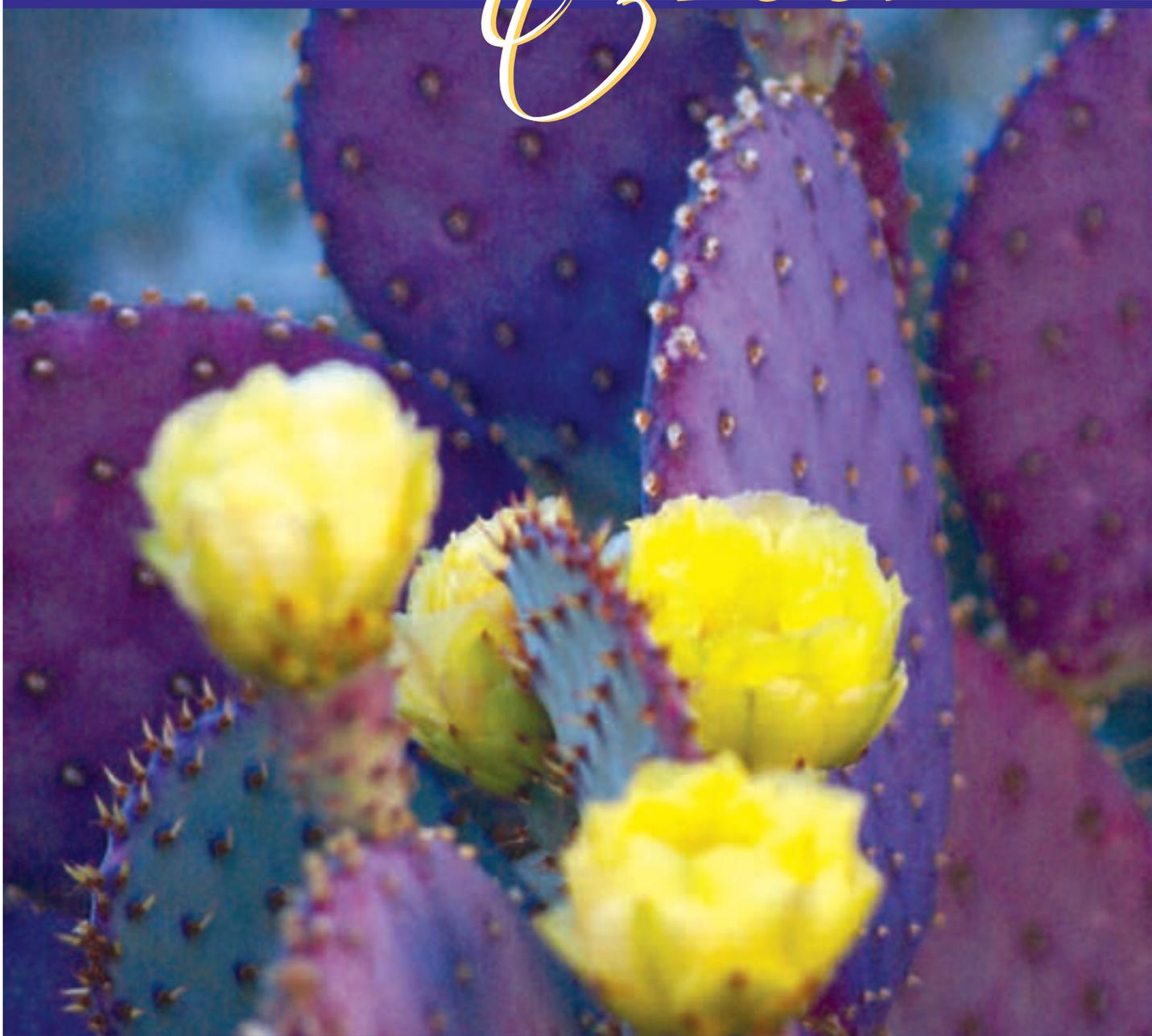


*“And this is my prayer, that your love
may overflow more and more with
knowledge and full insight to help
you to determine what is best...”*

– Philippians 1

Advent, 2009



Spirit in the Desert Lutheran Retreat Center
Carefree, Arizona



Thank you again to Pastor Steve Holm for his creative and inspiring reflections. Steve is the Senior Pastor at Desert Cross Lutheran Church in Tempe, Arizona. He writes Advent and Lenten devotionals for his congregation and generously shares them with the Spirit in the Desert extended community.

The photos on these pages are taken on or near the beautiful Spirit in the Desert campus.

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First Sunday in Advent



November 29, 2009

Luke 21:25-36

“People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” vs. 26

Folks in Jesus’ day had good reason to fear the future. There were constant rebellions and regular outbreaks of disease and poverty. Few lived to what we would call a “ripe old age.” Roman rulers not only exercised control with force and might, but could be counted to mount fierce persecutions on a whim. In such an atmosphere, fear was logical and predictable. It’s more difficult to explain the fears that permeate our more settled and prosperous societies. Yet we cannot deny that there is, for many of us, a deep and pervasive sense of foreboding, hanging like a dark cloud on our horizons. The discomfort could come from a variety of sources, depending on our political or environmental perspectives, but it serves to put a damper on our enjoyment of the present. How can we appreciate today when unseen calamities threaten our tomorrows? This season of Advent can help us refocus our thinking and reclaim the hope that is ours in the incredible message of Christmas. We are reminded that there is more to existence than what meets the eye, that God loves and is never absent from creation, and that in God there is always room for joy, no matter how scary the times may be.

Thought for the Day: What fears do I have for this world?

November 30, 2009

Malachi 3:1-4

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” vs. 1a

Through centuries of exile, abandonment, and turmoil the Jewish people had stubbornly clung to the hope that one day God would act, leaders would be restored, and there would be a return to ancient glory. Prophets fanned that hope, regularly pointing to signs that the Lord’s intervention would be imminent. But for centuries nothing happened...and hope began to fade, only to be stirred up again in the ministry of John the Baptist. As people flocked to hear him they recalled Malachi’s promise and wondered if perhaps at long last the messenger had come. In our day seekers are still watching and waiting. People flock to conferences and retreats looking for the key to understanding life, searching for the secret, the knowledge that will give meaning and purpose. Popular speakers galvanize crowds, raking in enormous profits while offering a message of self-improvement mixed with bits of wisdom culled from a variety of new age sources. The truth is that God has already acted, and in the Christ we have all we need to know for joy in living. Of course not all questions are answered...some things are simply beyond comprehension. But we do know this: we are loved, our sins are forgiven, and there is hope for tomorrow. We have not been abandoned!

Thought for the Day: What are my unanswered questions?

December 1, 2009

Luke 1:68-71

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” vs. 68

It’s amazing how the birth of a baby can bring instant hope to a dispirited family. Elizabeth had been barren for so long...and now, miracle of miracles, a child had been born, and Zechariah, the father, was exultant. This is how God consistently acts to restore and reform humanity. Children are born and with them come visions of how good life might be. Of course, that’s a lot of pressure to be put on a newborn, and sooner or later parents are reminded that there’s only so much joy a baby can bring. And as this little gift from God gains mobility, elements of our fallen nature begin to appear with increasing regularity. But still we hope and pray that, even in the presence of sin, our children will make a difference for good in this world. So much depends on the influence and the witness of mothers and fathers! Where moms and dads are faithful the odds increase that children will fulfill God’s loving purpose for them. For many reasons December has become a month for celebrating children. We go to their programs, listen to their singing, and spend more money than we should on their gifts. For their sakes, may this also be a season when the Christ Child takes center stage in our homes.

Thought for the Day: How will I be celebrating children this month?



December 2, 2009

Luke 1:72-79

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” vss. 78-79

In these few spectacular words, the gospel writer captures all of the hopes and dreams of humanity. He speaks of God’s true nature, the tender mercy that has become incarnate in Christ Jesus, and that brings light to the dark recesses of our hearts. And what is God’s purpose in all this? The answer is plain: to guide our feet into the way of peace! Oh, how we yearn for that life that is promised in Jesus! We crave peace and serenity for the whole God-loved world. Some days the absurdity of our sinful intransigence is overwhelming. We live on a tiny blue planet in the midst of a magnificent galaxy in a universe chock full of spectacular mysteries. And yet we spend our days and years in killing and wounding, in bringing stress and pain to both family and foe, in starving the poor and pandering to the rich. Surely this is not God’s intention for us! And of course it isn’t! God desires peace...and has acted in Jesus to make it real. And that’s the hope of this season! We pray that little by little, one person at a time, all might embrace God’s vision of peace. And as we pray, we dare to believe that one day it will be so.

Thought for the Day: How real is the possibility of peace in our world?

December 3, 2009

Philippians 1:3-8

“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” vs. 6

It can be disconcerting to discover that places of darkness remain in our hearts even after we’ve made a sincere commitment to walk in the way of Jesus. Somehow we’ve gotten the notion that once we’ve made a decision for Jesus everything is going to be fine...we’ll never fall when temptation comes and we’ll always be able to do what we will to do. Paul reminds us in a number of places that sin is more powerful than we are, and that temptations are unbelievably subtle. Life in Christ is infinitely complicated and doing good is more complex than we can ever imagine. Frequently our best intentions will have disastrous results. When this happens it’s good to know that we’re on a journey with Jesus and God isn’t done working with us. As long as we live we’re a construction zone for the Holy Spirit. Every day we will need to die to self and rise to live with Christ. There’ll never be a day when we won’t have anything to confess...and there will never be a time when we won’t need a word of forgiveness. Will there be improvement? Of course...God’s grace is transformative, and God’s love can change even the most stubborn hearts.

Thought for the Day: How has God’s love changed me?

December 4, 2009

Philippians 1:9-11

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best...” vs. 9

Paul was understandably thrilled to hear the stories of overflowing love that were emerging from this little body of believers in Philippi. It really is amazing to see what can happen in a congregation where people have experienced the fullness of God’s grace, where personal agendas are put on the back burner as the faithful bring their gifts and put them at the disposal of the whole. Instead of worrying about issues of power and prestige these servants open their arms to the world and begin to reach out to the hurting and the wandering, inviting them to come and see Jesus, while meeting both their material and spiritual needs. Of course that doesn’t happen in a congregation apart from solid scriptural study and prayers for wisdom and insight. We live in a complicated and distorted culture and it’s hard to discern what is pure and just and true. It’s easy for us to get off track and allow secondary issues to distract and divide. The landscape is littered with the remnants of congregations that have lost their grace-filled focus in favor of exclusionary rules and legalistic behaviors. Praise God for those places where love abounds and leaders serve!



Thought for the Day: What are the core values of my congregation?



December 5, 2009

Luke 3:1-2

“During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” vs. 2

Luke goes out of his way to let his readers know that God comes to real people in particular historical contexts. John the Baptist had a family and he had lived during the high priesthood of known religious leaders. He conducted his ministry, not in the comfortable urban setting of Jerusalem, but out in the wilderness, where the faith of Israel had its roots. John was a living, breathing, down to earth person...and so are we! And the word of God continues to come to us in our particular context, coaxing us into action, always with the intention of capturing us for service in the name of Jesus. Who knows what mission God might have in mind for us? Undoubtedly there is someone who needs loving...maybe even some poor soul in our own household. Or it could be a word of peace for that friend wandering in a wilderness teeming with demons of stress. God knows what surprising word or action awaits us as each day dawns! No one of us exempt! Anyone who has been baptized into Christ can expect to be used as God's chosen instrument...and as the Spirit blows through us, the world will experience music that hones in on broken hearts. There is no doubt...we are the ones through whom God acts!

Thought for the Day: What word has come from God to me today?

Second Sunday in Advent



December 6, 2009

Luke 3: 3-6

"...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." vs. 6

There's a remarkable inclusivity built into the scriptural gospel of grace, a point that we often forget in our concern for making distinctions and establishing boundaries. Now, obviously there's nothing wrong with making judgments about behaviors as we live and work in our world. Experience tells us that there are both wise and foolish routes on our journey...and appearances don't always show the difference. The ability to discern is both a gift and a blessing. But we should never imagine that those who choose other paths or who have made foolish decisions have thereby wandered beyond the reach of grace. The love of God can not be limited by our conjectures about good and evil...and certainly God is the final arbiter in matters of salvation. Ultimately this good news is a source of incredible consolation. All of us have family members who have messed up their lives in unbelievable fashion. Their choices have been lamentable. As we pray for them it is so good to know that God is where they are, and that the God whose eye is on the sparrow, has in no wise abandoned them...and one day all flesh will indeed see the salvation of God. God's grace has no limits...and that's the best news of all!

Thought for the Day: How is it possible for us to miss out on the salvation of God?



“Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.” vss. 14b-15a

The prophet had good news for the people of Jerusalem. Even though they had wandered from the way and deserved destruction, God had had mercy on them. The sentence would not be enforced. That’s how it is with God...we don’t get what we deserve. Even though we mess up our lives with willful, careless behaviors, there is always mercy with our Lord. We might wonder how that could be so. What would possess a judge to drop a sure fire conviction? This obviously isn’t a typical judicial procedure. Oh, occasionally a pardon may come from a governor or a president...particularly if the guilty one has wealth or prestige. But generally the wheels of justice grind on and we have to face the consequences of our actions. But with God it’s different! With God there is forgiveness, an opportunity to start over, a chance to put the past behind and move on. God’s motive of course is love, pure boundless love that is patient and kind, that bears no resentments and that desires the best for us. God’s grace opens the door to changed lives and pure hearts. Leaving sin behind, we actually become the people that we’ve been created to be.

No wonder the prophet enjoins us to rejoice and exult! This is the best news ever!

Thought for the Day: What if we treat grace as a license to do as we please?



December 8, 2009

Zephaniah 3:16-20

“And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.” vs. 19b

Again and again in scripture we are reminded that God has a particular love for those who live beyond the edge of respectability. And this is the one time of the year when the world seems to catch on to God’s intentions. All around us we see people scurrying to provide food for the hungry and aid for the poor. There are appeals for toys and clothes...every charity is letting us know how they serve...and asking for our donations. And we respond...and it’s not just that we want more deductions for income tax returns. Christmas really does have an effect on our hearts. Of course God desires that this kind of generosity would become a way of life for us, that we would regularly be moved to share the bounty that is ours. There are so many needs in our broken world. Wherever we look there are people in pain...and there is such a disparity in the distribution of God’s wealth. So many get left out and live their entire lives in poverty...not because of their sin, but because of their place of birth. As instruments of God’s grace it’s up to us to figure out ways to touch those hurting lives. Praise God for those gentle folk who are creatively using their gifts to make a difference for good!

Thought for the Day: Where are my gifts being directed this Christmas?



December 9, 2009

Isaiah 12:2-6

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” vs. 2

When things are going poorly for us it’s easy to lose hope and begin to imagine that we have been deserted by God. The witness of the prophet reminds us that God is never absent, and that, when things go bad in our lives, God becomes our only source of comfort and stability. The key word in all of this is “trust,” the essential ingredient in every cherished relationship. Whether it’s in marriage or in a friendship, if trust is not present there will be brokenness and stress. But where trust is present there will be stability and strength, even in the face of turmoil or adversity. How is trust established in a relationship? It obviously takes time, and a measure of sweet naïveté, much like that of a child. In fact, it’s in the security of a loving home that we first learn to trust God and one another. As we experience the dependable hugs of our parents we begin to develop the confidence that comes from a secure and loving relationship. Sadly, those who have endured disappointment and broken promises as children will likely have a hard time with trust in later years, and may even have a hard time trusting God. Fortunately God can be trusted to love us even through our periods of mistrust and alienation. We are never abandoned!

Thought for the Day: How easy is it for me to trust?

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” vs. 5

In a world that values toughness it’s good to be reminded that we have a renegade Savior who calls his followers to live in open gentleness. This isn’t a matter of politics or policy...we can and will have a variety of opinions about most any topic that comes up. But in Christ the tenderness that some are inclined to keep hidden will be seen by all. It’ll appear in our tears and compassion, in our shining, loving eyes, in our welcoming of children, and in our tension softening smiles. We’ll be inclined toward hugging instead of hitting and peace will break out in our presence. This is not to imply that disciples of Jesus will be passive by-standers in a world threatened by self-destruction. Not at all! On the contrary we will be among the leaders in causes that work for justice and equality. We’ll be assertive in feeding the hungry and preserving the environment. But there’ll be a gentle, humility that surrounds our presence, and through us God’s transforming power will work to bring change. Even the crusty curmudgeons among us have had the seeds of gentleness sown in their hearts. And as they learn to trust and relax, the tenderness will show and people will know that the Lord has indeed come near.

Thought for the Day: When does my gentleness show most clearly?

“Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” vs. 8

With all of our emphasis on grace we sometimes forget what our scriptures have to say about fruits. Repentance isn’t just an Old Testament concept or a misguided, old-fashioned, prophetic notion...when we stay connected to God’s love change will always be a part of the equation. John the Baptist was not impressed by those who claimed heritage or status as an excuse for continuing in sin. In our day he’d even scoff at our baptismal claims if they weren’t backed by a daily dying to sin and rising to new life. Those for whom the water washing is mostly fire retardant haven’t a clue about God’s intentions. The act of baptism is an important beginning but it is meant to be a launching pad for covenant living, and not just a childhood dunk remembered mostly in faded photos. As we regularly affirm our baptisms in the course of a lifetime we commit ourselves to life in community, worship, witness, service, and working for justice and peace. If those fruits aren’t a part of your life today, it’s not too late for repentance. God is patient... and rejoices whenever the harvest comes.

Thought for the Day: How fruitful is my life?



“In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’” vs. 11

The bounty of material wealth that sometimes defines our lives is meant to be shared. It's a simple directive...but it's so hard to put into practice. We tend to believe that everything we have is ours...we worked hard for it and it belongs to us! And nobody better take it away from us. Granted, there is a flurry of giving that comes to complicate our Christmases. Even now we're trying to figure out the perfect gift for that someone special or for the grandchild who already has too many toys and games. And of course many are going overboard with their spending. Bills will haunt us for months. How ironic that a season with a giving focus would turn into an ostentatious display of extravagant excess! What if we just put a moratorium on our holiday gift giving and instead thought about ways we could give to make a difference in the lives of the truly needy in our world? There are a multitude of worthy organizations working on problems of health and hunger. Of course we'll make some exceptions...our little ones would be mighty disappointed if Santa brought them nothing. But if they're included in those giving choices that can change hurting lives, they'll understand...children have a heart for helping...and they'll learn lessons for a lifetime.

Thought for the Day: How can I redirect my Christmas giving?



Third Sunday in Advent



December 13, 2009

Luke 3:15-18

“So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” vs. 18

When these words are read in our worship, those who have been listening carefully often smile. John’s message is full of passion and judgment: axes at the roots of trees and chaff burning in unquenchable flames. It’s hard to imagine that anyone really heard this as good news. But let’s think about it! John was issuing a warning, and for people who are in danger, warnings are always good news. With a warning we can change direction and avoid disaster. How far would any of us have gotten in life if people who loved us hadn’t ever warned us about danger? There might even be some warnings worth listening to as we live in today’s world. Maybe we do need to simplify our lives and stop our mindless exploitation of the world’s resources. Maybe we are a major cause of global warming and need to reduce our carbon footprints. There are those of course who consider such warnings a fiction...they listen to other prophets warning about other things. So which prophets are authentic? It really is hard to know, but generally, if a prophet’s warning is hard to hear, if it requires change or repentance, it could very well be that this is what we need to hear. Thank God for the good news of warnings! May we have the wisdom to discern the truth!

Thought for the Day: What warnings have changed my life?

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel...” vs. 2

As prophets considered God’s future, waiting for God’s intervention, they remembered God’s past actions on behalf of the chosen. From their perspective David had been the ideal ruler...and he had come from a small town. Perhaps the new anointed one, the messiah, would also have humble origins, and they dared to imagine such a birth...maybe even from David’s home village. We too like our rulers to have humble backgrounds. Part of Abraham Lincoln’s mystique arose from the stories told about his birth and early childhood in a log cabin out in the wilds. Being “born in a log cabin” became almost a necessary part of the narrative for political candidates. Somehow this added credibility to one’s life story. For Jesus the question of origins was pretty much of a liability during his lifetime. According to the gospels everyone thought he was from Nazareth, a pretty much end-of-the-road hamlet in rural Galilee. His opponents scoffed at his pedigree. But they didn’t know the Christmas story! Only after Jesus’ death and resurrection did the tale of shepherds, manger, and Bethlehem become widely known. This was the icing on the cake, the proof that Jesus really was the one that all Israel had been waiting for.

Thought for the Day: What do my origins say about me?





December 15, 2009

Micah 5:3-5

“And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.” vs. 4

It’s really kind of funny. Shepherds generally had a pretty crummy reputation in old Israel. Stories were told about their eccentricities and they weren’t generally given center stage at family gatherings. Shepherding was more of a dead-end occupation reserved for outcasts and children. Yet the prophets knew that the greatest leaders of Israel, Moses and David, had both gotten their training out in the wilds taking care of sheep. It was their sense then that any future leader would more than likely be a shepherd to them. No wonder shepherd imagery flowed from the mouth of Jesus as he led and taught. He even described himself as the Good Shepherd and told stories about God’s great love for lost sheep. In fact the earliest image of Jesus, scratched on the walls of the catacombs, is that of a shepherd cradling a lamb in his arms. As we wander our ways through the twists and turns of life it’s good to know that our Lord is one who is adept at tracing the footsteps of the lost...and that there will never be a time or a place where we will go unfound.

Thought for the Day: What does it feel like to have a shepherd?

December 16, 2009

Psalm 80:1-3

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” vs. 3

There’s nothing like a smile to brighten our moods and lift our hearts. It doesn’t matter much where it comes from: a clerk at Target, a receptionist at the dentist, a teacher in the hallway, or maybe even someone at church. Wherever we see it, no matter whose the lips, a smile is from God, a sign of joy at our presence. A baby’s first smile, whether from gas or real affection, is sure to be reported and maybe even recorded. When pets smile, as some say they do, it cements their role as faithful companions. For followers of Jesus the smile is our most effective evangelism tool, a pick-me-up for the weary and a “you’re welcome here” message for visitors at worship. Often new members in a congregation will report that smiles were a major reason for decisions to join. With such a powerful weapon at our disposal, it’s a mystery why so many Christians show a marked reluctance to use it. Pews are full of dour folks, much more disposed to glare than to smile when someone new intrudes on their space. During these holidays we have so many opportunities to meet strangers. Pray to God that our faces will shine with the joy of new life and good news! May we not miss a single chance to grace the hurting with a smile!

Thought for the Day: How do I respond to a smile aimed at me?

December 17, 2009

Psalm 80:4-7

“O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?” vs. 4

When things go bad in our lives it’s customary to look for a reason. We ask a ton of “why” questions and can even begin to imagine that God is angry with us and has stopped listening to our prayers. Sometimes the good is so obvious. We know what needs to happen to rectify wrongs and re-establish rights. And when in our prayers we assert the justice of our claims we have every right to expect a speedy response from God. But then it doesn’t happen. Sinners keep on prospering and the righteous suffer. Has God wandered off and lost track of creation? Has God fallen asleep? In our human desire for answers it’s easy to conclude that somewhere along the line we’re the ones who have messed up...and God in a fit of spiteful anger has decided to give us the silent treatment. Of course we know better...God is not a vengeful spouse or angry parent. The truth is that injustice is part of the scene in our earthly interactions. For one reason or another, in a world populated exclusively by sinners things aren’t going to be the way they’re supposed to be. We may not like that...but that’s the way it is. We can be sure of one thing in this messed up world. God has not lost track of us and is where we are. God is present even in our suffering to bring strength and comfort.

Thought for the Day: How does it feel when it seems God is silent?

December 18, 2009

Hebrews 10:5-10

“And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” vs. 10

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, under the influence of God’s Holy Spirit, his Jewish followers searched their scriptures for images that would help them understand what had taken place in him. They found one such image in the sacrificial system that had long been a part of their heritage. For hundreds of years they had been bringing offerings to the temple to make atonement for their sins. It had worked pretty well for them and had become their routine. Of course the system was complicated and worked to bring wealth and prestige to the priestly caste. Abuses crept in and ultimately those who received the offerings acted to kill God’s chosen one. The followers of Jesus, who believed that God had a plan for the salvation of the world, concluded that Jesus’ death had been the ultimate sacrifice...the temple was no longer necessary. It is true that in our time there are some who have trouble with the notion of Jesus as sacrifice. It seems to them a bloody and primitive image. Yet the truth of the disciples’ “once for all” conviction remains at the core of our faith. What happened in Jesus was enough for our salvation. Nothing remains for us to do...the gift is pure grace...it’s a past act of God with eternal benefits.

Thought for the Day: What does the death of Jesus mean to me?



December 19, 2009

Luke 1:39-42

“And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’” Vss. 41b-42

Women played a secondary role in most ancient cultures, and Israel was no exception. Their scriptures consistently discount the worth of women, and only occasionally do we see them mentioned as leaders. It’s amazing then that Luke chooses to make women the centerpiece of his nativity narrative. They’re the ones who are visited by angels and who have encounters with the Holy Spirit. It’s the men in Luke’s story who miss the point and play a background role. One might wonder about the reason for Luke’s bias, but it is consistent with his gospel’s more positive approach to gender inclusion. In fact he tells us that female disciples were prominent in providing material support for Jesus’ ministry. For Luke the Holy Spirit worked through both men and women in a powerful, world-changing way. And what a blessing it has been for denominations and congregations who have followed his lead in opening doors for the full involvement of women in the life of the Church! They’ve had a long journey and there’s still a ways to go, but it’s delightful to experience the varied and multiple gifts that women have to share as we walk together on the journey of faith.

Thought for the Day: How has my life been enriched by the ministry of women?

Fourth Sunday of Advent



December 20, 2009

Luke 1:43-45

“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” vs. 45

The message was stitched on a banner hanging from the pulpit in a church sanctuary, “Without faith there is nothing!” Was it an overstatement? Perhaps...yet there was powerful truth in the words. We simply can’t overestimate the value of faith. With it all things are possible...without it there is nothing. Mary believed and she was blessed...and new life was born, a life that would be the salvation of our world. We don’t know where faith comes from...its origins are a mystery and we can’t know why some have it and others don’t. But somehow the Spirit blows into our lives and makes believers of us and the direction of our lives is changed. Now for persons without faith words like this are gibberish and they would deny that they have nothing. They would claim that they do have something and perhaps be able to describe what they have: power, possessions, families, etc. And they would be right! But for faith-filled folks, the value of such things is as nothing when compared to the relationship of trust that is ours in Christ Jesus. In Christ the trajectory of our lives has purpose and there is meaning for our existence. To put it in the jargon of our times, faith is priceless!

Thought for the Day: If faith were snatched from me, what would I have left?

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” vs. 2

The lights of Christmas are spectacular and a wonderful reminder of the One who is the Light of the World. For those who are mired in the darkness of their own hopelessness, the decorations (however cheesy some of them might be) can even bring hope. Some of us (even if we don't decorate our own homes) take drives around the city just to look and admire. It's inspiring to see the creative and inventive ways in which whole neighborhoods can be transformed into winter wonderlands. Of course the origins of our lighting traditions lie in the mid-winter festivals of our pagan ancestors, but once again, with our marvelous adaptive abilities, we use our eyes of faith to turn cultural practices to our advantage. So while others celebrate Santa, Rudolf, and Frosty the Snowman, we see in the lights a metaphor for the living presence of the Christ, the Hope of the World. The whole season could be even more spectacular if the world could begin to see the light of Christ in us. In truth the artificial lights of glowing nativities are as darkness when compared to the living light of Christ's healing presence in us, not only at Christmas, but through the entire year.

Thought for the Day: Why do people decorate their homes at Christmas?



December 22, 2009

Isaiah 9:6-7

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” vs. 6

Evidently a child had been born to the king in Jerusalem and Isaiah spares no superlative to describe the joy of the people at the arrival of an heir. As humans we really do have an endless optimism about new rulers and changes in the political climate. Every new president, every new governor causes at least some people to imagine that a new day is dawning, and that this leader, unlike all who have gone before, will usher in an era of unprecedented prosperity and endless peace. We keep hoping this over and over...and to date no leader has been able to pull it off. Reality sets in, problems are bigger than imagined, and human sin presents one roadblock after another. Still we keep hoping and dreaming, raising up one messiah after another, even though we're often gravely disappointed. Many were even disappointed with Jesus. They had thought that he would live out Isaiah's dream and be the perfect human potentate but he had no interest in joining the succession of failed sovereigns littering the landscape of Palestine. He would be different, offering a heavenly kingdom on earth and bringing change from bottom up and inside out. Granted, some rulers are better than others, but none can compare with the Lord who came as an infant in a stable.

Thought for the Day: When have my high hopes for a leader been disappointed?

December 23, 2009

Titus 2:11-14

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly.” vs. 11-12

The bible is a book of grace from beginning to end, telling the story of God's loving interactions with a stubborn people, and coming to a climax with the incredible story of grace become flesh in Jesus. Through this great gift of grace we are given the freedom and the power to use our lives in ways that are pleasing to God. And God's standards are high! Occasionally this truth is forgotten as we exercise our freedom, and we act as though God doesn't care. We engage in self-indulgence on a high level and allow fleshly passions to rule. Sadly, the season of Christmas has become known for excessive living, for partying that gets out of control. The answer is not to adopt puritanical reforms that clamp down on celebrations and offer laws as an answer to sin. That doesn't work and is a negation of grace. Rather Christmas calls us to intentionally adopt practices of the Spirit, to be gentle and kind, to reject false notions of power and prestige, and to be generous in our giving. We have a Lord and Savior who provides a blueprint for godly living, and as we model our lives after his, we will grow in grace and truth...and salvation will continue to come to all.

Thought for the Day: What does a self-controlled, godly life look like?



Christmas Eve

December 24, 2009

Luke 2:1-20

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” vs. 12

For children Christmas is primarily about presents...they're wondering about those brightly wrapped packages under the tree and imagining what delights are going to be theirs. Perhaps they'll get what they want...or maybe Santa will have misunderstood their whispered entreaties as they sat on his lap in the mall. Anticipation runs high through the days of Advent and today those feelings are right out in the open. Sometimes as the hours drag on, goodness drains right out of those little ones, and the nice turn into the naughty. But time does pass and finally the hour arrives for the grand openings. The beautifully wrapped packages are torn apart, boxes are ripped open, and wishes see their fruition. Far too soon however, the adrenaline rush is over and anticipation is replaced by realization. No matter how cool a gift may be as it emerges from its wrapping, the value quickly declines as it joins the rest of the “stuff” of our already crowded lives. There is only one Christmas gift that has never lost its value and that is the one that was wrapped, not in shiny paper but in bands of cloth, and that was found, not under a tree but in a manger.

We celebrate that gift tonight! May God bless us once more as we hear the story of its giving!

Thought for the day: What do I want for Christmas?

Christmas Day



December 25, 2009

John 1:1-14

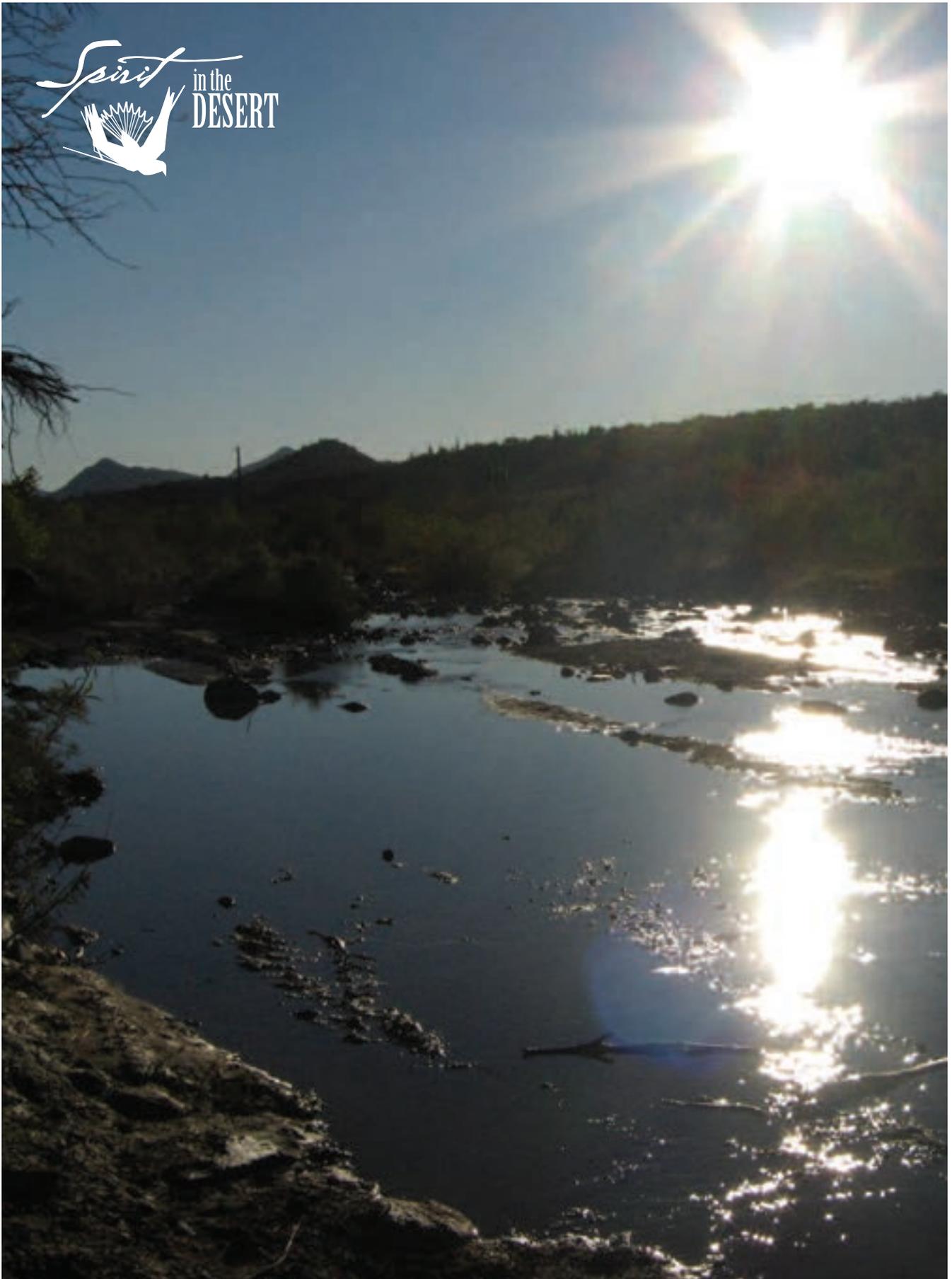
“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” vs. 12

Christmas is more than a syrupy, sentimental story about a little baby born in unlikely circumstances. It's more than parties and extravagant gift exchanges...it's about power! The message from John is clear: there is power in the Christ! It's not a worldly external kind of power, the kind that is used to exercise control over others, the kind relished and wielded by politicians and corporate executives. Rather, the power offered by Jesus has internal influence, and enables us to finally be the kind of children God has craved from the very beginning. Put simply, with Jesus in control, we will change...we will be transformed. According to John, the key to the change is faith, believing in the name of Jesus. This is not an ability to piously recite all the doctrines about Jesus that have been contrived by theologians down through the years. That kind of knowledge can be completely self-serving and is rarely transforming. Instead John encourages us to so dwell in Jesus through our practices and our habits that we absorb the faith of Jesus. We actually become the gentle, loving, healing presence of Jesus in our families and communities. In a very real sense, we become God's Christmas gift to the world...and through us, the world itself is transformed!

Thought for the Day: Are all people children of God, or only a few?



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