

Flower of Jesse's Tree
Advent Devotions 2011

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Introduction/Reading for Sunday, November 27

Thank you so much for joining us in this Advent devotional. A few words to the wise (or merely curious) as we begin.

First, these devotions are keyed to a devotional practice called “The Jesse Tree.” I was introduced to the idea of the Jesse Tree by my Aunt Margie and Uncle Jim and their family, who made a Jesse Tree as a gift for my family when I was about 10. The tree they made us was a simple thick wooden dowel, with thin wooden dowels inserted in it, on which we could hang tiny ornaments. Each ornament represented a story in the Scripture, starting in the very beginning with creation, leading up to the birth of Jesus. Each day we would hang a new ornament up and read the corresponding story from the Bible. The Jesse Tree became a favorite family tradition. My sister Beth made me a Jesse Tree and ornaments when I went away to college so that I could read along with the family until I got home for Christmas break.

Our church is encouraging members to use the Jesse Tree this year for family or private devotions. This evening, Sunday, November 27, we’re meeting at the church and families will be able to make the first few ornaments together, as well as learn a little bit about how to put together a Jesse Tree. There are slightly different versions of the Jesse Tree, though all are similar, so we had to pick one version. The ornaments we have chosen to use can be found online at <http://www.eriecnd.org/jesstree.htm>. At this site, you’ll be able to print off ornaments to use in your home if you wish and find the corresponding Biblical texts. In addition, I’ve written this little booklet you hold in your hand with devotional reflections on the various Scripture passages.

I’d like you to feel free to use the Jesse Tree—and this booklet—however you wish. You may wish to go all out and make a Jesse Tree in your home, complete with ornaments, and sit down with your family every night and read the Scriptures and my devotional comments. That’s great—you’re more than welcome to do that. Or you may prefer to make a Jesse Tree and ornaments for use in your home and simply read the Scriptures each day, but find my devotional thoughts are not a great fit for your style or your family’s style. That’s OK too—simply reading the Bible and retelling the stories is a great way to experience Advent in a meaningful way. (Believe it or not, the stories in the Bible are actually more interesting and useful than my devotional writing! 😊) Or, you may not be a visual person, so you may not be interested in making an actual Jesse Tree, but you may enjoy reading the Biblical texts and these devotions as a way of preparing your heart for the coming of Jesus. That’s fine too. You should also know that some days’ readings are quite long; take time to enjoy and soak in the whole reading, or abridge them if necessary or useful for your purposes. There’s no legalism here.

Please get in touch with me if there are ways I can help you, or simply if you want to interact with what I’ve written. I enjoy hearing from people, even (especially) if they disagree or want to discuss things further. I never intend to write the last word on any given topic, but simply the first word that can stir up the wisdom that exists in the whole Body of Christ. I hope these texts achieve that goal as we walk through the great stories of the Bible leading up to the Greatest story, the Incarnation of Jesus.

Monday, November 28

Dove; Isaiah 11:1-10; 1 Samuel 16:1-13

It is difficult to imagine, as we sit at the beginning of another Advent, that there was ever a time when all this was surprising. The wolf will live with the lamb, we read, the cow with the bear, the little child with the venomous snake, the lion eating straw like any other domesticated animal. We have heard it so often--thundered from glorious pulpits, read with distinction by folks with fine British accents—that it almost makes sense now. Of course the way of God is the way of the peaceable kingdom. Of course a little child will lead them.

But if we are to truly experience Advent, we must go back in our hearts to a time when it didn't make sense, a time when all this was surprising. Wolves and lions and snakes and bears are not naturally inclined to play with lambs, cows and toddlers—they are inclined to tear them limb from limb. On the surface of it, this is how the world has always understood itself: the strong survive, and indeed the strong flourish by dominating the weak. This is no less true now, even though we tend to insulate ourselves from the raw realities of killing and death. Even now, "wise" people know that this is how the world works, that if you want something you have to go out and get it, that in the end no one can be counted on to love you but you and so you better be ready to fight and conquer the weak.

Advent steps in and dares to lift up another vision of what true wisdom is. True wisdom—embodied in this Root of Jesse—recognizes that what we see, a world of violence and self-preservation, is in the end not real. Instead, God desires to bring a Kingdom about where the strong and the weak live together in mutual self-giving. In the end, the lions, wolves, snakes and bears don't win, and nor do they lose. In the end is peace, joy and reconciliation.

Maybe this passage is harder to believe than we thought. Even though the words are familiar, I've met few Christians who truly believe that God is truly capable of reconciling the broken relationships they see every day. Deep down, we still live by the world's wisdom, still believe the strong survive—even though we'd never say it out loud. Yet within the heart of every Christian is a ray of hope, a spark, that the Good News might actually be this good, that reconciliation is possible not just in heaven, but here, today, now, in our violent and fractured world. Advent will fan that spark into flame if you will let it.

Tuesday, November 29

Apple; Genesis 2:4-3:24

In the beginning, we read that there was "no plant of the field" and "no herb of the field" in the ground. We expect we know why, of course, and that is that God had not put any plants or herbs there yet. But that is not what the passage says. It says that there were two reasons why there were no plants nor herbs yet: first, that God had not yet caused the rain; and second, that there was no one yet to till the ground. This is a surprise, of course: certainly it seems to us like the God who made bats and bumblebees, hippos and hedgehogs could find a way to plow a field. But no—human effort is part of the equation. Without us, creation simply cannot be all God wants for it to be.

This ought to make you swell with pride and become a little nervous all at once. There is somewhere a little plot of ground for each of us—a good work to do, a relationship to heal, a group of people to love. And that ground will yield no fruit until we till it. Couldn't God do this on his own? Couldn't God unilaterally heal your marriage? Could God translate the Bible for an unreached people group on his own? Could God, on his own, counsel people in time of need? Could God provide hospitality to strangers on his own? Could God raise a family? Maybe. But this text reminds us that our human labor is charged with divine power, that creation is only all it can be when we are all we can be. We have the awesome privilege of being partners with God in creation, helping creation function as it ought—but we can only know that privilege if we pursue it. Fruit only comes when we till the ground.

Wednesday, November 30

Ark; Genesis 6:11-8:22

The story of the great flood is fraught with difficulty for Christians, a fact skeptics take great glee in pointing out. God got so fed up He just decided to destroy everybody? Just up and wipe them all out, animals, plants, women, children, men, just drown them all? I mean, what if someone did that today with their cats and dogs? What if an owner just got tired of owning their animals because the animals wouldn't behave and thus killed them all? Wouldn't we put that owner in prison? "Is this the kind of God you worship?" the skeptics sneer. "This is your loving God?" There are not easy answers to these questions. We shouldn't pretend there are. Yet there is an important point to be made here, and it is in the very beginning of chapter 8: "But God remembered Noah..."

God remembered Noah. Today, we expect God to be in a sense obligated to us, so much so that we feel that He has some explaining to do when things do not go well for us. Yet people in the ancient world were had no such pretense; they believed that gods were not in any sense accountable to human beings. Yet God remembered Noah, called him to mind, and felt a sense of obligation to him. It is as if God thought, "Wait, there's a human here to whom I have made a promise. I must be faithful to my promise because he does not deserve this fate."

This would have been stunning—and good!—news to the ancient world, that God would muddy his hands with human notions of deserving, that He would take pains to deal justly with an individual person rather than indulge a sense of righteous anger. While we moderns can't take our eyes off the mass destruction, the ancients would have been amazed to see that God saved even one person, that the Creator would humble himself to be accountable to the creation.

Perhaps we take that for granted, because the Bible is so suffused with this good news. We see God's humility and mercy extended again and again, right up to the person of Christ, in whom we see so clearly that this good news is not just for Noah, or isolated individuals throughout history. No, it is for all people—all can enjoy Noah's relationship with his creator.

Thursday, December 1

Stars; Genesis 12:1-7, 15:1-6

One of the tricky parts about being a Christian today is how to balance family with the rest of our lives. All Christians face the challenge of how to balance church with family, for instance; when should we say "yes" to church activities when it costs precious family time? Many Christians also face the question of how to balance their calling at work with their calling to their family. There are no "one-size-fits-all" answers to these questions. In some homes, it may be appropriate for one parent to leave their job to dedicate themselves to full-time parenthood; in some homes, that would not be the best choice.

Over the last few years, since we have had kids, I have been increasingly convicted that our culture often understands children as interruptions to our "real lives." (I have also been convicted that Christian complicity in this will be one of the darkest legacies in this era of Christianity.) Yet this passage stands in sharp contrast to this idea. Abraham's real job—his way of blessing the world—was not a trade, not a place he went from 9 to 5. His real job was to start and nurture a family, and through this family the world would be blessed.

Like so much of the gospel, this is a double-edged sword. For those of us with careers, it challenges us to pay attention to the complex, exhausting world of parenting and to not let the difficulties of parenting slip by. For those of us who have chosen to stay at home with our children, this passage lends dignity and meaning to our choices, and encourages us that even though our culture may not value this type of work, God does.

Friday, December 2

Ram; Genesis 22:1-19

Just as with Wednesday's reading, we find ourselves with questions about God's actions here. Again, let's not dismiss those questions—they are important—but let's not let the concerns about God's work here dominate our understanding of this text either. Abraham's God doesn't need us to defend how He acts here; much less does He need us to apologize for Him.

Just like in the text about Noah, it's important to understand that ancient readers would have understood God's request to sacrifice Isaac as completely fair for God to demand. What would have stood out to the readers was the way this God again felt an obligation to Abraham, to Isaac, and above all to the covenant he had made. This God, seemingly so violent to moderns, is actually *less* capricious than ancient readers expected.

In the New Testament, Paul brilliantly shows how we Christians are children of this same covenant. Romans 9-11, in particular, talks about how God wants to redeem all people, bringing them into one church to show them His love. The consequence as far as this Genesis chapter is concerned is that we also can confidently know that God will be faithful to us. The covenant he made with our forefather Abraham is not something he takes lightly. He is not like other "gods," capricious, promising something one day and ripping it away the next. He is good and faithful and can be counted on.

Saturday, December 3

Ladder; Genesis 27:41-28:22

Jacob doesn't set out to look for God. He lays down to sleep, and there God just shows up, unexpected, in a dream, standing beside him, watching angels ascending and descending on a ladder. God promises him the land on which they stand, a legacy, and most precious, His presence. Jacob awakes and realizes he has been in the presence of God, and that this land is "the gate of heaven." Jacob then takes a stone (which had been his pillow) and sets it up as a pillar, pouring oil over it. This is a very natural human response to the divine—setting up a stone of memorial, making it sacred, a place to remember a mighty act of God.

Most of us would not take the time to set up a stone like this today. It seems a little silly and maybe even idolatrous—after all, God isn't really tied to any certain place. There is no one spot on earth that is "the gate of heaven," and it seems strange to us to put up a stone to honor a God who will not be confined to one space. Mostly, though, it seems arduous and wasteful: dragging a stone, setting it up just so, wasting a bunch of perfectly good oil, making a plan to return to it when you could be out doing something useful. Why bother?

Most of us wouldn't bother setting up a stone; but then again, the truth is that most of us would forget what God has done. Isn't that the way with us moderns? God is caring for us, in a way we all realize when we're being cared for, but the next minute we're back to our old comfortable anxieties, back to feeling alone in the world, back to doubting the existence of this loving God. You bother setting up a stone when you don't want to forget, when you don't want to go back to being the person you were before, when you want to remember the gift and the faithful God who gave it.

Sunday, December 4

Sack of grain; Genesis 37-50

The heart of this passage is the meeting between Joseph and his brothers. The brothers had presumed Joseph was long dead, and instead God had mysteriously arranged it so that Joseph was a leader in Egypt, responsible for overseeing the nation's treasuries of food, a bit of which Joseph's family desperately needed.

It is interesting to me that when Joseph was alone with his brothers, we read that he wept loudly, so loudly that it disturbed people well beyond the room. I wonder what made him weep. I mean, I know generally what made him weep, but what was it specifically? Did his brothers look gaunt? Was it their desperate straits? Was he angry with them? Was he simply weeping over their broken relationship? Was he reliving the agony of his journey from the bottom of a pit to becoming near-royalty?

We don't know. And that's OK. What makes the story remarkable to us moderns is that he wept at all. Today, weeping is a sign of having lost, that the person who "made" you cry has power over you. Crying, after all, is reflexive and involuntary; you don't choose to cry, and so to us, crying must be bad because it takes us away from conscious, rational action. To us, crying means you've lowered your defenses too far and surrendered your precious autonomy. Yet this is the gift Joseph gave his brothers. Instead of insisting on appropriate boundaries, instead of coolly informing his brothers that he had moved on and was a different person now, instead of exacting his pound of flesh, Joseph allows himself to be vulnerable to them in a way you only are with family. His crying meant that in the end, he was not the cool and collected Egyptian leader—he was part of a family.

It seems to me that crying in church could solve a lot of problems in the body of Christ. So often we work to maintain our boundaries between church and home, friends and family. Yet how sweet it is to cry, to let go of our autonomy, our sacred reputation, and be completely vulnerable to another person who cares for us as our brother or sister! In the same way, what an honor it is for someone to cry in front of you, to allow you to see them in an unguarded moment; it demonstrates such complete love and trust that it cannot help but build the Body of Christ.

Monday, December 5

Burning Bush; Exodus 2:1-4:20

It appears that the miracle of the burning bush takes place simply to get Moses' attention. There is no content to the vision; the angel says nothing, and the bush itself seems to have no specific message. It is as if God simply needed a surefire way to get Moses' attention, knew a tap on the shoulder wouldn't do it, and so schemed to create a scene so elaborate, so surreal, so vibrant and intense that Moses would have to notice it and enter into a dialogue with God.

It is remarkable—yet not so surprising if we read the whole Bible—that we worship a God who is so passionate about talking with his people. Like Moses, we are woefully unaware of our true identity until God reminds us who we are. And there is something about God that wants us to see who we are; when He sees His people in slavery, He yearns for their freedom even more than they yearn for their freedom. When He sees one of their noble leaders wasting his life as a pseudo-royal in Egypt, He simply has to show Moses who he really is.

Are we not constantly in danger of becoming slaves ourselves? Aren't we always tempted to trade in our status as children of the living God for the trinkets and baubles of this world, a bit of conspicuous consumption here, a bit of casual sex there? Aren't there days we would prefer an ape's contentment with life, sating our belly and our appetites, shutting out the message that we were made for more than this?

God no more can stand to see you in slavery than He could His people then. It makes me wonder how God is trying to get your attention today. Have you considered that the gifts he has given you might be, like the burning bush, God's attempt to get your attention? Have you considered that God wants to remind you who

you really are? Have you considered that all the good things he gives are not simply to make you happy, but to make you realize that you are, after all, royalty?

Tuesday, Dec 6 Lamb; Exodus 12:1-14:31

Whenever I read the Passover story, I always am very aware of my status as a firstborn son. I remember watching *The Ten Commandments* as a kid, watching the creepy green smoke coiling into a hand, the angel of death come to slay the firstborn son of all the Egyptians. Being prone somewhat to flights of fancy, I remember feeling *very* vulnerable every time I watched that movie. It somehow seemed to me that I could deal with some mysterious aspects of God's character, but when it came to God killing the firstborn, I wanted an explanation!

I never paid much attention to the fate of the Israelite firstborn sons. While God didn't kill them, he did require that firstborn sons be redeemed. Orthodox Jews still follow this practice today in a ceremony called the *Pidyan Haben*. The rabbi reads Exodus 13:2, "Sanctify to me the firstborn among the Israelites. Among man and beast, it is Mine." Then the rabbi asks the parents, "Which do you prefer? Do you wish to give me your son?...Or do you wish to redeem him for the 5 *sel'a'im* (about 100 grams of silver) as you are required to do by the Torah?" Then the father says, "I wish to redeem my son," and pays the rabbi the required amount.

It is both comforting and thrilling to be a firstborn among God's children. God looks at you and says the words all children love to hear from their fathers: "you are Mine." Of course, in the light of the cross and empty tomb, we see that these words are not just for firstborns, and not even just for any particular ethnic group. These words are offered freely to all. God enables all to be His children, and waits for us to lay aside the death-dealing identities offered by the world in order to live in simple daily dependence on Him.

Wednesday, Dec 7 10 Commandments; Exodus 19:1-20:26

The depiction of God in this passage can feel quite foreign to those of us steeped in the Gospel. God seems so mysterious, shrouded in a black cloud, descending onto the mountain like fire, keeping his distance from the people, warning them that if they approach too close he may "break out" against them, flanked by thunder and lightning: all of this is enough to make the people say, "Do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

Of course, Moses is there to help explain the phenomena to the people. "Don't be afraid," he says, "God is only testing you and making you fear him so that you do not sin." Moses is performing a classic priestly duty: interpreting the actions of a mysterious God to a confused people. Because of Moses' deep relationship with God, even friendship with God, he understands a part of God's character most people don't understand. And he uses this information to help his people.

Most of us are uncomfortable with the idea of a priest. After all, we attend a church where the clergy are quite intentionally called pastors instead of priests. Priests are something they have at other churches, we tell ourselves, where the laity is more passive and expects a paid priest to go to God for them. I don't have to do that—I can go to God for myself. After all, it's not like Pastor Wes is like Moses, having some special knowledge so he can interpret something of God to me that I don't understand—I have the Bible and so I can understand God!

True enough, as far as it goes, I guess. But it has always seemed to me that the glory of the gospel is not that a good church doesn't have a priest—it's that a good church has lots of priests! Truth be told, Pastor Wes *does* have special insight to God that he can use to help other people. But it's not because he's a pastor—it's because he's a Christian. You too have a special knowledge of God, borne of your own experience with him. And you have a responsibility to share that with the body so that we all can benefit from your experience. Perhaps you have seen God in the midst of your suffering in a way that will unlock the mysteriousness of God for a person who is suffering right now. Maybe God has brought you through loneliness or depression or even spiritual attack; I promise you there are people right now who are going through those things, and God seems so mysterious to them. You can be their priest, helping them to see that this God still loves and cares for them and can see them through.

Thurs, Dec 8 Trumpet; Joshua 1:1-11, 6:1-20

Sometimes God seems, well, a bit callous. Moses is an epic figure throughout the Pentateuch, and certainly one of a very few historical figures that defined the people of Israel. Yet when talking to Joshua, God says simply, “My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan...” This is not a touching eulogy. It appears to be the same tone of voice you and I would use to talk about a leftover sandwich.

The difficult thing about the way God works in the world is that He appears to not be dependent on any specific person. Moses was God’s servant; but now Moses is dead and unable to help the cause and God will find someone else to do His work. We all want to feel indispensable, as if we are integral to a job and that no one can ever do it as well as us. In that sense, we might feel threatened at the way God seems to have moved on so easily from Moses.

Of course, there is good news here too. The truth is that the mission of God in the world is far greater than any one person. And God does not rely solely on our perfection, or even our strengths, to do his work in the world. Think of it: just after God has done great work through a near-perfect man like Moses, he uses the combination of a prostitute and a ram’s horn to bring down the great city of Jericho. This may be very bad news for people who trust in their own strength, but it is very good news for people who know they are weak. You and I—and all the weak—can take heart, because as surely as God could use Moses, He can use us.

Friday, Dec 9 Pitcher; Judges 7

The story of Gideon is one we’d rather read than live. We forget that Gideon hadn’t simply showed up that morning and decided to start a war. No, he had carefully weighed military strategy and decided that 32,000 soldiers was just about right to engage the Midianites in battle. Yet by the end of the day, God had sent 31,700 of them home; for every one person that stayed, 105 were gone. And the consequences of a misstep here were grave indeed—Gideon wouldn’t be simply embarrassed or ashamed if things didn’t work out, he’d be dead. Often, in our rush to apply lessons from this story to our own lives, we forget the very real mix of dread and resignation Gideon must have felt. We know how the story turns out; Gideon didn’t.

God calls us to do all sorts of wild and seemingly foolish things, asking us to allow Him to write a story with our life that might not seem prudent to us. And we, of course, don’t know how *our* stories turn out. In the end, we don’t know if our major life decisions—who to marry, what career to pursue, to stay home with the kids (or not), to join a church or leave it—will work out or not. And there are few things worse than feeling that you’ve done something stupid, something that will harm your chances at having it all work out well. When you leave behind a life you know—even if it’s miserable—to chase God’s dream for your life, there are times when you will feel like an utter fool.

And so this passage is the ultimate good news; it reminds us that those who risk for God will be rewarded, even if we can’t always understand how. But at the same time, it is the ultimate challenge; it asks us to let go of everything, to stop believing in human wisdom, in order to follow Him.

Saturday, Dec 10 Crown; 1 Samuel 3:1-21, 7:1-8:22, 9:15-10:9

When I was in 1st grade, I distinctly remember Grandparents’ Day at my school in New Jersey. I had grandparents who lived locally, who were always there for parties, but this day was particularly exciting because my grandparents Lindley could come down. I lived about ½ mile from school, and they walked with me that day; unsurprisingly, I talked the whole way. One thing that stuck with them was when I looked up at Grandma Lindley and said, “Grandma, I’m different than the other kids, and that’s OK.” By that I think I meant that my family and my church family had expectations for me, that I held myself to a higher standard because I understood myself differently. My family, my church, and even God, had made me not to blend in but to stand out.

That's a happy memory for me. And there were lots of moments like that, where I felt OK being different from everybody, having different priorities, different loves, different goals, different behavioral expectations. But there were also moments when being different felt not so great, moments where I felt so keenly the sharp wedge between me and everybody else. In these moments, I wanted to fit in, wanted to say whatever words the other boys were saying, to listen to the music they listened to, to be like them. When I look back, I realize they weren't so bad—they were just boys, after all—but I also realize that I am thankful that adults in my life helped me to think of myself as different from the crowd.

Israel here wants what I wanted: to fit in. To be like other nations. Other nations had kings, respectable men who represented them on the world stage and oozed power and prestige. Following the one true God was rewarding, don't get me wrong; but Israel was tired of people looking at them cock-eyed, wondering why they didn't have a king, wondering how exactly they governed themselves, wondering how exactly one follows an invisible God after all. For once, they thought, it would be nice to fit in.

But fitting in has its consequences. When you have a goal of fitting in, you lose that precious characteristic that made you unique. What's more important, you stop being yourself and start being someone else. Sure, as a little boy, I could experiment with saying a few four-letter words, getting into (*read: losing*) a few fistfights, and slacking off on my homework, all in the name of fitting in. But what I found was that when I tried that, I lost me. All the people who helped me construct a healthy identity, the community I dearly loved—these people I shut out, in the name of fitting in. When we have to fit in, and never ask whether the people we're trying to fit in with are worth it, we give away the freedom God gives us to find ourselves in Him.

Sunday, Dec 11 Shepherd's Crook; 1 Samuel 16, 17; 2 Samuel 7:1-17

I never noticed until just recently that, when David is considering volunteering to battle Goliath, his older brother Eliab accuses him of "presumption." David has rather recklessly left a bunch of sheep in the pasture, and come down to the battlefield, and now he's considering recommending himself for the battle with Goliath? Just who does he think he is? He's a young kid, and he needs to understand his role and respect it.

I'm sure that from Eliab's perspective David was presumptuous, and I probably would have thought so too. He couldn't truly understand what was going on, the gravity of the situation, the danger of the battle and the very real consequences for everybody if he failed. David's youth and inexperience had prevented him from seeing things as they truly were. Yet the reality is the opposite, of course; David realized that God was bigger than this battle, that God had enabled him to kill lions and bears to defend the sheep, and that that same God would enable him to defeat the giant Goliath in order to defend His people. In fact, it was Eliab who was naïve, who hadn't thought things through enough; and it was Goliath who was the most naïve, thinking he could trust in spear and sword against the power of the name of the most Holy God.

There is a sort of presumptuousness, a self-assuredness of godly people. To the untrained it appears to be arrogance, an ultimately foolish trust in one's own strength. Yet in the end it is not arrogance at all, but conviction: conviction that the God who made the world and planned for the redemption of humanity is still at work today, and (praise Him!) still at work through people who are yielded to Him. After all, if a Christian says, "I can't do that," they actually mean, "God can't do that." There ought to be a sense among all of God's people, young and old, that there is nothing we cannot do because it is God who gives us the power to do it. We sometimes resist feeling this bold and assured because others see it as arrogant; but we must embrace it in humility, knowing that God can use us to conquer giants today.

Monday, Dec 12 Altar; 1 Kings 17:1-16, 18:17-46

There are so many different items to write about in these two stories, but for today I want to focus on one little line from 18:21, where Elijah asks the people, "How long will you go limping about with two different opinions?"

I notice how often people feel stuck in their spiritual lives. Often people pray to little effect, or try to discipline themselves to pray and it just doesn't seem to work. We feel stuck in a particular sin or passionless for

the gospel, unable to muster the energy or emotion to genuinely change our lives. Perhaps worst, we feel almost constantly unhappy; anxiety and anger tend to be the fuel for us to take action rather than the good news of Jesus. Limping is actually a pretty good metaphor for it, as it suggests that we make some progress but only with extreme effort and usually a lot of accompanying pain.

Elijah names the reason for Israel's limping: they were living in two different directions, believing two different opinions. They understood the beauty of the way of the Lord, the traditional religion of their people; and yet at the same time, they were drawn to this new religion that promised answers and prosperity. And so they tried to live with a foot in both worlds, to syncretize two religions that simply would not mesh. They were naïve in thinking that God and Baal could comfortably coexist.

It seems foolish, but it is essentially what we do every day. Most of us recognize the power of God, and are thankful for the life we can have following Him. Yet at the same time we also believe the subtle pseudo-religious messages of the world, which promises salvation through our social status, possessions, or political affiliations. If we are truly going to follow Christ, we cannot afford to be naïve about the power of this secular religion, and we cannot compromise with it. To follow Christ and yet at the same time give so much time and attention to fitting in in the world will only disappoint us on both fronts: you'll make a miserable Christian *and* a miserable unbeliever. You'll make no progress on either front; you will merely limp.

Tuesday, Dec 13 Tent; 2 Kings 18:1-18; 19:32-37

Today's text focuses on a miraculous intervention of God to stave off an Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem. Assyria's might was almost unthinkable in the ancient world; their King, Sennacherib, had utterly destroyed the northern tribes of Israel. But when he tried to take Jerusalem, the siege failed. Though Sennacherib claimed later that he had won the victory because of all the money that Hezekiah paid him in tribute, the fact was he did not take the city.

Why not? The Bible's explanation is that God simply willed it. "For I will defend this city to save it," says God, "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." As we have steadily seen during these first couple weeks of Advent, we again see God being faithful and accountable to the promises He has made to His people. He has made a promise to David and so He will not allow David's city to be taken.

It's interesting to me how God phrases his rationale: "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." Even the way God states it shows how much the line between the mission of God and the mission of His people is blurred. God is so invested in his people, so radically devoted to the covenant He has made, that to care for them is to care for Himself. His sake and their sake—and our sake—are tied together and cannot be undone.

One wonders if we think the same way about the church today. It is fashionable to complain about the church, to talk about its irrelevance, its failures. One achieves a certain moral high ground by pointing out the failures of others, and that high ground is addictive. But we need to (re-)consider this important truth: to love God means to love His people. It is not enough to critique the church, standing at a distance and saying "here is what you need to do." No, to love God is to love the church, to give yourself for its flourishing, to lose yourself and only find yourself again among its people. We do this for His sake, and for our own.

Wednesday, Dec 14 Hot Coal; Isaiah 1:10-20, 6:1-13, 9:1-7

The three readings for today are rather stunning, and they point at three distinct qualities of a prophet. In chapter 1, we see the great *boldness* of Isaiah, daring to call the leaders of God's people the leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah. Any time you compare Israel to Sodom, the intention is not flattery. In chapter 6, we see the tremendous *humility* of the prophet. Isaiah encounters the Lord and is instantly convicted of his own sinfulness and unworthiness. He knows that he has no intrinsic value, that his ideas are not important, but only proclaiming the Word of the Lord. Finally, in chapter 9, we see the prophet's emphasis on *good news*. While there are portions of the prophetic message that are harsh, even painful, this cannot be the end. Because the

prophet proclaims God's news, he ultimately must proclaim *good* news of God's ultimate desire of peace for the world.

There are many people in the church today who style themselves prophets. Maybe you are even one of them! Every pastor has at least somewhat of a sense of themselves as prophetic, as encountering God in a unique way and speaking God's word into a unique situation. But please do me a favor: if any person calls themselves a prophet and lacks any one of these three qualities—boldness, humility, and a focus on good news—do not take them seriously as a prophet. A prophet without boldness is no prophet at all because they lack the conviction borne out of a genuine encounter with God. A prophet without humility is even more dangerous, because they are prone to baptize their own ideas, thinking they're from God when they're really just their own invention. But most dangerous of all may be a prophet who never tells good news. This does not mean that prophets are supposed to tickle your ears, telling you what you want to hear and that all is well. It simply means that any prophet that cannot see God's goodness in the midst of human degeneracy is just not seeing God at all. Such a prophet may be a huckster looking to profit from your guilt, looking to obtain power by convincing you that things are so awful that they alone hold the keys to your salvation. Such a person, who cannot see the peaceable Kingdom that God is bringing, cannot speak for a peaceable God.

Thursday, Dec 15 Tears; Jeremiah 1:4-10, 2:4-13, 7:1-15, 8:22-9:11

Tears are a powerful thing. I had a friend once who rented a video and returned it to the store the night before it was due. The return slot, however, was misaligned, and the video dropped onto the floor and the owner never saw it. The next time she went to rent a video, the store thought she had not returned the previous one yet, and so she owed \$25 in late fees! She tried explaining this to the store owner, who was stonewalling her attempts. Finally she broke down and began to cry in frustration. Only then did the store owner give in and "forgave" the fee (which she never should have owed to begin with). The tears helped the store owner recognize her full humanity. No longer was she just a scumbag trying to avoid a late fee; the fact she cried made the store owner realize she was a real person.

We do not cry enough. A few days ago, I wrote about how we do not cry enough within the body of Christ. But here I mean we do not cry enough for the world. We evangelicals appear to be killjoys, scolds anxious to ruin the fun of the world. Of course, the world doesn't have as much fun as it constantly reminds us it is having. In reality, the world's situation is rather tragic: an addiction to youth, which is by its nature fleeting; an addiction to sex, which can never satisfy without marriage; an addiction to stuff, which costs money, which costs time, which means we can't enjoy our stuff we work so hard for. And we see the problem with such crystal clarity—it is so self-evident to us, that we just get so exasperated with those without eyes to see. And so we huff and we puff and we scold and we get angry, when we forget the power of tears.

Jeremiah wasn't angry. Scratch that—he was angry. Very angry. But mostly, he cried. He wished he had more tears to cry for his people. He didn't put himself on a pedestal and get angry at "you fools"—he cried for "us." He counted himself as one of the people and wept for their lostness, their ignorance and their blindness. We would do well to cry these tears, to weep for the tragedy of our culture, rather than to simply scold it.

Friday, Dec 16 Watchtower; Habakkuk 1:1-2:1, 3:16-19

The first chapter of Habakkuk is a series of complaints the prophet has against the Lord. Habakkuk first complains that injustice is rampant in Judah. When God agrees and declares that he will send the Babylonians to conquer Judah, Habakkuk complains again, saying that the Babylonians are even more unjust than the people of Judah. Surely God cannot abide injustice, nor stand idly by while the poor are trampled, says Habakkuk. Chapter 2 begins with Habakkuk saying, "I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart. I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint."

Habakkuk is not alone. He is filled with the same frustrations that have animated godly people forever—a sense that the purposes of God are not being recognized quickly enough. This is the same sentiment

that pervades virtually the whole New Testament, where the Christians are desperate for the Lord to come again. Though we don't generally try to hasten Judgment Day, Christians today often are struck with the pervasiveness and complexity of the injustice we see in the world, and we wish God would take swift, decisive steps to restore justice.

Advent is, in a sense, that kind of waiting. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God that Habakkuk and the prophets longed for; and He is the ultimate revelation of God we look back to in order to hope for the future. Every year, we remember and re-enact the prophets' desperate desire for Emmanuel, God with us, in order to rekindle that same kind of desperate wanting and waiting in our own spirits. We live too easily with injustice; and Advent reminds us of a world without Jesus in order to help us love him anew all over again, and to passionately long for his return to restore all of creation.

Saturday, Dec 17 Wall; Nehemiah 1:1-2:8, 6:15-16, 13:10-31

One of the more challenging aspects of Old Testament passages like this is the emphasis on absolute obedience. Nehemiah is a servant of a foreign king, a cup-bearer, when he hears of the destruction of Jerusalem's city wall, which brings great shame on the city. He's obviously sad at this destruction of a city so close to his heart and spirit, and so empowered by God, he asks the king for the privilege of going back to Jerusalem and rebuilding the city wall. He does so, fighting through many difficulties to rebuild the wall.

So far, so good. But the passage closes with what may be (to modern ears) disturbing stories. Nehemiah comes down hard on those who are profaning the Sabbath, doing business on a day of rest. Finally, he condemns marrying outside the faith, arguing that it is a compromise too steep for the people of God to legitimately make. Today, we consider the Sabbath an issue of individual conscience, and we certainly are not judgmental of those who marry outside the faith, even if we don't exactly recommend it. Anyone who would make too much of these issues is thought of as having misplaced priorities at best, or being legalistic at worst.

Nehemiah's message is unmistakable, though—obedience matters. It is as if Nehemiah is saying, "I didn't go to all the trouble of rebuilding a wall—restoring Judah to its proper glory—for you to go wrecking it with your disobedience. Obey the Sabbath, obey God's command regarding marriage, so that we will have God's favor and not wind up destroyed again." While we may not understand God as dealing with us in exactly the same way, there is an important point here for us. When we choose disobedience, when we live as if our actions are not important, we invite trouble. Just like God did not restore Jerusalem's wall just to let His people slip back into old ways, God did not save us so that we could return to old, self-destructive, self-enslaving ways of living. God gives us a new life so that we can enjoy abundant life by leaving all that behind and taking on new patterns of life.

Sunday, Dec 18 Scallop; Luke 3:1-20, 7:18-30

The seashell is an ancient symbol of Christian baptism, because the most ancient mode of Christian baptism involved kneeling while water was poured over the convert's head, probably with whatever was at hand, sometimes a shell. Here, the shell reminds us of John the Baptist, the wild preacher who came baptizing to prepare the way for Jesus.

John follows a tried and true preacher's formula: warn people of the consequences of their actions. "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees," said John, implying Someone was about to come along and pick up the axe, "every tree that therefore does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire." Predictably, John's audience was concerned. "What then shall we do?" they asked.

"What then shall we do?" The question rings down through the ages and is worthy of our consideration. A week from today is Christmas—a reminder of the Incarnation. God became flesh, invaded our world and today stands ready again to invade our personal world. Is he going to pick up an axe and take it to something in our hearts? Will we be burned away for failure to bear good fruit? How can we be ready? Before we think about John's answer, consider what we often do. When we want God to do a great work in our hearts, when we

want to be ready for Him, we often try to prepare the way spiritually and emotionally. We try to get our hearts in a certain receptive frame of mind; we read the Bible, we pray, we seek God's face.

These are good things, but they are not John's advice for how to be ready. John says the way to prepare for God is through action. Those with two coats or extra food need to give their excess away. Tax collectors need to stop stealing; soldiers must stop extorting civilians. In short, if you want to see the King, begin creating the Kingdom He wants us to build. Do not work yourself up, twisting and contorting yourself emotionally to try to get spiritually ready for Jesus' coming; instead, build a life in which Jesus will feel at home, and He will surely show up.

Monday, Dec 19 Lily; Luke 1:26-38

There is a tremendous paradox on display in this passage, a cycle which shows us the amazing way in which God chooses to use humanity in His work. Theologians are fond of pointing out (and they are right) that anything good that we humans do is because God has enabled us to do it. On our own, we're incapable of glorifying God, turning our lives around, or doing anything truly good. Thus, for Mary to respond to the angel here and willingly shoulder the burden of carrying the Messiah was something God enabled her to do.

Yet at the same time God makes His plan contingent on the "yes" of a young woman. In a very real sense, Jesus is only Jesus because of Mary's willingness to bear Him. Does this mean God would have been thwarted if Mary had refused? Of course not. God could have saved the world and incarnated himself in some other way. But whatever humanity was Jesus' was Mary's first—so we can safely say that Jesus would not have been exactly the same if he were born in another culture or in another time. I would not be *me* if I had been born to a different family in a different time—and Jesus would have been very different if he had been born in 16th-century England, for example, or 21st-century Jamaica.

And so we have a cycle. Mary can only say "yes" to God because God enables it, but God can only say "yes" to humanity as he did in Jesus because Mary enabled it. This may well be the most scandalous part of the Incarnation, that God gives himself so completely to His creation that His purposes become one with the purposes of His people (and vice versa). The mission of God becomes indistinguishable from the mission of the church (which ought to cause some real soul-searching and an honest review of church budgets everywhere).

Still today, God waits for us to echo Mary's "yes." Politely, in a gentlemanly way, God asks to be incarnate to the world through us. Mary, first of Jesus' disciples, says yes, and sets a pattern for us to respond to God. Yes, I will give up my future, my loves, my very life, in order to bear you to the world, Jesus, says Mary. May it be so with us.

Tuesday, Dec 20 Mother and Child; Luke 1:39-56

I love the beginning of this passage where we read that Mary went "with haste" to see Elizabeth. In the days before email (or phone, or even reliable mail service), Mary has to share this news the angel has brought her with a trusted friend. Mary can barely say hello when Elizabeth recognizes the supernatural glow upon Mary. Elizabeth instantly recognizes—without having to be told—that God is doing something mighty through her friend and cousin, and even that she is becoming the mother of God. In response, Mary sings her famous song of praise to God, for the good things God is doing for her and through her.

If Mary is the first of the disciples of Jesus, the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth here serves as a prototype of the church. Mary no doubt goes to meet Elizabeth still rattled a bit from her meeting with the angel. Any unexpected pregnancy brings the question of whether or not this child is indeed a gift or a burden—how much more so when the child within Mary is destined to be the fulcrum of history? Mary must have doubted whether or not she should have agreed to such a task.

Yet one conversation with Elizabeth helps Mary to see how glorious it is to serve God in the special way God has enabled her to serve. Elizabeth helps Mary to see how amazing it is to be the mother of God; she receives Mary with joy and Mary is able to leave their encounter praising God because she sees so much more clearly that serving God is a joy instead of a burden.

In the same way, we have the privilege not only of bearing God to the world, but encouraging each other in that task. Every one of us is occasionally shaken (or simply confused) by the call to serve God and share His presence with the rest of the world. We have the ability to bless each other through our friendships, so that through talking with us, others can see that serving God is really a blessing instead of a pain. We have the opportunity to strengthen each other for the occasionally scary task of putting hands and flesh on God's love in the world today.

Wednesday, Dec 21 Tablet; Luke 1:57-80

Anyone who believes Christianity is a patriarchal faith needs to wrestle with this text. Two women (one of them a teenager) have correctly interpreted what God is doing in bringing His Son into the world; on the other hand, Zechariah—a priest, of all things!—fails to believe an angel when the angel tells him that he will have a son. For his failure, the angel condemns Zechariah to silence until the baby is born. Finally, the baby is born, a son, and Zechariah is free to speak, and like Mary, he too speaks a poetic prophecy about God's goodness.

I used to feel that God was a bit hard on Zechariah. After all, he had every reason to believe that he and his wife could not have children, so the fact he didn't instantly believe the angel is not surprising. It doesn't seem to warrant the punishment of being silent for nine months. (Trust me, silence is always a difficult thing for members of the clergy.)

What if, though, the angel's action was not a punishment but an act of mercy? It seems to me that nine months of silence is exactly what Zechariah needed. There are times when our need to talk, our need to express ourselves, serves only to confuse the issue at hand rather than illuminate it. Zechariah could not express himself and so was stuck pondering the strange logic of a God who would use an unmarried teenager's son to save the world and a barren woman's son to pave His way. After nine months of pondering this, God's logic begins to make sense to Zechariah. In the end, he sees God's way for what it is, and he rejoices at God's plan and his own little part in it.

In the same way, perhaps silence is the desperate need of our heart. God's way is no less strange to us than it was to Zechariah. It is no easier to understand now how God wants to partner with us to redeem the world. We understand as well as Zechariah all the reasons why God's plan is foolish and won't work. We too need silence to understand the wisdom of God's plan. We need to let go of the need to express ourselves, the constant need to discern and proclaim God's wisdom, so that we can see—and embrace—that wisdom anew.

Thursday, Dec 22 Carpenter's Hammer; Matthew 1:19-25

Joseph is one of those characters who says very little, and about whom little is written in Scripture. This means that he is more open to interpretation than most characters, and so many writers have tried to get into Joseph's head and explore what he must have been thinking and feeling. Michael Card, in his "Joseph's Song," writes "Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours/How can a man be father to the Son of God?/Lord, all my life I've been just a simple carpenter/How can I raise a King?" Now, I love Michael Card's music and think he's one of the most astute singer-songwriters out there. But I've never really resonated with his vision of Joseph, hand-wringing, not sure what to do, wishing he had some guidance from God. I think I would be like that if I were in Joseph's shoes, but I never really have pictured Joseph that way.

I've always imagined Joseph to be a simple, rather decisive man. Not simple in the sense of stupid, but in the sense of singular, living life in one direction, uncluttered. Perhaps it's the fact that so little is written about him, but I think of him as being a man of few words, content to let faithful actions speak for him. I picture him as a man whose actions flowed naturally from his beliefs, without the self-doubt that I so easily fall into. Mary is pregnant, and because he is righteous, he has a righteous plan: to divorce her privately without subjecting her to humiliation. God appears to him in a dream and says, "Take Mary as your wife," and so he does, even obeying the rather difficult commandment to remain celibate for a good deal of time.

As a person who over-thinks things, analyzing often until I'm paralyzed, I'm grateful for the many people I know who live faithfully in this way. It is tempting for academics and preachers to think that everyone has to spend their time thinking about God from different angles; that is tempting, of course, because it is their gift and we sometimes wish to enforce our gifts on other people. But the reality is the call is not first to think, but to follow. I'm grateful for those who are thankful for God and who are immediately faithful without the hand-wringing I so often experience. Their lives exhibit joy and godliness that challenge me to live faithfully in the same way.

Friday, Dec 23 White Candle; Matthew 2:1-12

In my family, we were taught not to read the horoscopes. Consulting the stars for wisdom was considered contrary to Scripture, which teaches that God alone gives wisdom and that the moon and stars—and all created things—cannot ever satisfy our craving for God's presence in our lives.

In light of that, this passage has always interested me. Here were three men who did nothing but search the stars for wisdom, even though God repeatedly warned His people that such a search was fruitless and in vain. Yet for these three men, it was anything but fruitless—it even led them to the home of the Messiah. Further, they interpreted a dream—a suspect but not irredeemable way of hearing from God—correctly and spared the boy from Herod's bloodlust. These men read the stars, interpreted dreams, and came to recognize and even save the Son of God.

These men, of course, were not followers of the God of Israel. They likely had not read the sacred texts warning them against consulting stars for wisdom. They were merely searching for wisdom the best way they knew, looking for God honestly, with integrity, digging up truth wherever they could, chasing it across the desert looking for a baby boy. In the end, God honored their quest for wisdom. With God, it was not about knowing the correct facts about God; it was about cultivating a heart that loved wisdom like He loves wisdom.

Faithful seekers of wisdom always strike fear in the powerful. Here, even though these men had virtually no knowledge of the God of Israel, they manage to be some of the most pure, pristine and attractive characters in the story, simply because of their wholehearted search for God. In so doing, they reveal the selfishness and pride of those who opposed God's work. There is something about a person who has their priorities straight, who searches for God before anything else, that threatens a man with hidden motives. Perhaps this is a bit of what Paul means when he talks about being "children of light," helping to expose the deeds of darkness. When Christians become winsome, honest seekers of truth, open to correction and reformation, they cannot help but reveal those who cling to a tattered pride in their own achievements and righteousness for what they are.

Saturday, Dec 24 Manger; Luke 2:1-15

A manger makes no sense. Today, the very idea of a manger has become so connected with the nativity that we often forget that the little baby Jesus lay in a simple trough, where one put slop for the animals. We have had three babies, most recently little Lucy, and while we're not the world's best parents, we try to keep her out of the pig slops. A manger is no place for a baby, much less royalty, so a manger makes no sense.

A manger makes perfect sense. When you know the One in a manger, when you know how He is defined by self-abasement, when you know that He is glorified by descending, a manger makes perfect sense. Where else would one find the Son of God but among the pig slops? When you know Him, a manger makes perfect sense.

A manger makes perfect sense, too, when you consider that He came to nourish. There's something about the Man that simply made more sense around a meal, turning water to wine, feeding 5000 with a few bits of food, telling his disciples that the bread was his body and the cup his blood. He talked about food almost constantly, about giving a banquet and inviting the outcast, about how one must respond to an invitation to a dinner or be left out, about a wedding feast being prepared for us in a world beyond this one. This Man loved food and became food to nourish us, and still meets us today in a meal; a manger makes perfect sense.

A manger makes perfect sense, too, when you remember that He came to redeem not just a few people here and there, but to renew all of creation. His goal was cosmic: to create a people who are redeemed by his death and so live unafraid of death, a people who can go without fear into the world and burn brightly with his love, either through the fires of passion or martyrdom. This was not only for the sake of us who follow him, but for the sake of all of creation. “The creation waits with eager longing for the children of God to be revealed,” writes Paul, and we get a picture of everything waiting for us to realize who we are, everything that was or is or is to come waiting for us to come to our senses and see the glory God has given us. All stars and galaxies, seen and unseen, all philosophers and their ideas, all music and composers, chemicals, kangaroos, drug addicts, toadstools, colleges and nations, and yes, simple pigs, everything, all of creation waiting for this people who would follow this baby who right now lays in the place where a pig simply wants to see dinner.

And we waste it. We miss it. We see the good gifts of God and we plot how to use them to get what we want and we miss their glory. Like the prodigal, we waste what God gives us and long to eat the pig slops; and if we’re not careful, we’ll miss him again this Christmas even though he’s right there, in the slops, waiting to nourish us. Salvation—redemption—belonging—all these things lie tonight in a trough and cry out to be embraced, and—miracle!—nourished, and to nourish us.

Sunday, Dec 25 Chi-Rho; John 1:1-34

I have always loved Christmas. When I was a child, I was painfully aware of how quickly time passed. Each Christmas had such anticipation, starting in September, a magnificent crescendo and then so quickly it was over. Perhaps you’re reading this Christmas evening and the presents have been opened, the feast devoured and leftovers put away, the family gone home, the house quiet as an ordinary day in March. Another Christmas, gone so quickly. This is part of the Christmas mythology our culture has built up as well: in the secular world, Christmas is (in part) about childhood, which comes and goes so quickly and cannot be grasped or retained. Once it’s gone, it’s gone, but Christmas makes children of us all, at least for a day. But then the day goes, and back to the bleak grind on December 26.

This is a lie. A beautiful, attractive lie, but a lie nonetheless. John reminds us that Christmas is not timebound. It is an event that takes place in time but is intertwined with the eternal. Before time began, the Word of God existed; Christmas merely spoke Him forth in a way we could understand and love. Now that God’s perfect Word has been spoken, the rest of history makes sense: we see clearly through Advent how God’s story had been building to Him all along. But the birth of Jesus does not only make sense of the past: it makes sense of the *future*. This Child changes everything. Now that we know how much God loves us, that He would become one of us, our lives make sense in a new way. We become not mere accidents of chemistry, but charged with divine meaning, divine purpose. There is Someone powerful at play, behind the scenes, Someone who lends dignity and purpose to all of our human experience just because He Himself became human.

So December 26 is not the first bleak day of 364 more bleak days until we can celebrate Christmas again and recapture the fleeting joys of childhood. Christmas instead is the ultimate reminder that we are free always to live as children, to live in simple dependence on the God who made us, and who gave us His Word to nourish and sustain us, and so December 26 is yet another day to live as His child. Christmas asserts that the strutting and fretting we call adulthood is not real maturity; genuine maturity is found in those who do not have to strive for nor create a sense of self, but merely accept the new self this baby gives us, living in dependence on Him. Christmas is the ultimate vindication of the Kingdom of God, inhabited not by bleak and bleary adults but by children and those with children’s hearts. And we can safely be a child, enjoying life as a joyful feast, for all our tomorrows, dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.