



Strangers Among Us

An Advent Devotional 2010



These Reflections were written by The Reverend Larry Jent, Elder and pastor in The United Methodist Church, and Co-Chair of the Virginia United Methodist Conference Commission on Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy. Larry is a person of Cherokee and Sac & Fox heritage.

The devotional is recommended by the Virginia Conference Immigration Work Group as a means of reflection during a Christian season where our focus is on the greatest gift ever received—God's son, Jesus. It calls us to remember the birth of the Christ Child while calling to mind the similar situations of so many wandering without a "home" and seeking a place of acceptance and safety in our country today.

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Strangers Among Us: An Advent Devotional Introduction

In this season of Advent, we remember how the Holy Family walked this earth as refugees. As they followed the Roman decree -- as they fled across the border to escape Herod's law of the land--even up to the day he testified to Pilate, "My Kingdom is not of this world," they walked as strangers among us. This is the scandal of Bethlehem: If God invaded our world once unawares, God could do it again. Today. Anywhere. Among any people. Anytime.

Yes -- of course -- we have this all figured out. We have scholars who tell us when and where and how the next coming will occur. But what if they are as wrong today as the scholars were in Jerusalem 2010 years ago?

What if Christ is among us as a stranger today? Would he still be in the most unlikely place? With the most unlikely parents? At the most inconvenient time? Could that time be this Advent?

If so -- how would God want us to treat the least of these strangers among us? In our nation of immigrants, the issue of immigration has become a hot topic. Now, as perhaps never before, we feel a need to maintain our own safety. Enforce the laws! Reinforce the borders! Watch out -- there are strangers among us!

This study is an invitation to ask how God would view our concerns. We may even hear the voice of angels unawares as we listen to our proudest Americans -- those who most recently earned the right to call themselves citizens. These proud Americans do not want to abolish the borders or repeal the laws. They only want an immigration policy that works as advertised, with justice and liberty for all.

Surely, those who love the land of the free and the home of the brave want nothing less. Surely, God Almighty wants the same. As we read the word together in this holy season, let us ask: What would God do with the strangers among us? What would God do with strangers and sojourners -- like us?

Advent Week One

First Reading

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Reflection

So begins the lectionary for this Advent season. If we had chosen a scripture for this study, we could hardly have done better. Indeed, the words of Isaiah 2:4 are inscribed upon the wall of the United Nations building. In that building -- where shoes have hammered the podium -- where pistols have been waved -- where cheers and jeers have gone on and on and on ... the stones bear witness to the prophet's immortal words. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares!" But when, O Lord? How long must we reassure our mothers that their sons have died for a noble cause? How long must we take up arms against those who would storm the walls and destroy us all? Isaiah lived in a time of high stakes international intrigue. Israel was a small nation in a time of super powers. Her borders were weak. Her citizens were divided. And she was perched atop the crossroads of the world. The clock was ticking, and time was running out. But Isaiah saw another reality. There was no way the army of Israel was going to defeat the barbarians at the gate. BUT -- there was another power at work. The day would come when people from all over the world would come to God's holy hill. This was beyond radical! No one had ever suggested that foreigners should come streaming in among God's chosen people! They were still trying to find a way to defend their borders--but Isaiah saw God tearing down all borders. "Do you know when we'll REALLY be strong?" he asked. "When we show ALL people why they should want to come HERE -- and kneel before the Almighty God." Israel was praying that God would destroy her enemies. Isaiah knew you can only truly destroy your enemies by turning them into brothers and sisters. How is God calling you to turn enemies into friends today? How will we call them to this holy hill?

**Prayer —
Holy God, show me the walls and borders of my heart and life. Tear them down that I would more easily welcome your Spirit and welcome others. Teach me how to welcome even my enemies to your holy hill so that, together as friends, we become your chosen people. Amen.**

Advent Week One

Second Reading

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD. For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Reflection

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! It seems strange that we should still be praying for the peace of Jerusalem after 4000 years. The very name means, "City of Peace." For Christians, Zion stands as a physical reminder of that heavenly city to which we are bound. Yet those who love this city the most seem determined to fracture her most deeply. A wall encircles Jerusalem today, separating old from new. A wall runs through the city, separating gentiles from Jews. A wailing wall stands at the temple mount, symbolizing ultimate destruction and hope. The very nation of Israel now pins her dreams of peace to a wall. How is it that mortals are so quick to trust in walls? There is a wall in China, meant to keep the Mongols out. It is so grand that it is the only human-made artifact visible from outer space. Today, the Mongols are in China. The wall runs through the middle of the country. There was a wall in Germany, separating East from West. It ran through the middle of the country. Today it is rubble, and pieces of that mighty wall are residing in pawn shops. There was a wall between England and Scotland. It once separated Rome's known world from the untamed Celts. Today, that wall runs through the heart of Great Britain. Walls have never kept people apart. Peace only comes when God pulls down the walls. Today, many in our land are devoted to building stronger, longer walls. Do we really believe that the path to peace runs along a fence? What if God is trying to pull down our fences? Or worse yet -- what if we suffer the fate of Jerusalem? If we build stronger fences long enough -- will our children still be praying for peace 4000 years from now?

Prayer —
God of Peace, may I find sanctuary in you, so that I do not need to place walls between me and others. Show me a new vision of your heavenly City of Peace where there are no walls to separate us. Amen.

Advent Week One

Third Reading

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Reflection

Watch! Post the guard! You know it's getting late! Pay attention! Get ready! Paul calls us to wake and watch -- not because danger is close, but because salvation is at hand. What would you do if your neighbor's house was on fire? Would you watch to make sure no smoke blew your direction, or bang on the door to get everyone out alive? What if you knew the whole neighborhood would soon be in flames? Would you head for the highways before anyone else, or call everyone to find safety?

For the early church, there was a tremendous urgency to the gospel. Time was ticking away -- no time to waste! Christians had to reach as many friends and neighbors as possible -- as quickly as possible. The ultimate question was this: If the judgment came tomorrow, who would you be willing to leave behind? In our world today, the same question applies. Yet we do not feel that sense of urgency.

We suffer from the illusion that we have plenty of time. The Lord's coming will not be today or tomorrow. Plenty of time. And since we are here for the long haul, we need to safeguard our investments. Maximize our returns. Guard our property values. Keep out the intruders. As Christians, we are not called to hope in this world. We are in the business of offering hope to the world. When strangers among us come seeking hope--how shall we respond? Are you in the business of offering hope?

Prayer —

Lord, forgive me for becoming so comfortable here. Forgive me for assuming I have more time to tell others about you. Wake me up! Fill me with a new urgency that you are coming to take us home. Amen.

Advent Week One

Fourth Reading

Matthew 24:36-44

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Reflection

Once again, the scriptures call us to watch. This time we are not called to watch for a flood ... nor a chance to eat and drink ... nor an opportunity to be about the business of daily living. No, we are called to watch for Jesus. Jesus is a slippery character. He shows up in the arms of an unwed mother. He shows up among a family of political refugees. He shows up on the run in Egypt. He shows up among sinners and tax collectors. He shows up at Pharisee's homes. He shows up on the fishing docks. He shows up all over the place -- but never at the time and place you might expect. This is the dangerous thing about Jesus. He might be at the homeless shelter tonight. He might be out drinking with rowdy friends. He might be in the arms of an unwed mother - - again. He might be an illegal alien on the run from a modern day Herod. He might even be at the immigration office tonight. You never can tell about Jesus. Of one thing you can be certain: There is no need to sit still and wait for him to show up. If you want to find Jesus, you have to go out looking for him. Oh, but this one thing is certain: The more often you LOOK for Jesus, the more often you will find him. So LOOK! He's coming sooner than you think!

Prayer —

Jesus, where are you? Will I find you, today, near me? Will I notice if you are next to me? Lord, please help me find you. Please help me recognize you. Amen.

Advent Week Two

First Reading

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Reflection

In a world gone mad, Isaiah dreamed of crazy peace. Dangerous peace. Unreasonable peace. And when will this happen? When the earth is full of the Lord's knowledge. That's a tricky word -- knowledge. In our Western world, we view knowledge as facts and figures -- things we can measure and touch and taste and see. But not all knowledge fits between your ears. When we were dating, I knew a lot of facts about my wife. Long before we were wed, I knew her height, weight, age, and size. But as we have lived and loved, I have come to KNOW her -- like no one else on earth can possibly know her. Our relationship shows me more about her than any facts could ever convey. When you come to know God, it has less to do with theology than relationship. You cannot prove the truth about God -- and you do not have to do so. All you need to do is get to know God. The same is true for people. You cannot know the truth about people by collecting data. You have to get to know them. When we take time to get to know one another as PEOPLE -- we are not far from the Kingdom of God. Isaiah tried to tell us this. If we are ever going to know peace in this world, it will be through relationships: one soul at a time. Dangerous times call for dangerous measures: get to know a stranger in your midst. It just might be the way God brings in unreasonable peace.

Prayer —
Lord, I want to know you, with more than information about You. Reveal Yourself to me so I can experience the crazy peace of Your Kingdom. Amen.

Advent Week Two

Second Reading

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

Reflection

God cares about poor people. And it's a good thing -- because sometimes it seems God is the only one who does. For those who have achieved some level of comfort and success,

there is always the temptation to believe, "Hey! I EARNED this!" And, "If I can earn it -- anyone can!" Well, that may be true. Our good fortune may indeed be the result of hard work and grit. Still, I wonder... If you were born to a family of Ethiopian farmers, could you have EARNED everything you have today? If you were an Asian peasant who lived in the way of a revolution, could you earn peace and safety? If there were no schools or hospitals

within hundreds of miles, would you even be alive today? It is easy to become numb to those realities. We come to believe that we deserve all our blessings -- and those who are struggling to survive should just try harder. But can you imagine this from God's point of view? Could you watch one of your beloved daughters struggling to feed her children, while your son complained that he could not afford a new car? What if God loves all those children the same? How would God's heart be breaking? Is it too much for God to ask us to care about those who dream of dignity and hope?

Prayer —

Righteous God, forgive me for too often feeling like I deserve the blessings you have given me. Remind me that you love all children, even those who seem forgotten in today's harsh world. Remind me that my peace and security is a gift from you. Amen.

Advent Week Two

Third Reading

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection

These are dangerous words: welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. Forgive, and it will be forgiven you. Give and it will be given to you. Love as you have been loved. Once in a while we are privileged to meet someone who lives by that golden rule -- who gives with the same measure they have received from Christ. It seems to me that the folks who are best at this are generally those who feel Christ's love in a fresh way. People who have recently found the power to get clean and sober are able to see hope for anyone. People who have recently been healed are quick to offer powerful words of healing. Those who have been alone a long time -- and have recently found a home for their souls -- are very, very good at inviting others to come home. In America, we tend to have very short memories. We believe we have always been here. Things have always been like this. Our culture grinds down our memories. Most of our families are newcomers. Most of us came without a prayer. We found our way in this land because people welcomed us... and we have forgotten all of that. God called His people to remember their roots. "My father was a wandering Aramean." So begins the Jewish credo. "We were strangers in a strange land -- slaves to Pharaoh -- but God brought us out to freedom." If only we could remember how our families were welcomed, our lives would be filled with gratitude and wonder. But be careful: for we might also be called to care for strangers -- just as others have cared for us.

**Prayer —
Loving Jesus, too often I forget how much you have loved me, and how much you have forgiven me. Remind me of the full extent of your love so I might offer your love to others. May I welcome them as you have welcomed me. Amen.**

Advent Week Two

Fourth Reading

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Reflection

John was outraged when people claimed that salvation was their birthright. "We're children of Abraham," they said. "Of COURSE we are God's chosen ones!" "Show me the fruit," John scoffed. What is the fruit of our prosperity? You would think that prosperity would make people generous, wouldn't you? After all, those who have more than they need can surely share with those who have too little. God's abundant blessings should make it easier to give. Curiously, it seems that the opposite is true more often. The more people have, the more we need. The more we need, the less we can give. Time after time I have seen church budgets kept afloat by widows on pensions. Those with five-figure incomes often cannot afford to tithe. Those with six-figure incomes cannot afford to give at all. The Pharisees were blessed as children of Abraham -- but that blessing made it difficult for them to accept or love anybody. If they had carried the day, you and I would still be outside their clubhouse. As Americans, we have been blessed more than any people on earth. We may even believe it is our birthright. But those blessings belong to God -- not us. If God's blessings make us more gracious people, God will continue to pour out blessings. If, however, those blessings make it harder for us to care for the poor and oppressed, then God will not prolong those blessings forever. The axe may already be laid to the root of the tree. Do we really deserve to continue to be blessed -- more than any people on earth? Perhaps God is waiting to see if we can be generous -- or to welcome the strangers in our midst. If not, we deserve the same fate as the Pharisees who would gladly have turned us away. But if there is room in our hearts, perhaps there is still room for blessings to come.

Prayer —
God of all creation, you have blessed us with great prosperity. We have become comfortable because of your good gifts. May I remember from where my comfort comes. Turn my heart and hands that I would be as generous with other as you have been with me. Amen.

Advent Week Three

First Reading

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Reflection

The ransomed shall return! God is opening a superhighway! It's time for the homecoming! We might get the impression that the Babylonian captivity only lasted about a week and half. Truth is, it lasted a couple of generations - about seventy years. Think of that! Isaiah was calling people to come home -- people who had not been home in decades! In our nation, anything twenty years old is considered ancient history. Can you imagine how these people felt, when Babylon was the only home they had ever known? But God called their hearts to come home and promised to make a way.

They followed a vision of hope and peace -- but it was not always easy. After all that time, there were others who thought the holy land now belonged to them. They thought it was their birthright. They thought these Babylonian Jews were newcomers and immigrants. They fought them every step of the way -- but you cannot stop God's calling. You cannot stop the vision. In our own land, we are quick to point out that we have always been here. We own this land, and it is ours. Isaiah might warn us: ownership is temporary. The vision of peace and hope is eternal. Don't try to stop the vision.

Prayer —

Lord, we enjoy the fruit of this great land. You have given us this home. Thank you. Forgive me when I forget that this is a temporary home on land that you own. Show me the highway to Zion that I might return to you with everlasting joy. Amen.

Advent Week Three

Second Reading

Psalm 146:5-10

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Reflection

The Lord watches over the strangers. This psalm opens with visions of great power. The creator of the earth, the sea, and all therein -- sounds like a full time job!

What do you suppose a God of such great power would do after hanging the stars and setting the planets in motion? Here is the wonder of it all: God almighty has turned all that creative power toward the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the crippled, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows. God cares for those who

Prayer —

God, I want to be on your side! I want to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Show me how to reach out to those who are forgotten. Help me to look after the strangers near me. God, I want to be on your side! Amen.

cannot care for themselves. Someone once asked Abraham Lincoln if he believed that God was on his side. Lincoln replied that he was more concerned with making certain that he was on God's side. Do you want to be certain that you are on God's side? Then care for those who cannot care for themselves. Reach out to those who have been forgotten. Give to those who cannot repay you. Look after the strangers in your midst. It is a curious thing: When you do these things, you find yourself more blessed than you ever dreamed possible. You cannot out-give God. Give away help, hope, and justice. Set prisoners free and feed the hungry. Show the strangers in your midst that you truly care. Then you will be one of happy ones, whose help is the God of Jacob.

Advent Week Three

Third Reading

Luke 1:46b-55

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Reflection

This may well be the most revolutionary song ever written. It is a song of power -- from a powerless person. It came from the lips of a girl in a male-dominated world. It came from the streets of a backwater town. Her nation was a pebble in the shoe of the greatest superpower in history. She did not even have anything to do with the birth of this child! But she knew the tide had turned. This Messiah was not being sent to the high and mighty -- but to a peasant child like her. He came without a man's permission. He came without the blessing of Rome. He came to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

He came to change everything. He came to care for those that the world did not recognize. He came to reach the homeless, the helpless, and the lost. How did she know all that? Because he came -- first of all -- to her. If you want to see the power of God in action, do not wait too long in the pews. Do not read too much theology. And above all, do not sit with those who are comfortable. Go the least and lowest. Tell them Mary sent you.

Prayer —

Lord, I wish I was a brave person, like Mary. She saw your revolutionary hand at work through her, and she still said "yes." Place *me* next to the uncomfortable, the afflicted. Send *me* to the least and the lowest. Amen.

Advent Week Three

Fourth Reading

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Reflection

The judge is standing at the door! What will he hear? I fear he may hear us grumbling against each other, like children who all claim the same portion of the sandbox.

It is not as if there is too little sand to share -- but no one had better try to play in MY pile of sand! Of course, am from the South -- so I am never so crude as to simply complain about my brothers and sisters. First I say, "Bless his heart," and THEN I complain. How do you suppose God feels about us grumbling against others,

when we are all his children? How do you suppose God feels when we value our corner of the sandbox more than the people in our midst? How do you suppose God feels when we label some of his children as "aliens," instead of guests?

Prayer —

Lord, forgive me for being one of the grumblers. Forgive me for caring more about what is "mine" rather than who I am with. Fill me with a generous spirit so that others always feel welcome near me. Amen.

Advent Week Four

First Reading

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Reflection

It's not that John didn't believe. It's just that he was expecting a few more explosions. He expected Jesus to be more of a firebrand than himself, raining down judgment on the world. Lord knows they deserved it! But here came Jesus talking about LOVE this, and LOVE that, and good SAMARITANS, and caring for the lost SHEEP... Where was the judgment? What about the wrath of God? Walking on water was nice -- but how about a few lightning bolts? And now John was in prison -- a prelude to execution. He was about to be martyred, but for what? Where was the power of God he had been promised? Jesus said, "You want evidence? Go tell John what's happening here. We're caring for the poor and the outcast. We're healing them and welcoming them home. You can't get a bigger miracle than that." If John was looking for evidence of the Kingdom of God today, would he find it in the Church? (In fact, that's a sneaky way of asking: would he see it in you?) What would you say if a skeptic asked you for evidence? Well, it's hard to do better than Jesus. Tell them we are caring for the poor. Tell them the outcasts are being welcomed home. Tell them about the miracles -- and tell them how God is using you to reach the strangers in your midst.

Prayer —

Awesome God, show us your power through a transforming love. Show us your miracles as we reach out to the poor and needy in our community. Remind us, Lord, that the best evidence that you walk among us today is when a life is changed through our generous love. Amen.

Advent Week Four

Second Reading

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Reflection

"Ask for a sign! Make it a big one! C'mon! I Dare you!" "Oh no," said the king, "I could never put God to the test." Really? Like the king, we all put God to the test on a daily basis... we just do not admit it to God. All of our anxiety, worry, and stress are evidence that we do not trust God. We have to handle all of this ourselves. It is clearly too big to trust to God. Really? "I'll tell you what," said Isaiah. " Watch the baby. God has it all worked out -- and the baby is the proof. The king thinks he is in charge. The armies think they are powerful. Want to see real power? Watch the baby." Our faith is built on the shoulders of a homeless child born to immigrants in a barn. Do you want to see who is in charge of our tomorrows? Don't go to congress. Don't bother to worry or stress. Go watch an immigrant baby in a homeless shelter. Hope is growing. Hope is growing.

Prayer —

Lord, I guess you already sent us a sign. Maybe we missed it. Have mercy on us and call us back for a second look at the baby. Grant us the courage and wisdom to place our hope in the baby. Amen.

Advent Week Four

Third Reading

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection

Paul -- who had once considered it his mission to destroy the Church -- now considered himself the apostle to the Gentiles. This could not have been easy for him. He was, in his own words, a Pharisee of Pharisees. He had been taught all his life that Gentiles were dirty, crude, and barely human. But he found that the love of Jesus erased all boundaries. By the grace of God he was sent to the people he once despised. Nor did he sit with arms folded, waiting for them to seek him out. He built relationships. He got to know them one soul at a time. He came to know them as brothers and sisters. If God can do that with Paul, he can do it with anyone. Where do you suppose God might send you? What walls might you pull down? Where might you go? Anything is possible when Jesus calls you to follow.

Prayer —

Lord Jesus, your love for me is overwhelming and transforming. Thank you for your steadfast and sure love. Use me as your instrument of love, so others will feel welcomed and enjoy your transforming love, too! Amen.

Advent Week Four

Fourth Reading

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

In the earliest days of the Church, preachers did not find it difficult to persuade folks that Jesus was divine. The ancient world was full of tales about gods walking among us. The sticking point was this idea that Jesus was also human. How can that be? A God who comes as a real baby -- with real bodily functions? A God who eats, drinks, weeps, and gets angry? A God who dies? A God like us? Yes, said the Church, a God like us. In fact, this God is like the very least among us. This God is one of the lonely, the outcast, the poor, and the oppressed. If he was not one of us, he could not save us from our

Prayer —

**Jesus of Nazareth, you walked
Among us and showed us the way.
You taught us how to live and how
to die. You taught us how to love.
You were a stranger among us, yet
you loved us the most! You were
one of the lonely outcasts. You
were among the poor. You were
oppressed, even to your death.
Show me your way even today.
Show me how to love your way. I
want to follow you, Lord. Amen.**

sins. He could not save us from ourselves. This God walks with us. This God could be around the next corner. This God is a stranger who is always in our midst. And this God calls us to see the reflection of the Divine in every stranger we meet.

For more information about the work of the Immigration Work Group of the Virginia Conference Commission on Ethnic Minority

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