

AWAITING THE KING

Reflections for Advent 2021



Edited by Jonathan Turtle

This devotional resource is offered to the glory of God and in thanksgiving for the faithful that call The Anglican Church of Canada home. Deo gratias!

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”
— Luke 24:45

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Introduction

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, now and ever. Amen.

~

In many ways Advent is a microcosm of the Christian life. The expectant waiting and anticipation, the sobriety and alertness, all our hopes and fears laid on the one who is coming. *God's* coming. Advent reminds us that God is seeking, always seeking us, in order that we might seek him. Grace upon grace.

The above Collect, that we pray each day in Advent, reveals that there are three ways that Christ comes to us. Or rather, that Christ's once and unique coming to us refracts into what we experience as three separate instances – as a single beam of white light refracts into many colours when it travels through a prism (John Behr).

First, he has come *in the flesh*. As the Collect puts it, “thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility.” Dare I say this is what most of us believe Advent is really all about, awaiting the birth of the lowly infant in the manger. We are not wrong in believing this, but there is more.

Second, he will come as *judge*. “In the last day...he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead,” says the Collect for Advent. Contrary to what you and I may have been

conditioned to think, the judgement of God is profoundly good news. It means that nothing that inhibits, obscures, or distracts from God's good work will last. As gold is refined by the fire so this world, so our own hearts and minds and souls, will be refined and tested by our Lord.

In this sense Advent is multi-dimensional, as the late Fr. Robert Crouse would say. Advent looks backward in time as well as forward to the end of time and reminds us that these, the beginning and the end, have something to do with Christ's Passion – his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

But there is another dimension to Advent that is vitally important to our spiritual life. Namely, Advent is about God's coming to us "now in the time of this mortal life," in our *souls*. And that's tremendously important for you and I. It means that the Christian life and hope is not locked away in the past nor is it awaiting us a long way down the road in "the future." No, the Christian hope – life with God, through Jesus Christ, by and in the power of the Holy Spirit – is available to us in our life here and now.

Advent reminds us that Jesus – God himself! – has come to find us in order that we might find him, and that this Jesus is risen and living and can fill our hearts and minds and souls with his grace, even now.

My prayer for you as you read this devotional is that Jesus would give you a real sense of his presence with you now, that you would hear his voice in the Scriptures, and that you would respond daily to his invitation to live in the light.

Finally, a word about the format of this resource, and a word of thanks. The passage of Scripture selected for each day is the second lesson assigned at Morning Prayer according to the Daily Office lectionary as it is set forth in The Book of Common Prayer and is accompanied by a reflection from a Canadian Anglican.

To the contributors, thank you. I am grateful for your faith in Christ and the way in which that faith comes through on these pages. It is a privilege and joy to labour alongside you in this little corner of God's vineyard.

Ad gloriam Dei!

Jonathan+

Sunday, November 28

Revelation 2:1-17

The Rev. Molly Finlay

St John the Baptist, Norway, Diocese of Toronto

‘To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

‘And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

‘I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have

affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

‘And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

‘I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

~

Nothing kicks off an Advent devotional series like a few fiery church letters from Revelation! And so often in this new year season of our church year, we pass over the hard and searing messages – from John, writing from Patmos – to get quickly to the bits like “I am the Alpha and the Omega!” and “See, I’m doing a new thing!”

But these letters have something for us today, in this Advent of 2021. And they start out with a message for the most established church of the first few centuries after the birth of Christ: Ephesus. We can sure relate to some of what these Ephesian Christians have been dealing with since they have been sweating away for the sake of the Gospel and facing some serious challenges. And we too have been busy trying to figure out how and when to livestream, whipping up contact tracing sheets, vaccination protocols, and trying to faithfully proclaim the transformational power of Christ (while also doing socially distant pastoral care). Phew!

And John the Revelator reminds us then, like now, that the One who holds the seven stars in his hands, sees all our works, our toil and our

patient endurance. But there's more. Yes, that's right, one more thing to add to your notes section on your phone. Love. We forget to love! We so easily abandon the first love of our salvation and how that's supposed to flow out over everyone around us. We are so busy doing church as we now need to, with all the pressures that come with our new hybrid reality, and against the backdrop of all kinds of worries (including, how are we going to invite folks back to church if we can't sing or eat together?!). We can forget who God is and what our church is supposed to be about: love. God's love for us as his children, beautifully made in his image and redeemed by his Son.

Our love relationship with the risen Christ is the first priority for us as disciples, and from that all our good works flow, including reaching out and loving our neighbours. The Revelator puts it like this: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (2:4). And with this, the call to *remember* and *repent* (2:5).

Advent, one of the two great preparation seasons of our church life is a time to clear out what is hindering us from welcoming the Christ child into our lives and communities anew. And so, on this first day of Advent, may we all *return* – repent – and not abandon the love we had at first. After all, it is Love that came down at Christmas.

Monday, November 29

Mark 1:1-20

The Rev. Joel Steiner

Holy Trinity, Kitchener and Christ Church, Ayr, Diocese of Huron

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

~

“How do we wait well?” Advent asks us. Most obviously we are waiting to celebrate Jesus coming in a manger, but the season invites us to reflect on how we wait for God to heal our deepest wounds now, and eventually to put all things to right.

Advent’s advise might not be your first choice; it’s not mine. Each year we read “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight! Repent for the Kingdom of God is near!” (Mk 1:3, Mt 3:2). John’s call is grating, but it is precisely what we need in moments like this where much of life has fallen apart, when we aren’t sure how to get through or how God is with us.

We often think of repentance as just a turning away from something. But that is only half of it – and really it is the less important half. The point of the turning away is always that it allows us to see and walk with God. As Augustine put it: “God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you.” Repentance is settling into this rest.

We were made to rest in God’s delight. All of our desires found their place and fulfillment as we lived in trust with God. Yet – as I have at least seen in my own life – our hearts wander off. Despite how we try, our thoughts and desires scatter like birds, drawing us every which way and leaving us at odds with ourselves and God. Rest and peace evade us.

Repentance then isn't just about saying no to a list of behaviours. It is about handing our hopes and desires over to God, and resting in expectancy for him. No longer pulled every which way, we are able to pay attention to what is happening in and around us, and to watch for God's presence. As a friend once put it simply: I find that God speaks when I get rid of all the clutter. Or, as John the Baptist might put it: repentance prepares the way for God to come to us.

Over the centuries, when the world is engulfed by chaos, the church has spent times inspecting their hearts and repenting because we find our peace as we come to rest in God. Focusing our hearts on him, we learn to see God present and working in the darkest of moments. For even in these moments the Kingdom of God is near.

Lord, give us the grace to repent.

Our hearts are restless; our desires, confused.

Teach us to draw our hearts back from the hinterlands

And rest in hope for you alone.

And when we are just too scattered or scared, Lord, pursue your lost sheep.

In your mercy place us on your shoulders and carry us back to Your rest.

In Your name we pray, Amen.

Tuesday, November 30

John 1:35-42

The Rev. Dr. Cole Hartin
St. Luke's, Diocese of Fredericton

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

~

Christmas always seems to spill over into Advent.

Most of the Christmas parties – if we can have them this year – will be during Advent.

I shuttle my family to some friend's or family member's house where we shorten our lifespans eating cloying cookies and truffle chocolates before the appetizers are served. These usually are heavy on the salt

and fat, delicious, but sending me running for the heartburn medication.

Then, we sit around sofas, perhaps by a fireplace if our host has one, and we chat, play games, catch up. You know the scene.

Listen: I know I am a bit of curmudgeon. Though I often look forward to Christmas parties, I find they end with me tolerating them, or worse, plotting an escape.

I love people. I really do. And I love spending time with friends and family. But after an hour or two, when we've heard each other's recent stories and finished our food, I find I am ready to pack it in. While I am excited to get the conversation going, once it's been on for a while, I find I am increasingly less interested.

I am aware of the existence of the incomprehensible and strange group of people called "extroverts" who are energized by small talk over fondue, but I know there are many others like myself. Whether introvert or extrovert, moreover, I think most often the more we get to know people the more we see their flaws, even if we enjoy their company. This is why we're told to never meet our heroes. That Andrew could spend a whole day with Jesus, then, and still believe he was the Messiah is awfully powerful proof that he was.

Let me explain.

In John 1:35-42, we see Jesus presented as the "Lamb of God" by John the Baptist. Some of his disciples' dug the title and followed Jesus for the day. They even went to where Jesus was staying (at his request! They were totally not stalking him!). Scripture says that "they remained with him that day" (John 1:39).

Then comes the really interesting part: After spending the day with Jesus, Andrew went on to tell his brother Simon Peter that Jesus really was the Messiah.

You see, if Andrew could spend the day with Jesus without being tired out and uninterested, I think Jesus must have been beautifully compelling. The one whom John called "the Lamb of God" was not flashy at distance but a flop in person. Instead, Andrew was so impressed by Jesus after all of those hours that he had to go tell his brother about how great he was, that he really was the Messiah.

If Andrew could spend the day with Jesus and come to this conclusion, there must be something to it.

Wednesday, December 1

Mark 2:1-22

The Rev. Heather Liddell
St. Peter's, Diocese of Edmonton

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw

Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'

'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

~

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins, but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

God is doing a new thing. A thing that grows in us and grows us just as wine swells and the skin expands to accommodate the contents. In this Advent season, we are called to a time of deep and pregnant waiting. We are called to consider the entirety of scripture in our hearts the way Mary herself pondered the circumstances of the birth of God's son, her son.

When the people of Capernaum heard that Jesus was at home, they gathered around in such numbers that a desperate group of friends climbed the sides of the building, cut a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down on his mat.

They believed in this new thing.

They believed Jesus Christ would heal their friend. And you would be justified in thinking that that was the point of the story. You would think that an act of faith so dramatic, so boldly loving, and so recklessly kind would be the point. It wasn't.

The point comes down to nothing more than Christ's presence amongst them.

This pericope – this vignette – fits together with the two that follow to show this reality clearly.

First, Jesus heals a paralytic man's sins. Then he heals his body. Then, despite the scheming of naysayers and Pharisees, he heads off, and he heals yet more sins, restores yet more lives.

He calls Levi – a tax collector and sinner – to follow him. And Levi does. Jesus and his disciples sit down at Levi's table and break bread together.

This is a new thing; old walls are tumbling down, new wine stretching old wineskins to their breaking point, and imperfect human beings who have no business getting face time with God, sharing a cup with him.

But even that is not enough, and Jesus has the audacity to claim that all the partying and preaching and healing – the impossible, perfect, miracles – are happening simply because he is here. He is among us.

The Bridegroom is here, and so the wedding guests cannot fast. Jesus is here; God walks on earth, and therefore those who follow him live as new wine.

Because we know the stories – because we know the truth – we too are called to live as new wine.

In the Gospel and in our reading today, Jesus is doing a new thing in a new world. A new thing that cannot be bound by old wineskins.

So we are called to wait.

What kind of God forgives sins? What sort of God heals bodies and offers new life to those who are mired in sin? What kind of God asks us not to fast, but instead pulls up a chair at his table and asks us to call him Father?

Our God.

Thursday, December 2

Mark 2:23-3:12

The Rev. Jonathan Turtle

The Parish of Craighurst & Midhurst, Diocese of Toronto

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the

Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

~

One sunny spring afternoon a number of years ago I took my eldest daughter out to learn how to ride a two-wheeler. She had been wanting to learn for a while but was always a bit timid so we never pressed the issue. She wasn't made for that bike, after all.

But let me tell you that bike, with the handlebar streamers and everything, that bike was made for her. And when it all came together and clicked that sunny afternoon she must have done one-hundred laps of the basketball court down the street. Smiling ear-to-ear as she proclaimed, "I feel like I've been riding for years! I love the feel of the wind on my face!"

The Christian life has a goal – to know God in and through and with Jesus Christ. To know, love, and adore the One from whom all goodness, truth, and beauty are derived. To know the joy and freedom that life in Christ can unlock for you and I and anyone at all.

Yet the Christian life is challenging, difficult even. For example, there are so many things that a Christian ought to do or not do. Consider one of my favourite little portions of the Prayer Book, the Rule of Life, tucked away on the bottom half of a page towards the back. Every now and then, it says, Christians should take stock of their lives and consider the extent to which they are living in accordance with the gospel.

Here is what the Prayer Book prescribes: Make going to church a priority, pray and read the Bible regularly (daily even!), integrate the teaching of Christ into your life, share your faith with others, give yourself to service both in the Church and in your community, open your wallet and give generously to the work of the Church. Do these things and you will live a Christian life says the Prayer Book.

From one vantage this can seem like a rather long list of to-dos and quickly become burdensome and constraining, like some sort of spiritual straight-jacket. But from another vantage, the Holy Spirit can open your eyes to see these disciplines for what they truly are, things

that help you grow in your life *in* Christ by connecting you to the life *of* Christ.

It's not that you were made for these Christian practices and disciplines but rather that they were made for you, that you might know the love of God in Christ and be transformed day-by-day. "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

See, the goal with my eldest was never just to get her riding a bike. The goal was the joy and freedom that learning to ride a bike can unlock for a child. In a similar way, the goal of the Christian life is to experience the joy and freedom of knowing God. The goal isn't simply to pray more, to read your Bible more, to be more generous with your time and money. Those are just the practices that get us there. And once you begin to get a glimpse of that, well let me tell you, the feel of the wind on your face!

Friday, December 3

Mark 3:13-end

The Rev. Jason Postma
St. James, Paris, Diocese of Huron

He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’— for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

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We are longing for our liberator, the One who will save us from our bondage. We are captives of the strong man, prisoners of him who forsook God and service in God’s kingdom to be master of his own dominion. It is a dominion of self-seeking and self-serving mastery and is, therefore, a kingdom that cannot ultimately endure; it is a kingdom which sows the seeds of its own eventual destruction. Precisely because of its blasphemous and selfish foundation, this unholy kingdom thrives upon thralldom, imprisoning any and all who enter its domain – the domain of all mere earthly, that is to say fleshly, reality.

It is into this earthly, fleshly reality that our liberator and redeemer is born. He alone can plunder the fortress of the strong man because he alone has power to withstand and overcome the strong man. The strong man steals what does not belong to him and claims the property of another as his own. However, we are the rightful possession of God; to him alone, our souls and our bodies, do we belong.

God is a jealous God, zealous for protecting what is his and his alone. It is for this reason that God sends the One who saves us from our bondage. Only by his forgiveness are we released from our chains and only by his wounds we are restored to health. His heavenly, that is to say his divine, strength becomes the source of our strength.

As those who are rescued, restored, and forgiven, we find ourselves in the company of other former captives, gathered by our redeemer into a fellowship, nay, a family. No longer do the old bonds of thralldom define us; our identity is forged by the bonds of our shared

relationship to our saviour and brother. This bond that is thicker than genetics, a bond born and confirmed of Spirit and water, sustained by oil, bread and wine.

Our freedom is not only for its own sake; it is also for the sake of those who have not yet tasted and seen the emancipation of God and for those who are longing to escape the labyrinthine dungeons and deceptions of the strong man. It is clear that we cannot save ourselves and we cannot save others from the lure and grip of the strong man; however, we can embody the way of freedom, of selfless service, as a living testimony that deliverance is possible if we are willing to serve a new master, the one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. In this way of life is true freedom.

Come, Lord Jesus – our Saviour and our brother – come and ransom your captive people.

Saturday, December 4

Mark 4:1-20

The Rev. Bill Mok

St. Chad's, Diocese of New Westminster

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear,

Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’

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The Parable of the Sower was told to the multitudes in public and explained to the disciples in private by Jesus. I gained farming experience when I was living in Mainland China, therefore, I could immediately relate to what Jesus was teaching. When I was small, my mom brought me to her village many times. My cousin brought me to the field and trained me to be his assistant. I have seen a farmer walk into his field and begin to sow seed into that field. I have seen the crops spring up and begin to grow. I even attended a one-week bootcamp to learn how to farm, and the importance of the seed, the soil, and the hard work for the coming harvest.

In our earthly realm some of the seeds produce fruit and some do not. In the spiritual realm, when “the word of God” is sown then spiritual fruit is produced. Since the parable was explained to the those who were around Jesus along with the twelve, the soil is the primary emphasis of this parable.

The “soil” in this parable represents the heart of the person who hears “the word of God.” Everyone who hears “the word of God” hears it in a different way. Some people cannot make the connection between “the word of God” and their own life. They cannot see how “the word of God” could possibly hold any value for them. Even though they may hear “the word of God” many times, it is not found in their heart. Is your heart this type of soil, “the narrow footpaths” that run beside and through the fields?

The second type of soil speaks of the heart that makes an emotional response to a shallow presentation of “the word of God” without depth and without cost. Because they have no depth to their profession, they fall away when the persecutions and tribulations

associated with knowing Jesus arise. Is your heart this type of soil, “the rocky ground”?

Is your heart the third type of “soil” that looked like it was ready to be sown, but underneath the surface are the living roots and seeds of thorns and weeds? With this soil of heart, we try to have the benefit of “the word of God” while still clinging to the old life of sin. The seed of “the word of God” cannot survive to produce fruit in a heart filled with other things.

The good soil that can produce fruit is the heart that has been plowed deeply by “the word of God,” and tilled by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. When the seed of “the word of God” enters this kind of heart it germinates, grows up, and bears fruit to the glory of God.

The season of Advent emphasizes our preparation for the coming of Christ who is the Word. The soil has no will, but the human heart has will. What type of “soil” is your heart?

Sunday, December 5

Revelation 2:18-3:6

The Rev. Melissa Frankland
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Steinbach, Manitoba

‘And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

‘I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call “the deep things of Satan”, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come. To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;
to rule them with an iron rod,

as when clay pots are shattered—
even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

‘And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

‘I know your works; you have a name for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

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The traditional Collect for Advent II: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the ways of thine only begotten Son; that through his advent we may be worthy to serve thee with purified minds, who liveth and reigneth...

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 3:6)

There is much richness contained in Revelation, and to understand the Book of Revelation is to gain access to the inner secrets of its vision, if we but take the time to read, and to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

It begins with seven letters to the churches of John’s day. These letters contain the reality of ‘suffering for the faith.’ Some in the church of Thyatira encountered persecution, while enduring patiently in the faith. While others were all too comfortable in their accommodation with the world. Has much changed?

The letters sum up the challenges, experiences, successes and failings of real life Christian communities, and they apply today. Like Advent these letters comfort and rebuke, inspire hope as well as fear. On top of all this, God is calling us to listen up! To open our ears and hearts to what our Heavenly Father has to say to the churches, to our own parish, and to our hearts. What is the Spirit saying to your parish? What is he saying to you? Are you having trouble hearing his voice

because of the noise that surrounds you? Especially the noise of social media?

If there is too much noise in your life, I have Good News...Advent! We begin the second week of the Season of Advent today. Advent is calling us to a time of preparation and waiting. We are preparing our hearts by making room to receive our King at Christmas, and we are waiting patiently in hope for our Lord's return, when He will come to judge the 'quick and the dead.' Part of this preparation is to let go of those things which are preventing us from hearing or seeing our Lord in our lives. A sort of 'spring cleaning,' like the spring cleaning that must be done in the churches of Thyatira, and Sardis, and locally at the parish level, and in our own hearts.

Today, we are chastened because, by his Word, we have been made aware of our failings. We are expectant, because we have been reminded yet again of Christ's enduring love for his people. That, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the hope we hold onto.

Advent says when we clear away all of those things that are preventing us from hearing God's Word, and his voice, then we are ready to receive the special message that is about to be given to us at Christmas, and we are ready for Christ's return.

Lord Jesus, help me to let go of the things that stand in the way of hearing your loving voice. Amen

Monday, December 6

Mark 4:21-end

The Ven. Dr. Pilar Gateman
Archdeacon of Calgary

He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

~

Mark is usually such an urgent feeling read, unlike this section. It is striking how subtle Jesus is in contrast to how Mark has thus far shared the Gospel.

The three parables Jesus shares prior to the windstorm event all begin by sounding like he is about to explain something, only to leave us wondering what he means. We sense Jesus is really wanting to tell us something that matters. There is a promise in these words, but there is an edge to them also. Pay attention, this is going to matter.

Jesus, the master story teller, draws us in with statements which are easily agreed with: "Don't hide this message (your light)," and "When you share this message it will grow (without much input from you)," and then "The smallest sharing of this message will multiply exponentially." Yet the more we settle into these parables the more Jesus *speaks*.

Jesus is not being purposely obtuse. He is very aware of how dangerous what he is suggesting is to his current disciples and all those multitude – including you and I – who will come after them. He shares the truth only with his immediate disciples because of how explosive and transformative this message was and is, and knowing that those in authority (even the church) are not going to be happy about its table-turning potential.

We see this especially in the parable about the seeds as Jesus explains how the seeds go into the ground quietly and unobtrusively grow. But when harvest arrives Jesus quotes the prophet Joel (3:13) saying, "In goes the sickle at once, because harvest has arrived," and is speaking about the day of the Lord when some pretty devastating stuff is

going to happen before God restores their fortunes and pours his spirit upon them. The farmer seems to be unaware of what is happening but nevertheless it happens. Of course, the references to death and resurrection are also visible with a deeper read.

Jesus assures us that even the smallest amount we share in word and deed with regard to our faith in him will be like ripples from the smallest stone thrown into a pond of water. They will be felt on the other shore, with little effort from us.

The season of Advent is one which reveals over weeks the coming of Christ. With all the hope, anticipation and even twinges of regret that idea might bring. We have time to consider what it will be like to stand face to face with our Saviour when he comes again. These readings, as with the season of Advent, allow Jesus to slowly reveal himself to us more and more each time we read them. “For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed,” when we sit at the feet of the lover of our soul.

May Jesus reveal himself to you in these, and all the words of scripture you hear during this season – in a way which is transformative for you and may he use the ripples of that transformation to point others to him.

Tuesday, December 7

Mark 5:1-20

The Rev. Mark Regis

St. Mary and St. Martha, Diocese of Toronto

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right

mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

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Exhausted, terrified, amazed, and confused, the disciples with their rabbi made it to the other side of the lake, just as he said they would. Perhaps no one was more exhausted than Jesus himself as they landed in the region of the Gerasenes. Exhausted enough to sleep through a violent squall, Jesus' intentions lay in and beyond the calming of that storm. Arriving on shore "a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him."

This man was driven by a force so powerful that he broke shackle and chain. He gashed himself violently with stones. Screaming out in strangled agony and fierce misery amongst the tombs, the man could not be restrained or controlled. An overpowering storm within.

To what degree was it the man who ran, or were the demonic forces impelling him? We simply do not know. Was there within a lost cry for help to Jesus, or a solely a vicious imploring for Jesus to depart? Again, we cannot know and are not meant to.

We do know that Jesus came to him, a man spiritually tormented and impure, with purpose and a spirit of saving mercy that belied all the hopelessness of that moment.

How earnestly do we yearn for Jesus to come and come soon? On the other hand, how often do our lives say, "Jesus, leave me alone"?

That day, Jesus sent the demonic forces into a herd of pigs that were drowned in the nearby sea, sending a shockwave throughout all who witnessed or heard of these events. This shockwave produced an action that we might not expect: begging.

The demons begged Jesus to send them into the pigs, recognizing his power, but only to be momentarily spared from a spiritual abyss we would rather not imagine.

The townspeople begged Jesus to leave, recognizing his power, but only through the lens of a terrible supernatural force and authority – which fractured their worldviews and offered only a fearfulness of personal loss.

The healed man, on the other hand, begged to remain with Jesus, recognizing his power, now knowing personally a loving and merciful Authority that transformed his life from the inside out.

The same Jesus who had authority over the primeval forces of nature, is the same Jesus who has power over the storms of our inner selves. When temptations come, when powerlessness overwhelms, when our personal paradigms are shaken by God, when the storms hit – what, or who do we beg for?

Jesus Christ, heal the eyes of my heart, that I would see and know you as a strong deliverer. Cause me to cry out to you in every storm. Jesus, come soon. Amen.

Wednesday, December 8

Mark 5:21-end

The Rev. Sarah Armstrong
Diocese of Algoma

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’ So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

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Waiting is not a virtue that is valued by our society. We are sold on services that minimize or eliminate our need to wait and are taught to delight in instant gratification. We are easily annoyed when we must wait unexpectedly; our precious time is out of our control.

Perhaps this relinquishment of control is the root of the discomfort that we experience in our intentional practice of waiting during Advent. We know our need for the Lord to come as we confront suffering that is beyond our ability to alleviate, and we must trust that he will and soon. Our prayers echo the plea of the psalmist: "O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame" (Psalm 25:2). We trust, and at the same time, we ask that our hope not be in vain. After all, hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12). This is especially true when we find ourselves clinging to hope in the midst of death.

Jairus clings to hope at the feet of Jesus, begging him to come heal his daughter. One can only imagine the sense of helplessness and desperation that Jairus and the members of his household felt at the time of the child's illness. We learn at the outset of this story that she does not have much time for help to come; she is described as being at the point of death. What relief when after his repeated pleading, Jesus goes with the synagogue leader to heal her.

This relief must have wavered, giving way to desperation once more, when Jesus stops. The Lord looks around for the person who touched him after noticing that power has gone forth from him. The woman healed, addressed as 'Daughter' by Jesus, is surely loved by him, but Jairus' concern must have been for *his* daughter. While Jesus is still speaking to the woman from the crowd, some people from Jairus' house come and deliver terrible news: his daughter is dead. It is too late; she is past the point of help, so why bother the Teacher?

How often messages such as these challenge our own faith: we are told that death wins. Our pain makes us feel as though we have been put to shame. In these moments of despair, may the Spirit recall in us the words that Christ speaks to Jairus in his suffering: "Do not fear, only believe." Death is not the end of the story. Keep on waiting. Believe in the one who has overcome death. Everything is going to be okay in the end, and if it's not okay, then it's not the end. We know that this little girl's story does not end at the point of death, but with the coming of the Lord. Surely the same is true for us.

"Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame," (Psalm 25:3).

Thursday, December 9

Mark 6:1-13

The Rev. Roshni Jayawardena
Trinity-St. Paul, Diocese of Toronto

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Jesus spent the previous chapters of the Gospel of Mark being baptized, overcoming temptation, gathering followers, teaching, healing, appointing apostles and even stilling a storm! He has returned home with numerous accomplishments and as Jesus and his disciples enter Nazareth, it is evident he is returning with more than when he left. As a reader this is perhaps why this scene stings even more. None of it seemed to matter to the people of Nazareth, they didn't believe in Jesus, they were offended by him and so he was rejected. So much for a home court advantage!

Advent doesn't seem like quite the right place to explore feelings of rejection and isolation, but even in the midst of wonderful hymns, preparations for joyous celebrations with family and an eventual peek into the manger scene we all know what it feels like to be rejected. We can feel rejected, alone and less-than in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, and unfortunately every space we inhabit, and joyous Advent cheer doesn't always break through these painful feelings.

Thankfully, the life of Jesus reminds us that rejection is never the end. Jesus pushes back against rejection with all-encompassing and farther-reaching love. Jesus sends the twelve out into the world, embracing and empowering those who are now closest to him. The twelve are instructed to go to those who are sick and in need and to teach about the kingdom of heaven. Their mission is to spread the good news with each step and each new person they meet.

That mission did not end with the twelve, and generations of people have continued to embrace and empower one another with the hope of Jesus and love for Jesus uniting us all.

Who were those people for you?

Who spoke to you about God and the gospel and inspired your life of faith?

Who were the preachers and teachers that taught you?

Who were the neighbours that strengthened and comforted you?

Who showed you the love of Jesus and **who do you show it to now?**

We all face rejection at one time or another, but today we are invited to remind ourselves of the people who powerfully showed us a glimpse of God. The people that showed us love and brought us here. This Advent let us give thanks to God for those people and let us pray for the strength to remind those who feel most rejected and alone that they are not. Let us go out into the world and tell people and show people that they too are beloved children of God.

Friday, December 10

Mark 6:14-29

The Rev. Ajit John

St. Paul L'Amoreaux, Diocese of Toronto

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths

and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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If there is a defining image in this gospel text it would be the severed head of John the Baptist on a platter. It's not just the blood and gore of it all, it's the context of that horrific act. The head of John is brought into a royal banquet for Herod's birthday celebration. Invited guests mentioned in the text include the nobles and military commanders under Herod's control. Apart from the ritual overeating and the wines that must have been plentiful, we have the dancing of a beautiful young woman to stir up the lusts of the flesh. Into the swirl of power and excess is brought the severed head of the last of Israel's prophets.

What strikes the reader more than anything else is that the scene exposes a clash of two empires, something we are compelled to consider in Advent.

We are given the backstory. Herod and John the Baptist are at odds because Herod has married his brother's wife. John's pointed criticism of this open sin has landed him in prison. The head on the platter is one empire's attempt to silence the voice of another kingdom. The voice of God through John calls for widespread repentance in preparation for a different rule and a different king. In his imprisonment of John, Herod tries to silence something that could never be silenced. Not even the dungeons of Judea could do that.

I remember seeing a production of Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* built as it is around this very gospel text. In the staging of the banquet scene a large sewer grate was placed over a hole in the palace floor. From deep within it rose the prophet's bass voice clear and unwavering. The director got it right. The voice of God's servant could not be silenced even in a dungeon at the centre of earthly power. A political machine is no match for the voice of the living God.

What might Jesus have been thinking as his disciples brought him the news of John in prison? John was his cousin after all, one of the first

to rise up, even in the womb, to give him honour. But what did his treatment by Herod foretell of his own ministry? There would be a cost to his speaking and to his miracles that confirmed his identity as God's Son. Nothing less than God's voice could vanquish the power of the showy empires that corrupt and oppress God's people.

Every time we see shocking displays of raw power levelled against God's people we must remember the One who came that first Advent, with an equally shocking reversal of the world's values. Instead of lethal weapons this empire offers forgiveness, truth, mercy, and above all humility. Jesus has come to be present at the horrors of each age and will come finally to complete his work. The head on a platter does not speak of the world's triumph and empires will still clash. God's voice goes out now through ordinary people. Be faithful, then, in what you do or say. God's reign will reach its completion and it will be blessed and glorious. That is why Advent is a season of hope.

Saturday, December 11

Mark 6:30-end

The Rev. Steve Greene

St. Luke's and St. Thomas the Apostle, Diocese of Huron

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

When evening came, the boat was out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

~

"We surrender, we surrender!" Think of your favourite movie or show in which those words are declared. Instantly in your mind you see a white flag, the guilty party with their hands up and remorse on their faces. How quickly we think a giving *in* is a giving *up*!

Have you ever wanted to give up? Think of a predicament where the resources weren't quite sufficient for the job. You have taken the time to assess and re-assess; the same conclusion rears its ugly head over and over: Nope, this is not going to work!

Imagine you are with Jesus in today's passage. You know and love Jesus. You've seen him do some incredible things! You've seen him turn water into wine, heal a paralytic, heal the royal officials' son! But this? We literally have a kid's meal to feed thousands of people, many of which are children! People have travelled for days to hear Jesus, to hang on to every word of this incredible Rabbi. The peoples bellies begin to grumble due to the lack of food and soon we're going to have a serious problem. This is bad. It's time to give up!

Imagine you can have two or three minutes with Jesus to inform him of the impossible predicament.

You: Rabbi, I understand the importance of not sending the people home due to the large distance. Yes, some may faint on the way home. Some may die. Personally, you should have let them go home and reschedule for let's say, Tuesday, 1:30pm? No matter, can you please, please rain manna from Heaven? You've done it before; it will save us from this embarrassing situation.

With love in his eyes and with a stern voice, he says, "We have what is needed. There is no multiplication without division. There is no addition without subtraction."

As Jesus turns to face the thousands and begins to bless the food, you think to yourself, "What nonsense is that? That doesn't even make any sense and it doesn't even solve the problem! I give up!"

When we surrender, when we give of ourselves, we are gifted with the opportunity to glorify God. Think of Hannah, a barren woman, who cried and pleaded with God for a son. Think of the widow's offering in Mark 12. She gave out of poverty while the others gave out of abundance. This woman gave God the glory by understanding and living out a sacrificial and surrendered life.

When we give of ourselves, we are given the opportunity to make an impact. Think of the little boy's heart to surrender his meal, a meal prepared in love by his mom. Think about what he has imparted and continues to teach us in 2021! It truly doesn't matter the size of the gift, the talent, the job nor the goal. We must surrender all to him!

When we surrender, we trust in the value and valour God gives us. The last twenty-one months have been a gong-show! Our lives have been pushed, pulled, and broken by the passing of friends and family members. Jobs lost. Hopes and dreams have quickly vanished. We too have strained against the adverse winds of life. We too have rushed to Jesus with our pains, trials, sorrows, griefs and sufferings, waiting with bated breath for healing. It is in this holy space we truly recognize that our walk with Jesus is wonderful and heartbreaking, a surrendering course of action and identity.

During this season of expectation we are called to surrender. A life that is blessed, broken and given like the bread and fishes, and beautifully received by our Lord and Saviour. A life that can be calmed and sustained by his rule, reign, and love. A life that risks it all

in the face of insurmountable odds, persecution, and self-doubt. A surrendered life that strains to simply touch the hem of his garment, the Great Physician.

Today and everyday, we are called to give *in* to his word, will and Spirit. We are called to give *up* ourselves, our agendas, our praise and thanksgiving, our hearts, souls, minds and gifts. Our hands are in the air and we profess with our mouths and lives, we surrender to you O Lord, Most High!

Sunday, December 12

Revelation 3:7-end

Professor Joseph Mangina
Wycliffe College, Toronto

‘And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:
These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

‘I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

‘And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.'

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One of the best-known prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* petitions God on behalf of "all sorts and conditions of men." Just so, the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation might be seen as addressed to "all sorts and conditions of churches." Some of the assemblies are poor, others are rich. Some are struggling, others are proud. Some are faithful, others are woefully inadequate, barely deserving of the name of "church." The church is a mixed bag—then as now.

If we would know what the church is, however, we must know who Jesus is. It's no accident that each of the seven letters opens with a self-description on the part of Christ. So, for instance, the message to Philadelphia: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens." These words (which echo Isaiah 22:2) form part of the great "O" Antiphons, which we often hear in our liturgies in the season of Advent. Philadelphia is one of the faithful churches of Revelation, but it is a community under considerable pressure. Jesus reminds them that it is *he* and no one else who is the arbiter over their destiny. As the Messiah of Israel and Key of David, he opens the door to the future; all they have to do is walk through it. It is that simple.

Things are rather different with the church in Laodicea. This community is, quite frankly, an ecclesial disaster in the making. They

are not so much apostate as feckless, useless, disgustingly mediocre—tepid water that Christ threatens to spit out of his mouth. The Laodiceans are a people who think they have it all together but do not. By their mediocrity they have managed the extraordinary feat of making the gospel *uninteresting*. No wonder Jesus counsels them to buy from him eye salve so that they might “see again.”

But again, notice how he introduces himself to the Laodiceans: “The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.” He is faithful, even when they (and we) are not. He says Yea, Amen—he *is* the Amen—even when we play it safe, trading the gospel for some easier and less challenging message. He cares enough about us as his people that he refuses to leave us alone:

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev. 3:19-20).

Lord Jesus Christ, in this season of Advent, speak to us again so that we may open the door and admit you. Restore our lost courage, and rekindle our love for both you and the Father. These things we ask for your name's sake. Amen.

Monday, December 13

Mark 7:1-23

The Rev. Dr. Dane Neufeld
St. James, Diocese of Calgary

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, “Honour your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the

word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

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The past number of months have been consumed with conversations about what enters our bodies. Though Jesus was certainly not speaking here of vaccines, he does draw a distinction that seems entirely lost on our contemporary society and our degraded public discourse about any contested matter. It is not what enters our bodies from without that defiles us, but that which comes from within.

What comes from within us may well be shaped by that which enters us from the outside. The advice we listen to, the entertainment we consume, the books we read, the YouTube channel we frequent, the people we aspire to imitate, all have a powerful influence on our inner formation. But even still, the choices we make in what we consume and the filters we use to construct our inner life have their origins within, Jesus says, and we are responsible in some way for our own inner life and how it projects onto the world around us.

Though vaccines, to use a particularly sensitive example, are an important element in our struggle against the pandemic, they do not make us clean within. Nor does the receipt of a vaccine provide warrant for us to regard our neighbour or even our enemies with contempt or derision. The Pharisees misunderstood this ordering of the inner and outer life, because they thought their adherence to law provided cover for a host of other behaviours and dispositions that

Jesus lists: evil thoughts, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

Obviously what enters our bodies from without is not irrelevant to the Christian life. God willing vaccines will bring the pandemic to an end and better environmental regulations will improve the air we breathe, while better agricultural practices improves the food we eat. But none of these goods will cleanse our souls and bodies, if they do not cohere with the inner transformation of the Holy Spirit. Even good things like the law can be corrupted by our selfish and proud hearts and turned into tools of division and hatred.

This Advent, as we await the coming of the Lord, let us pay attention to what is within us. And may the fruit that grows from our individual and common lives bring life and beauty, not bitterness, to the world around us.

Tuesday, December 14

Mark 7:24-8:10

The Rev. Colin Nicolle

The Parish of St. Mary & St. John, Diocese of Nova Scotia & PEI

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.' His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' He asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven.' Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

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"But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" Such is, I think, the kind of question we face almost daily in our own lives, or at least it is the *spirit* of this question that drives our fears, our doubts, anxieties, and daily worry. "For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning," cries the Psalmist, and so to do we, if we are being honest with ourselves. What we have seldom seems enough, who we are is not entirely who we want to be, and often our lives seem like nothing but struggle after struggle, lack after lack.

Advent begins in darkness and it will end in darkness, both in this darkest time of our year but also in the darkness of the night on December 24th, and in the darkness of a manger outside of Bethlehem. For many, the past two years have felt like a time of perpetual darkness; we cannot gather with friends or families as we want, we could not attend church as we were used to, and we have suffered for it. For others, darkness is something that is lived every day through struggles physical, emotional, and mental.

But, Advent, I think, means to draw us into and through that darkness, just as the Great Lent draws us towards the darkness of Calvary, not so that we become lost in the darkness but rather, so that we can become *found* in the darkness. For it is in these deepest,

darkest places where we can encounter God's grace and mercy in its fulness. It isn't in human platitudes and comforts where we find liberation from our grief and darkness, but instead *in* the dark and humble manger where we will see our saviour, under the dark skies of Calvary where we will see him killed, and in the darkness of the tomb where we will know him to be risen.

Miracles are what we hear in this passage from Mark's Gospel – acts of our Lord which can fill stomachs when nothing earthly can, or which can loose tongues or give sight to blind eyes, or cast out demons from those suffering possession. It is in the darkness of the possession, or the blindness, or the deafness, or the hunger, or the leprosy that the Lord meets those in need, it is *through* that darkness – not in spite of it – that they are healed.

Advent is a season in which we enter into the darkness, at least a little bit, recognizing our lack and our need in order to prepare ourselves for the coming light, the birth of our Saviour. The Saviour who can feed us as nothing else can, loose our tongues, open our ears, and give us sight.

Wednesday, December 15

Mark 8:11-9:1

The Rev. Tyson Rosberg

Regional Ministry of the Eastern Townships, Diocese of Montreal

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.' And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.' They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread.' And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' They said to him, 'Twelve.' 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like

trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’

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Baking sourdough bread has become part of the weekly pulse of my life over the past few years. One gets a taste of Kingdom time in baking bread, a taste of the slow, natural rhythms of human life — an ancient ancient rhythm, going back some 30,000 years, when humans first began grinding plants for flour. When Jesus taught the disciples, he spoke in images and stories that people understood — he spoke of fishing and farming, of seeds and soil, of bread and yeast.

Jesus says, “Watch out — beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” Our world that we live in is not all that different from a great big kitchen mixing bowl, and the question to ask ourselves is what are we putting into that bowl? Are we (intentionally, or perhaps entirely unknown to us) kneading in to our world the yeast of hypocrisy, corruption, abuse of power, greed, or pride? Or are we stirring in to our world the yeast of the Gospel, the yeast of equality, justice, hope, joy, and love? If Jesus is asking us to beware of one thing, he is alternatively asking us to pay attention (the great theme of Advent, to pay attention, to “keep awake”) to something else.

It’s funny how no one needs to teach yeast to do its work. Yeast doesn’t need a university degree, least of all a masters in divinity, to know how to grow and rise. It rises on its own. It wants to rise. The Kingdom of God is the same way too. The Kingdom wants to grow. The Kingdom is growing. God is already at work in our world!

When we pray “Give us this day our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer, it isn’t so much petitioning the Divine for our daily morning allotment of toast, but asking God to have a taste of the Kingdom — to be filled and sustained, to be charged with life, to dream big, to live large in Christ.

Yeast is such a small, small thing. When mixing dough, it’s easy to forget that the yeast is even there; yet, anyone who has baked bread without yeast will be all too familiar with the disappointing “door stopper” results. Despite being small, yeast is a powerful agent. You don’t need a lot of it for explosive results. What once was flat and inert, rises, grows, becomes full of new life, energy, and vitality.

The words of St. Therese of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century Carmelite nun, often come to mind: “Do small things with great love.” Walking the Gospel is a radical path in our current global culture, but it needn’t begin with earth-shaking actions. Like yeast, big dreams can be born from the tiniest of microscopic possibilities. In this Advent season, I wonder how we can more intentionally be yeast in the Kingdom bakery? How can our thoughts, prayers, and actions grow the Kingdom of God? Questions to chew on. Food for the journey.

Thursday, December 16

Mark 9:2-32

Martha Riddell

St Mary Magdalene (Picton), Diocese of Ontario

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd

saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

~

"This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.' Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command" (Deuteronomy 34:4-5).

What was the sin of Moses that prevented him from entering the land promised to his ancestors? Disobedience: “You broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites” (Deuteronomy 32:51). If one as great as Moses – the one to whom God gave the Law – was not worthy to enter the land of Canaan, how could we possibly expect to enter into God’s rest?

But did Moses not, in fact, cross over and enter into the Holy Land? “And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.” His feet stood upon Mount Tabor and once again the Lord spoke “to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). Through the Messiah, the sin of Moses was absolved, and he was able to enter the Promised Land. In Christ all transgressions are redeemed, all promises are fulfilled, and all desires are satisfied.

The Transfiguration is the ultimate demonstration of Christ’s declaration, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17). He showed to Peter, James, and John that he holds the power of life and death by bringing before them Moses, who was dead, and Elijah, who had never suffered death. By his Transfiguration our Lord joined the Law and the Prophets – the Old Testament – with the New, and brought his followers from every age into communion with one another.

After Moses received the two tablets of the covenant “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (Exodus 34:29). Now he sees the face of God shining with an ineffable brightness. When our Saviour was transfigured he did not lose the substance of real flesh nor was his human nature lost. He showed forth the glory of his future Resurrection and revealed to us the promise of our future bodily resurrection. On Mount Tabor the Apostles saw Christ as all the elect will see him on the Day of Judgement, his face “like the sun shining with full force” (Revelation 1:16).

Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Law and once again the Lord brought him up a mountain to receive a new means of justification. Let us await the second advent of our Lord confident in God’s promises revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration: the forgiveness of sins; the Resurrection of the body, and the Life everlasting. “If the transfigured humanity of Christ and the society

of but two saints seen for a moment, could confer delight to such a degree that Peter would, even by serving them, stay their departure,” writes the Venerable Bede, “how great a happiness will it be to enjoy the vision of Deity amidst choirs of Angels forever?”

Friday, December 17

Mark 9:33-end

The Rt. Rev. Jenny Andison
St. Paul's Bloor Street, Diocese of Toronto

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.'

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be

thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

‘For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’

~

With exorcisms, Taliban style mutilation, and the fires of hell thrown in for good measure, this passage rarely makes it to people’s Insta page. Albert Einstein once wrote, “If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it.” The end of Mark chapter 9 puts some dark and violent words in the mouth of Jesus and, as disorienting as they initially are, Jesus is diagnosing for us the problem underneath all our *other* daily problems. He may not be asking us to take him literally in this passage, but he is asking us to take him seriously this Advent.

Take me seriously, says Jesus, because you have power and can cause other people to stumble. Mark 8:34: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” By time we get to Mark 9 Jesus has already told them twice that he is going to be rejected by the establishment, tortured, and die. The issue was the disciples still hadn’t grasped that if they wanted to be his followers, they too were going to have to suffer and sacrifice.

Underneath our insecurities, self destructive habits, and sins, is our failure to understand that if we want to find significance and success, then just like him, we are headed to the cross. Significance and success, for the follower of Jesus, comes through suffering and sacrifice and the degree to which we fail to grasp what this means for our daily lives, is the degree to which all our other problems will flourish!

How might this work this Advent? In your relationships try to bring an attitude of humility and sacrifice to arguments. Humility that you just might be in the wrong as well, sinners every one of us. Seek to sacrifice, by letting some issues go, or by going the extra mile to bring pleasure to your friend or partner. Walk this same path in your work

relationships. Adopt a posture of learning with your colleagues and be willing to cede the spotlight.

This path of sacrifice and suffering is how we also find significance in the eyes of God, because at the end of the day, that's all that really matters, and God does not measure things the way we do. If you give an increasing amount of your income away this Advent to serve the poor, it will mean sacrificing Christmas pleasures you had been looking forward to. If you make certain ethical decisions at work or work reasonable hours so you can invest time in spiritually nurturing your children, your career will suffer, but significance and meaning will be yours.

This is a tough passage from the writer Mark, but underneath the hyperbole and violence, there is good news from Jesus that our lives can have significance and meaning through suffering and sacrifice. A path that doesn't look like what the world offers, but that's okay, because what the world offers has an expiry date and is expensive. This Advent, we are preparing our hearts to receive the gift that Jesus is giving us for free.

Saturday, December 18

Mark 10:1-31

Cormac Culkeen

All Saints' Peterborough, Diocese of Toronto

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive

the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

~

In this season of yearning and longing for the incarnation, I have appreciated this opportunity to reflect on the gospel of Jesus the Christ. The topics in this passage from Mark's gospel initially seem distinct, even disparate. Divorce, the welcome of children, and the spiritual fate of the rich don't often come up in the same conversation – but as we prepare for the coming of the Christ-child,

this passage invites us consider themes of interdependence, dependence, and independence in the kingdom of God.

I am a Youth Minister in the Anglican Church. That means I am a pastor, a preacher, a planner, and a mentor. But three days a week after school, I have a very specific role: I am an applesauce opener.

I don't know how the kids in our church after-school program heard of my applesauce opening skills, but the cat is out of the bag now. The kids are all about 8 and 9, and the little tubs of applesauce we give them for snack have a foil lid that proves a bit too hardy for small fingers. So, the kids line up and ask for my help the way kids often do, without guile or embarrassment, and I open up all the applesauces. It's a high calling.

The kids teach me a lot though, about openness and humility. Small children are unselfconscious about their dependence on grown-ups to help them with what they cannot do by themselves. When Jesus invites his listeners to receive the Kingdom like little children, it is this unselfconscious dependence, and free admission of our need, that we are called to emulate.

The rich man in the Gospel, on the other hand, is hamstrung by his independence. What is wealth if not the ability to rely wholly on one's own resources? With his wealth, the rich man might even have the wherewithal to be generous, without significantly lessening his means. But Jesus does not instruct him merely to be generous, he instructs the young man to sell all he has and give it to the poor – to move from reliance on himself to a much riskier reliance on the promises of God. Unsurprisingly to modern readers, the rich young man is unwilling or unable to place himself in a position where he risks dependence on others, and so he leaves full of sorrow.

Our culture is obsessed with independence and self reliance, with wealth and financial security. The reality of our desperate reliance on God for our salvation, and on our fellow human beings for care and community, is hard to acknowledge. The world would tell us that we aren't supposed to be needy – but this is not the Good News of the Christ child. Jesus the Christ, our needed Salvation, enters the world full of human need. The scriptures today, and the awaited Christ Child, invite us to embrace the reality of our souls deep need for God and for one another.

In his book, “Life after God”, Canadian author and artist Douglas Coupland wrote this passage. I will leave it with you all, praying that each of us will be blessed this Advent season with a deep knowledge, and an earnest admission of our reliance on the Divine.

“My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

Sunday, December 19

Revelation 14:13-15:4

The Rev. Christopher Samsom
North Peace Parish, Diocese of Caledonia

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.'

Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, 'Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.' So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.' So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

‘Great and amazing are your deeds,

Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways,

King of the nations!

Lord, who will not fear

and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come

and worship before you,

for your judgements have been revealed.’

~

This passage begins with words that The Book of Common Prayer has us recite at every funeral, “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, even so says the Spirit for they rest from their labours.” In death our works are done, and we can finally and wholly wait for the coming of the Lord. To follow Jesus is to lay our lives down before him until we are laid in the grave in the trustworthy hope that he will raise us up on higher at the resurrection.

We are being fashioned into saints. That is what we are working at in this devotional right, becoming saints? To be made a saint is to come to a place where we can both tremble and cling to God for mercy while also praising him with our whole hearts for the coming of his just wrath. There is a real tension here. God is great because he comforts us in our sorrow, because he is tender to the vulnerable, because he loves the unjust (sinners) enough to eat and drink with him and adopt us as his children. He is mercy. And yet this fellowship is bought in blood. This real tension between the mercy and justice of God is irreconcilable without the power of Jesus on the cross, in whom justice and peace kiss each other, the wrath of God is satisfied, and our humanity is taken up into God’s holiness.

In becoming followers of Jesus we are learning to call upon God to deliver this world from the occupation of sin and the devil. Even from our baptism we begin this, by repenting, by renouncing Satan, the flesh and the vain pomp and glory of the world, a world we know

is passing away. The image we hear in this passage is gory and terrible. Look at it, for the same Jesus who took the children up in his arms and blessed them is the one you see here, behold him revealed and be sanctified by it. See Jesus riding on a cloud, crowned and ready for the harvest, striking down the peoples and the nations and the whole earth. See him cause our blood to pour from us and rise and pool together like a great sea.

See this and learn with the saints who have gone before you to sing songs of deliverance. There are real evils in this world that can only be overcome in the end by God's justice, by the pouring out of our lives as we know them. The passing of evil and the coming reign of our rightful King Is cause for celebration. I would encourage you to say the next sentence out loud. "Great and marvelous are God's deeds, just are true are his ways, his name is to be feared, we are to behold and praise his justice."

Monday, December 20

Mark 10:32-end

The Most Rev. Linda Nicholls

Archbishop & Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so

among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

~

Here, in these three vignettes in the life of Jesus, we see the cost of discipleship and human responses that continue to echo in our time, especially in Advent. After almost three years with the disciples, teaching and witnessing to a way of living God's love and compassion, Jesus is preparing them for the cost of that discipleship. For a third time he predicts the cost will be his life with a promise of resurrection. It does seem paradoxical that extending the love of God, fulfilling the law with grace and compassion, would invoke such violent responses.

Yet we see it happen around us today. When systems, institutions and people invest in the certainty of a particular framework for life and reject all other ways to see or to live it, they react strongly. We see advocates for human rights and justice jailed, imprisoned, tortured and killed because they have dared to cry out for their people. Even the Church struggles when we are called to look at the effects of our ways of living the gospel. The work of reconciliation with Indigenous people and the dismantling of racism are met at times with denial and rejection.

After such a powerful statement by Jesus, for the third time, it is jarring to hear James and John approach Jesus with their request. It is as if they are truly unable to comprehend the costs ahead of them and can only see the possibility of power and status as they ask to be

seated at the right and left of Jesus. Whether the other disciples do see the irony, or are simply annoyed that James and John are asking for what they might have wanted, Jesus is remarkably gentle in his response. He draws them in to see that his life and ministry is about servanthood, not about power.

In contrast the final vignette shows us Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Somehow he has heard Jesus is a healer and a Son of God – a title of intimacy with God. Even when the crowd, including the disciples, try to shush him he cries out louder. Jesus invites the very crowd, who did not want this disturbance, to be the ones to bring him forward. He asks the same question of Bartimaeus that he asked the disciples – ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Bartimaeus asks for sight. After the blindness of the disciples to the call to servanthood there is the intimation that this sight is more than physical.

Bartimaeus leaps up to meet Jesus – leaving behind his cloak, likely his only possession – and when his sight has been restored, he follows Jesus, whose very next steps in Mark’s gospel are into Holy Week. Where the disciples saw only dimly what discipleship might cost, Bartimaeus left everything to follow Jesus.

Advent invites us to prepare for the fullness of God’s reign, not yet realized, alongside the seeds of that reign planted in the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah and Mary and Joseph through John the Baptist and Jesus. Our discipleship is part of a long trajectory between the birth of John and Jesus and that coming fullness of God’s reign. Will it be a discipleship desiring a life of privilege and status or willing to see with the eyes of Christ and serve as Christ served, even if it costs everything? Mark leaves this question suspended over these three vignettes as key questions for every disciple in every age.

Tuesday, December 21

John 14:1-7

The Rt. Rev. Joey Royal
Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of the Arctic

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

~

We’re at a dramatic moment in John’s Gospel. Jesus has eaten his last supper, washed his disciples’ feet, announced (quietly) Judas’s betrayal, predicted Peter’s denial and announced that he is going where they cannot follow. Not yet anyway.

The disciples are rattled, but Jesus comforts them. He meets them in their fear and uncertainty, just as he’s met countless others since.

First, he urges them to believe in God *and* in him. Of course, those are not different options. They’re the same option. But there’s always the temptation to imagine a *different* way to God, one that bypasses suffering, one that bypasses the cross. But there is no other way. If

they were why would anyone choose the way of the cross? The good news here is that our suffering, which is to say our *lives*, can be a participation in Christ's own suffering and a journey towards God. Believe in God *and* in Jesus. Same thing.

Second, he tells them something about the destination. For Jesus the direction is always toward God the Father. God is where he comes from, and God is his destination. That means God is *our* destination too if he is our "way." Jesus speaks of his Father's house, which has many rooms, and that he's going to prepare a place for us. Why worry about the troubles of this world when the joys of heaven await? There is an "otherworldliness" to Christianity that nevertheless grounds us in the reality of the present, all the while recognizing its transient nature.

Then this: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Jesus is the *way* to God. It's not that he will show you the way to the Father. He *is* it. Have you lost your way? Find it in Jesus. Are you worried about following God's will? If you're with Jesus, you are in God's will. Jesus will take you to God. Are you suffering and feeling like God has abandoned you? He hasn't. Connect your pain with the cross of Christ.

Jesus is the *truth*. Do you want God's truth? It's not always easy to take. It might unravel you and drastically reorder your priorities. It will not make you popular, or successful by any worldly measure. It can be painful. There is an elaborate kingdom of darkness all around you conspiring against the truth. But the truth will be victorious. That we know with certainty.

Jesus is the *life*. We live in a culture of death. We're surrounded by dead and dying things. But all that Jesus touches he restores to life. Even our dying, if we die "in Christ", is a doorway to life. With Jesus we go deep in the darkness of death and out the other side in the fullness of everlasting life.

Jesus will take you to the Father. It's the only direction he travels. That means if you travel with him, he will take you there as well. Thanks be to God.

Wednesday, December 22

Mark 11:27-12:12

The Very Rev. Alexandra Meek
Dean of All Saints' Cathedral, Diocese of Edmonton

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be

ours.” So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes”?’

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

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“I will ask you one question. Answer me.” In our reading today, Jesus is unwilling to answer questions from those who will not submit to being questioned themselves. He will not engage in a charade of a conversation. We meet Jesus and his disciples in the Temple, when he is asked about the nature of his authority by the priests, scribes and the elders. This is a trap, but Jesus can see the game that is being played and answers their question with a question of his own, in an attempt to make the conversation a bit more honest. When the authorities refuse to answer Jesus, he refuses to answer them and offers instead the parable of the vineyard.

The parable is allegorical, but also set into a very relatable story line for those listening in the first century, when tensions between tenants and absentee landlords was a growing concern.¹ In the parable Jesus alludes to the greed of the ruling class, echoing the vineyard language in Isaiah 5, but specifically calls out the attempts of the tenants to make what is the landlord’s, their own. The allegory concludes with the beloved son, a term already used for Jesus in the gospel of Mark, being killed and tossed aside in an attempt by the tenants to take control of the land that does not belong to them. In this allegory the question of authority is answered with a very clear emphasis on the fact that those who have been claiming it, have none.

This passage begins and ends with the priests, scribes, and elders unwilling to approach Jesus honestly. Their desire to maintain their place of power over the people keeps them from speaking and, as a

¹ See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* Orbis Books 1998,2008

result, from engaging with Jesus over their questions. Jesus will not play their games and so they leave angry and without resolution.

In this season of Advent as we anticipate again the birth of Jesus, God incarnate, I wonder if we can read this passage asking a devotional question: Am I willing to engage with Jesus and answer the questions that he asks?

I wonder how differently this interaction between Jesus and the leaders would have been if they had clearly spoken their fears and their concerns about all of it – John the Baptist, the miracles, the law and authority – and let Jesus answer instead of attempting to play games of control? We all have questions that we ask of God (some of those questions are more honest than others), but when we ask and Jesus responds to us with a question of his own, are we willing to stop and answer? Are we willing to engage with Jesus in truth? I think if we could, we would be amazed by the God who meets us in that vulnerability.

Thursday, December 23

Mark 12:13-34

The Rev. James Liu

The Cathedral Church of St. James, Diocese of Toronto

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?’ But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, ‘Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.’ And they brought one. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they were utterly amazed at him.

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they

rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.’

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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It is not uncommon to treat these scriptures as a topic regarding the relationship between politics and theology, often with the emphasis on politics. The politics that we are naturally drawn to is one of power and influence. We want to follow a figure who can offer us this and make good on his or her promises.

Picture the story before us today, imagine yourself in the scene. The Bible says, “Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap Jesus in what he said.” Pharisees are the religious leaders who consider themselves more righteous than others. Herodians are the representatives of the party in power, who think they represent the people. And these two groups of people don’t get along usually. They are cooperating with each other here only in an attempt to try to set Jesus up. Their intent is malicious.

They start things off with a bang, a delicate question about the tax. Picture this, someone holds up a coin and asks aloud whose image is on it? Of course the emperor’s. And this image on the coin represents the pinnacle of their desire for power, riches, and

influence. Jesus replies, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Caesar's image and all that it represents is the ultimate pursuit of a lot of people. However, Christians are called to follow after the image of God himself.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, the great festival of Christ's incarnation. The Incarnation means that God has a human face. God is not a supreme being that sits on high, not caring, not approachable. On the contrary, God entered our infirmities, he walked in our shoes, and ate the bread of our bitterness and sorrow. Christ is the seal of our Christian life. Exalt Christ, not Caesar.

The image of Caesar on the coin is a dream that a lot of people are following. May we Christians, however, see the seal of God that is imprinted on our heart. May we let Christ grow in our heart, live out the incarnation in this world and make Christ seen.

Friday, December 24

Mark 12:35-13:13

The Rev. Canon Dr. David D. Butorac
The Cathedral Church of St Alban the Martyr,
Diocese of Saskatchewan

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet.’ ”

David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

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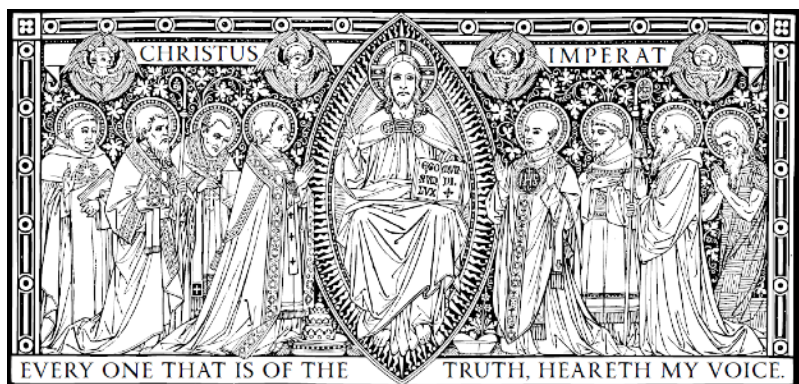
As Advent reaches its end and we slouch towards Bethlehem, Jesus presents the scribes and us with a puzzle, as much intellectual as it bears on every fibre of our life. He refers to a Psalm (110:1) which simply does not make sense if time is to run in a straight line and if family lineage proceeds in a similar fashion and if power is simply top down.

Jesus asks the scribes how it can be that the Messiah can be David's son, if David refers to his Lord, someone superior and presumably older than him. Older and younger at the same time? What do you make of that, Pharisees? That Jesus trolled the scribes is comforting on its own. And yet the man mocking those who would not be mocked is he who is the pivot that smashes all assumptions and presumptions including, notably and foremost, our own. Maybe how we look at the world needs to be overturned, again and again?

Advent points, in part, to this great demolition, where not one stone of our pride will be left on another: the Creator becomes creation, the eternal God born in the bleak mid-winter, the King, with no room at the motel, born in a shed, 'Immensity cloistered' in the womb of a girl in her early teens, wailing after he takes his first breath, expelling amniotic fluid. We forget how radically strange the basics of Christianity are. But if we come again to this beginning, we might understand why David's Psalm isn't as much a puzzle as it seems, at first, it is: the impossible has happened and what our heart has longed for has come true: 'the hopes and fears of all the years / are met in thee tonight.'

This whole passage cashes out in Jesus' observations about how the rich tithe and what it means that that poor woman gives her last few coins. Most translations, not incorrectly, say that she gave 'all that she had' or some such. But the Greek is more suggestive: more literally, she gave 'her whole life' (12:44). Once you begin to come to terms with your own airs and presumptions and return to the utter strangeness of the Nativity that Advent points to, the birth of Jesus requires this alone: your whole life. Not bits and pieces of our ample neuroses and vanities. From our poverty of spirit, we offer only what we have: all that we are. Stripped and bare, naked and weak, what else are we? The Christ comes in such pathetic majesty and came to give his whole life. Our rebirth comes through following this soon-to-be newborn.

In our secular temper, we can gawk at marvels of wealth (13:1) and wonder aloud on social media about injustices that are harbingers of evil tidings (13:4). But Jesus points us inward: "Look to your own selves" (13:9). It is there, and there alone, that he will "cast out our sin and enter in / be born in us today".



O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other,
mightily and sweetly ordering all things:
Come and teach us the way of prudence.

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths,
to you the nations will make their prayer:
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;
you open and no one can shut;
you shut and no one can open:
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O Morning Star,
splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O King of the nations, and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race,
which you fashioned from clay.

O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.