



2012

Advent

Daily Devotions



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We also thank each of our contributors.

December 2, 2012

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:11-14

When we hear the words, “Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep,” the way we feel about them differs greatly from individual to individual. Being a morning person, even more so now that I have two small children, the morning has always been a good time for me. The whole day waits with a world of possibility in front of me. For those who are night owls, the idea of waking up may be more burdensome and difficult. This concept of waking up has both literal and figurative connotations for our lives as believers. Literally, each day we wake up finds us one day closer to our destination of the Kingdom eternal. In a more spiritual sense, we “wake up” every time we come across a new understanding or any time God is revealed to us in a new way. I think Advent is beautiful embodiment of this “wake up” mindset because each year we must acknowledge that we are another step closer to the “new heaven and new earth” God has promised, yet we also must come to a new understanding for what God is calling us to be in the here and now to a hurting world.

Holy God, may this Advent season be a time in which we wake up and become the people of light that you would have us to be. Amen.

Brad Gray
St. Andrews UMC, Charleston

December 3, 2012

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge--even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you--so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord .

Corinthians 1:3-9

The Corinthian church has developed an unhealthy obsession with who's got what spiritual gift. The result is that worship services have turned into contests (traditional/contemporary, anyone?) and fellowship meals into competitions (who sits with the cool crowd?). Knowing this, there are three things about Paul's introduction that call our attention.

First, Paul tells the people in Corinth how he thanks God for them. This is an important move. The people in Corinth need to know that the one addressing (and later correcting) them is someone who loves them dearly.

Second, Paul proceeds to tell them *why* he loves them. Because *grace has been given* them. Because they *have been enriched*. Because the testimony of Christ *was confirmed* in them. All of these constructions have one thing in common: the passive voice. For those of us who haven't studied grammar since 8th grade, the passive voice makes the subject (in this case the Corinthians) *the recipient* of the verb's action. In other words, Paul is thankful not for what the Corinthians *themselves* have done, but for what *God* has done for them. Paul is modeling for us the proper way to talk about our common life--if our graces and riches and confirmations are the result of God's actions and not ours, none of us can get "puffed up" about our own abilities.

Third, Paul brings up a key term that will reappear in the rest of the letter. He notes that the Corinthians are not lacking in any *spiritual gifts* (*Greek = charismata*). This is the lynchpin of the argument Paul will make throughout the letter: the church in Corinth has every spiritual gift necessary for sustaining their common life until Jesus shows up among them again. They don't have to compete, choose sides, strive or strain or struggle. Grace has *already* been given. They have *already* been enriched. The testimony of Christ has *already* been confirmed in them. Because "God is faithful," Paul concludes in verse 9 (once again in the passive voice); "You *were called* into the fellowship of his Son." *Given, enriched, confirmed, called.* That's our story. Paul invites us to stick to it.

God, help us remember that our work and worship, our lives and livelihoods, our ideas and efforts, are the outcomes of your grace. Sustain us to the end, we pray, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Chris Barrett
St. James UMC, Spartanburg



December 4, 2012

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Watch therefore--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning--lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

Mark 13:33-37

There have been several times that my daughter Sarah and her best friend play together when it gets a little too quiet. I have found it to be the case when it is too quiet, they are up to no good. When it gets "too quiet," I go and take a look to make sure they don't get into too much trouble. Most times I am right; they are doing something that they are not supposed to do. Recently as I have been quietly walking to where they are, I hear one telling the other to "keep watch." Who are they keeping watch for? They are keeping watch for me because I have quietly and unexpectedly walked in on their fun and games. As I reflect on them playing and doing this, I think that just about everyone has done this as a child, and our parents knew when it was "too quiet" that we were up to something as well. And we, too, told our friends to be on the lookout.

The Gospel of Mark tells us to be on the lookout, to keep watch, be alert, be on guard: "You do not know when that time will come." The season of Advent is a joyous time for many. We fill our time with parties, decorating our houses, prepping for Christmas, and spending time with families and friends. Memories of years past are brought to our attention by the sentiment of the season. Decorations abound and many a manger scene with the focus on baby Jesus. Be mindful that the season of Advent has a dual meaning. We look forward to the coming of the Christ. We seem to focus, however, on the first coming of Christ as a child, but forget that he promised to return once again: "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come." As we get caught up in the season of Advent

with all the preparations, let us not forget to prepare ourselves as well. Let us live our lives as though we are prepared for his coming at any moment.

Most gracious God, in the busyness of this present age, help us to be alert, to be on guard, and be prepared for that glorious day when Jesus shall return once again. Amen.

Chris Lollis
Augusta Road UMC, Piedmont



December 5, 2012

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

Have you ever stepped into a room that is wrapped in total darkness? Your eyes struggle to focus on something, anything. Your heart beats a little faster, and you nervously slap your hand against the walls in a desperate search for the familiar feel of the light switch. Thoughts can race through your mind: Am I going to trip over something? Am I going to knock something over? Is someone here? Did I just hear a noise?

Then you find that switch, you flip it up, and the lights come on! The room instantly floods with light, and the darkness is defeated and gone. When your eyes adjust, you realize that things are much better now.

The world seemed that way before Jesus' arrival. Darkness extended across so many levels, and things seemed so desperate and broken. For decades, people had prayed for a savior, a messiah, a light in the darkness.

Then God shines the light of Christ into the darkness of the world. Jesus is our light that brings life and hope to all. The light of Christ shines brighter than the darkest days and moments we will ever experience in our lives.

At first, many might not have known the impact of the switch that God flipped that night, but as more and more eyes began to adjust, many started to realize that things will never be the same again. Light has come to defeat the darkness.

God, as we live in a world that sometimes seems so dark, help us to shine with your light. Amen.

**Dean Lollis
Wightman UMC, Prosperity**

December 6, 2012

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.

John 1:6-9

While on vacation at Hilton Head Island, my friend and I left the beach at sunset on our bicycles headed back to our rented condo. We made a wrong turn and found ourselves lost on pitch dark streets. As cars passed, we took advantage of their headlights to progress a few yards. The light from my cell phone was not enough to help us. Reluctantly, I called my husband to come rescue us. "Where are you?" he asked. "I don't know," I said. "We are at the corner of two streets somewhere between the beach and the condo." Soon enough we found our way back by the headlights of his car. We know what it means to experience darkness. We feel helpless, lost and afraid. John's Gospel frequently speaks theologically of spiritual darkness and light. Today's lesson teaches that Jesus, the true light, enlightens everyone. When we feel helpless, lost and afraid and don't know where we are, the light of Christ shines sometimes very brightly and sometimes just enough that we can progress a little farther. We already have the light we need to guide us on our journey. The light of God is within us. Like the man named John, we are called to testify about this light.

*God of light and darkness, guide me today in all that is before me.
Amen.*

Debra Griffis Woodberry
Disciples UMC, Greenville

December 7, 2012

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

Jeremiah 33:14-16

I remember when we were wanting so desperately to be parents. We had tried everything, and nothing worked. The doctors had tried many things that would in hopes help, but in the end, the results were always the same. Not pregnant. We felt all was lost, and maybe God's plans did not include children to be a part of our family makeup. I desperately cried out to God to give me the desires of my heart, to give us a child that we could love and complete our family. I wondered many times why God was not blessing us with a child. After all, we were both very devoted Christians and in ministry together. Then I was reminded of this scripture. While I could not see God's plans for our lives and our family he knew exactly what he was doing. Through some friend we met at church, we decided to explore the opportunity of adoption.

In this scripture the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. To a people devastated by loss, Jeremiah's prophecy offered hope: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (33:14). All might seem lost, but God still is faithful. The house of David might be cut down, but God is able to bring life out of death. Such is the word of promise and hope.

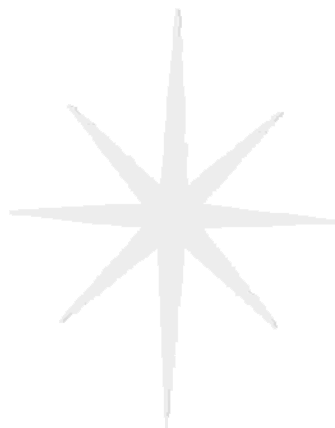
A righteous Branch will spring up. This word of tenacious hope is spoken to counteract all of the life-sapping, despair-inducing evidence to the contrary. And that is its power.

The same proclamation is given today to us, inheritors of Jeremiah's task. We are called to speak a word of hope and promise

in a world often filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair. Especially in this season of Advent, we speak words of hope. In the midst of darkness, light is about to break in. In the midst of despair, hope erupts. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

We realized that in our process of adoption, we had to wait on God's promises to happen, for him to go before us and prepare the way and the womb for our child. And while the waiting was difficult, we still had hope, and we still had faith, and we believed in God's promises to us. Then on July 19, 2005, at 7:20 pm they laid this beautiful, healthy baby in my arms and in that instant I knew that God's promises had come true. He did hear us, and our faith had brought us through.

Donna Lollis
Francis Asbury UMC, Greenville



December 8, 2012

*The sun shall be no more your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night;
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.
Your people shall all be righteous;
they shall possess the land for ever,
the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands,
that I might be glorified.
The least one shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the LORD;
in its time I will hasten it.*

Isaiah 60:19-22

The sun has gone down.
The moon has drawn away, shadows shrouding her light.
Your spirit groans within you.
How long, O Lord, must I wait?

Your grown daughter's marriage is crumbling around her; and you
are as helpless as you used to be when she was teased to broken-
hearted tears in grade school.
How long, O Lord?

Our cancer has come back, implacable and deadly, and you have no
bravery left for this next round of the fight.
How long, O Lord?

You can't feel love for your spouse any more, and you're so afraid
that the rest of your life is going to look like this, a series of days
endured and passions killed, until you are walking dead as well.
How long?

All these griefs and doubts and hurts, all these and more wrestle within you, against the backdrop of suffering writ large across the universe: foster children who will never find a family; little ones prostituted and sold into slavery; rivers and skies streaked black with waste growing deadly in the bloodstreams and lungs of their people; baby bellies swollen with worms; bellies swollen differently with too much empty food; loneliness and poverty and Alzheimer's and floods and earthquakes and genocides.
It is too much. We cannot live without the light. How long, O Lord, must we wait?

A promise, this Advent, this Coming.
God says: Yes, it is too much. No, you cannot live without the Light. Child, I will not make you wait for always.
The Light is coming.
And in the Light, you will be righteous – right-with-God-ness welling up in you like living water.
And in the Light, the smallest among you will not be lonely or abandoned, but will be in the loving center of a people.
And in the Light, your time of mourning will be over.
In the right time, I will hurry to you.
I Am coming.
Don't lose heart – see, I am on My Way.

God, in this present darkness, give us strength to endure until the Light returns. Amen.

**Elise Erikson Barrett
St. James UMC, Spartanburg**

December 9, 2012

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

*"Therefore I will praise thee among the Gentiles,
and sing to thy name";*

and again it is said,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";

and again,

*"Praise the Lord, all Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";*

and further Isaiah says,

*"The root of Jesse shall come,
he who rises to rule the Gentiles;*

in him shall the Gentiles hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Romans 15:4-13

As we journey towards the manger this Advent season, we read God's word. But why? Romans 15 says because God's word gives us *hope*. Our world seems to produce division, fear, and despair. However, God's word generates hope for harmony, unity, and peace. But some of us ask, where is the harmony, unity, and peace in the hustle and bustle of everyday life? The whole point of Advent is to be prepared for the coming of the Christ Child once again into our lives and into the world. Jesus Christ is the example of hope and

how we received hope. So this Advent, we are called to read God's word and respond to its call to live in harmony and welcome one another. As we prepare to welcome the Christ Child, how are we witnesses of God's word, bringing harmony to the world? Maybe we live into the hope that the Christ Child brings by sharing Christ's peace in the busyness of everyday life – at the grocery store, at work, and in traffic. If we simply took a deep breath and shared God's peace with one another, do you think we would begin to find harmony at least in our communities? For others of us, maybe instead of having private Christmas parties, we welcome one another, especially those who are hungry and cold, into our places of fellowship and worship in order to welcome all of God's children. No matter how we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child, the Gospel is clear: come Christmas morning, there is hope for all who inhabit this earth.

God bring us hope in the midst of the busyness of today. Help us find time to join with others in glorifying your name and welcoming all to fellowship at your table. Amen.

**Emily Scales Sutton
Bethel UMC, Rock Hill
Philadelphia UMC, York**



December 10, 2012

*Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill and
to thy dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

Psalm 43:3-6

Our lives have so many distractions, the bells & whistles, parties & presents, stresses & strains, discouragement and despair. It is so easy for each of us to get caught up in all of our surroundings and then allow our circumstances to dictate our emotions and focus. We feel like we are swimming upstream, and the current can be so strong that we become exhausted; then we are just going with the flow. Life comes at us fast and then picks up the pace between Thanksgiving and Christmas. All too often I hear people say, “*I can’t wait for Christmas to be over!*” Sadly, the holiday season leaves us empty and unfulfilled; darkness and depression looms everywhere it seems.

Advent is a time to anchor ourselves and our lives in Jesus Christ. By following the path that God lays out before us, we can make our journey to the manger. We can experience, with eager expectation, all of the true riches of a joyous Christmas encounter. When we consciously set our hearts and minds on prayer and quiet reflection, our hands and feet will slow down. We find ourselves drawing closer to God instead of running the rat race.

Sharing hope in Christ and help through scripture is the greatest gift. It is amazing that we are about to open God's gift for us!

Dear Heavenly Father, today slow my soul, and cast your light so I might see the true gift of Jesus! Amen

Joel Shaw
Spread the WORD Ministries, Greenville



December 11, 2012

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me,
uttering slanders against me,
my adversaries and foes,
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though a host encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.*

*One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.*

Psalm 27:1-4

A favorite Christmas hymn of mine is "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" (check out the versions by Casting Crowns and Jars of Clay for my favorites). This is not your typical, holly jolly Christmas song:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day,
their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet, the words repeat
of peace on earth, goodwill to men.*

*But in despair I bowed my head,
there is no peace on earth I said,
for hate is strong and mocks the song,
of peace on earth, goodwill to men.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote these words on Christmas Day in 1863, after learning of his son being wounded in the Civil War. Just two

years prior, Longfellow had suffered the tragic death of his wife and now, hearing of his son's injury, he penned the words that screamed out from his suffering soul: there is no peace on earth, despite what the Christmas bells proclaim.

Today these words of anguish still ring true, as do the words of the psalmist: evildoers still assail us, adversaries utter slanderous words, wars rise up against us, literally and figuratively.

But Longfellow went on:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,
God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
with peace on earth, goodwill to men.*

In the midst of devastating grief and brutality on that Christmas morning long ago, Longfellow refused to let heartbreak have the final say, for he knew what the psalmist knew and what we also know: God is not dead, nor does he sleep. God is our light, our salvation, our stronghold; a God whose light shines in a darkness that cannot overcome it; a God who offers beauty and hope in the midst of heartbreak. Whom, or what, shall we fear?

*Then ringing, singing on its way,
the world revolved from night to day.
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
of peace on earth, goodwill to men.*

May the bells keep ringing. Amen.

**Jonathan Tompkins
First UMC, Myrtle Beach**

December 12, 2012

*Thy word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe thy righteous ordinances.*

Psalm 119:105-106

For over 20 years, I have gotten a flashlight for Christmas. My father-in-law puts one in my stocking. Flashlights of all sizes and colors have been hidden there. I have gotten an infrared flashlight and a solar powered one. I have received flashlights that could guide planes at the airport. Yet, as much as I have joked about these flashlights, they have been helpful. When my sons were young and the electricity was lost during a thunderstorm, those bright flashlights comforted scared little boys. Long before dawn, my stocking stuffer illuminated a path to my study.

The psalmist in today's reading experienced a dark time in life that no torch could brighten. We all have times of such darkness; it is marked not by the absence of light from our eyes, but the diminishment of hope from our lives. Sometimes the darkness is a momentary loss of life's direction. At other times the darkness is endless, empty and depressing. We need a light for our dark times.

The psalmist finds solace in God's word. It was a lamp for the moment and a light for life's journey. God's word tells us we are never alone in our darkness. We recall that by the covenants and disciplines of the law we are in relationship with God who commanded light to appear in the formless, shapeless void at creation's start. John's Gospel reminds us the light has come into the world, and no darkness can extinguish it. God's word shows us the bright light of eternal love.

Lord, may your word be a lamp before my feet, and a light for my journey. Amen.

**Joseph James
Cayce UMC, Cayce**

December 13, 2012

Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." When Jesus had said this, he departed and hid himself from them.

John 12:35-36

U2 singer, Bono, tells how Advent struck him for the first time one Christmas:

"...if there is a force of Love and Logic in the universe, that it would seek to explain itself is amazing enough. That it would seek to explain itself and describe itself by becoming a child born in straw poverty, in shit and straw... a child... I just thought: 'Wow!' Just the poetry... Unknowable love, unknowable power, describes itself as the most vulnerable."

When the arrival of God-in-the-flesh in Jesus really sinks in like this, it's beautiful and awful, humbling and comforting. It makes perfect sense.

Except when we feel like we can't make sense out of it. Or, when we decide we have too much sense to be drawn in by such a thing. Or, when far more "sensible" things occupy our attention instead.

Likewise, those with Jesus in Jerusalem had probably had moments when they were on the verge of being totally blown away by it all. They had overheard his birth story, or witnessed his teaching or healings, and felt something. But still there was confusion about his identity, what he was saying/doing, and whether he was worth following.

Jesus answers here with simplicity, as I hear it -- "The sun is nearly set. Now is the time for one thing: walk with me. Believe in me." He promises that doing so will change one's very nature.

This Advent, simply, who of us would become a child of light in Christ Jesus?

Lord, let us exalt an urgent hope over our rationality and preoccupations. Amen.

**Josh McClendon
Shandon UMC, Columbia**

December 14, 2012

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it is said,

*"Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ shall give you light."*

Ephesians 5:6-14

As a youth minister, one of the biggest challenges I see Christian youth face is how to respond when their peers do something wrong. I'd like to believe that if a student brought alcohol on a trip, stole something at a convenience store stop, or sneaked out with others to smoke cigarettes that someone in our youth group would clue me in on the misbehavior. Fat chance. The reputation for being a snitch overpowers "exposing" the "works of darkness." I encourage my youth to look at it this way: "Youth who are willing to break our behavior covenant on trips are being selfish and unloving towards the others in our group. They are putting themselves and the rest of us at risk, and they aren't worthy of being protected by your silence. I need you to love everyone else in our group enough to tell me when someone is not loving us."

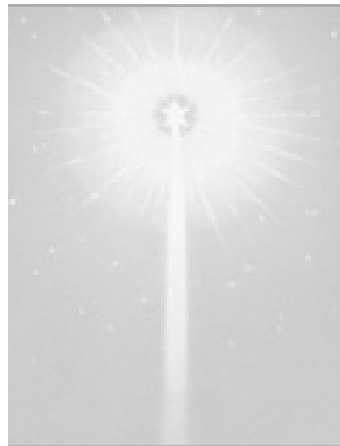
This is just as challenging for adult Christians. We see others treated unfairly. We hear racist and sexist jokes. We witness the impact of war and poverty around the world and in our own communities. The world can be a very dark place.

During Advent, we are reminded that the light of Christ came into the world. As Christians, we bear the light of Christ in the world

today. We are the ones called to expose the wrongs being done by individuals and institutions. Do we?

*Emmanuel, give us strength, give us determination to expose cruelty, apathy, and unjustness wherever we see it; may we be forces of goodness, purity, and love, as we bring your light to the world.
Amen*

**Karen Kluever
Woodland UMC, Rock Hill**



December 15, 2012

and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in scripture:

*"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and he who believes in him
will not be put to shame."*

To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe,

*"The very stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner,"*

and

*"A stone that will make men stumble,
a rock that will make them fall";*

for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:5-9

We church folk can relate to cornerstones. Many of us have lived through a building program in the church and can now tell the story of stepping out in faith to expand the church facilities in order to accommodate new people and new ministries.

This scripture speaks of Jesus as the cornerstone and challenges his followers to be "living stones...built into a spiritual house." What is a living stone and why should I be one?

I pass by several churches on the way to work. Each one says something to the surrounding community about who God is by virtue of existing. What message are they sending to their communities?

Do the people walking by think of God as present and engaged in the community? As living within a fortress? Or as the great clockmaker watching what he has set in motion?

As a child I loved to sing,
The church is not a building;
The church is not a steeple;
The church is not a resting place;
The church is the people.

I am the church.
You are the church.
We are the church together.
All who follow Jesus, all around the world,
Yes, we're the church together.

First Peter tells us, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of his darkness into his marvelous light." What wonderful deeds of God can you share with a hurting world?

Remind us, O God, that we and not our buildings are your church. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Kathy James
SC Conference Director of Connectional Ministries
Columbia



December 16, 2012

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the
peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

Isaiah 60:1-3

As I read this passage, the phrase “Arise, shine; for your light has come” stood out to me. What does that phrase mean, and how does it apply to our lives this Advent season? Before we answer the question, let us focus on the scripture. The three verses in Isaiah give us hope. We receive hope because the prophet is proclaiming the promise that Christ our Lord is coming. As children of God, we do not have to fear the darkness that covers the earth and is in our lives. We can live in hope knowing that Christ our Lord is coming and Christ our Lord will fill our lives with glory. Rather than being overcome with the difficult times in each of our lives, this passage reminds us of the light of Christ, which is our hope. Let us go back to our question of how the phrase “Arise, shine; for your light has come” applies to our lives this Advent season. The phrase applies to each of our lives because it reminds us that we have hope since the light of Christ has come. We are called to receive the hope of Christ and share that light, the hope of Christ, with all people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may we be faithful this day to arise and shine the light of Christ through our thoughts, words, and actions.

*Thank you God for the gift of Christ who is our light and hope.
Empower us to arise and shine the good news of Christ each moment.
Amen.*

**Laura Bratton
Laurens Road UMC, Greenville**

December 17, 2012

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

Every year as we approach the shortest days and the longest nights of the calendar, I yearn for more sunlight! Darkness really does have a way of affecting the soul. I remember going on a UMYF retreat in high school where we went spelunking (you know, climbing around in dark tight caverns). We reached a large open room deep in the belly of the cave, and the guide asked us to turn out our headlamps. The darkness was oppressive. I could not see my fingers in front of my face. And even though I knew that there was no danger, I was scared. At just about the point when I didn't think that I would be able to take it any longer, the guide pushed the indiglo button on her watch. That tiny green light lit up the entire cavern. I could clearly see the faces of every person in that room by that small, seemingly insignificant light.

There is much darkness in our world, in our communities, our churches, our lives, and in our very own hearts. The darkness of sin and death that we are daily faced with can be oppressive. Yet a light shines in the darkness. All we have to do is take the time to lift up the light higher than our own darkness, or as it says in 2 Corinthians 4:5, preach Christ and not ourselves. God says, "Let light shine out of darkness." At times when your faith feels small and your light miniscule, remember that even the smallest amount of light overcomes the darkest dark. Hold fast to the light that has been given to you through your Savior Jesus Christ. Let Christ shine in your hearts and in the world. And watch the darkness flee!

Radiant God, give us the strength to allow the light of your Son Jesus Christ to shine. For we know that wherever that light shines it will overcome the darkness. We ask this through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Megan Gray
Cokesbury UMC, Charleston

December 18, 2012

And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:4-7

In the last few years of her life, my grandmother kept a flashlight by her bed. To everyone else, this seemed like a prudent thing to do, especially if the power went out and she was left to fumble through the darkness. Yet because I lived with her during that time, I knew the real reason: though she did not realize she had Alzheimer's disease, my Granny knew something was terribly wrong with her memory because sometimes when she woke up in the middle of the night, she couldn't even remember where or how to turn the overhead lights on. It wasn't, she told me, that she was afraid of the darkness, but rather, she knew there was less chance of her stumbling, or falling, or getting hurt, or even getting lost in her own home if she had light.

Years after I watched my sweet grandmother forget everything and everyone she knew, I came to realize how profoundly theological her words were. She knew that in the light, there was less chance of her stumbling, falling, getting hurt, or getting lost. Frankly, that's good, solid, Christian advice—especially here in the midst of Advent. There is less chance of any of us stumbling, falling, getting hurt, or getting lost in the darkness of sin if we would but walk in the Light, the light of Jesus the Christ.

Almighty God, grant that we may always walk in the light of your Son Jesus, the Light of the world. Amen.

**Mike Smith
St. Luke UMC, Hartsville**

December 19, 2012

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

John 3:16-21

Two years ago, while attending a conference, I was challenged to sponsor a child through Compassion International. I quickly did the math before responding. The cost was too much, I figured. As the presenter continued, my heart and mind began to change. Too much? Really? I raised my hand to the usher, who approached to offer me an envelope. I became the sponsor to Victoria! I was looking at the provided photo when I noticed Victoria's date of birth, December 19th. I smiled at the realization that Victoria shared the same birthday as my mother. I felt a sense of peace about the situation. Last year I returned to the same conference. Again, we were challenged to sponsor a child. "I did that last year," I told myself. At the end of the presentation, the speaker informed the audience that a child's information had been included in the "conference material." I reached into the bag. I grabbed the envelope. Immediately I looked at the date of birth and I thought, "Oh, come on!" The child's birthday was December 19th. Too much? Really? And, I carried the envelope home.

While life is enigmatic, it is a precious gift that God has given. Unfortunately, it is too easy to overlook this blessing. It is too easy to overlook God's gift. It is unfortunate, as well, that these verses have become familiar to us. They are equally puzzling, and yet, the familiarity makes it easy to overlook the blessing of God's gift given in his Son. This year can be different! Remember that Christmas is a time to celebrate the gift of life! God sent his Son *so that* those who knew him would have eternal life. Having received this blessing of God, be encouraged to share it with others!

**Ross Chellis
Hampton UMC, Hampton
Varnville UMC, Varnville**

December 20, 2012

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

*A voice says, "Cry!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"*

*All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people is grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion,
herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

*Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

Isaiah 40:1-11

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings.” God is doing something new. The condemnation and exile of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah have given way to comfort and a new word of hope. “Behold, the Lord God comes with might.” The exile is ending; God’s people are returning home.

Being home for Christmas is a dream we have long shared, even before Bing Crosby popularized it in song. But, for ancient Israel, returning home meant something even more. It meant returning to the Promised Land and recovering that great sign of God’s covenant faithfulness. It meant the sins and idolatry that caused the exile were forgiven. It was time to renew a right relationship with God. In these final days of preparation before celebrating God’s coming to us in Christ, what do we need to do to restore a right relationship with God? Do we need to spend more time in prayer or worship or Bible study or fasting? Do we need to spend more time serving those in need, knowing that as we serve them, we serve God as well?

Returning from exile also meant the restoration of community; those dispersed in exile came back together. As we welcome the Christ who calls us to be reconciled to one another, to whom do we need to grant forgiveness? From whom do we need to ask forgiveness? If we do Advent’s hard work of forgiveness, we will find the true peace of Christmas.

*Lord, this Advent, help me to deepen my relationship with you,
and help me forgive and ask for forgiveness. Amen.*

**Ryan Spurrier
St. Mark UMC, Greenwood**

December 21, 2012

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiber'i-us Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturae'a and Trachoni'tis, and Lysa'ni-as tetrarch of Abile'ne, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Ca'iaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechari'ah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

Luke 3:1-6

I love fried chicken, preferably drumsticks with the skin still on. The best chicken cook in the history of humankind is not Colonel Sanders or Paula Dean, but my great-grandmother Kirk. Kirk fried her chicken in a cast iron frying pan she received as a wedding gift in 1913. That frying pan, which now belongs to my mother, continues to fry chicken that tastes better than chicken cooked in any other pan. You could follow the same recipe, use the best organic chicken, but fry it in any other pan, and it simply will not taste the same. The difference is nearly a hundred years of chicken grease which has seasoned and prepared Kirk's pan for a specific purpose – making delicious chicken.

For far longer than a hundred years, God guided creation to the time Jesus would come into the world. God called John the Baptizer to complete the last steps and prepare Jesus' way. Origen, an early father of the church, wrote, "What way are we to prepare for the Lord?... Should not the way be prepared for the Lord within? Should not the straight and level paths be built in our hearts? This is the way by which the Word of God has entered. That Word dwells in the spaces of the human heart."¹

It has taken a century of frequent chicken frying to prepare Kirk's frying pan to function at its current level of excellence. An unused hundred year-old pan would fry chicken that tastes as if it came from a brand new pan. Kirk's pan was probably pretty good a few years into its life, but Kirk and Mom have continued to use the same pan. As it produces great chicken, it is also being prepared to make more great chicken in the future. Preparation through continual use makes the difference.

Luke reminds us that we have some preparation to do. Advent reminds us that God's work in our lives is not a one-time event. Just as the world prepared to receive Jesus in the days leading up to his birth, in Advent we prepare to receive Jesus anew in our personal and communal faith life. Even if we have received Jesus into our hearts at some point in the past, we must continue to prepare a place for him there. In so doing, we continue to experience the joy and peace that comes from living in transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.

Lord, help me to continually prepare a place for you in my heart and in my life. Amen.

Thomas Smith
New Beginnings UMC, Boiling Springs

¹Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, from *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III: Luke* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998).



December 22, 2012

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.*

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

*In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples;
him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.*

Isaiah 11:1-10

On Christmas Eve, my parents would always give me one simple instruction: “Tomorrow morning, you must wait at the foot of the stairs until we call for you.”

My sister and I would wake up early every Christmas morning and rush down to sit on that bottom step. Despite our pleas for our parents to hurry up, we could hear them slowly moving around in the other room. The smell of coffee would begin to fill the air, and the sound of Christmas music would surround us. But it seemed like an eternity as we sat there waiting on that bottom step.

As we near the end of the Advent season, we are reminded that we all are sitting on that very bottom step, waiting with eager anticipation. We are waiting for Christ to come again, waiting for peace on earth, and waiting for a child to lead us up that holy mountain where we will no longer hurt nor destroy. We are waiting for the greatest gift, which is not found in another room underneath a Christmas tree. Instead, we are waiting for Christ to bring peace and righteousness.

As you gather with family and friends this holy season, listen for the sounds of Christ preparing the world. Be on the lookout to see where the child is leading us. Allow the music to fill your hearts, and eagerly wait in anticipation for Christ to call your name.

Bless us, Heavenly Father, with hearts that eagerly wait for your return. Amen.

**Walter Cantwell
Point Hope UMC, Mt. Pleasant**



December 23, 2012

*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has cast out your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear evil no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
"Do not fear, O Zion;
let not your hands grow weak.
The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing*

Zephaniah 3:14-17

My four year-old hates the dark. When we tuck him into bed, he insists that his closet light be left on and door open. Interestingly, he's never very specific about what exactly he's afraid of. He never mentions monsters, or boogeymen, or anything else. It's more a matter of loneliness. He wants to know that he is not alone in the darkness.

Fear. It is a universal human emotion. Sometimes it drives us. Oftentimes it handicaps, even paralyzes us. We fear all sorts of things. We fear our own brokenness. We fear that no one loves us. And, like large four year-olds, we fear being left alone in the cruel darkness.

But, Advent is almost over. We've been through the church year, so we know the glad tidings of great joy that are imminently approaching. A light is dawning in the darkness. It's not just any light. This is the Light of the world, the Light of God's love, assuring us that he will absolutely not leave us mired in our brokenness and darkness. God would not remain aloof or leave us stranded in our sin. God is coming to us. The Lord is taking "away the judgments

against” us. God is coming to us in the flesh, so, in the words of Zephaniah, we should fear evil and darkness no more. God loves us, even us, so much that God would stop at nothing to have us as his children.

So, as the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness gives way to the brightness of Emmanuel, God with us, “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” No fear can eliminate hope, and no darkness can overcome the brilliance of the Son.

Lord of Love and Light, pierce the darkness of our lives and drive away our fears. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Michael Turner
Advent UMC, Simpsonville



December 24, 2012

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Isn't it interesting what matters in the birth story? If someone asked me to describe the birth of my children, I'd start with the restaurant we went to the night before and the huge desserts we enjoyed. I'd talk about the restless nights of anticipation and the early morning arrivals at the hospital. I'd talk about the epidurals and my wife's bravery. I'd talk about the people who were there and who supported us. I'd, ultimately, talk about the joy of seeing, then holding each child. I probably wouldn't even think to say how it is the children received their names.

Matthew doesn't share anything about the actual hours surrounding Jesus' birth when he describes the way it "took place." His focus is on God. The Holy Spirit was at work, first creating this child, then working through an angel to give Joseph the good news. God, who has been speaking through prophets in anticipation of this day, is now fulfilling the prophecy. God has determined to be with us ("Emmanuel") and save us ("Jesus"). The way Jesus' birth took place has much more to do with God's ongoing work than with the actual

event itself, which is why we'll celebrate tonight and tomorrow and throughout the Christmas season.

If we were just commemorating a birthday, then the focus could be on that one event, way back then. No, we're commemorating an event where God is unleashed on the world in a brand new way. Not *was* unleashed; *is* unleashed. Conceiving this child, convincing Joseph, and fulfilling the prophecies were just the beginning. "Emmanuel" is not God was with us, but God *with us*. "Jesus" isn't saved, but *saves*. The point of the birth story is not a few beautiful moments that happened once upon a time, but an infinite number of beautiful moments that continue to happen because God is with us, saving us.

Will Malambri
Central UMC, Florence



