

ADVENT READINGS

CHRISTMAS 2016

Week 1 HOPE (Luke 1: 5-25)

Hope is a “nice” word. Like the decorations we adorn our homes with, it adds a “nice” touch, when we utter it against the backdrop of the warm candlelight, hand holding, and all-around fuzzy feelings that go along with the season we are now entering.

But don't be fooled. Hope is *not* just a “nice” word. It is a POWERFUL word, and its full meaning can only be known by those who have known what it is to be *hopeless*.

When promises remain unfulfilled... When cries seem unheard... When all options have been exhausted... When it's too late... When disappointment prevails, and there is no reason to think things will ever change...

Hope enters in... And changes everything. As it did for a faithful, childless couple so many, many years ago. But not just for them. For a whole nation of people who had known years, even centuries of disappointment, of oppression, and of seemingly silence from the heavens... Hope was on its way, its very messenger growing, unaware, inside of the one who thought it was too late.

Hope is *never* too late.

Just as surely as it came for them... Hope, too, is coming for us. Jesus, the Anointed One. In fact, He has already come. Nonetheless, let us prepare the way and receive Him in a new way this season, as we light this first candle of Advent: HOPE.

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Week 2: PEACE (Luke 1: 26-38)

They say no one likes change. Of course, they also say “variety is the spice of life.” So which is true? Or, is there a difference? Maybe it’s that we think of variety as a choice, that is, “change” we can manage, on our terms. We like options: which one of the hundreds of cable channels to watch... where to go for lunch today... who we align ourselves with politically.

But unlike variety, *change* is not like that. It often doesn’t happen on our terms. Unexpected news. Uninvited guests. Unplanned life events. It happens. To all of us. And we can try to manage change, as best we can. But we can’t prevent it. We are not in control as much as we like to think.

When our status quo is invaded with troubling news, it can be unnerving. As it was for a young girl whose quiet life was suddenly disrupted by an uninvited messenger with news of change like none other. “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!” And even though these were glad tidings – *very* glad tidings, in fact- sometimes even good change carries with it a heavy burden. It is then we must decide Who is in charge of the change. The young girl knew, and responded well.

Peace does not come from our ability to control what God allows in our lives, but from our response to Him. Let’s reflect on our response to our changing world in light of God’s sovereign plan, as we light the second candle of Advent: PEACE.

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Week 3: JOY (Luke 1: 39-56)

Everyone loves the first signs of this season. That first sound of jingling bells... The first snowfall... The first time you hear “Feliz Navidad” on the radio (maybe not as much by the 75th, but still).

It’s like we finally have permission to enter in, to anticipate what’s been in the back of our minds all year: Christmas is almost here!

There’s just something about anticipation. That day *is* coming. That day which epitomizes all we hold dear: family, friends, warmth, kindness, generosity, unity... That one glorious moment when all is right with the world, and we catch a glimpse of what love might actually look like. And the best part is, we spend weeks getting ready for it, practicing, if you will, all of these things so the day really becomes a whole month.

Of course, for many of us, the anticipation comes with its fair share of stress, strife, and anxiety. This happens when we get caught up in the preparation, and forget what it is we are preparing for.

Mary’s preparations for the day she knew was coming didn’t look much like ours. Instead of parties and gift exchanges, dealing with rejection and hardship were her lot. How did she endure it? The same way her Son, decades later would: “For the joy set before Him...” Joy involves preparation, but it’s fueled by anticipation. He is faithful, and true, and will fulfill His word. May we be fueled with the same assurance and filled with anticipation as we remember who we are preparing for, and light this third candle of Advent: JOY.

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Week 4: LOVE (Luke 2: 1-20)

The way the world works, we are often presented with a choice: Love or Power. You can have one, but you cannot have both. Choose to be loved, but don't expect this affection to translate into any real influence. Or choose power, but don't expect much adoration in return.

Our tendency is to see love as *nice*, while we regard power as a necessary evil. Love is, well, lovely, and power may be lonely, but let's face it, at the end of the day, hugging it out doesn't get things done. Power does.

This is the reality of the world we live in. But...it is not the reality of God's kingdom. Love and Power are not at odds with each other. Not at all. In God's economy, they are, in fact, inseparable. There is no true and lasting power without the sacrificial and unreasonable love that God lavished on this world awash in weakness. And anything less than this kind of love is not love at all, and therefore powerless to change anyone, let alone anything. His love means power over darkness. Power over hopelessness. Power over sin. Power over death. Power that came to earth, through His Son.

God does not give half-heartedly. There is nothing more powerful in all of creation than His love, and there is nothing more loving than the way He shared, and continues to share with us this power that transforms the world. Let's receive this gift in its entirety, as we light this fourth candle of Advent: LOVE.

ADVENT READINGS

CHRISTMAS 2016

Christmas Eve: CHRIST

Hope.

Peace.

Joy.

Love.

These are the themes we have been pondering throughout this Advent season. And yet, all along, we have really been pondering so much more than themes. We have been pondering Christ.

Christ, our Hope- the one who meets us in our hopelessness, and delivers us from our despair just in time, just when we thought it was too late.

Christ, our Peace- when our world is disrupted with change, welcome or not, and we need an anchor to hold us in the middle of our chaos.

Christ, our Joy- the anticipation of all we desire, all we hope for, here and now... with the best yet to come.

Christ, our LOVE – the source of all that brings us joy, peace, and hope. The power that conquered sin, that we might never know death, but life, everlasting.

O come let us adore Him, as we light this final candle of Advent, for Jesus Christ our Lord.