

ADVENT LESSONS
presented by
KING OF GLORY

led by
**PR. KENNY
DICKSON**



"IT'S A WONDERFUL STORY"

**WEDNESDAY EVENINGS
DINNER AT 6:30
LESSONS AT 7:00**

NOV 16 • NOV 30 • DEC 7 • DEC 14

It's a Wonderful Story Advent

Isaiah 9:2-7 *A Christmas Story*

The theme of this first week is “anticipation.” For over 1000 years the Kingdom of Israel has lived under the threat neighboring countries. At times they were overtaken and exiled from their home. The Prophet Isaiah offers hope that God will deliver them a Messiah who will lead them from the darkness that is exile and defeat.

Isaiah 40:1-11 *Scrooge*

The theme for the second week is “transformation.” In addressing a heavenly court, God calls for his Word of forgiveness and comfort to be spread among his people. Jerusalem has paid for her sins and now should receive the healing comfort that comes through forgiveness from her God. She is no longer bound by the power and pain of her sin but is transformed into the people God desires.

Luke 1:46-56 *A Charlie Brown Christmas*

The theme for the third week is “joy.” Mary, the mother of Jesus offers her song of praise for God that she, a lowly, common woman, would be the one through whom God would bring the Savior into the world. Mary realizes that her humble state magnifies the nature of God and shows what is truly meaningful and joyous.

John 1:1-18 *It's a Wonderful Life*

The theme for the fourth week is “new life.” Through the incarnation, God, coming into our place and time, God forever changes creation and begins the redemption of creation. God is now present with us, as us, and is involved in our time and place giving us new life and meaning.

The Goal of the Study:

Advent is a season of anticipation. The more we anticipate, the more we desire and the more we desire, the more we appreciate. The goal of this study is to understand the historical and scriptural grounding of the incarnation, God taking human form in Jesus Christ. Part of understanding this, the most important event since creation, is having an awareness of the great anticipation the people of God have experienced in waiting for the promised Messiah. As Israel anticipates the coming of the Messiah, Christians anticipate of the return of Christ and completion of the Kingdom of God.

As part of the anticipation of the season of Advent, it is also a season of tension. We most often see or think of tension as it relates to relationships and as such it is something we generally prefer to avoid. In the physical sense tension has vital and positive attributes. It is the tension created between gravity and velocity that orders the universe and our solar system. It is the tension of a string or wire that allows pianos and guitars to make music, and, when the tension is correct, be in tune.

Tension also has a place in theology. As Christians we are called to look back to gain understanding of the roots of our faith in Israel and the new covenant that was begun in Christ Jesus. As disciples we are called to look around in the present as we minister to others in the name of Christ. At the same time, we look forward to the return of Christ and the completion of the Kingdom of God which was begun at his birth.

Advent is a season of the Church year that speaks to both anticipation and tension. Advent stirs our desire to remember the gift of Jesus at his birth as well as anticipation for the return of Christ and the completion of the Kingdom of God and the work of the incarnation.

Kenny Dickson

First Week of Advent

“Anticipating the Righteous Reign of the Coming King”



Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7 NRSV

*^{2b} 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.*

*³ You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy
at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴ For the yoke of their burden, and the bar
across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For
all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as
fuel for the fire. ⁶ 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. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of
David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from
this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Introduction:

“Fog of war” is a term coined by Prussian military analyst Carl von Clausewitz, popularized by former U. S. Defense Secretary William McNamara, and most recently adopted by video gamers. It is a term that describes the uncertainty in which military decisions must be made during combat. In addition to limited knowledge of opposing strength and tactics, often commanders don’t fully know the condition or abilities of their own force. Yet, in the midst of

such uncertainty, decisions must be made and actions carried out. The results are often not what was desired or expected at the beginning of the conflict.

Historical Setting:

The historical setting of chapters 6-9 in Isaiah are believed to be during, or just following, the Syro-Ephraimite War of 735 BCE. During the 8th Century, Assyria was the primary power in the



region around Israel and Judah, the two countries in the Kingdom of Israel. To face the threat of Assyrian power, the smaller nations of Syria and Israel, led by the Israelite tribe Ephraim, joined together in hopes of defeating or dissuading Syria from invading either country. Judah's King Ahaz refused to join the alliance with Israel and Syria as to do so was an affront to Yahweh. In an attempt to depose King Ahaz in Judah and compel it to join their alliance, Syria and Israel attacked Judah in 735 BCE. In addition to Syria and Israel, the Philistines and Edomites took advantage of the actions and attacked towns and cities in Judah. In response, a desperate King Ahaz reached out to Tiglath-Pileser III, the King of Assyria and the enemy of

his new enemies, for help. Assyria joined with Judah and defeated Israel, Syria, and the Philistines. As is often the case however, such an alliance came at a great price. Ahaz had to pay Assyria large sums from the Temple and Royal treasury. King Ahaz also built idols of Assyrian Gods in Judah in an effort to keep the favor of Tiglath-Pileser III. In the midst of fog of hostilities and threats from a seemingly stronger power, the leaders of both Israel and Judah made decisions that did not work out as they believed or hoped. While the actions of both might have made sense from a strategic or military point of view, they went against the expressed desire of their God and both nations suffered the consequences.

Reflection:

Think of a time you have been amid the “fog of something.” Perhaps it was business decisions during a time of uncertainty, or personal and family decisions that had to be made during some sort of crisis.

How did you feel during that time, and how did you make the decision?

What did you decide and how did things turn out vis-à-vis your expectations?

In the midst of a dilemma, have you ever chosen a path that seemed to be the logically correct choice but went against your thoughts or beliefs and may have not been the wisest in the long term?

What led you to take that road and what was the result?

Scripture and Story:

Isaiah Chapter 8 speaks to the cost both Israel and Judah paid by doubting God’s ability to offer protection from Assyria, Syria, and the Philistines. Instead of trusting God to protect them, the leaders made alliances with other nations, and, because of their lack of faith, Judah and Israel walked in the darkness that is oppression and exile. The Prophet Isaiah relates the actions of Israel and Judah to those who would consult with the darkness that are diviners and ghosts rather than the light that is Yahweh. Chapter 9 speaks of a new age when those who had known the shame and darkness of doubting God and losing their land to Tiglath-Pileser III hear a hymn

of hope that the darkness of domination from others will give way to the light of freedom and life in Yahweh.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is considered by many to be a hymn pronouncing the birth of a child, namely the birth of a crown prince. Inherent in the birth of children is hope that comes with new life. All parents hope that their children will have meaningful lives that leave a lasting impact. The birth of a child to a royal family brings an additional hope and expectation of continuity of leadership and greater security through strength. For the people of Judah and Israel, after wandering in darkness due to weakness in leadership, the birth of a crown prince offered hope and expectation of righteous leadership that would lead the nation back to the light that is Yahweh.

At the time of this war, the people of Israel have lived and struggled a thousand years yearning for the Messiah and the true and lasting security and peace he would bring. Time after time they had hopes of freedom raised only to again feel their oppressor's rod against their back. Yet, even in the midst of defeat, exile, and losing all that they have known, the hope and the expectation of a true Messiah that would deliver vindication and victory has been nurtured and kept alive.



Set in the late 1940's, the film, *A Christmas Story* chronicles the life of Ralphie, a pre-teen boy whose one true desire in life is to receive a Red Ryder BB Gun. Ralphie has decided his best hope of receiving what he has so longed for is Christmas. Weaved throughout the details of an adolescent boy growing up in a post war, medium sized, mid-western city are the various plans Ralphie concocts to acquire his prize. Whether it is playing to his parent's sympathy, seeking the support of his school teacher through a writing assignment, and, of course, falling back on the big gun, Santa Clause, Ralphie will employ all means necessary to receive that for which he has so longed. Yet, despite his best efforts, Ralphie seems hopeless in overcoming the ultimate BB gun block, the fear everyone has of him shooting his eye out. One by one, as his plans fail, Ralphie still holds on to the hope that his desire will be fulfilled. Even at his lowest, Santa Clause himself repeating his mother's and teacher's pronouncement that he would "shoot his eye out," Ralphie still keeps alive the kernel of hope and anticipation that he will receive his dearest desire. For Ralphie, hope sparks anticipation, and anticipation fuels desire, and desire sustains hope.

As with Ralphie acquiring his BB gun, the hopes of 8th Century BCE Judah receiving their dearest desire, the Messiah who would lead, protect, and vindicate them, seemed beyond their grasp. How many times had they prayed? How many times had they been defeated? Yet, amid loss and even exile, their hope and expectation could not be extinguished. Yahweh would be faithful and deliver them a leader, protector, and counselor to break the rod of their oppressors and lead them out of the darkness and into the light of freedom and redemption.

Sometimes when we at last receive what we desire, it is not what we expected. As with Ralphie, whose first experience with his prized gift did not go as he thought, he almost shot his eye out, Israel's receiving the gift so longed for turned out to be different than most in Israel thought. Jesus did not match their expectation of what the Messiah was to be.

Questions:

What is your Red Ryder BB Gun, something that you long desired and dreamed about above all other Christmas gifts? Did you receive it? If so, what was it like? Did it meet up to the expectations you had for it? If not, what was that like?

Even as many in Israel and Judah gave up hope, through the preaching and teaching of the prophets, a remnant maintained the hope that God would deliver their long-awaited Messiah. How do you think the remnant were able to maintain such hope in the face of overwhelming life experiences that testified to the impossibility of such a gift and vindication?

When considering hopes, it is helpful to distinguish between hopes that arise out of our desires and hopes that are based on God's desires for us and promises to us. Sometimes our hopes are fulfilled, and for a time it is worth holding on to them. At some point, however, it becomes better to let go of our hopes that seem impossible so we can be open and take hold of new hopes. Hopes based on God's promises are worth holding onto even when they seem impossible. Do you have hopes that are based on your desires, dreams, and abilities? What are they?

How long have you been holding on to them?

How long should you continue to hold onto them?

What hopes do you have that are based on God's promises and faithfulness?

What helps you keep holding onto them?

Prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for Jesus, the greatest gift in all of creation. Help us recognize the meaning and importance of your incarnation into our world through Christ. By your Spirit, help us live within the tension that exists between looking backwards to your coming into the world and forwards to the return of Christ. Guide us in our ability to discern the hopes that are grounded in your desires for us and promise to us, and those hopes that are based on our desires. Give us the strength and faith to hold on to the hopes that are yours for us. Give us also strength and faith to let go of hopes and desires that are ours alone.

Second Week of Advent

“God comforts God’s People”



Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11 NRSV

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” ⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Introduction:

Nothing challenges one’s faith more than uncertainty. All people like to have an idea of what is coming next so they can be prepared. Many would prefer predictability, even when accompanied by suffering, than uncertainty absent immediate trials. In the Old Testament this reality is depicted in the fear the Israelites expressed following their exodus from Egypt. When faced with questions of ‘What do we do

now?’ ‘Where do we go now?’ or ‘How will we survive away from Egypt?’ many Israelites preferred returning to their oppressed lives as slaves to the Egyptians. There is a familiar quote in which people sometimes prefer “the devil they know rather than the devil they don’t.” In reality, people often prefer the devil they know and have gotten used to over the God they have lost sight of

Historical Setting:

The 40th chapter of Isaiah is the opening speech in the second section of the Book of Isaiah. Dating from 550-515 BCE, most scholars refer to this as deuter, or second, Isaiah as it is believed to have been written by a disciple of the prophet we know as Isaiah while Judah was exiled in Babylon. As with the first section of the book, this section speaks to the presence of God in the midst of what were very difficult, uncertain, and confusing times for the people of Judah. Chapters 40-55 have been referred to as the “Consolation of Judah” as they offer the hope and promise of God’s ultimate victory over the Babylonian captors, the return of the people to Judah, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

While chapter 40 begins on a note of hope in the ultimate triumph of God and restoration of Judah under God’s care, there will be chaotic and difficult times for the people who are exiled. These chapters allow readers to observe the changes and challenges to the relationship between Yahweh and the people of God. At times the people express anger that God has allowed them to be defeated. At times they will be confused that the God who loves them allows them to suffer. There is also confusion that the instrument of the return to the homeland will be Cyrus, the King of Persia.



Amidst the confusion from national defeat, exile, and the impending defeat of their captors, this Prophet of the exile reminds Judah that it is Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, who is central to their lives, beliefs, and very identity. Isaiah did this by directing the attention of the people back to Yahweh, the one who was present before, during, and after the institutions of Kings and the Temple. Though these institutions had served a purpose in building relationship between the people and God, they had also lost their way through fear, greed, and corruption of leadership and others. Here Isaiah is telling God's people that their relationship with Yahweh was the central component of their lives and nation, and it would be their saving grace.

Reflection:

In the midst of turmoil and challenge, it is easy to lose perspective on what is truly important and focus on things that are not central in life or overcoming the challenge. Think of a time when you lost focus on what was central. What got you off track and were you able to regain proper perspective. If so, what was it that helped bring you back?

Have you ever had a time when, in the midst of hopelessness and anxiety, you received comfort from someone either by what they said or did? If yes, what was that comforting word or deed?

Have you ever been the source of comfort to someone going through a difficult time in life? How did you comfort them, by word or example? Upon what did you base your words or actions? Life experiences, scriptural teaching, faith, or the guiding of the Holy Spirit?

Scripture and Story:

Isaiah 40:1-11 is one of the Old Testament texts for the second week of Advent. In it we hear the prophet speaking words of comfort to a nation exiled from their home and living in uncertain times. As Christians, we also hear the prophet speaking to us, disciples living in the uncertain times of our own exile, a world separated from God through sin. As Judah awaited the Messiah and through him the victorious return to their homeland, we await the return of Christ and reestablishment of God's Kingdom over all creation.

Chapter 40 begins with a conversation between God and heavenly hosts. Such conversations occur throughout the Old Testament. Yahweh is giving marching orders to spread this word of comfort to Judah, that, although they have suffered in exile for their turning away from God, God will grant them pardon as they repent and turn back towards Yahweh.

Second Isaiah is allowed to overhear these words of comfort that the struggles of Judah will end and, more importantly, their relationship with their God is secure.

The reference to "make straight in the desert a highway" through the wilderness for their God speaks to the Babylonian tradition of building roads on which they would carry their Kings and gods during festivals and celebrations. Rather than serving as a ceremonial or victory road for the Kings and gods of Babylon, the way of the Lord will be exodus roads that stretch through the wilderness, the land that separates the people from Jerusalem. While the wilderness refers to the geographical separation from Jerusalem, it also represents the areas within Zion that are spiritual waste places, separated from Yahweh. Even here God will lead the people back to righteousness. In this restoration, as in the exodus from Egypt, the glory that is the transformative power and love of God is revealed.

At the beginning of his ministry to prepare the people for the ministry of Christ, John the Baptist recalls this cry in Isaiah to prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord. As Isaiah was offering comfort and calling Judah to prepare for their reinstatement into their homeland, John is calling the people to prepare to receive the Messiah whose way will usher all people out of the exile of sin and separation from God.

The remainder of the text reflects again the reality of the people and all creation. What is alive today withers and fades tomorrow. What seems strong and mighty today is overthrown and forgotten tomorrow. But the word of Yahweh stands forever. Jerusalem, and all the cities of Judah, are to be heralds of this truth.

Scrooge is the 1970 musical film adaptation of the Charles Dickens Christmas classic, *A Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge is the portrait of a man who lives isolated in his bitterness and anger. Just so there is no misunderstanding, in this musical version of the story Scrooge

sings a song entitled “I Hate People.” The verses of this song indicate that Scrooge is more than merely grumpy.

I hate people! I hate people! People are despicable
creatures, loathsome inexplicable creatures good
for nothing kickable creatures, I hate people! I abhor
them!.... and I don't care if they hate me.

Scrooge is not only isolated, but he also lives in a personal exile of anger. He detests everyone,



even, and perhaps especially, his sole living relative, the son of his deceased sister.

In the story, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley who is bound by chains that represent the empty

actions, selfishness, and disregard for others he forged in his earthly life. Scrooge is also visited by three spirits, or ghosts, who represent Christmases in the past, present, and future. In visiting Christmases past Scrooge is reminded of the happiness of his former life and the change in him that cost him his life of happiness; namely, after achieving some success, he was so focused on keeping wealth that he could not attend to other relationships, including with his fiancé. In Christmas present, Scrooge sees the happiness of the family of his employee, Bob Cratchit. Even though they have little to live on monetarily, the abundance of love carries them through the difficulties of poverty and caring for a sickly child. Scrooge also hears Bob Cratchit and his nephew defend him against those who correctly judge him as miserable. Christmas future shows the deaths that are heading toward the Cratchits and Scrooge himself.

Acting the part of prophets or heavenly hosts from the Book of Isaiah, these ghosts are calling Scrooge to repent and offering the hope of a new life that can still, even at his advanced age, be won if he will follow a new pathway. The story concludes with the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge from a bitter man into one who again loves life and people.

Questions:

How is your life, or our world and time, like that of Judah during this before being delivered back to their homeland and Jerusalem being rebuilt?

Do the words of comfort from this chapter speak to you today? If so, how?

Have you ever felt that you have been exiled from happiness, or the life you want or God wants for you?

Are there areas of your life that need to be cleansed of fear or disappointment that have turned into resentment or bitterness?

Do you hold onto them because their familiarity is preferable to the unknown life of letting them go?

What transformation is needed in the world or your life today?

Prayer:

Comforting God, you are the source of all goodness and comfort. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to recognize when we hold on to our brokenness because it is familiar. Give us the faith to hope and be open to receive the comfort and life you desire for us. Help us to remember that letting go of our brokenness and reaching for your wholeness is an act of faith, and that the birth of the Lord we worship is proof of your faithfulness and love. Amen.

Third Week of Advent

Magnifying the Lord



Reading: Luke 1:46-56 NRSV

⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Introduction:

There is often an inverse relationship to honor and ease. Honors classes are more demanding than standard classes and graduating “With Honors” is a greater challenge and more significant accomplishment than simply graduating. Veterans of the military often speak of the honor it is, or was, to serve the nation even though it was not easy. Though it is an honor for police and fire fighters to protect and serve it is often very difficult. While offering care to individuals and families as they journey through the dying, death, and grieving process is not easy, it is truly an honor for any lay or clergy person of faith to be invited into that sacred time and space.

For Christians, there is no greater honor than to serve as disciples for our Lord. Although it requires us to give of ourselves, our time, talent, gifts, and emotions, and even take risks, there is nothing that we can do that is more honorable than serve our Lord. In this week's passage, such honor is recognized by a young woman who accepts the offer and honor to serve her Lord even as this honor will put her at risk and bring unimaginable challenges to her life.

Background:

The Gospel According to Luke presents an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is believed that Luke's Gospel is the second oldest of the Gospels written in the mid 80's of the first century. When combined with his second book, The Acts of the Apostles, which details the work of the Apostles and other disciples, Luke presents the most complete history of the early Christian movement and Church. Both books are addressed to someone named Theophilus, which means "Lover of God." It is not certain whether this was a specific individual, such as a patron, or all who love God. With references in Philemon and Colossians to a follower of Paul named Luke, many Biblical scholars believe Luke was an associate of Paul and a physician. This designation helps explain the emphasis the Gospel places on the prophetic nature of Jesus and his call to care for all persons, especially those who are ill, lame, blind, widows, or poor, along with Gentiles and those on the margins of society. While the author displays a command of the Old Testament, the skilled use of the Greek language, Hellenistic literary traditions and conventions, and a possible association with Paul lead many scholars to believe Luke was a Gentile.

One such convention of the time was the belief in the power of events to predict the future. As such, Luke's use of the parallel accounts of John's and Jesus's births being foretold by an angel suggests that both lives will impact Israel and indeed all of creation.

Text and Story:

These ten verses, 1:46-56 are known as "The Magnificat of Mary," a title taken from her soul's magnifying the Lord. Earlier in chapter one, Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive a son through the Holy Spirit, that this child is to be named Jesus and he will be the Messiah, the Son of the Most High, and will be given the throne of David. After telling Mary that her older, and presumed barren relative Elizabeth, has also conceived and will bear a child, Mary goes to Judea to see Elizabeth and celebrate their good news. Upon Mary's arrival Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb and Elizabeth offers four oracles honoring Mary.

“The Magnificat” is Mary’s response to these oracles offered by Elizabeth. Mary recognizes and accepts the blessing God has offered her, a lowly woman and servant, in being the mother of the promised Messiah. In so doing she offers the confession that God is her savior. In choosing a woman of her status, Mary magnifies the nature of the Lord. God is not one who withholds blessings to persons because they are not wealthy, powerful, or otherwise celebrated in worldly ways. Instead, Mary offers God’s choice of her as evidence to the nature and true way of God. Mercy and blessing from God will, from that time forward, be with those who fear, respect, and live for God. Those who are bolstered by pride and their own accomplishments are scattered in their thinking. Continuing the Old Testament tradition of God going against social expectations and customs, it is the powerful that God has brought down, and it is the lowly that have been lifted up. It is the hungry whom he has filled and the rich who have been sent away empty.

Interwoven in these 10 verses are the foundations of the “Sermon on the Mount” and other teachings from the life ministry of Jesus. As in the prologue of The Gospel According to John, all of God’s activities, from the judgement of the rich and powerful to the lifting of the lowly but faithful poor, are presented in past tense. The dye is cast. God’s Kingdom has come in the incarnation of the child conceived by God in Mary’s womb. While the incarnated Son is the ultimate expression of God’s faithfulness to God’s people, it is not new. Time after time, God has reached out, using the least likely choice to serve as the light which guides Israel out of their darkness. “The Magnificat” echoes a similar song by Hannah, the mother of the great prophet and Judge Samuel, who rejoiced when she unexpectedly conceived a child and dedicated him to the service of the Lord

Reflection:

Think of a time when you have been surprised by something totally out of the blue. What was it? How did it come to pass? How did you respond?

Have you ever been asked to do something that you knew would be difficult, yet it was an honor to do it? What was it?

What happened and how was it an honor?

Have you ever felt you were called by God to do something that you knew would be challenging yet important? How did you feel?

What did you do?

What was the result?

In the 1965 television classic, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie Brown is sent by Lucy on an errand to find a Christmas tree that fits the modern spirit for their Christmas play. Charlie and Linus go to a Christmas tree lot and, amidst all the brightly colored aluminum trees, there is one modest little wooden tree that stands out only in its humble contrast to the manufactured perfection of the other trees. Charlie is drawn to the tree that is alone in modesty and suggests



it would work for the play: "This little green one here seems to need a home." Linus cautions and reminds Charlie of Lucy's directions; "I don't know, Charlie Brown... this doesn't seem to fit the modern spirit." Upon returning to the auditorium with an old-fashioned shrub of a tree, Charlie is lambasted for his incompetence and failure to understand the meaning of the season. In desperation, Charlie shouts to the heavens if there is anyone who knows the true

meaning of Christmas. Linus responds by reciting the Luke birth narrative wherein the true meaning of Christmas is found.

Linus correctly gives the true meaning in reciting Luke 2: 8-14. The appropriate and meaningful response to Christmas is to glorify God without fear as God works in Jesus to bring peace and

goodwill to all people. “Mary’s Magnificat” further unveils the meaning of, and our response to, the birth of Christ.

In choosing a common, humble woman to be the mother of the Messiah, God reveals the disposition of the Messiahship, the nature of the Kingdom of God, and the true meaning of Jesus’s birth. The Messiah will be one who serves rather than is served. And, in the Kingdom of God, humility, love, and devotion to God are most important. The meaning of Christmas, with the incarnated God born to the carpenter Joseph and Mary, is that neither God nor the Kingdom will be defined by earthly standards of power or righteousness. Each celebration of Christmas is a reminder that what is important in worldly standards is often not what is closest to God.

When all of Charlie Brown’s friends see Christmas in this true light, their perception of reality and truth changes. They are now able to see the true beauty in the modest tree, a beauty the manufactured trees in their shiny perfection cannot hope to match. When we see the beauty of Christmas is God’s incarnation in a helpless baby born in the most common of circumstances, we see the true beauty, hope, and assurance that is God’s love and salvation.

Questions:

What character or theme in ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas’ resonates most with you.

What is one of your most special Christmas memories?

How was this emblematic, or not so, of the true meaning of Christmas?

How do we get trapped into the seeking to satisfy, replicate, or placate, the worldly understanding, presentation, and celebration of Christmas?

How do we live out the true meaning of Christmas as sung by Mary in her Magnificat?

Prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God, though Your might and greatness are beyond measure and imagination, You see humility and sacrificial service to others as exemplary. You do not judge by earthly measures of titles, trappings, or accomplishments. Rather, You desire and hold dear, humble service and love for others. It is in such humility and loving service that You came into our world and lives in the birth of our Savior. Inspire and empower us to magnify Your nature and love by our words, deeds, and faithfulness. Amen.

Fourth Week of Advent

The Word Becomes Flesh and Dwells Among Us



Reading: John 1:1-18 NRSV

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[e] who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Introduction:

There is a distinction between knowing about God or Jesus, versus knowing God or Jesus. Knowing God or knowing Jesus suggests a relationship with, rather than just cognitive knowledge of, God and the person of Jesus. Having a relationship with someone is inherently closer, more intimate, and more important than possessing even greater amounts of factual knowledge.

While it is not appropriate to say that the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer only historical facts about Jesus and that such facts are absent from John, it is appropriate to describe the central focus in the synoptic Gospels. Even as each Gospel has similarities and differences in the presentation of specific facts and teachings about the life of Jesus, all three generally describe the nature of God and life in God's Kingdom.

And while it is not correct to state that the fourth Gospel is void of Jesus's teaching moments, it is appropriate to say the primary focus in The Gospel According to John is establishing the identity of Jesus, the relationship between Jesus and God, and the implications of this reality for followers who choose to accept it as truth.

Because of these differences, most Biblical scholars encourage readers to resist the temptation to consolidate the Gospels, including a synoptic consolidation, in an effort to develop one clearer picture and understanding of the historical person named Jesus. While such blending may produce a cleaner historical account or record, it loses the nuanced perspective of Jesus presented in each Gospel. The result is a shallower understanding of Jesus and his ministry. By holding the teachings of each Gospel separately, even in tension with each other, followers have the most developed knowledge and understanding of Jesus, God, the Kingdom and the relationship between such and themselves.

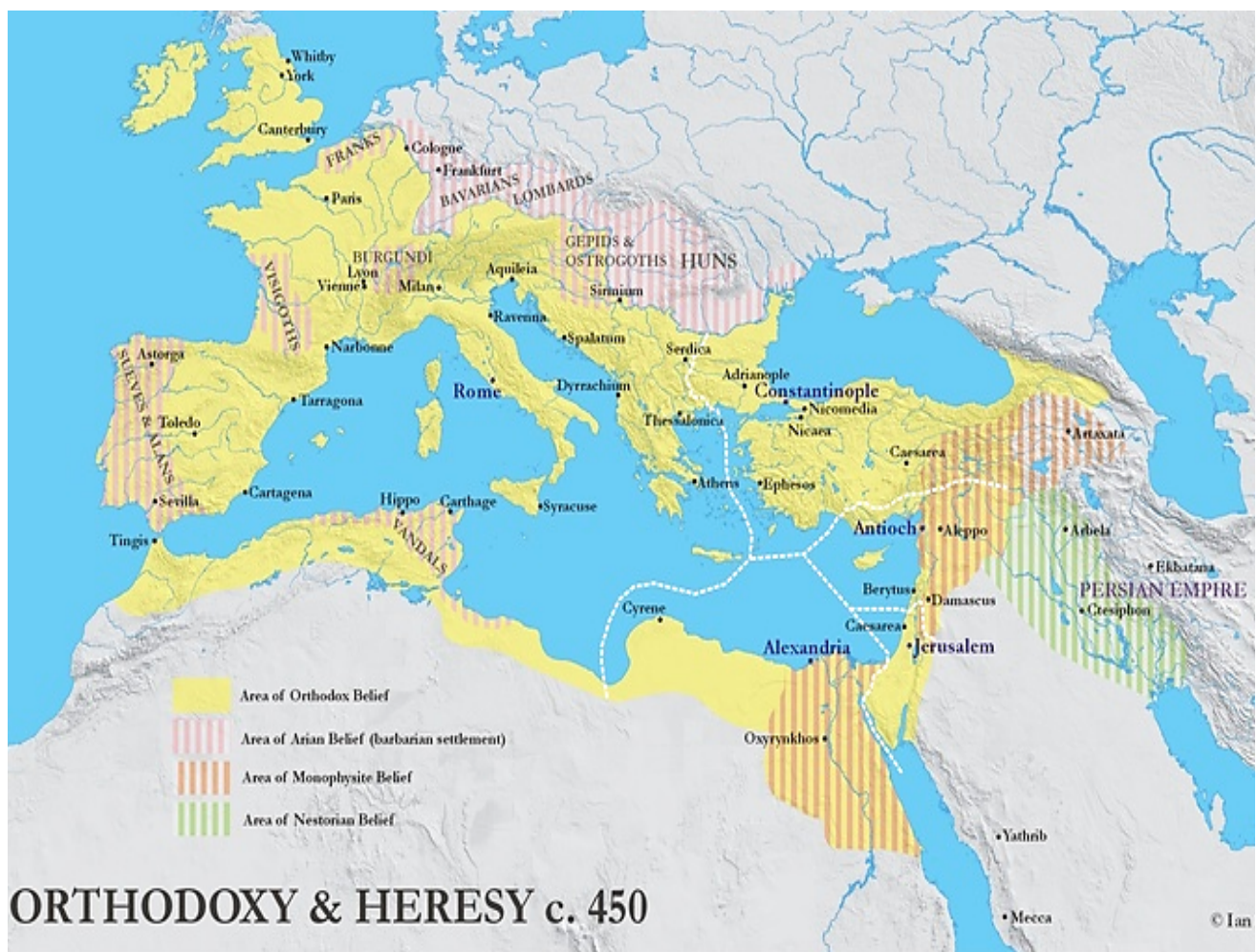
Put another way, by studying and accepting all four of the Gospels, and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, followers are best able to know, and know about, Jesus and God.

Background:

John 1:1-18 is known as the prologue to The Gospel According to John. As such it serves as an overture for the entire Gospel, revealing teaching and truth that will be communicated throughout the Book. It also serves as the perhaps the most efficient and beautiful summary of God's involvement with creation from before creation through the entire history of salvation.

The Gospel According to John is believed to be the latest of the four Gospels. Most scholars date the book in the 90's CE. While it is attributed to the disciple John, the son of Zebedee, it is

also attributed to the “disciple whom Jesus loved” who is mentioned frequently in the text. There is no attribution within the text regarding the author. The Gospel was written prior to the councils that established the boundaries of orthodox theological beliefs. During this time there was a splintering of ideas and understandings regarding the identity of Jesus within the Christian Church. Such differences were the result of the spread of the Church into regions where the traditional teachings of the person and ministry of Jesus encountered persons with differing life experiences and more Hellenistic or Persian philosophical world views. Just as it was very challenging for Jewish Christians to let go of Jewish teachings and traditions regarding the law, it was a challenge for Gentile converts to replace their ways of being and thinking, much of which was based on Persian or Greek philosophical thought.



As such competing teachings on the nature of Christ surfaced that so differed from orthodox understanding, they were labeled heresies. One such heresy was Docetism, the belief that Jesus was not truly human, that his body was a spirit and as such did not truly die. Believers of this theology had difficulty accepting that Jesus was human, not only because of the challenge to

believe he could die and be resurrected but also from the understanding that all creation was corrupt, and the divine could not be a part of that which was fallen.

Adoptionism was another heretical teaching that Jesus was not truly divine. Some believe he was only a very wise prophet while others believed that he was born fully human but achieved some sense of divinity through adoption by God or gaining divinity through wisdom and knowledge. In addition, there were still some who believed that Jesus had corrupted the true teaching and revelation of God from John the Baptist. It is into this theological and philosophical soup that the writer of The Gospel According to John sought to establish and spread the true, what is now considered orthodox, identity of Jesus as God, and specifically as the second person of the Trinity.

Text and Story:

As the prologue is so rich in teaching and revelation, it is best to consider it in sections.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Jesus as The Word is not only divine, He is truly God. The Word predated creation, and indeed creation came into being through The Word. The Gospel states that all things were created through the Word, and just to make sure there is not room for doubt, it denies that there is anything in creation that was not created by the Word and thereby God. By stating this, the Gospel is declaring that creation is not inherently bad or evil, and that it was not created by a false demagogue as was thought and taught by some groups. Instead, creation was created as good and was corrupted by humanity's fall.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

In the time of Jesus and the early church, things that were older were considered greater. Older sons, often referred to as greater, received a larger share of the inheritance than younger sons. Master craftsmen and teachers were considered greater than their apprentices and disciples. John the Baptist was considered by many to be the greatest prophet of his time, and as Jesus came after John, was so closely associated with John, and was even baptized by John, many followers of John, and followers of John's followers believed John was greater than Jesus.

The Gospel makes plain that Jesus, as the Word, did not hijack the message and ministry of John the Baptist. Indeed, John's ministry was to prepare others to hear and accept the greater ministry of Jesus that was to come.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

As the world and all creation came into being reflecting the perfection of God, the Word came into the world and creation following the fall in order to restore that perfection. In so doing, Jesus revealed God fully and completed what was begun with the Law. As in the days of creation, God offers freedom of choice to believe and follow or reject and ignore. With the incarnation, people are again offered the choice to believe and accept, or not believe and reject, Jesus as the Word. For those who accept and believe, the Word offers new life as children of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.....

John describes Jesus in no uncertain terms. Jesus is not "God-like" or "God in human disguise." Jesus is not half divine and half human. Jesus is fully God and fully human. As a human he lives with us, as us. He knows our circumstances, our greatest joys and our worst fears. As Jesus fully knows our life, he also fully experiences our death. It is through his full humanity and obedience to God that Jesus is able to be the source of salvation for all who believe and accept.

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law that was first offered to and through Moses. Whereas the Law had its limits, Jesus as The Word was able to offer salvation through God's grace and truth. In offering light and life that was not extinguished by the darkness of sin, Jesus, as the Word, the only Son of God, reveals fully the glory, grace, and truth of God. Through the incarnation of God in Christ, the world, and all of creation is forever changed back into the Kingdom as God created.

Questions:

It might be hard for believers today to understand how or why people in the early days of the Church could have had what are considered unimaginable understandings of who Jesus was. Consider what it means that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Is your operating understanding of Jesus in line with this teaching or, when you think of Jesus, is it more as God or human, or perhaps half God and half human?

What is it to believe that Jesus is both fully God and human?

Do you see persons in the world and or in the church with incorrect thoughts or understandings of who Jesus is?

How or why do you think people have these misunderstandings of the identity of Christ?

What are the implications of such incorrect or unorthodox understandings of who Jesus is?



In the 1946 Frank Capra classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart portrays George Bailey, the favorite son of Bedford Falls, who never left home.

George was always the smartest, most ambitious child of his generation. No one had more plans to do more things farther beyond the city limits of Bedford Falls than George Bailey. Likewise, no one played a greater role in offering hope and the possibility of a true and happy life to the citizens of the Bedford Falls than George Bailey.

After the stress-induced death of George's father who headed the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan, it fell to George, as the oldest son, to keep the business going. In so doing George and the Bailey Building and Loan offered a fair, community-oriented alternative to the town's only other financial resource, the bank, which was owned and ruthlessly operated by Mr. Potter. Each time George was set to leave town and pursue his dream, something happened to keep him tied to the town and the business. His father died the night before he was set to leave for college. When George thought his brother would take over the business after he returned from college, George decided to stay on so his brother could take advantage of a better job opportunity. When George and his new bride Mary were set to go on a world-wide honeymoon, the bank crash occurred and they stayed, using their travel money to keep the Building and Loan open. George even withstood the temptation to join Mr. Potter during a time when George was in the wilderness that is raising children and caring for an aging mother. When Potter offered George a large salary and an easy life, the Bailey son rejected the offer when he found out it would result in the closing of the Bailey Building and Loan.

George's lowest point came after his uncle and partner Billy lost \$8,000, accidentally giving it to Mr. Potter, who in turn used the mistake to try to force the Bailey Building and Loan to close. Facing charges of bank fraud and the anger of those whom he had helped so much, George considered taking his own life.

In response, heavenly hosts send a guardian angel, Clarence, to show George the impact he had in the town by showing what would have happened had George not been born. Most of the characters in the story would have had tremendously more difficult and sad lives had not George been in Bedford Falls. Indeed, Bedford Falls would have ceased to exist as Potter would have taken over the entire town and renamed it Pottersville. As Clarence told George, "You had a wonderful life." What Clarence did not say directly, but the audience saw, was that through George so many others were able to have wonderful lives as well.

Had not the Word accepted the mission to leave the comfort and perfect community with God the Father and the Spirit, creation would have had no hope of transformation back into the Kingdom, and humanity no hope of salvation and restoration back into the image and likeness of God. The Word gave up existing in full glory with God the Father and the Spirit in order to reveal such glory to the creation that was fractured by sin. As humanity was helpless in justifying itself and breaking the power and removing the stain of sin, it was up to God to do so through God's incarnation. Through the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, creation was changed, and we not only have hope, but an assurance of a life more wonderful than we can ever imagine.

Reflections:

George Bailey is a Christ figure, a character that exhibits aspects or characterizations of Jesus. Such figures allow viewers to see Christ-like behavior in circumstances and instances that they might encounter.

What are some of the ways George Bailey modeled Christ-like living?

Who are some George Baileys in your life that represent Christ-like lives?

In what ways do, or did, they exhibit or mirror the teaching and life example of Jesus?

How is the world different since the incarnation of God in Jesus?

How is your world and life different?

How can a greater understanding and appreciation for the Incarnation of God in the birth of Jesus change or enhance your celebration of Christmas?

Prayer:

Ever loving and present God, your love for us is so great that you sacrificed that which was most precious, the Word, so that we could have hope of restoration into full relationship with you and everlasting life. You, who were not satisfied to just know about us, but sought and sacrificed to know us, are our true desire. Encourage and inspire us to know you by giving ourselves fully to you, to live as you would desire us to live and as your disciples offer ourselves completely to serving you through serving others. Beginning with this Advent and Christmas season, help us reflect to others your grace and love that Jesus made known to us. Amen.

Resources:

Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abbingdon, 2001) pages 27-40, 120-124

Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abbingdon, 2001) Pages 309-323, 327-339

Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel According to John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abbingdon, 1995) pages 493-526

David K Rensberger, "The Gospel According to John" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: Harper Collins, 1989) pages 2011-2014

