

Archived December 2009

December 31, 2009

Reach Ahead

"In His wisdom God does not show us all that lies ahead. So we enter a New Year to live it day by day. What is past is past. Today we start anew, and what we do today will make our life for tomorrow." - William T. Hanzsche

New Year's Eve is a time to commemorate the passing of yesteryear as we celebrate the coming of a new one. My wife and I have a favorite tradition on New Year's Eve. We enjoy sitting with a cup of coffee, or another hot beverage, in front of a warm fire sharing memories. Stories of the past year bring us laughter and joy as well as times of reflection and even a few tears. We remember them all as we embrace the next set of adventures ahead. Looking over the past sometimes does not bring pleasant memories; but one thing's for sure, we live in the present as we reach ahead.

The more years I live, the more reasons I see to fixate my view on what God desires. It's easy to be bogged down by failures, past events and other downturns. When I am tempted to look southward on yesterdays, God reminds me on what He is doing now, today. Am I still alive? Am I still breathing? Am I provided for? Better yet, is He on his throne? Are His promises true and not slack? Is He faithful? It is a blessing to simply answer yes. Surely, He knows how to take care of us and is doing so even in the here-and-now. But there is something hidden to be revealed. As He is taking care of us in the present, He is preparing us for what comes tomorrow. His blessings and desires are what lie ahead as He calls us to reach for them.

The apostle Paul in Philippians 3.12-14, tells us:

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Only when we lay down the things we've held on to, are we free to embrace the Lord Jesus. We trade our sorrows for His joy. As the writer declares, we have not been made perfect. However, in our imperfections, God perfects His love through us. In this love, He has given us the ability to press forward in the upward call of Christ Jesus.

Reflection:

What are the untraded things in your life that you are still holding on to? Regret, despair, delayed-hope or something else? Will you ask Him to show you what is keeping you from laying these items at His feet? Allow God to have these things as you can be free to cling to Him.

In this New Year, by His grace, He will renew your hope, your vision and your joy as you reach for what lies ahead: His desire for you, which is the Lord Jesus himself.

December 19, 2009

Peace - Advent 4

"Lord Jesus, master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, 'Come Lord Jesus!'" - Henri Nouwen

Do you ever stumble in the hallway at night looking for the light switch? If we were living in the last times of the Old Testament, we too would struggle to find the light. We look through the ages for our Messiah to come as He shines his light in the darkness. We too wait in hope for His peace to come.

In our fourth week of Advent, we light the candle of peace. The commemoration of this week signifies our peace that comes through Christ. At the dawn of the New Testament, Israel longed for the Messiah to come. Could you imagine? The world was in complete darkness and complete chaos. Since the Old Testament, God has not spoken in 400 years. In the past, prophets proclaimed of the Promised One to come and to make things right.

All we have to cling to is God's word that says: "The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace," (Ps. 29.11). Isaiah 55.12 says: "You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands." But when will these times come? Where shall we see Peace that was promised? When will God answer? When will He come to His people? These words alone could not even contain a thumbnail sketch of the longing and heartache felt by Israel.

Now, in the New Testament, we hear an angel that cries: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Lk. 2.14). You mean peace is here on earth? It now rests with whom God has favored? Where or who is this peace? It is Christ who comes as a Child of light, a Message of hope, an action of Love, a reason to rejoice and the answer of peace. Shining His light into a world of sin and a place of darkness to bring Life everlasting. The Messiah comes as God's payment of sin through mercy and grace, which fulfills the Old Testament Law and completes the Covenant. He also stands ready to come again to His Bride as we wait in eager expectation.

On this fourth week of Advent Sunday, worship Him with the expectation of his grander and peace. He has found us all stumbling in the dark to bring us to the light. Upon his payment of sin and washing of our hearts, He has called us to new life. We are now to

live in the light of His coming. May our worship be a gift to Him as the candle of peace warms our hearts as we give glory to the Triune and Eternal God.

Reflection:

What does His coming, as a babe, as our soon and coming King mean to you? Advent is a time when we commemorate His Birth and expect His Coming that brings hope, love, joy and peace. How are you allowing His peace to settle your restless heart? How are you allowing His peace to move through you to reach others in need of his light and hope?

December 17, 2009

Security

"I believe God, through His Spirit, grants us love, joy, and peace no matter what is happening in our lives. As Christians, we shouldn't expect our joy to always feel like happiness, but instead recognize joy as inner security -- a safeness in our life with Christ." - Jill Briscoe

As seasons change, we have a God who provides love, joy and peace, even when circumstances or emotions dictate otherwise. Our feelings may indicate our response to an event; however, they are not to be confused with our knowledge of God nor the power of his Word within us. It is good to be reminded that our spiritual resilience depends on what the Bible says and none other.

Humanly, it is far too easy to let our feelings dictate what we believe about ourselves and/or God. We can even go as far as making comparisons and judgements about ourselves and/or others. I feel bad. I feel happy. I feel miserable. It's nothing more than being human as we evaluate our emotions. We feel something and take it into inventory. We may process the event and link it to a past memory or a present experience as we try to reason our way through our emotions. The danger is when we are tempted to dwell on our feelings as they envelope us in fear. Another danger is to stuff our feelings deep down inside and ignore them. A third option, is the most difficult; we feel the emotion and allow our faith to dictate our responses.

I have a very close friend who said to me: when you feel it - feel it. When or after you feel it, use what you know. What does that mean? It means that during or after the emotional process, we move toward God's help to spiritually process.

God built us with emotions in order to move us closer to Him. God has given us a faith inside that reminds us of who He is and what His word says. Yes, sometimes it's easier said than done; so this is the part when you let God do the doing inside of you. Use what you know. In other words, use your knowledge of who God is in your condition/ circumstance. Allow His Word to dictate your outward and inward condition. We also

find affirmation of what God has done for us historically. As you re-evaluate the events, you can see God's invisible hand moving through your life. We are to be reminded of how God has helped us before. Like road markers, we see the worn miles and bends in the road, but they fade in the light of God's grace and victories. When we use what we know, our faith reminds us of the hope and presence of God in our lives.

When we feel broken, we know God is the Healer: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." (Ps. 147.3). When we feel sorrowful, we know God is our Rescue: "He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains," (Ps. 107.14). When we are in need of forgiveness, we know He is faithful: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness," (1Jn. 1.9). When we are in need of guidance, we know that He is our Guide: "Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell," (Ps. 43.3).

As you can see, we identify our feelings as we link them to God's actions. We may feel the effects of life, but by His Word, we use what we know. God identifies with our feelings as well, yet He provides a way out through faith. Our security and safeness of Christ gracefully stems to His word. Through our days, God remains constant as our Hope and Strength that soon turns to joy.

Reflection:

As you encounter emotional challenges, how do you find your security in Christ? Knowing that our relationship with God is not based on emotions, but truth, what parts of Scripture do you turn to for strength and encouragement? How can you keep those passages of joy close at hand in your time of need?

December 14, 2009

Fan Into Flame

"Give me the Love that leads the way / The Faith that nothing can dismay / The Hope no disappointments tire / The Passion that'll burn like fire / Let me not sink to be a clod / Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God" — Amy Carmichael

What are you most passionate about? God has called each of us to do an extraordinary work in Christ. The challenge is not in the work itself, but in our ability to allow God to be the Keeper and Giver of our dreams as we pursue them accordingly. Like a man who waits for the fire to grow, we may find ourselves waiting on God to move. However, if He's already provided the spark, He may be waiting on us to fan the flame.

Many years ago, I wrestled with God concerning my career. I felt the tug and heard the call to ministry, but I was not fully assured. Truthfully, I wanted to do things my way. During this time, I was working on my undergraduate degree involving music. My endeavors were to teach, write and record music, but God had something else in mind.

Concurrently, I was serving as a volunteer on my church's worship team. I had the bold impression that God wanted to use me more in this capacity. My fear? Giving up my dreams. For me, it came down to a selfish decision. I knew God had something for me, but I competed with God over what I wanted for myself.

By a process of prayers, friends and experiences, God opened my ears to help me stop and listen. It soon became crystal clear that I was to obey Him regardless of my vocation. I soon recognized that He knew my desires and dreams; but God wanted my heart first. It was here, when I discovered a passion for serving God through ministry - vocation or not.

So what about those dreams? Interestingly, I am doing much, much more now than I ever envisioned in writing, teaching and recording music. The Lord proved to me that he kept my desires all along, because they were really His desires. The difference was that He wanted to use those desires in his way; and I was to obey him as Lord and Owner of all.

God is the Keeper and the Giver of all dreams. 2 Tim. 1.12 says: "That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

We suffer for the sake of the Gospel through the power of God. Whatever our gifts, talents and dreams, they are to ultimately be used by Him to love people into the Kingdom. He is able to guard what we entrust to Him as it complies with His will. In the meantime, "fan into flame the gift of God," He did not give us a spirit of fear, but one of power and purpose (2 Tim. 1.6-7). As you seek Him first, he will direct your paths. Give Him your heart and watch Him give you His dreams.

Reflection:

What are the dreams you are holding inside? How is God calling you to entrust your desires to Him? He is already working within you, forming and molding you as He desires. As He fans your gift into flame, where in your place of service are you obeying and honoring Him?

December 11, 2009

What Are We Waiting For? (Advent 3)

(Advent) "The event of Christ is the only event in human history that promises relocation and centering, meaning and purpose. This promise and its fulfillment evoke passionate and heartfelt praise and thanks, especially for those aware of their own brokenness and the healing which Christ brings into their lives." - Robert Webber

What Are We Waiting For? In this day and age in our fast paced society, waiting is not even an afterthought. When we enter into the month of December, we are in a frenzy of shopping, preparing, scheduling and traveling. So when it comes to waiting, we may find it near to impossible, while Newton's Law of motion is in full effect. So it seems almost counter-cultural when Advent is about a season of waiting. Advent provides the opportunity to pause as we meditate on the coming of Christ. We also commemorate our Savior's birth as He brought hope, love, peace and joy to this broken world.

In this third week of Advent, we light the pink candle, which refers to rejoicing. What are we rejoicing? The promises of God fulfilled through Christ in order to make a new covenant with man. Christ comes in the flesh as Emmanuel - God with us. We also rejoice in His second coming, Jesus our King, who is our blessed Hope. When He comes, he will wipe away every tear and every pain (Rev. 21.4). Forever, we will live in the light of his glorious and eternal Kingdom (1 Thess. 4.17).

Way before our time, there was a 400 year period where God was silent. This time period stretches from Malachi (OT) to Matthew (NT). No other books of the Bible were written, nor are we told of any prophets the spoke God's word. This does not mean that God was not active in the lives of people, it just means that there was no Biblical recorded time - there was no spoken word from God. Could you imagine God being silent for 1 year, let alone 400 years?

Put yourself in this scenario: going through life without ever hearing from God and all you have to cling to is the Old Testament. This is exactly what the people of this time went through. It had to have been a very discouraging journey. But one day, God finally spoke for the first time in 400 years through the prophet Zechariah (Lk 1.11), the messenger John the Baptist (Jn 1.15) and through the angel who spoke to Joseph in a dream (Mt. 1.20). You can just picture all the excitement and rejoicing, when all of Israel heard God speak through his prophets. Even more so, their excitement was heightened by prophesies of the coming Messiah.

If you were Joseph or Mary, what would your response be in hearing the first spoken words of God since the Old Testament? Joseph had to have been stunned. This is what he heard: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Emmanuel', which means 'God with us,'" Matthew 1:23. This passage references the OT in Isaiah 7:14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Advent is about the celebration of the Lord's Second Coming, while we commemorate the first coming through our Savior's birth. We can see how Israel longed for the Messiah to come. This season helps remind us of what it means to long, hope and rejoice in Christ.

As we light the pink candle on this third week of Advent, we rejoice in a three folded response:

The past: God's fulfillment of the Messiah

The present: God's fulfillment of the Holy Spirit and His work through the Church

The future: God's Second Coming through Christ - who is our blessed Hope

During Advent, may we echo the words of the faithful Hymn "O Come O Come Emmanuel." We give thanks and praise for God's ransom and deliverance of His children. We rejoice in His sending of Emmanuel. From our longing hearts, we worship and pray for His expected Return. In answering the question, what are we waiting for? Our blessed Hope, who is Christ our Lord to come.

"It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Lamentations 3:26

Reflection:

How can the celebration of Advent deepen your worship to the Triune and Holy God? As you go through the busy days ahead, keep the hope, love and expected Return of Christ close to your hearts. Next, when you gather to worship, what will you say to this King who is our blessed Hope?

December 10, 2009

Follow the Sun

"Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey towards it, casts a shadow of our burden behind us." - Samuel Smiles.

The core of a constant worshipper is one who places themselves in the hands of God. They trust the Lord with all their heart, lean on His understanding and acknowledge him in all their ways to make their paths straight (Prv. 3:5-6). By His light, those paths will ultimately lead us home to be with God our Father.

Hiking in the foothills of the Arizona sun is not for the faint at heart. A few years ago, I took a trip to the old southwest. I've never been hiking in this region, nor have I truly experienced the Arizona heat. A local friend took me on a hike through the desert. We packed our gear and headed out to the starting point. About three hours into our hike, I was growing extremely weak and overheated. Every step felt like an eternity; I soon became disoriented and needed to find the way back home. Suddenly, I remembered my friend's words of advice: use the sun to find your direction and move towards it.

At day, if you are without a map or compass, you can locate your direction by the Sun. The old rule of thumb is that the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West, and at midday in the Northern hemisphere will be roughly South. One of the keys to survival is knowing the location of the Sun.

In times of weakness and confusion, locating God's Son will help us find hope and strength. How does this happen? We call out to God for His love and faithfulness. He

shines His light and we walk in his presence. Psalm 89.15 says: "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD." In our spiritual journey, here are two great survival keys: learn and walk. We learn how to recognize God for who He is according to Scripture. Next, we walk in His ways as seen in the life of Christ. Learning to be a true worshipper is to walk in His presence as we stay in constant communion with His fellowship.

As Psalm 89 declares: "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens." Just as the Sun lights the day and the moon and stars by night, He is constantly with us to guide and show His love. Whenever we lose our way, we are to locate the Son. As we walk in the light of Christ, he casts a shadow of our burdens behind us. He also comes along-side us to daily bear our burdens. Thanks be to God for calling us out of the shadows of sin, and into his marvelous light.

Reflection:

What is your journey like? Are you in a desert experience, a mountain top experience or maybe you're deep in the storm? How can locating the Son help you find hope, peace and direction? What difference would it make in your life if you truly trusted Him with all your heart, leaned on His understanding and follow his ways to make your paths straight?

December 8, 2009

The Music of Grace

"Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace." - Karl Barth

Can music really tame the savage beast? I've learned an effective way in dealing with stress in traffic. Move your car to the full right lane and put on classical or some soft music. The same is true in our interactions with people. Proverbs tells us a soft answer turns away wrath. As believers in Christ, how do we practice this form of softness - this form of grace with others?

As music can calm the heart, God speaks to us in song through his grace. He comforts our souls as He speaks of gentleness through his Word. God supplies our need for grace when we face difficult circumstances. We can see how God's grace worked through David in his relationship with Saul. In 1 Samuel 18, we read about how Saul was deeply jealous and became angry with David (vv.8-9). Saul even attempted to take David's life several times. David on the other hand, showed Saul grace and mercy.

As the story goes, David was asked to minister to Saul. David played his harp as usual, but Saul used it as an opportunity to make an attempt on David's life. By the grace of God, David was able to escape and to honor the Lord through his actions. Here's why. David could have retaliated in many ways, but he choose to be in control of his spirit and the situation. David simply fled the scene without a counterattack. We could say

that this was a soft response to turn away the wrath of Saul. As a result, he maintained his integrity, while possessing a wise and calm spirit. In fact, Scripture claims in verse 14: "And David behaved wisely in all his ways, and the LORD was with him." Because David was at peace in God, he was able to think clearly and to respond rightly.

We can pretty much be sure that God was pleased by David's response. David trusted and allowed God to flow through him like sweet music. The music of grace is infectious; God knows how to play the right notes at the right time. Ultimately, when we ask God for His grace, He provides it abundantly. We can hear His notes of grace, whether we are face to face with the enemy or we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. Like a lullaby sung to a child, our Father sings over us (Zep. 3.17). He is mighty to save and delights in us. In His music of grace we are quieted in his love.

Reflection:

As you face the enemy, how is God calling you to respond in grace? What words of comfort is God singing into your heart? In your family-life, relational-life and work-life, how are you expressing the music of His grace.

December 7, 2009

Moved To Worship?

"Music is the expression of the movement of the waters, the play of curves described by changing breezes." - Claude Debussy

When are you most moved to worship? Often, we think that worship is sparked when we gather together on Sunday or in times of happiness. While this is true, do you ever think of worship in times of difficulty? In the above quote by Debussy, we see the phrase "changing breezes." What are the changing breezes in life and how can we use them as our response to God in worship?

Some may be moved to worship when they hear a song, read a verse or say a prayer. These are all indeed igniters of worship; but there are other motivators that call us to our knees. Responding to God involves our honesty and emotions. As we are affected by life's experiences, we respond to God in a variety of ways. How we choose to respond is key. Let's look in the responses of David.

Grieving: "my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you." - Psalm 88:9

Relieved: "I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry." - Psalm 40.1

Anxiety: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me." - Psalm 138:7

Reassured: "Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" - Psalm 66.20

Destitute: "Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay." - Psalm 22:27

Grateful: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." - Psalms 103.8

Discouraged: "My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" - Psalm 42.3

In each of these passages, you can feel the human side of David's plea, yet you can also anticipate God's answer. You will find that in each of these listed emotions, David responds to God in a form of prayer. David is as real as you can get as he is boldly honest before God. How often do we allow ourselves to respond to God in the same way as David? God wants our honest response, especially in the hard times. When we do, our feelings of sorrow, frustration or insecurity are released in a healthy way. Thus we are able to get out all the bad stuff and God is there to refill us with His goodness. This too is a form of worship and exchange. We seek God as we are in need of healing, forgiveness and comfort; He is present as He reveals himself as Healer, Forgiver and Comforter. We are able to rejoice as Him in action.

What an awesome God to turn our present circumstances into healing! This does not always mean that our situations will change instantly, it means that He changes us by the means of a process into the image of His Son. This is a cause for joy even in our sorrow. He truly does turn our mourning into dancing. By the movements and changes in life's breezes, we can find true refuge and healing in God as we worship Him.

Reflection:

In what way are you responding to God by the movements in your life? Just as the movements of the waters are stirred by the wind, so the Lord uses music to stir our souls. Just as we've seen in David's life, are you allowing God to stir your heart to honest and sincere worship?

December 4, 2009

Why Celebrate Advent? (Advent 2)

"Advent is the season of the church year that ignites that longing in our hearts. Before we rush into "Happy Holidays," we pause and let longing rise up within us. Throughout Advent we catch glimpses of a better world." - Mathew Woodley

A mentor of mine asked an important question. Why do we celebrate Advent; is it necessary? I thought about this for a while and came up with an answer. It seems that in this day in age Christmas comes sooner and sooner, even as early as August. Have we become impatient or is the rest of the world trying to speed the year on by ballistic marketing? It's a both/and response. The holidays are fast enough with all of the hectic shopping and traveling. When do we ever stop? To listen. To be quiet. To hope. To long for God to touch humanity with His mercy and grace. When does this occur in a worship service?

The word Advent means: coming. The coming of our Lord and Saviour. Advent really points to His second coming, while we commemorate His first coming to earth. Previously, I shared how the first week of Advent represents hope - the hope and longing for our Messiah to come. (See: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Worship-Team-Training/49680975701?ref=nf#/notes/worship-team-training/advent-1-related-quote/187201719780>) In this second week of Advent, we focus on the word love.

Love is the second candle lit on the Advent Wreath. This commemorates God's character, which is love, and his action of love by sending Christ. God's nature is love. That same love who spoke into Creation, breathes new life into humanity through Jesus Christ (John 1.1-3), in whom we have the fullness of Grace and Truth(v.14). In His coming, we recognize that the Messiah comes to fulfill the old Covenant prophecy (Jeremiah 31.30-32 and Luke 22.20). If it were not for the coming of Christ - we would not have a means for remission of sins and fellowship with God the Father. Through Christ, God completes the New Covenant (Matthew 5.17-20).

So I asked myself the same question as above, why bother celebrating Advent? Well I bother, because I view Advent as a type of Homecoming. Is Advent even Biblical? I believe so, like Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, this festive celebration is based on the observances and expositional foundation of Scripture - framed by the early founding Church Reformers of the 16th Century (The beginning of the Protestant Church - see: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/495422/Reformation>). Celebrating His expected Entrance brings joy, excitement and expectation. We already are surrounded by the goodness of His presence, yet a time will come when all will be complete - on earth as it is in heaven. In Scripture we have countless reminders of His coming. They can be seen as the most significant type of invitation cards.

Jeremiah 31:31

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

Zechariah 14:7

It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime—a day known to the LORD. When evening comes, there will be light.

Revelation 3:3

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Reflection:

The Psalms tells us: "My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." How much greater will it be when the longing of our Lord will turn into rejoicing by His coming and presence? What does Advent mean to you? How can the Lord use this season to stir your heart deeper in the riches of his grace and the praise of His worship?

December 3, 2009

Bob the Builder

"Christianity has always been the hope of God through Jesus played out in the lives of real people living in real circumstances." —Doug Pagitt

Waiting and longing are one in the same. More often than we like, life's circumstances force us into a waiting room. We ask God for help, while we wait for an answer. Sometimes, the waiting can feel like an eternity. As we wait, what is the condition of our hearts? Though, we can see the outside of things, how can we see the inside of His workings?

I have a really neat friend who loves woodworking. He is also a wonderful and gifted theologian and has written many books, commentaries and devotionals. This guy has more creativity wrapped up in his one finger, than I have in my whole body. He gets an idea and tears into it like Bob the Builder. One day he mentioned that he had writer's block. I was astounded. One of the most creative guys I know has writer's block? Most people get frustrated, impatient and even depressed. Not my friend. Interestingly, he had an uncanny response.

He told me that he indeed felt blocked, pressed and even confused by what God was doing. Regardless of his emotions, he said that he was accepting this moment as a gift. What? How this could be? My friend revealed to me that the reality was not so much found in God giving us an answer. Rather, the Lord prepares us for how we are to receive His answer and to respond to that answer rightly. I was stunned at his words. God is always building something within us as a way to prepare us.

Scripture says in 2 Corinthians 4:8, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;" we also find related passages like Philippians 1.6 "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

We are created for the workmanship of the Great Carpenter (Eph. 2.10). On the outside and inside, we feel the etchings of his chisel and the pressure of his hand. We also experience times of darkness. In some cases, we even run into blocked paths. One thing is true, we are never alone. Here's why. The chiseling we feel is the shaping of his will. The pressure we experience is the grip of his grace. The darkness we see is the canopy of His protection. A blocked path before us is to safely lead us in a new direction.

We are filled by His presence and strengthened by our hope in Christ. 2 Corinthians 4.16 reminds us to: "...not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

Reflection:

As you wait on God, how is he filling you with hope? There is no doubt that we are affected by challenging times. Look around you, notice what God is using to mold you. The question is not what He is building, but how is he building - you? Are you able to patiently trust Him as he desires to form you into the loving image of Christ?

December 2, 2009

Enter His Gates

"The Christian who walks with the Lord and keeps constant communion with Him will see many reason for rejoicing and thanksgiving all day long." - Warren Wiersbe

What does it mean to give thanks? Because of who He is according to Scripture, what he has done and how he continues His great work throughout the ages. Namely, the greater work that He has done through Christ in redeeming our souls. In all acts of worship, whether in private or corporate, we come into His presence and serve Him. In public worship, we enter His gates and into his courts of praise in a procession as the people of God.

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name." (Ps. 100.4)

When we enter into God's courts, we bring Him the praise from our lips. If we keep in step with the Spirit, by doing the good works of Christ, then we are filled with good things. Like the air we breathe, as we are filled, we also exhale praise and thanksgiving. Proverbs 12.14 tells us "From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him." also in Hebrews 13.15, we are told: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name." Essentially, this is what it means to give Him praise from the fruit of our lips. What is this fruit? It is described as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness (Gal. 5.2) and then some.

Reflection:

Before you come to Sunday worship, how much of your day is spent giving thanks to God? When our relationship with God deepens, so does our ability to stay in constant communion as we are continually filled by Him. How are you being filled today; how can this be offered to God as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving?

December 1, 2009

The Altar of Worship

"Those will soon come to make nothing of God that will not be content to make him their all." - Matthew Henry (1714)

Out of impulse, have you ever replaced or added to something that wasn't needed? Did your decision really improve the situation or did it further complicate the problem? In our world today, we are inundated with the latest and greatest thoughts, ideas and innovations. Often, we find shortcuts that appear to be better than the original. We are convinced that if we make these changes our dreams will come true. In the end, we find that these new concepts fail; we also find that nothing can replace the original. All the promises we were told proved to be empty lies. Regretfully and humbly, we eat our words and go back to what we know.

Israel sought after the latest and greatest as well. They grew tired of serving an invisible God and made idols for themselves. They soon forgot the Lord who led them out of Egypt as they dwelt in enemy territory and followed after their gods and philosophies. After Solomon's death, Israel unhappily went through king after king and was never satisfied (2 Kings 14). Israel changed their houses of worship into a cathedral of idols. The original altars were replaced with new altars of precious stones and metals (2 Kings 16.15). They also set up sacred stones on poles on every high hill (2 Kings 17.10). Nothing was good enough for Israel, and the Lord's anger burned against them.

"The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble." - Prov. 19.23

It is not enough for worship to be right in our own eyes, it must be right in the eyes of the Lord. Otherwise, worship will not be right at all. In whatever the case, we go through every attempt to improve our worship spaces - in our hearts or in our sanctuaries. We walk away unsatisfied, tired and disheartened. The Lord God is our origin of worship. He is our Source and the One we are to serve in worship. Only the altar of Christ should rise in our hearts as we are to denounce all other gods and other high places. Only through Christ is our worship sanctified and accepted by the Father.

Let it be forbidden that we should replace anything other than the worship of God. No matter what seems to gleam in the eye or itch in the ear, we should never imitate the

ways of the world (Jas. 4.4). When we go too far in our ways, we find that we are exactly where we should not be - in our own ways apart from God (Jn. 15.5). Being content in God is all that matters by his standards. His worth can never be exchanged for a lie; neither should our worship be exchanged for any other shortcut or impulse by man (Heb. 13.5).

Reflection:

When you worship God, how focused are you in Him alone? What lingers in your heart that distracts you from giving Him authentic and focused praise? How deep the Father's love is for us to calm every storm. Allow Him to be your all in all; allow Christ to be the altar of worship.

November 30, 2009

Leftovers

"To be hungry is not enough; I must be really starving to know what is in his heart towards me. When the prodigal son was hungry he went to feed upon husks, but when he was starving, he turned to his Father." - J N Darby

Still have those Turkey leftovers from the Holidays? There must be 1001 ways to utilize turkey. I've even heard of non-food related ways to use leftovers; those old rolls make great doorstops. Gorging on food festivities can really be a workout, but it's not the food that fills our need completely. It is possible to be full, but still be empty.

The words of Jesus ring true: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." We can fill our lives with many things, but which items are most essential for our spiritual well-being? When we are far from God, our souls become in need of his Word; we become famished for His presence and grace. To go hungry is one thing, to be starving is another.

I remember a time when I used to fill my mind with non-Godly things. I thought that I could satisfy my own hunger, but every attempt was rooted in sin and self. When God captured my heart, all I desired was Him and to be filled by His presence. I wanted to be so close to God, that I filled my mind with His word and prayer. I rejoiced in His work around me and was astonished by his acts of love. I was in constant God-talk as I noticed that my old self-talk was fading. After some time, I would catch myself praying in almost every small, great or uncanny circumstance. Then it occurred to me. I was not trying to be close to God; His closeness was already with me. When I was starving, I turned to the Father who filled my every need in Word, prayer and presence.

"and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." - Eph. 3.19

God does not give us His leftovers, he provides His fullness. God is the Father - the Fountain of all good. He is unchanging in every way. No matter the conditions of our souls, He is consistent and stands ready to fill us. The shelf-life of worldly leftovers never last and never satisfy. As Jesus multiplied the fish and loaves of bread, He fills our every need and every joy. We give Him thanks for His constant presence; so should we walk in His constant presence.

Reflection:

What is the condition of your soul - hungry or starving? Praise be to God that he provides us to the full and does not handout leftovers. However, even the crumbs from His table can fill the needy soul. How is God filling you with His goodness and grace? As you go through your day, what can you give out of your abundance to help others who are spiritually in need?

November 27, 2009

Advent 1 (Intro)

"A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent. "
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This coming Sunday, November 29, 2009 marks the first week of Advent. Here's a little Church history trivia. What is Advent and it's meaning?

If your only memory of Advent serves as the chocolate candy calendar that leads up to Christmas, you're not alone. The name Advent is not a electronic manufacture for producing surround sound home theater systems, nor is it a micro-filtration unit for your air conditioner. Advent is a four week period in which the Church celebrates the coming of Christ that precedes Christmas (his birth). Why isn't Advent more widely celebrated in most churches? Good question, our discussion will involve the point and purpose of Advent and its vitality in our services.

Advent is the coming (light) of Christ that shines into darkness to give hope and life to a dying world in need of Salvation. God's nature is love, that same love who spoke into Creation breathes new life into humanity through Jesus Christ, in whom we have the fullness of Grace and Truth. We also rejoice in His second coming, who is also our blessed Hope. When He comes, he will wipe away every tear and every pain as we will live in the light of his glorious Kingdom.

The word "advent" is from the Latin word for "coming," and as such, describes the "coming" of our Lord Jesus Christ into the flesh (Incarnation - Emmanuel). Advent begins the Church Year (another unfamiliar word). The Church Year or Church Calendar

is a timeline of the seasons, celebrations and observances in the Christian Church. Each season is also marked by a color to emphasize significance and meaning (commonly known as Colors of the Church Year). We begin with Advent (Coming of our Lord); to Christmas (The birth of our Lord); then Epiphany (about his miracles and ministry); then Lent and Holy Week (about his Calvary-bound mission); then Easter (about his resurrection and the sending of the apostles); and then Ascension (40 days after Easter) and Pentecost (with the sending of the Holy Spirit).

Minor celebrated days such as Reformation Sunday, All Saint's Day and other observances mark important days of the Church's beginnings and the Christian Faith. During the Reformation, the Church Calendar was utilized as a tool for teaching the Gospel and God's actions in human history. The purpose for the Church Calendar is to reflect on these important Biblical seasons that remind us of our faith as we give praise and thanks to God. It also serves as an important teaching tool for our children and neighboring communities to understand the workings of God in the building of his Church and the heritage of our Faith. In conclusion, this is the Church Year in a nut-shell and Advent helps us understand the bigger picture of the Gospel.

Advent specifically focuses on Christ's "coming." This is a celebration that brings vitality to our services of worship. We give God praise and thanks for his indescribable Gift to man. In Advent worship services, the colors of blue or purple are used to signify the royalty of Christ. Candles are lit as they help commemorate the meaning of Christ - the Light of the world who comes to humanity.

The traditional use of Advent candles (sometimes held in a wreath) originated in eastern Germany even prior to the Reformation. As this tradition came down to us by the beginning of this century, it involved three purple candles (some today use the colors of blue as well) and one pink candle. We often use blue in place of purple because purple is also used during Lent and Holy Week. As my professor and mentor of Theology Mark D. Roberts says: "The first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent are "purple/blue" Sundays. Only the third is a "pink" Sunday. The pink, joyful color reminds us that, even as Advent helps us get in touch with our sober yearning for God to come to us, we know that he did in fact come in the person of Jesus."

1. The first week/first candle to light signifies "Hope," our long expected Messiah to come.
2. The second week/second candle to light signifies "Love," God's motivation for sending Christ.
3. The third week/third pink candle to light signifies "Joy," Rejoicing of God's delivered promise.

The pink candle was the third candle to be lit (not the fourth) on Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent. "Gaudete" means "Rejoice!" in Latin, and is the first word of the traditional Introit for that day which is taken from Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

4. The fourth week/fourth candle to light signifies "Peace," God's gift to man - Christ our Peace.

5. Some also included a white "Christ candle" in the middle to be lit during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25-January 5).

(to be continued on Week 2 of Advent)

Reflection:

How is the coming of Christ significant to you? As the Bible announces His coming (both to Bethlehem and in Revelation), what is your heart's response to the coming King? In what way can the Church Calendar and Advent help you respond in fresh ways to the Lord in rendering His deserved worship?

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