

Daily Readings

This is the third Sunday in the season we call Advent. Advent includes the four Sundays before the celebration of the birth of Jesus. This is the traditional season of preparation for Christmas. The following passages are some of the traditional Advent passages as we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child of Bethlehem. The Study Guide readings allow you to dig deeper.

Monday, December 14 – Read Isaiah 40: 1-11. In these days of anxiety and faultfinding we find the prophet Isaiah offering us a new way to live. Don't rush thinking you can do everything alone. Wait upon the Lord and depend on God's strength. What situation in your life needs the strength of God this week? Can you be still and wait on God?

Tuesday, December 15 – Read John 1: 6-8; 19-28. Christmas is a time of light. We put lights on everything we can find. In this passage the gospel writer quotes John the Baptist as he identifies Jesus as light. Light exposes, reveals, and makes public. The darkness of our failure can find healing only in the light. Where does your life need light this week?

Wednesday, December 16 – Read Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-11. Luke reports in his gospel that Jesus begins his ministry with these words. Who are the oppressed, broken hearted, captives, or prisoners in your life? As you walk the sidewalks, hallways, and board rooms of your life this week, whom do you see?

Thursday, December 17 – Read Matthew 24: 36-44. Jesus is warning His disciples. Our human tendency is take for granted that which we know best. On our way to work, the buildings we see everyday are almost invisible. The laughter of our children and the beauty of their eyes go unnoticed. Once they were little and now they are grown... where did the years go? We are a people of habit. To every generation, Jesus says, "Stay awake!" less you miss the coming of Christ. Listen for the voice of God today. Radio? Children? Co-workers? Friends? Spouse? Could God be using them to tell us something? Stay awake! Listen! Look!

Friday, December 18 – Read Romans 13: 11-14. In the book, The Uncluttered Heart (the study our church has recommended for this month), this was the scripture reading for December 2. As we think about the importance of silence in listening for God's message, this passage reminds us to stop, pray and trust God. This day, take time to prepare your heart for God's presence even in the most difficult situations by following the advice of Beth Richardson to repeat these instructions to yourself: 1. Stop what I am doing and turn my attention to God; 2. Pray and turn over to God everything that is bothering me; and 3. Trust God in all things. No matter how difficult the situation, God will guide me.



STUDY GUIDE & DAILY READINGS

Sunday, December 13, 2009

Wonderful Silence *Tales of Wonder, Week 3 of 5*

Luke 1:5-22— The Word from the Bible (TNIV)

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both well advanced in years.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Silence

Silence is an uncomfortable place for us in today's culture. We need noise to help us get through the day. In our cars, at home, even at work, we seem to crave the drone of the radio or television. Some psychologists believe it's because we need the ordered noise of the human voice or music over the disorganized noise of everyday life. Still other psychologists believe the distraction of this organized sound insulates us from the pain of a meaningless existence. So we turn on our radios, plug in our iPods, and keep the constant distraction of the television going.

What if God is trying to speak to us while we are distracted by all the noise? Would we hear God's message or miss it like so many others before?

Between the time of Malachi and Zechariah the voice of God had been silent. For 400 years, no prophet had

come forward with a word from God. Was it because God was silent or because no one was listening?

No one really knows the answer to that question. We do know that when God did give a message to the priestly Zechariah, he did not believe it. So for nine months, Zechariah was mute. Unable to speak, all Zechariah could do was listen. For nine months, old Zechariah watched and listened to what God had to say.

When the time came for his wife Elizabeth to give birth to John the Baptist, Zechariah was ready. The word he spoke was prophetic alright — the word was about the new Elijah (John the Baptist) coming to prepare the way for the awaited Messiah.

Notes on Luke 1:5-22 – the Silence of Zechariah

(Edited from the Interpreter's Concise Commentary)

Luke sets this story into the context of contemporary history. John is born ***in the days of Herod, king of Judea***. The Herod mentioned here is Herod the Great, who ruled from 37-4 B.C. By Judea, Luke means the whole area of Palestine. The parents of John represent Jewish piety at its best. ***Zechariah***, the father, is a member of one of the twenty-four divisions of the priesthood. His wife ***Elizabeth*** is also of priestly descent. Although they are righteous before God, they have not received the blessing of a child.

Zechariah goes to Jerusalem with his division to officiate at the temple. While there Zechariah is chosen by the casting of lots to offer incense in the holy place. The ***casting of lots*** was believed to guarantee divine approval. ***Incense*** was offered morning and evening. The service was preceded by a call to prayer, and while the priest was in the temple proper, the people remained assembled in the courtyard.

While Zechariah is performing this rare duty, the ***angel of the Lord*** suddenly appears beside the altar of incense. The angel is Gabriel (verse 19) – one of the seven archangels of Jewish tradition. Zechariah is shocked, although he might have known that the offering of incense provided the proper setting for supernatural revelation. At any rate the angel brings good news: Elizabeth is to bear a son. His ***name*** is to be ***John***, which means “God is gracious.”

Gabriel now bursts into song: The birth of John will bring ***joy to many*** people. The child is to be dedicated to God, and therefore like a Nazarite (Numbers 6:1). ***He shall drink no wine nor strong drink***. Since Luke stresses the idea that God’s work in history is accomplished through the Holy Spirit, it is noted here that John is to be ***filled with the Holy Spirit*** from birth.

He also will come ***in the spirit and power of Elijah***. The idea that Elijah would come as herald of the end of the world finds its roots in Malachi 4:5. The early Christians interpreted the returning Elijah as the forerunner of the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Luke, unlike Mark and Matthew, does not explicitly identify John as Elijah. However, the one who comes in the spirit of Elijah has an eschatological mission – a mission concerned with the end of the age. He is to prepare the people for the coming of the kingdom of God.

When Zechariah hears this, he cannot believe. The evidence is all against it: he is ***old*** and his ***wife is advanced in years***. The angel now presents his credentials. He is one who stands in the presence of God, so his predictions are sure. Moreover, Zechariah will be struck mute because of his unbelief. This traditional experience of speechlessness (Daniel 10:15-17) after receiving revelations indicates the overpowering character of the divine word and the miracle of revelation.

Meanwhile the people become anxious. According to the ritual, they must remain praying until the officiating priest comes out to offer the benediction. When Zechariah belatedly appears, it is evident that some wonder has occurred. The priest can only make ***signs***; he cannot speak. After his week of duties is complete, Zechariah goes home to await the work of God.

Elizabeth conceives and praises God for removing her ***reproach among men***. Childlessness was blamed on the woman. Elizabeth hides herself ***for five months***. Since this was not a customary practice of pregnancy, something symbolic is probably meant. Just as Zechariah’s silence awaits the word of God, so Elizabeth’s secrecy awaits divine revelation.

Prayer Focus

Trietsch is a praying church. This morning, as you worship, one of our prayer volunteers is praying for everyone in each section of our worship center. We believe that prayer changes lives and hearts for good and for God.

We invite you to join these volunteers by praying for those persons around you. We believe these prayers will have an immediate impact on those for whom you are praying.

Remember... someone is praying for you. Here are a few prayers to guide you.

These prayers were written with the season of Advent in mind. They were listed on the Creighton University online ministry page. Often we feel rushed and anxious during December. Hopefully these prayers will help you focus on the presence of God as you start each day or as you face a day full of activities and pressure.

Watching the Sunrise During Dark, Mornings of Advent

Thank you. What a gift this morning from you as I watched the blazing sunrise through a cloudy sky. It is hard getting up these dark mornings, Lord, and yet you gift me with a sight that I miss at other times of year, when the weather is warmer and the sun rises before I get up. I stared out the window at the red and purple light, gloriously framed by the gold of the rising sun. “Be still, and know that I am God” was the only thing that came to me. I watched in silence, filled with a sense of your presence in my life.

I am filled with gratitude this day for such a treasure and could feel it and see it as a gift from you. Thank you for your love. Today, let me carry a sense of how much you love me to send me such a gift. Let that awareness of your love change the way I treat others today. Let me be more reverent in the irritations of the day. I ask your help to move through my errands and holiday preparations today with peace and a sense of your sunrise in my heart. Your glory fills my spirit and I want only to give thanks with my life this day.

Preparing for Visitors to My Home

They are coming! Oh, dear Lord, like the Wise men wandering toward the stable, visitors are heading to my house. I am so excited about this visit. But I can get so side-tracked about how my house looks, or the food that I serve. I can only keep this prayerful with your help.

Help me to stay humble this Advent and Christmas season. You invite us into the humility of the stable where you were born. Help me to remember that humble-ness and the simple joy of your birth. Let me stay focused on my guests, not on myself and my worries about my house. Guide me in rejoicing in who these people are and in loving them freely.

Praying Over My To-Do List

I sit here with my list, Lord, and I know I need help finding a balance. I am so looking forward to Christmas Day, with the family here, the company, the wonderful celebration. But, Lord, there is SO much to do! When will it all get done? How will I maintain any semblance of inner peace in this “peaceful” season?

I think, Lord, that I need some balance in my life. I feel so torn between wanting to cook and fill my house with wonderful welcoming smells, and wanting to finish decorating the house. I have shopping to do, the house to clean and cards to write and mail. When? How?

Help me, guide me, Lord. Help me to set priorities around doing those things that will bring me closer to you. Maybe my house really is clean enough, or maybe I can ask my family for help. Can the cards wait until a quiet afternoon after Christmas? Can my house decorations be simpler? Is there more than a little ego involved when I want so desperately to have my house “magazine perfect” for the holidays?

Help me rediscover the joy of simplicity, Lord. Help me to remember what I am celebrating.

Help me to find it in my heart to call out, “Come, Lord Jesus.”