

First Fifteen: December 13-17 Advent 3
Scripture for Sunday December 19 - Luke 1:39-55

Monday: Isaiah 9:2-7

Going Deeper: *“For unto us a child is born... unto us a son is given.”* I remember the day my daughter was born like it was yesterday, and I am not referring to the specific details. What has stayed with me through the years was the experience of intense, overwhelming joy and love like I had never known before as I held her in my arms for the first time. It changed my life forever! Each year during Advent I find time to read the sections of Isaiah that tell us of God’s coming. Isaiah reminds us as people who are called to live by faith to trust God’s movement in our lives and world... even when we feel we are living amid darkness and an unknown future. Isaiah, like every other person who has ever lived, understood there are moments when the foundations we once thought were solid and unmoving now seem to have become unsteady. Advent comes to us each year to invite us to recognize and acknowledge these experience... while at the same time hold onto our faith in the Light of God which has come and is still present. God’s desire and flow is toward restoration and healing... making our world and lives whole. Isaiah 9:4-5 reminds us of the work of Advent, which then continues into the rest of our lives. The call of Advent is to trust and have faith, being aware this can feel like fighting a battle within ourselves. I suspect Isaiah understood this as well, and nonetheless through faith he saw the joy that was coming, he saw the end of darkness through the One who was and is born anew continually. This week begins our journey from hope, and peace toward joy, I pray that you will take a moment to ponder the One who is born unto us... reflect upon the names by which he will be known (from Isaiah 9:6) and how his birth changes everything for you.

Prayer: Our God of wonder, hope and life, shine brightly upon us all. Help me to lift my thoughts beyond what tasks need to be completed this week. Raise my awareness of how and where your light is shining around me. Help me seek the joy you desire for me, so I may face the challenges of this day from a place of confident faith, knowing you are with me, and you have given me what I need to rise to these challenges. O God, our God of wonder, hope and life, shine brightly upon us all. Amen.

Tuesday: Isaiah 40:26-31

Going Deeper: O that we would allow ourselves to become star gazers! Our lives at this time of year can become so busy with all our efforts to create joy for others. We tell ourselves these things must be done to recapture something... some moment or feeling from a long-ago memory. I don’t know about you, but there have been far too many years when I spent far too much time chasing after old memories in the hope of finding joy in the present moment. These words from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah invite us to slow down and look up from what we have been doing, or away from the things that have been a distraction to take in all that God is doing around and within us. I encourage you to allow yourself to do some “star gazing!” You may want to go out and look up into the night skies, but star gazing may also be looking within, allowing

ourselves to feel and then release all that we have been carrying over the last year or even longer. We allow ourselves to take in the wonder and majesty of nature, but the star gazing I am inviting you to do is allowing yourself to believe you too are part of God's magnificent and amazing creation! Does this mean we will not also see those places where God's restorative work is ongoing? Of course we will! Embrace these places in your life and trust God will bring strength to the weary, hope to the forlorn, and joy to those who wait in patient faith.

Prayer: This prayer from Thomas Merton has been one I found myself turning this past year. *"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."* Amen. (Thomas Merton from "Thoughts in Solitude.")

Wednesday: Matthew 1:18-25

Going Deeper: I suspect most of us are more familiar with Luke's version of the birth narrative of Jesus. There are no angels, or the mention of Mary in Matthew's version, but there is an equally important announcement... the One who was to be born would be called Emmanuel. Emmanuel, "God with us" is why Advent is a season of joy! Emmanuel is what the incarnation, God in the flesh calls us to embrace. God with us is far more than a theological concept, it reveals how far God is willing to go to love us and reassure us God has come near to walk and live among us. Emmanuel invites us to see God not as some unearthly being, but as one of us. Jesus, as Emmanuel reveals God's nature and love through his engagement with others, especially those who often go unseen. Jesus as Emmanuel reveals God's compassion and desire to see all of us, to help us know we are all God's beloved children. And yet Emmanuel, our experience of God among or with us is dependent upon what we do with this gift of God's love. As Matthew tells this story I hear an important thread, Joseph was afraid, and most likely deeply confused by all that was happening... and none of it was anything he could control or prevent. He did not want to lash out anger, he was looking for "the right way" to handle what had happened. The so call right way is rarely the easiest, and yet it is the only way that will lead us to peace, hope and joy. Matthew's narrative invites us to follow Joseph's lead in finding the right way so we can know and then share the joy of the message of Emmanuel... God is with us now and forever!

Prayer: Incarnate God, you know more about me than I do myself. Your love for me is given even when I wander. Your presence stays with me and calls me to come home, to find the path that leads me deep into your loving presence. This day will offer me numerous chances to follow your call, help me to choose to respond and seek the right way which creates hope,

peace, and joy for all, not merely the easiest solution. My Emmanuel draw near... guiding me throughout this day. Amen.

Thursday: Micah 4:1-5

Going Deeper: As a child Christmas morning was the most wonderful day of the year. But when I came to understand Christmas beyond the tree and the gifts I found a deeper joy, and a more profound sense of wonder that has grown throughout the years. These words from the prophet Micah remind us of God intention... the healing of our world and the restoration of our lives. The message of Advent and the meaning of Christmas brings hope, peace, and joy to all people. The joy of Advent and the message of the incarnation, God with us... as one of us... changes everything! The incarnation creates a connection for us with God that can never be broken... God's love revealed to us with the coming of the Christ Child opens a door that neither you nor I can shut... or anyone else for that matter! As I spent some time with these verses my attention eventually came to the message of the 5th verse... *"Each of the peoples walks in the name of their own god; but as for us, we walk in the name of the LORD God forever and always."* (Micah 4:5 – CEB) If we are honest, we all have things that compete for our attention and dedication to God. We don't typically refer to these distractions as "gods," but I suspect Micah might. I say this not to create any sense of shame or guilt, I simply want to be honest and point out something I am sure we already know. I also want to make sure you know our distractibility does not, nor will it keep God from moving in our lives and in our world. Although, I am pretty sure if we will let go of the other "gods" in our lives we may discover even greater joy, meaning, and purpose will flow into our lives.

Prayer: Lord of life, help me trust your restorative flow in my life. Lead me to the places I have held onto or given to much power and influence over me and the decisions I make. Lead me deeper into your restorative and healing grace where your Spirit can guide me and release me from all that holds me. Amen.

Friday: Psalm 46

Going Deeper: Growing up in northeast Ohio meant we rarely had anything other than a white Christmas. During our time off for the Christmas holiday one of the primary tasks in the neighborhood I grew up would be to build a snow fort. This would become our place of safety during the snowball fights that would take place. I cannot remember the last time I was in a snowball fight, but I can tell you I am still in need of a place, or at least the confidence I have someone will be there to provide strength and refuge for me. These words from the Psalmist tell us God provides for us shelter, safety, and comfort during the storms of life... *"That is why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart... when the mountains crumble... (and) when the waters roar and rage."* (Psalm 46:2-3 – CEB). Advent fulfills this vision of the Psalmist. God has come near, God is one of us, God is with us... we simply need to do is be still and know, trusting the promise of this season, and more profoundly believing the message of the One who came to us and is now with us forever. Take some time with this Psalm. Read over it and allow yourself

to be drawn to the words that seem to reach up off the pages and call you to be still. As you do consider what is it about the word or phrase that calls to you. What might God be asking of you? What might you need to release into God's care and know you are held within the love of the One who is your shelter and strength?

Prayer: My God you are my safe place, help me to embrace your love for me, trusting you are there always. Help me know, truly know your strength will be a refuge, even though I may need to grow through difficult situations and relationships. I pray that as we draw near to Christmas, your hope, your peace, and your joy will become mine. Amen.