments in their original boxes, and a miniature nativity set carved from ivory. Tiny shepherds, camels, wise men, Mary, Joseph, a manger, a stable and the babe were strewn all about.

"Oh my," the old woman laughed, "I guess I need to travel lighter." She knelt down, picked up the little lord Jesus figure, and gently laid him in the manger. "You are all I need," she whispered, as if speaking to him alone. And, then turning to her nephew, the one who had driven the minivan, she said, "Jerry, why don't you take this old trunk home. And if you don't want it, give it to one of your sisters. Maybe they can get some use out of some of this old stuff." She laughed again as Jerry helped her to her feet.

One of the aides who had come to escort the old woman asked her how she could be so happy on a day like this. She said, "You haven't even seen your room yet," in a tone of voice that suggested that it wasn't really very nice.

The old woman smiled and said, "Oh, I don't have to see it. I know it will be all right. I've learned to be content wherever I am. God has been so good to me. I feel so blessed."

All those years she had been packing Christmas in her heart, the kind of Christmas you can take with you wherever you go.

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Saturday, December 25, 2004
Week Four, Day Seven

SET APART

Romans 1:1-3: "*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God, which he promised before hand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.*"

Both management and union leaders were angry with Amos Dresser. To management he was a whistleblower and to the union he was a snitch. Amos had committed the unpardonable sin of speaking the truth in a company where it was understood that certain production practices were never to be questioned.

Amos broke the unspoken and unwritten rule. He asked questions of workers who became ill after coming into contact with illegal materials that were used in the manufacturing process.

And when he discovered that the public was also endangered by the use of these contraband substances, Amos made a speech at a public meeting which was attended by members of the press.

Amos' charges about the company's use of illegal materials and the complicity of union leaders was front page news for several weeks. He appeared on three national talk shows and testified at a special legislative hearing at the state capitol. The company paid fines of several million dollars and the union president was defeated in the next election.

Still, the rank and file were generally displeased with Amos' public protestations. Some accused him of being a publicity seeker. Others said the company could have been held accountable without all the fuss of stories in the media.

Amos reminded them that he was just a guy on the line who felt he had a duty to keep his co-workers and the public safe. "All I want is to do my job and be left alone," Amos said. But few believed him and none of his co-workers called him friend.

When Amos' work was declared to be unacceptable in his next performance review, the supervisor insisted that the negative rating had nothing to do with Amos' public stand.

And when Amos' section was down-sized and he was laid off without severance pay or pension benefits, no one spoke up to defend him. "That's what he gets for being a snitch," some of Amos' co-workers said behind his back. "That will teach him to stick his neck out."

Sunday, December 26, 2004
Week Five, Day One

TRY TO KEEP UP

Psalm 148, v. 4-6: "*Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever; He fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.*"

Sometimes when something new and wonderful comes into our lives, we have a difficult time adjusting to it. This is paradoxical; we don't expect trouble from blessings, but trouble we sometimes get. And so it is with the gift of Scripture, too. These verses from Psalms can lead Christians swiftly into error, for we instinctively think that the bounds the Lord has fixed for the heavens (and for humanity) are the bounds which are apparent to us.

In the lectionary, this passage is linked with Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. Jesus' arrival denied that the people of his day had a good survey of God's boundaries. As Christians, we understand Jesus' ministry as a new covenant, a change in the previously immutable relationship between God and humanity.

"New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth." (J.R. Lowell) Christians are legatees of the greatest of new occasions. Did we learn the new duties Christmas teaches? Christian understanding subsequently became as inflexible as the priesthood of Jesus' day. Just as the religious establishment then refused to accept Jesus' new teaching, modern Christians reject God's revelations through the science of our day. Following the path of theological ancestors who persecuted Galileo and Copernicus, today we choke on

evolution, the Big Bang theory, and the expanding universe.

We commit these errors because we think our old familiar boundaries are God's posts and markers. We presume to know the limits of God's mind. We fear and hate those who question the accuracy of our presumption. While we sing of the wideness of God's mercy, we struggle to assure ourselves that mercy's scope does not encompass those whose temerity threatens to break open the dark little tomb in which we store our God.

The world is far larger than Jesus knew. It circles the sun in the company of planets whose existence was unknown to humanity 2,000 years ago. The universe is incomprehensibly larger than the earthly Jesus understood it to be. If we do not allow Christianity to pass the boundaries which Jesus' temporal limits implied for it, Christianity cannot have a fruitful future.

"For humanity sweeps onward; where today the martyr stands, the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his hands, while the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return, to gather up the martyr's ashes into History's golden urn." (James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*)

Loose your chains. Accept the spiritual freedom Jesus offers all.

Monday, December 27, 2004
Week Five, Day Two

A PERSONAL PSALM

See Isaiah 63:7-9

The beauty of the sun and sky and trees and flowers around me
and the warmth and care and love of the people beside me
fill my heart – mind – soul – body – my whole being!

Today, I praise and thank you, O Eternal One.

Yesterday, I may have forgotten you,
worried if you are really there,
wondered if I could trust you,
missed your presence in the
busyness of my schedule,
my timidity of mind,
my pride of hear.

**Today, I praise
and thank you.**

With your people here, I sing and pray to greet the day:
giving thanks for your care throughout the night;
affirming all your work for good in our world;
offering myself as beloved friend and servant.

In the halls, at meals, and in our classroom,
we share smiles, words, laughter,
concerns and plans
and pain.

You know, O God, how great is the pain
for many sisters and brothers here.

How deep are their struggles;
how uncertain their future;
how loud is their cry:

“How long, O God,
How long?”

**O Eternal One, in the midst of all
this distraction, doubt, and pain,
I praise and thank you. Amen!**

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**Tuesday, December 28, 2004**  
**Week Five, Day Three**

**JESUS COMES TO RICH AND POOR**

Matthew 2:1-12: "*Wise Men*" Luke 2:8-20: "*Shepherds*"

Who came to visit Jesus and celebrate his birth? Luke has one answer: shepherds. Matthew has another: Wise Men.

Christmas pageants usually combine shepherds and Wise Men into one Christmas script. This tradition has the benefit of including more parts for people in costumes and the convenience of sharing the whole story in a single production. After all, who would want to wait for - or come back later to meet - travelers arriving from far to the east of Bethlehem. They came on camels, not in space ships!

A risk in our "one script includes all" design is: we may miss the unique vision and message each Gospel conveys. What we see and learn and value as our priority will shape our decisions as individuals and our witness as congregations.

In Luke, the first people to hear the Good News of Jesus' birth and run to celebrate it are shepherds. People hearing his Gospel would view their place of honor as - at best - unexpected. More likely, it would be truly shocking; - and, quite likely, unacceptable. Even to Christians!

In economic terms, shepherds were "the poorest of the poor." In social terms, they were the "lowest of the low;" though their work was essential for the owner's income and well-being, all shepherds were seen as actual - or potential - thieves. In spiritual terms, they were by definition "sinners;"

since their work was far from the Temple or synagogue, they could not participate in the required rituals. One more thing led people to "keep their distance" from shepherds: being with sheep day and night meant they had odors no "de-oderant" could disguise!

What persons do we view today in ways similar to how people saw shepherds then? If Luke is right, such persons might help us and our congregations hear and understand Jesus and his "good news for the poor." (*See Luke 4: 16-21 and Luke 6:20; also the remainder of Luke 6.*)

Matthew's "travelers from the east" are everything the shepherds are not: they are Gentiles, not Jews; they are wealthy, not poor; they are educated, not illiterate; they are respected, not despised; they are "kings," not workers. Their gifts signal a recognition of Jesus by persons beyond God's chosen people, the Jews. Their coming to see this new king is an enormous threat to Herod's power and ego and role in a society which was dominated by a powerful empire.

In Matthew's vision, there is room for all of us who are not like shepherds then or people they remind us of today.

However, if we want to see and follow Jesus, we will face changes in our self-understanding and conflicts in our churches and roles in society. Read what happened in Bethlehem when Herod's fear-filled wrath came down upon them: *Matt. 2:16-18*.

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Wednesday, December 29, 2004
Week Five, Day Four

JEREMIAH BUYS A FIELD

Jeremiah 32:1-15

Jeremiah tells a story about himself and a field. At the time of this story, Judah had been invaded by the army of Babylon. (Babylon was the leading regional power of the time.) Already, the land was almost conquered. Their sister nation of Israel had been lost long ago and the provinces of Judah had been picked off by the invaders. Only Jerusalem was left, and the enemy was literally at the gates.

Jeremiah himself was under guard, accused of sedition. In a time of national crisis, Jeremiah had been quoting God as saying things like, "*I am going to hand this city over to the king of Babylon.*" [32:3, Bright]

King Zedekiah would have liked to be rid of this public defeatism, but Jeremiah had a track record of quoting God accurately and the king would rather not risk executing a prophet of God. The king could at least contain the problem by placing Jeremiah under guard.

Now the word of God came to Jeremiah concerning his cousin and a certain field. And then his cousin came, confirming in his action the truth which Jeremiah had heard.

The cousin had come about a field which was being sold. Apparently Jeremiah, as a near relative, had the right of first refusal in order to keep the land in the family, as provided in Leviticus 25:25. So Jeremiah buys the field. He counts out the payment, signs the deed, and has it witnessed, notarized and copied. And then he puts the documents in the equivalent of a safety deposit box. When all of this has been done, Jeremiah repeats the word of God (which he hasn't previously told us), "*Houses and fields and vineyard shall once again be bought in this land.*" [32:15, Bright]

The dream, the truth, is that there will be life beyond the war, beyond the defeat, beyond exile in Babylon. People will buy and sell Judean real estate. Land does not go into exile; property deeds are useless under military occupation. The dream is that a normal life, with civil law and ordinary commerce, will return for this people in this place.

Jeremiah does something in accordance with this truth. Because he has faith in the dream of a peaceful future the dream becomes the truth for him even though war is raging and defeat stands at the gate.

Thursday, December 30, 2004
Week Five, Day Five

“YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”

John 1:1-5: *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

One mid-December evening, some years ago, as I was driving along a remote stretch on interstate highway, far from home, I ran into a stretch of fog. My child was ill in another state and needed to come home; I was in full mama-bear mode. The fog became thicker and the driving very slow. I was frustrated; time was of the essence as I was trying to take the fewest possible days off work.

The fog became thicker still and I was having difficulty seeing the lane markers. I was debating whether or not to pull off the road for a while -- not sure where the edge was and wondering if that option was even safe, given the conditions. Ahead of me was an eerie dark tunnel of fog illuminated only by my headlights, which didn't help much.

Suddenly I spotted the faint red glow of taillights, a semi just ahead of me. Trusting that the driver could see better than I, I stayed just as close as I dared; we crawled along for the next ten miles or so, until we finally drove out of the fog. Grateful and relieved, I drove on to my destination. I have never forgotten the hope that those faint red lights gave me.

There are times in our lives when we feel as hopeless as driving in fog. Grief, anxiety, depression, and other intense emotions envelop us, blocking our usual coping

mechanisms and turning us into fearful and sometimes paranoid creatures. We are not fun to be around. Friends avoid us because they do not know what to do or say, and family get tired of having this dead weight of unloving and unlovable presence around them. I know because I have been there.

I also know that it was the unwavering, caring presence of family members and friends who loved me, and who were the glowing lights that kept me steady and on course during my recovery. Not all of them realized the extent of my internal suffering but they were there. They did not give up or withdraw.

Epiphany is about light, the light of hope coming into the world. I believe the Christian imperative is to *be* light in the lives of others, to be signs of hope to others.

Friendship does not mean we have to know all the gory details of another's life, but it does mean valuing persons for who they are, not for how much they can do or be for you.

You don't have to bring cookies or say the right words. You just have to care - just be there.

After all, they can't drive out of the fog without someone to guide them. *You are the light of the world.*

For Meditation: The words of the hymn “Saranam, Saranam”

“Jesus, Savior, Lord, lo to thee I fly: Saranam . . .

Thou the Rock, my refuge that's higher then I, Saranam . . .

In the midst of foes I cry to thee, from the ends of earth wherever I may be;

My strength in helplessness, O answer me: Saranam, Saranam, Saranam

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**Friday, December 31, 2004**  
**Week Five, Day Six**

**LOOKING FOR LIGHT - LIVING IN LIGHT WHEN DARKNESS  
ABOUNDS**

“When does darkness end and light begin?” asked a teacher. A student answered, “Is it when you can tell a dog from a sheep?” “No,” replied the teacher. Another student asked, “Is it when you can tell a grape vine from a fig tree?” Again, the teacher answered “No” but added, “Darkness ends and light begins when you can look at another person and see a brother or a sister.”

As we mark the end of 2004, can you remember times of darkness in your family? among your friends and neighbors? in places you work or volunteer? in your congregation and other groups you are part of? In our town - city - state - and country as a whole? In personal and governmental experiences with people outside our boundaries?

I certainly can. Darkness so real I can feel it as I write. Darkness squeezes our joy - diminishes our dignity - reduces our energy - distorts our ability to see clearly and hear accurately - flattens all our emotions except anxiety and fear, guilt and shame.

Darkness arises when other people’s behavior reminds us of patterns and memories we find embarrassing or threatening or truly frightening. Rather than face these parts of ourselves and seek more understanding and healing, we project them on to other people and gossip about them, criticize them, and act as an individual and/or through rules and laws to make their life more difficult.

Darkness expands when we see people only as their roles and not as persons. “Kids” – “Parents” – “Teachers” – “Students” – “Workers” – “Management” – “Voters” –

“Politicians” – “Citizens” – “Others” (in the United States or overseas) - “The People” and “The Government.” Darkness thrives when we harden our hearts and call some of these persons “us” and the others “them.”

New Year’s Eve is a celebration of Light for people all around the world! Can you recall pictures on television as people celebrated January 1, 2000? Lights and music and dancing and fireworks – all manner of sights and sounds marked the safe arrival of a new month – a new year – a new century! People shared laughter and hugs and lively conversations – all signs of Joy and Hope and Peace.

January 6 is another celebration of Light! On that day, the light of God in the birth of Jesus was recognized by three travelers from the East. They followed the light of a Star to Bethlehem. There they knelt before a Child in the Manger of a Stable. Their journey and their gifts to the Child are a sign Jesus came not just to God’s people, the Jews; he came to all people.

In his ministry, Jesus looked for “the least, the last, and the lost.” He traveled to homes, lake shores and synagogues preaching and teaching. He fed and healed many in need showing us “God so loved the world God sent Jesus...not to condemn the world but to save it.” (John 3:16-17) Though he was rejected and killed, God raised him from death to be the **light** of the **world**.

The teacher in the story above and Jesus agree: we leave the darkness when we learn to see each boy and man is “our brother” and every girl and woman is “our sister.”

**Saturday, January 1, 2005**  
**Week Five, Day Seven**

**LIFE \* HOPE \* JUSTICE \* PEACE**

A song of God's love I hope will fill your heart, stir your spirit, and move you to **sing!**  
The song has three verses:

1) God meets us precisely here and now and says, "**I love you.**"

Each day of our life, healthy or sick, satisfied or struggling, employed or unemployed, confident or confused, active or "worn out," single, married, divorced or widowed – in all seasons and circumstances of our life, God's love is as near as our breathing!

2) God knows what we carry from the past and in the present and says, "**I'll help you.**"

When we've been called names that hurt us, made decisions that hurt other people and ourselves, dreamed dreams we could not achieve, set goals we did not accomplish, been injured physically, emotionally, spiritually, just staying alive becomes a heavy load to carry.

False pride says, "I won't ask for help."  
True respect for ourselves accepts God's help.

3) God looks at our gifts and people's needs in our world and says, "**I need you.**"

When we look into a mirror, we may see faults, deficits, and wounds in body, mind, spirit. God sees our potential for showing kindness and doing justice in ways small and large.

We are limited only by our ability to imagine doing what is new and right in God's eyes.

Today, ask God to show you someone in your family, a neighbor, a stranger nearby or anywhere in the world for whom you can sing a song of love to bring **life – hope – justice – peace.**

**Sunday, January 2, 2005**  
**Week Six, Day One**  
**THE MANIFESTATION OF PEACE**  
**IT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU WISH FOR**

Matthew 2:1-12

He was frightened; King Herod was frightened. Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Scripture tells us that King Herod was frightened and "...all Jerusalem with him."

When I read verse 3 of Matthew's second chapter I think of that old saying, "When Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" It seems there was something similar going on with King Herod; "When King Herod is frightened, everybody is frightened!"

When Mama ain't happy what do we do? We tread carefully, we speak softly, we act cooperatively, we do whatever we can to create that sense of calm that will help Mama get happy! There's a high price to pay if you don't learn quickly, that it's Mama's way...or else! *(apologies to the author's mother who is NOT prone to this behavior)*

When King Herod gets frightened, what do the people do? They behave extra-cautiously, they whisper the rumors quietly, they display their allegiance astutely, they do whatever they can to create that sense of calm that will help King Herod not to be frightened! There was a high price paid by the ones who didn't learn quickly, that it was King Herod's way...or else!

Who can blame the ones who do whatever it takes to keep the PEACE? What's with those upstarts who won't just shut up, cooperate, and follow the rules? They keep disrupting the PEACE with their noisy protests for workers' rights, healthcare for all, fair wages, racial justice, gender equality, environmental protection, an end to war, and on, and on, and on! Don't you just WISH that they'd finally figure out that it's still King Herod's way...or else!? Don't you just WISH that good causes could come to be without all this risky behavior and fuss?

Maybe there's more to it than wishing...

*"Peace is not something you wish for, it's something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away." Mother Teresa*

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Monday, January 3, 2005
Week Six, Day Two

IT'S SOMETHING YOU MAKE

Isaiah 60:1-6

Good news! The Prince of Peace has been born anew in and among us and everybody knows because we told them so with Christmas carols playing in the shopping malls. By now, of course, the carols have been replaced because most folks are “sick of hearing six weeks of the same old songs,” but we’re sure they got the point. Isn’t it obvious that Christmas has arrived and that the Prince of Peace rules our hearts, our minds and our lives? Maybe it’s not so obvious. Christmas has arrived, so where is the peace?

Jesus looked toward the city of Jerusalem and wept. “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

We read about centuries and centuries of Jesus’ ancestors and weep for them and their separation from God. God gave these people life and faith and yet they could not see the things that make for peace. We read about Jesus’ contemporaries and weep for them and their separation from God. Jesus preached and taught and healed right before their very eyes and yet they could not see the things that make for peace. We read about centuries and centuries of generations following Jesus and weep for their

separation from God...our separation from God. God has been and is revealed in myriad ways on a daily basis and yet they do not see the things that make for peace...we do not see the things that make for peace.

Isaiah helps make it clear that it is up to us to **make** peace. His words are not passive. His are words of **action!** “Arise, shine...lift up your eyes and look around...then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice...proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

Making peace is about standing up and speaking up for what is right. “Arise, shine!”

Making peace is about living in the ways of justice on a daily basis. “Lift up your eyes and look around!”

Making peace is about recognizing that change is necessary, risky, and energizing. “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”

Making peace is our faithful response to the God of truth, grace and justice. “Proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

How will I make peace today?

*“Peace is not something you **wish** for, it’s something you **make**, something you **do**, something you **are**, something you **give away**.” Mother Teresa*

Tuesday, January 4, 2005
Week Six, Day Three

IT'S SOMETHING YOU DO

Psalm 72:1-7

What does it mean to “do peace?” We look to an ancient prophet: “This is what YAHWEH asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.” *Micah 6:8*

We look to a recent prophet: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice.”
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We look to our tradition: “It is the vocation of every Christian to be a peacemaker.” John Wesley

We look to the One who is the focus of our faith:

“He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ Luke 4:18-21

We look within: There is no peace without justice. To DO peace, one must DO justice. What have I done today to bring justice to the poor, those held captive, the blind, those who are oppressed?

Thinking, praying and talking about peace isn’t enough?

I have to DO something?

Embody the dream of peace **now!**

This isn’t something for future generations to DO, but for us! DO justice. DO peace.

“Peace is not something you wish for, it’s something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away.” Mother Teresa

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**Wednesday, January 5, 2005**  
**Week Six, Day Four**

**IT'S SOMETHING YOU ARE**

Isaiah 43-44:8

For several weeks now, we've been lighting candles on the wreath. First one, then two, then three and four. Finally, on Christmas Eve, we lit the Christ candle at the very center and we've been lighting it since. Soon, we'll surround the wreath with bubble wrap and pack it away with all the other Christmas decorations, but the candles won't get packed.

The candles have been well used throughout the season; they have served their purpose. When our children were little, one of them suggested that perhaps we shouldn't light the candles. If we didn't light them, they would always stay nice looking, they would remain even in height, and we would be able to keep them from year to year. The thing about candles is, that unless you're willing to light them, they're not really candles.

Our advent candles do look and smell pretty, but candles are first and foremost about light. Wax and wick do not a candle make. Wax and wick become candle when the wick is allowed to burn. A candle is made for burning. Until lit by a flame, wax and wick are only possibility. Until lit by a flame, wax and wick are preserved, intact, unchanging, and remain only wax and wick. Until lit by a flame, wax and wick do not serve their purpose.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." It is a song I sang as a child, and it is a truth I try to live today. This little light,

this inner radiance, is your Christmas gift to me.

"O God, help me accept your gift with a grateful heart. Help me move daily to a better understanding of how precious this gift is. Let my hope in you be like oxygen to this little light that it might be fanned into a bright flame.

Help me remember you have claimed me and called me that I might give witness to the light of your love by sharing that light with others. I pray that your light in me will never be "extinguished, quenched like a wick."

Let the light of your love shine out from me like a searchlight into deep, dark crevices that are void of hope and joy.

Help me to find ways to bring a message of peace to those I encounter this day that together, we might come to "know and believe...and understand" that you are God and you are love.

It is in the burning that a candle shows its flame and it is in loving service to others that your light shines through me. Help me to burn brightly with your love, O God. Amen."

*"Peace is not something you wish for, it's something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away." Mother Teresa*

**Thursday, January 6, 2005, Epiphany  
Week Six, Day Five**

**IT'S SOMETHING YOU GIVE AWAY**

Ephesians 3:1-12

In the lectionary verses for this week, we read some of chapter three of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. But to read chapter three correctly, we need to go back. The mystery, the commission of God's grace, the revelation that Paul talks about in chapter three is summed up in these words of chapter two:

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...he is our peace...and has broken down the dividing wall...."*

Christ is OUR peace, the peace for ALL people. Paul helped the early church and helps us to understand that through the Spirit of Jesus, God's love is now seen by people even outside Jesus' own community. Peace is not something meant for a chosen few. All people are welcomed into the family of God and ALL of creation is meant to live in peace.

Sometimes we Christians act as though we have a "corner" on God's truth, or even God's love. Paul was very familiar with this kind of thinking. He experienced it among the Jewish

community of the first century and he speaks to it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is also a letter to us. As contemporary Christians, we read Paul's words and recognize that it is our challenge to bring a truly inclusive understanding of God's love to the world.

Jesus' entrance into human history, his life and his ministry bring close those who have been far off. All of Jesus' words and actions are directed toward unity, toward spanning the distances that separate. Jesus breaks down the walls that divide. Paul tells us that this good news is given to us, "...so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known..."

Christmas is our promise of peace. Epiphany is our call to show forth that peace, to make peace, to do peace, to embody peace.

It is in the act of giving peace away that we begin to recognize the true peace of Christ, in all its rich variety.

*"Peace is not something you wish for, it's something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away." Mother Teresa*

**Friday, January 7, 2005**  
**Week Six, Day Six**

**“FAITH IS THE YES OF THE HEART...”** *Martin Luther*

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Maybe it's a bit like a puzzle. With pieces missing, you might be able to make out the general idea of the puzzle's picture, but all the pieces need to be present for the picture to be complete. Each of the four readings for Epiphany is valuable in and of itself, but combined together, they give us a more complete picture. Even so, without faith, they would remain only a picture.

Isaiah prophesies the arrival of caravans of camels bearing gold and frankincense to praise the Lord. How often do we see images of the magi with camels? Matthew's telling of the visit by the magi (the only gospel to include the magi) never mentions camels, yet they have become part of our picture of Epiphany.

The refrain for Psalm 72 proclaims the arrival of a king who will pay homage to God's own just king. How often do we see images of the magi wearing crowns? Matthew's telling of the visit by the magi does not describe them as kings, yet we often sing "We Three Kings" as we celebrate Epiphany.

The short passage from the letter to the Ephesians boldly states that God's grace is revealed for all people. Matthew's magi, representatives of the nations of the world, are a sign that Gentiles are now joined to the Jews as co-heirs and co-partners in God's promises.

Reason and revelation work together in the journey that leads to Christ, but the journey can only be completed through the gift of faith. Using skill and science, the magi follow the star to Jerusalem where these Gentiles consult Jewish revelation for the next phase of their journey. Reason alone cannot bring them to Christ, nor can the revealed word by itself. It is, in the end, the gift of faith that makes the journey complete.

The prophesy of Isaiah, the proclamation of the psalmist, the Letter to the Ephesians and Matthew's Gospel combine to help us see the whole picture. Is this combination of scriptures telling us that **none of us has it all together, but together we may have it all**? God, grant us faith that we may see more clearly.

*“Peace is not something you wish for, it's something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away.”* *Mother Teresa*

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Saturday, January 8, 2005
Week Six, Day Seven

GETTING BACK TO REALITY

Matthew 5:3-12

I stand at the pantry door looking for the pasta. I know it's in there but I just can't find it! How could an entire box of pasta just disappear? Another pair of eyes come to join mine at the pantry door and with their help, the pasta magically appears...right there before my very eyes. The pasta was there all along. It's just that I was looking for a red and green box not a yellow and white bag! Sometimes it just takes a new pair of eyes.

Jesus' message on that hillside in Galilee challenges us to see with new eyes. Who would choose to be poor in spirit or to mourn? It's not part of the cultural norm to be meek or to hunger and thirst for righteousness. The merciful and pure in heart are probably not at the top of the chain for promotions.

Peacemakers, in this day and age, risk being labeled unpatriotic. Nobody wants to be persecuted!

In his book, *An Explorer's Guide to Christian Living: Journey to the Center of the Faith*, James Harnish says,

After Christmas each year I hear people say, "Well, it's time to get back to reality." They say it with resignation, as if all the promises of joy, hope, love, and peace that are at the center of the Christmas gospel are little more than a wishful fantasy, a pleasant

dream, like sugarplums dancing in our heads.

They assume – albeit reluctantly - that the real world is the world about which we read in the newspaper every day: the world of hurt, pain, violence, greed, and war.

But people of biblical faith know that reality is exactly the other way around.

The ultimate reality, the reality toward which all of history is moving...is nothing other than God's peaceful kingdom, God's loving reign, God's gracious rule revealed in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it is difficult to see that real world. That world looks very different from the world we usually see. The gifts of Christmas and Epiphany include the promise of new eyes for those who choose to see.

Christmas: God comes into our world clothed in the flesh of humanity. In that flesh, the gracious rule of God is actualized in real-life, down-to-earth, human experience.

O God, we are bold enough to ask that you now clothe yourself in our flesh, so people will recognize your Spirit in us and receive your great gift of love. Amen.

“Peace is not something you wish for, it’s something you make, something you do, something you are, something you give away.” Mother Teresa

Where do we see God's new things in our lives and our world today?

Which peoples and powers receive and affirm God's activity?

What peoples and powers ignore or oppose God's activity?

How do individual & group decisions make a difference?