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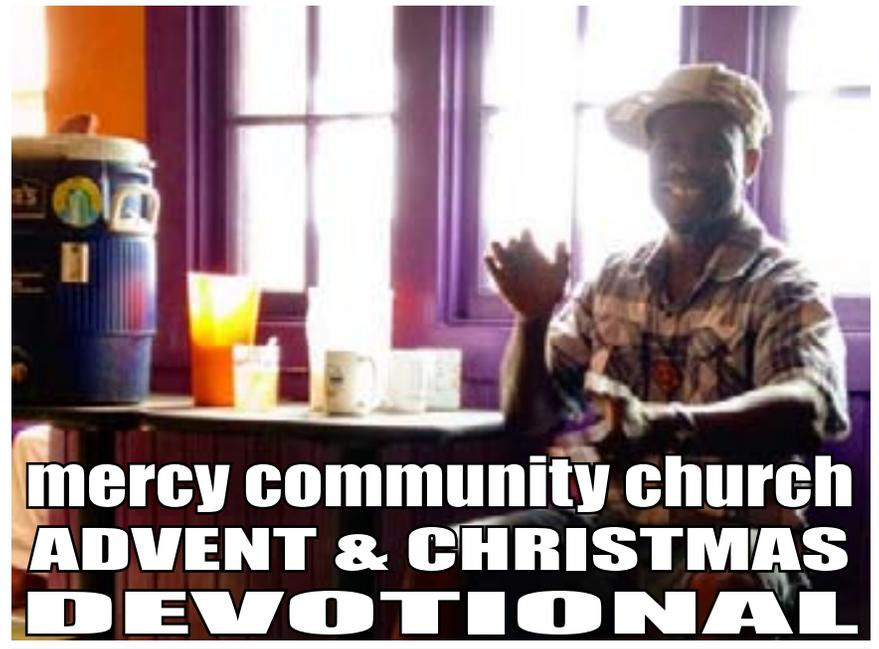
Thursday, December 29th

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 11, ‘a Savior, who is Christ the Lord’

The angel announces that the child who is being born is ‘Lord.’ Always and everywhere, in every age and time, this is our scandalous proclamation: Jesus is Lord. Make no mistake, to declare he is Lord is to deny that there is any other. Just as ‘good news’ signals the angelic message is political, the content of that good news—that a Savior is born for all the people, Christ the Lord—is an exclamation point. The birth of Jesus is a direct challenge to all other ways of organizing human communities apart from God’s justice and mercy. Caesar proclaimed he was ‘Savior’ and a ‘son of God,’ the unquestioned Lord of his empire. But we owe our allegiance to Jesus alone. We should, of course, work for the well-being of our nation—and all nations. We should vote, advocate, and vigorously debate the merits of public policy. But we must never allow such passions, however noble we believe them to be, to take the place of our call to a higher, transcendent, and fundamentally transformative politics—a revolution of God’s love, filled with mercy and justice, forgiveness for enemies and peace for the world.

Prayer Lord Jesus, our only Savior, let us give our only allegiance to your mercy.



Tuesday, December 6th

Matthew 3.1-12

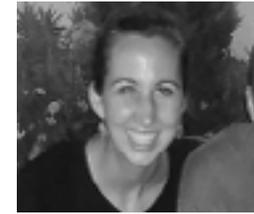
Reflection—v. 6, ‘they were baptized by him’

Since we are confessing, I like my routine—my daily rituals. These little actions—a cup of coffee, a tussle with my dogs, a fingered rosary on the drive to work—give me a sense of the order of things. They bring meaning amid the busy-ness of my life. At their best, these little rituals have a way of calling me back to myself, to the things I value, of reconnecting me with my heart. In the same way, the repentance for which John calls demands a ritual, a way of embodying in an action the conversion of heart and life for which we long. Baptism is just such an action. This sacred washing is a full body reminder that God can and will cleanse us of all the ways that sin and fear mark us. By grace, we are transformed, even though we have reached the end of ourselves and discovered—liberatingly—that we cannot transform ourselves. Baptism is, of course, far more than ritual; the very change it promises, it creates. It is a pledge, in the here and now, in life-giving water, that I and all I long to be, belong to God and God’s people, and that together we will work toward the Advent world that God has willed from the beginning.

Prayer God of grace, call me back to myself, and to you, at every sign of water.



Chad Hyatt
p. 11-17, 36-42



Maggie Leonard
p. 3-9, 19-25, 44-48, 50



Brittany Fiscus
p. 27-32, 34

Wednesday, December 7th

Matthew 3.1-12

Reflection—v. 2, ‘kingdom of heaven’

In my experience, people get really confused about the kingdom of God—and especially when, as we hear it here, Matthew’s distinctive language is used, ‘kingdom of heaven.’ (Folks think it has something to do with when we die, for example, which it really doesn’t.) But kingdom language is pretty much what it appears to be on the surface: God ruling as king in our world. Sure, we can still get confused about when or how—precisely because we can look around and it is not always immediately evident that God is ruling as king. But in a sense, that is exactly the point of the language: where we do not see God ruling in our world—for example, in violence and poverty, racism and genderism, exploitation and oppression—we are called to recognize our sins, confess them, and embrace the repentance that leads to that gracious rule becoming more visibly present in our lives.

Prayer King of heaven, help us to see signs of your rule in our world, and to turn ourselves and our communities toward your mercy where we do not.

Wednesday, December 28th

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 10, ‘to all the people’

The good news is not just for some. It is for ‘all the people.’ That the announcement is to shepherds is evidence enough of this. Contrary to Christmas pageant imagery, shepherds were considered dangerous outsiders by those who lived in homes. Could these men who slept in fields be trusted? What if they were to poach animals not in their care or steal from their neighbors? The religious elite considered them, along with other poor Israelites, to be ‘sinners.’ There was no middle class in first century Palestine. There were the very few who ‘had’ and the great many who ‘had not.’ ‘Crowds’ or ‘the people’ in Luke are just other ways of saying the ‘poor.’ That the heavenly angelic messengers would come first—and it would seem, exclusively—to shepherds with such earth-shattering good news only underscores the point that this is news for ‘all the people’—especially those for whom genuine good news is rare. With this announcement, God begins to re-gather a divided nation into one—eventually leaping the borders—walled or not—of any one particular nation in order to include everyone of us who will hear it.

Prayer God, no one is left out of your love; open our hearts as wide as yours. 39

say, looking for hidden clauses. You might weigh every word on a scale like a dead fish. You might pull out a ruler to measure from every angle in your darkness the beautiful dimensions of a heart you once Trusted.

I know the way you can get If you have not had a drink from Love's hands.

That is why all the great ones speak of the vital need to keep remembering God. So you will come to know and see him

52 as being so playful and wanting,

just wanting to help. That is why Hafiz says: Bring your cup near me, For I am a sweet old vagabond With an infinite leaking barrel of light and laughter and truth that the Beloved has tied to my back.

Dear one, indeed, please bring your heart near me. For all I care about is quenching your thirst for freedom!

All a sane person can ever care about is giving Love!

Tuesday, December 27th

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 10, 'I bring you good news...'

'Good news' in the Hebrew scriptures announces God's liberating work in bringing an exiled people back home. In the time of Jesus, the word was associated with events of political significance for Rome—a celebration of the birth of the emperor or a military triumph. The announcement of good news by the angel would have had a strong political edge for the shepherds and those who heard their message. And it should for us, too. But I do not mean the hyper-partisan politics of our day. One way to define politics is how people, power, and resources are organized. I believe the good news calls us to critically examine the ways in which all our communities, big and small, organize people (who's included, who's left out?), power (who's got it, who's denied it?) and resources (who has access to the necessities of life and who does not?). Do we seek to organize our lives, our families, our communities—and, yes, our nations—in ways that show we value mercy, justice, and the intrinsic dignity of every human life? The announcement of God's joyous good news calls us precisely to this rigorous task.

Prayer God of good news, show us whom we have excluded from our tables.

Getting Started

In our community, we practice an ancient style of prayer and Bible study called *Lectio Divina*. Through this practice, we read the Scriptures multiple times together when we study. The first time through, we notice what word stands out to us. The second time through, we attend to what phrase strikes us, and the third time, we ask ourselves what God might be calling us to do. For this Advent and Christmas, we have compiled a number of *Lectio*-style reflections to share with you, taken from the lectionary passages for the Sundays of the season.

We suggest you begin your daily devotion with a short prayer, simply and honestly asking God to speak to you for the day. Then read the text for the day before reading the reflection. Allow the reflection itself to serve as a voice from the wider community, as you prayerfully consider what God is saying to you. The prayer at the end of each reflection could be used to call to mind God's presence with you throughout the day.

Thursday, December 8th

Matthew 3.1-12

Reflection—v. 2, 'the kingdom of heaven'

The kingdom of God is easier to understand when we see what it looks like—what God wants. Jesus' way of being in the world, which we see narrated in the gospels, is a perfect picture of the content of God's kingdom. Jesus shows us what the kingdom looks like and what God wants. Jesus reveals healing in the face of diseased bodies and outcast persons. He shows us forgiveness in the face of violence and injustice, as a way toward truthfully facing the sins in our own communities and moving forward. He demonstrates how to respond to violence with creative nonviolence that re-personalizes and transforms our conflicts. Jesus shows us that peace begins by making peace with those who most suffer from the lack of it, that all of us have something to share with sisters and brothers near us who are in need. The 'kingdom of heaven' should not be some exotic mystery to us, the source of endless speculative debate. The kingdom of heaven calls all of us to respond to God's now-time work for justice and mercy, beginning among the poorest. Jesus shows us how.

Prayer King of heaven, you open our hearts when you open our eyes.

1st Week of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 2.1-5

Psalms 122.1-9

Romans 13.11-14

Matthew 24.36-44



2

Friday, December 9th

Psalms 72.1-7, 18-19

Reflection—v. 4, ‘defend the cause of the poor of the people’

Psalms 72 paints a clear picture of Jewish expectation for God’s kingdom by the portrait of an ideal king. The king is praised for a prosperous peace and the defeat of foes. But the key to the success of this king is ‘compassion for the weak and needy’ (72.13). The ideal king ‘delivers the needy who cry out, those who have no helper’ (72.12). This king ‘redeems their lives from oppression and violence; their blood is precious in his eyes’ (72.14). As one who works on the streets, not only does this psalm describe our hopes for justice and liberation, but it seems to understand the grinding cruelty of poverty—what it is like to feel the humiliation of ‘needing’ what others take for granted, what it is like to go everywhere looking and to find ‘no one to help,’ that oppression is ‘violence’ and that it kills all of us. This psalmist knows that a truly just king must value the life of each person who is poor—not just as an impersonal group or as the beneficiaries of some benevolent program. This is what the kingdom of God looks like. This is what God wants. This is precisely the ideal king we see embodied in the poor Nazarene, Jesus.

Prayer O Nazarene, teach us your compassion in the depths of our hearts.

16

I Know the Way You Can Get

by Hafiz

I know the way you can get
when you have not had a drink
of Love:

Your face hardens,
Your sweet muscles cramp.
Children become concerned
About a strange look that ap-
pears in your eyes
Which even begins to worry
your own mirror and nose.

Squirrels and birds sense your
sadness and call an important
conference in a tall tree.

They decide which secret code
to chant to help your mind and
soul.

Even angels fear that brand
of madness that arrays itself
against the world and throws
sharp stones and spears into
the innocent and into one’s self.

O I know the way you can get
If you have not been out drink-
ing Love:
You might rip apart every sen-
tence your friends and teachers

51

Monday, December 26th

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 10, ‘Behold!’

‘Behold’ is a great word, a wonderfully old-fashioned word, full of the hushed gravity that many associate with the Bible. Literally it means ‘Look!’ But literal translation is not the point. It is a marker word—there to call our attention to what follows, the ‘reality of the situation.’ As such, this old word serves us well because it is not part of our everyday conversation. I am not even sure how to ‘be-hold,’ but I know it calls me to presence—from which my fears and restless anxieties keep trying to lure me away. Beholding calls me to ‘be’ in the moment, present to what is now. And it calls me to ‘hold’ that reality, to keep it, as much as I am able, just as it is, without assimilating it into my own being—to allow the reality to speak for itself, to speak to me. To behold is to be present to a holy moment and to safeguard it for what it is—even if I do not immediately understand it or am disturbed by it. Fear will not let us be present or to hold the holiness of a moment. But we can be filled with a different sense of things, a different way of standing within reality—we can be filled with ‘beholding.’

Prayer God, help me to be and to hold, present to the holy reality of your mercy.

37

Epiphany — Friday, January 6th

Matthew 2. 1-12

Reflection—v. 3, ‘they saw the star they were filled with joy’

It was still distant, but the star stopped moving. The end was in sight, their long journey almost half over. The idea of following a star sounds so whimsical. I suppose there are some benefits, like never being out in the hot sun, but traveling only at night sounds dark, disorienting, difficult, and lonely. With so many stars in the sky, however did they distinguish them all? It’s astonishing how a little speck in the sky could keep them moving forward over thousands of miles. Hope can be like that, the smallest bit of light can inspire us to do the impossible. There are so many things that beg our attention—other stars that glimmer and flicker—but that do not bring the same joy as following God’s mysterious path. So much around us promises momentary pleasure—more so than ever before. In past years we had to work for the things that bring us pleasure, but these days, with so many pleasurable things at our fingertips, we forget the deeper satisfaction that comes with patience and joy. May we turn to God’s light and experience the joy that comes with God’s promise of presence and peace.

Prayer Lord of light, help me to discern your light, that I might follow it.

50

Christmas Day — Sunday, December 25th

Luke 2. 1-20

Reflection—v. 10, ‘The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid...”’

Today is Christmas, and the message of the angel speaks to uncertain times such as ours. The invitation to not allow fear to dominate our lives is a call to enter into and to help create truly safe spaces—for ourselves and for others. Through Zechariah, Luke tells us God’s people will be ‘saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us’ so that we might serve God ‘without fear... all the days of our lives’ (1.71, 74-75). We live in times in which it seems everyone is afraid. We even fear one another. But for the God of the Nativity, freedom from fear always begins first at the margins, at the edges, outside our huddled encampments. First to poor shepherds the angel comes, even as they are trembling in terror, and comforts them, ‘Do not be afraid.’ This message is truly for all of us. But first it comes to those outside any sense of protection and safety, outside city and village, upon the wild plains. We must respond to the gospel call to not be afraid any longer by going first to those outside, those left out, joining with them to create the safe places, the safe world, that God’s joyous salvation promises us all.

Prayer O Christ, be with us—a safe place for all people—and save us from fear.

36

Sunday, November 27th

Matthew 24.36-44

Reflection—v. 36, ‘nobody knows when the day or hour will come’

The end of the age is now. It’s not something to be anticipated. This reality was true in the time of Jesus just as much as it is for us today. In this passage, Jesus is speaking using apocalyptic language—a genre of writing that relies on poetic descriptions, celestial imagery, dualistic differentiation, and a wide view of history. Ultimately, all apocalyptic literature is meant to inspire hope in the face of great loss. Ironically, today we frequently read this genre as a damning indictment on the lives of others, and sometimes even ourselves. In chapter twenty-four, the disciples ask Jesus, ‘What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’ I suspect they were not asking when he was to return, but when his revolution and political reign would begin. They were expecting to rebel against the oppression and corruption of the Roman government and the temple authorities with whom the Roman officials were in cahoots. In the chapter preceding the disciples’ question, Jesus had been railing against the hypocrisy of legal experts and Pharisees and declared that the building would be destroyed. How will we know what to do? Will there be one light or two in the church tower to signal the plan? Will someone yell charge? Like the disciples, when I’m facing difficulty, sometimes I just want to know when good things will finally happen. I am so eagerly anticipating the future that I miss what is in front of me.

Prayer May we eagerly anticipate the coming of your kingdom today and everyday.

3

Saturday, December 10th

Matthew 3.1-12

Reflection—v. 2, ‘...at hand’

What does it mean that the ‘kingdom of heaven is at hand’? John means exactly what he says—that God’s rule is breaking into our world right now. It also means that the kingdom is ‘at hand’ in Jesus of Nazareth. His coming—his advent—is the coming of the kingdom. Because that was true in John’s day, it also true now. The kingdom of heaven can also be ‘at hand’ in how we respond to it; it is very literally in our hands. The kingdom John preached and Jesus embodied is ‘at hand’ as we pass the bread of communion in worship or a bowl of hot soup on the streets. It is ‘at hand’ as we clean and dress the wounds of spider bites on those who have been ‘sleeping rough’ or bandage a knife wound by an angry lover. The kingdom is ‘at hand’ as we wash dirty clothes and then share a laundered coat with a sister who shivers from the cold. The kingdom is ‘at hand’ when we grow vegetables in our own gardens to share with our neighbors and then chop them and stir them into a savory soup pot. The kingdom of heaven is at hand in every work of mercy that we do for one another in this wilderness of the streets.

Prayer O Lord, may your kingdom come as your people work hand-in-hand.

17

Monday, November 28th

Matthew 24.36-44

Reflection—v. 37, ‘the Human One’

I’m not going to lie, I find the designation, ‘the Human One’ to be a bit peculiar, if we have space we can talk about him referring to himself in the third person. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is the only one who refers to ‘the Human One’ or ‘the Son of Man,’ or as I would translate it from Greek, ‘the Son of Humanity.’ This designation is likewise used by the prophets to describe their visions. In Daniel 7, referenced in this text just a few verses before today’s passage, after God defeats four beasts that represent four empires, the ‘one like a human being’ (also translated ‘son of man’) approaches the throne and is given reign over God’s kingdom of peace. Being the ‘Son of Humanity’ both identifies Jesus as the heir of God’s kingdom as well as strongly places him in solidarity with us. Jesus identifies as human—in all of the brokenness and messiness that it means to be one of us. It’s precisely because of his humanity that Jesus can speak truth in love to us, holding us accountable as we seek to be a part of God’s kingdom.

Prayer Christ our savior, have mercy on me.

4

Epiphany Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 60. 1-6

Psalms 72. 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3. 1-12

Matthew 2. 1-12



49

3rd Week of Advent Readings

Isaiah 35.1-10

Psalms 146.5-10
or Luke 1.47-55

James 5.7-10

Matthew 11.2-11



18

Christmas Day Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 62. 6-12

Psalms 97. 1-12

Titus 3. 4-7

Luke 2. 1-20

or

Isaiah 52. 7-10

Psalms 98. 1-9

Hebrews 1. 1-12

John 1. 1-14



35

Thursday, January 5th

Matthew 2.13-23

Reflection—v. 18, ‘weeping for her children, she refused to be consoled because they are no more’

We get so uncomfortable by the weeping and grieving of others, but that process is so important. It is difficult to be present in those moments, there is nothing to do, nothing that we can fix. Often when we try to comfort others it is because of our own discomfort, not because they are ready to stop—the release is an important part of the process. Loss should be honored. Instead of silencing the voices of hurt and pain, I wonder if we are willing to hear the lamentation so many try to keep to themselves. There is healing in the sharing of the experience, there is healing that comes from truly being heard and that experience being honored. To work through our own grief and to hold the experience of others, we have to slow down. Together we will find our way through. It may be slower than we want, but we will find our way.

Prayer God, nothing will ever be right again. There are times when I am so scared and sad that I don’t know what to do. Help me find my release. Help me to have safe places to share my story. Help me to move toward hope.

48

Christmas Vigil —Saturday, December 24th

Romans 1.1-7

Reflection—v. 7, ‘called to be saints’

Paul writes to the Romans as ‘God’s beloved, who are called to be saints’ as if all are called to sainthood. When we hear the word ‘saint,’ it’s easy to think of the awe-inspiring and maybe a bit intimidating goodness of St. Teresa of Calcutta or even St. Paul, who writes this letter. Who could be expected to live up to those standards? But stepping into the basement room where our Mercy community meets, one sees a host of different, less-familiar saints who are probably more similar to the ‘saints’ Paul writes in Rome. Hanging from the kitchen ceiling of Mercy’s rented space are prayer flags honoring members of the community who have passed: many of whom died on the streets. These prayer flags honoring saints in our own community serve as a reminder that sainthood is in fact something we are all called to. Beloved, you are all called to welcome Christ into a broken world: be empowered to do the hard work of sainthood.

Prayer God, empower us to be unafraid and unashamed to do the hard work of reconciliation, forgiveness, and loving one another.

34

Tuesday, November 29th

Matthew 24.36-44

Reflection—v. 37, ‘as it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One’

It’s a bit disconcerting, I suppose—to compare the coming of the Son of Humanity to that of a sudden flash flood that, as it is told, killed off all living things on the face of the earth. I can understand how that might be scary, but take heart— analogies have their limitations. Here, Jesus is not drawing parallels about how the end of the world did look and will look, but rather to demonstrate the sometimes sudden and disruptive reality of the coming of the Son of Humanity. He means this to inspire the disciples, and us, to remain faithful and loving, even when chaos ensues. God’s kingdom is going to disrupt our broken systems and all that we know. We cannot predict when or how it will happen, but we are to hold fast to love. Jesus goes on to say, in chapter twenty-five, that the Son of Humanity came in the form of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and prisoner. Where there is hunger and illness, there is frequently unrest. And that is exactly where we will encounter the Son of Humanity.

Prayer God, you come to us in surprising and disruptive ways. Shake us from our comfort and open our hearts to show mercy to those where you are.

5

Sunday, December 11th

Matthew 11.2-11

Reflection—v. 4, ‘Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?’

Even from prison, John is a clear communicator. He does not make assumptions, but rather asks genuine questions and waits with patience for the answer. Our minds frequently concoct stories in our heads that are much more dramatic than reality. If I’ve recently been offended by someone and have a long car ride or hike ahead of me, I can play out our impending confrontation for hours and feel that it’s still incomplete. In reality, the conversation takes ten minutes. Recently I’ve started to worry that we are losing that ability to ask one another questions without anticipating the answers—our ability to really hear and honor one another. Somehow our own experiences best that of another person, when in reality they were never in competition. My prayer is that we can become a people who ask questions and who deeply listen to the responses.

Prayer Oh Holy One, you know our sighs when we have not words to pray. You hear our questions, and you always respond. Help us to hear more clearly and lovingly the responses.

19

Wednesday, November 30th

Matthew 24.36-44

Reflection—v. 39, ‘people were eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage...until the flood came and swept them all away’

It was business as usual, when the flood came. People were going through their daily routines and continuing to look toward the future. But what kind of a life could it have truly been without goodness, kindness, and compassion? As tradition tells us, the people who populated the earth were evil and only Noah had a relationship with God. God was left brokenhearted by the state of things. I can't help but feel broken-hearted these days. It seems very clear that so many of us, on all different ideological sides, live in a state of fear. Fear of job security, fear of terrorism, fear of discrimination, fear of harassment. My fear is that if we continue to act out of our fear that we will get swept away by it—swept into bigger echo-chambers, swept into self-righteousness, swept away by yelling, swept away by intimidation and name calling. And what's worse, what if those things became as common place as eating and drinking. May we not mistake that way of being for the one who sustains us and who keeps us safe. Turn back toward one another, turn back toward love.

- 6 **Prayer** God of all creation, teach us to love and be patient that our hearts can stay true to you. May we embrace diversity in all the forms you created it.

Monday, December 12th

Matthew 11.2-11

Reflection— v. 4, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see’

One of our favorite songs at Mercy is a version of the old gospel song, ‘Woke Up This Morning.’ One of the verses croons, ‘You gotta walk the walk, and talk the talk, you’ve gotta walk walk and talk talk...’ Likewise, Jesus need not convince others of who he was; he walked and talked who he was. John’s disciples could see it for themselves. Having just come out of a political season where people were trying to convince us of all kinds of stories that were meant to sum up the value of another human, I’m jealous of Jesus’ response to the disciples. Oh, what a world where we don’t define one another based on our worst moments and we lift up the good in others. I honestly believe, on any given day we are each doing the best that we can, no matter how grumpy we might be or the wrong that we do. My hope is that we can always work to widen our perspective and to find compassion for one another because we too have bad days. On our best days, when we are our best selves, we live with that same confidence that Jesus had. On those days we need not explain or defend who we are—we live it. After all, we only have this life to do good and to love others. We can live and love and walk and talk now.

- 20 **Prayer** Lord, guide my steps. Help me to walk and talk in your footsteps.

Wednesday, January 4th

Matthew 2.13-23

Reflection—v. 16, ‘he grew angry’

Anger is not a ‘bad’ emotion. Ever. Anger can be a gift. Which is not to say that we always respond well to anger, because we don’t. Herod for instance, was faced with a lot of stress when he got the news of the newborn Jewish king’s birth and the escape of the magi. I imagine he was still holding on to the fear he felt at the news of the baby and the anger he felt when he realized his plan hadn’t worked. After all, his own father was murdered by Malichus, a Jewish official who hoped to bring a Jewish ruler back to Judea (Herod was raised Jewish, but always seen as ethnically an Idumaeon Arab). His own rule had been precarious with the assassination of Julius Caesar and invasion of Jerusalem—and yet he was able to retake Jerusalem three years later. He submitted to Rome, but fancied himself a faithful and generous ruler to his fellow Jewish people. And then, an unforeseen challenge to the throne arises. Anger can indeed serve us, as can fear. When we allow anger to be felt in our bodies and acknowledged, but not reacted to, we can allow the emotion to move us in positive directions. Anger can help give us strength, energy, and motivation. If we deny it or allow it to drive us to reactivity, it can turn to rage. Similarly, fear can help us to become discerning, wise, and protective. However, unchecked it turns into paranoia and panic. May we allow God to use our anger and fear for good.

- Prayer** Son of Humanity, help us to feel the feels and channel them toward your merciful work.

47

Christmas Vigil Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 9. 2-7

Psalms 96. 1-13

Titus 2. 11-14

Luke 2. 1-20



33

Tuesday, January 3rd

Matthew 2.13-23

Reflection— v. 16, ‘When Herod knew the magi had fooled him’

I don’t think that King Herod was fooled. The magi did not set out to deceive the king. In fact, if anything, Herod tried to deceive them when he claimed that he intended to honor the new king of the Jews. Often we project our own thoughts and intentions upon others. Herod intended to fool the magi. When it did not work, he believed that he had been fooled by them. He may have felt foolish in the end, but that was never their intention. Without being malicious but with more time and information, the magi were entitled to change their minds and plans. We know that Herod’s deception was based in fear, for verse three tells us that he was troubled by the news of this newborn king. That fear, coupled with his newfound anger sent him into a rage—lashing out and devising the murder of thousands of innocent babies. Most of us do not plan mass murders, but many of us do lash out in destructive ways when our own plans go amiss, we feel that we’ve been made a fool, or our power is challenged. May we be less reactive than Herod, realizing that life’s circumstances are more complex than others trying to offend us. May we act slowly and with love.

Prayer God of comfort, calm our hearts that we not be angry, embittered, or reactive.

46

Friday, December 23rd

Romans 1.1-7

Reflection—v. 5, ‘Jesus Christ... through whom we have received grace and apostleship’

We find hope in the fact that Jesus is coming to bring healing grace to our broken world—but what about the call to action that accompanies this grace? Paul reminds us that the grace Jesus brings into our world inspires our participation in it. Though we wait for the grace that only Christ brings, we cannot sit idly by. As those of us struggling with mental health are ignored on the streets, and as those of us who weren’t born in this country, or do not speak English, are told we are not welcome here, and as those of us with black skin live in constant fear of being targeted or murdered because of the color of our skin, we are not merely called to wait and hope for grace, but are charged with the work of spreading a ‘good news’ that is better than our sad state of affairs. We are empowered to point to something beyond the systems of this world, where grace looks like finding value in all human beings.

Prayer God of grace, may we be ready to respond to your grace with action.

32

Thursday, December 1st

Matthew 24. 36-44

Reflection—v. 40, ‘there will be two men in the field. One will be taken’

This is not a Hollywood movie. Nobody is dramatically getting sucked into the sky. However, with Christ in our midst, some will be able to see the glimpses of God’s promised kingdom and others will not. Even those who are closest to us, those with whom we live, work, and love, will not necessarily see what we do. We are called to see the Son of Humanity in our midst, not to shy away from the suffering around us. At Mercy, when we talk about living fully in Christ, we acknowledge how difficult it is to stay atuned to our full array of emotions. Sometimes, they seem like too much. In reality, to feel is to fully live. When we numb ourselves—whether with screens, alcohol, purchases, racism, genderism— we experience a bit of death which can slowly take hold of us. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus describes evil being seperated from the good—the weeds are taken first. I wonder, if there are two in the field, might the one who lives in a world of hate and numbness be the first to kill. Such bitterness and emptiness eats us from the inside. May we turn toward life.

Prayer Author of life, turn our attention to you. May we not be distracted by our work but see glimpses of your love in our lives.

7

Tuesday, December 13th

Matthew 11.2-11

Reflection—v. 5-6 ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk... and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’

We live in a transactional society, many interactions between people can be measured. We take metrics on everything, especially the things we give away. I find that in Bible studies, we’re always a bit indignant about the stinginess of the tax collectors and Pharisees who judge Jesus’ actions, though in reality I’m not sure we’re much more generous. We grumble about those who get handouts and debate whether or not they really need them. Health care, cell phones, food, and transportation are viewed as things that ought to be luxury items. But honestly, when Sesame Street is only available on HBO, how can we really begrudge a poor woman with children for prioritizing cable tv? With pay phones being virtually nonexistent, why do we question the validity of the Obamaphones? When money is tight, how else is one supposed to make a doctor’s appointment, or get in touch with family, call back a potential employer, or notify a babysitter that the bus is running late? Mercy is frequently offensive precisely because it wasn’t earned. But then again, if it were earned, it wouldn’t be mercy.

Prayer Forgiver of sins, help us not to be offended when grace is granted.

21

Friday, December 2nd

Matthew 24. 36-44

Reflection—v. 42, ‘stay alert’

Time and again in this discourse, Jesus pleads with us to stay alert. I’ve learned a lot about remaining alert through my prayer practice. Silent contemplation calls us to cultivate an alert, relaxed awareness in which one can notice not only the outer world, but one’s inner response to those external forces without reacting to them. Finding a state of relaxed alertness helps us to cultivate our ability to witness, truly seeing all the relevant elements. We have to be alert to truly see what is in front of us, to be nonreactive, and to make wise and discerning decisions. To be alert we have to slow down. We have to have conversations with people different than ourselves and to receive their stories as their experience. We have to take time in silence—taking a break from replaying stories and stressors in our minds, from the constant stream of news on our various media sources, from being on the go, from the compulsions of our to-do lists. Jesus’ plea for us to ‘stay alert’ calls us away from those who would distract and deceive us from where God is bringing about God’s kingdom. May our hearts not grow cold with judgement, but help us to stay alert that we might grow in compassion.

8 **Prayer** Sustainer of life, may you instill a loving focus in me, that I may see your world clearly.

Wednesday, December 14th

Matthew 11.2-11

Reflection—v. 9, ‘prepare your way for you’

Preparation always seems to take longer than the main event. In the kitchen, chopping vegetables takes more time and energy than cooking. The set up and breakdown of our church services take longer than the service itself. The planning of a big party can take months, resulting in a few hours of fun. John had his work cut out for him, preparing the way for Jesus. If I’m honest with myself, there is a lot of work I could do in order to make my heart and life a more hospitable place for Jesus. Knowing that God is love and that God is beyond my comprehension, there is always room for me to grow in love. Preparing for God, I can practice forgiveness, cultivate patience, open my heart to humility, let go of expectations, try to understand others, attend to the lonely, and seek justice in the form of mercy. I’m glad that there is always something to do, I can never be bored, and grateful that I don’t have to have it all accomplished today. What’s more, I am confident that I don’t do this work alone—God helps me to do what God calls me to do. Thanks be to God.

22 **Prayer** Giver of life, help me to help create space for you in this world.

Monday, January 2nd

Matthew 2.13-23

Reflection— v. 14, ‘and went to Egypt’

Egypt. Why Egypt? I see that Matthew quotes Hosea in the next sentence—though Hosea seems to clearly be speaking about the nation of Israel during the Exodus. Theologically there are those who see Jesus in line with this scriptural reference as the one who enacts the entire history of Israel—living out its history and fulfilling God’s promises. It’s an interesting supposition, but I cannot help but see other interesting possibilities in the text. Knowing that the Hebrews fled from the slavery they endured in Egypt, I think it’s ironic that Jesus and his family were forced to flee there. Could this be a thoughtless reaction to fear—returning to what feels more comfortable but won’t end in death? Or is it an act of ultimate surrender and acceptance to God? And perhaps it points to the reality that fear and suffering are a part of our existence, but there is a larger, hopeful process at work. Sometimes we take two steps back to take one step forward. Or perhaps in this moment, God shows God’s work of redemption. The land of slavery has become the land of safety and security—nothing is outside of the saving grace of God. Perhaps all can be true at the same time.

Prayer Shepherd God, lead us forward with hope and help us to trust in you, that your larger purpose might unfold and that humility, acceptance, and reconciliation might become a part of our witness to your presence in your world.

45

Thursday, December 22nd

Romans 1.1-7

Reflection—v. 5, ‘to bring about the obedience of faith’

Phrases like this can make Christians squirm. Wrapped up in the word ‘obedience’ are all the negative connotations of ‘Christian guilt.’ Don’t tell us we have to come to church on Sundays, or volunteer, or be on a committee to be a good Christian. We want living the gospel to be ‘choose your own adventure’ style, where we determine how much commitment it is. But here we have Paul in his letter to the Romans blatantly, and almost embarrassingly, stating that his purpose for writing is to bring people to the ‘obedience of faith.’ But what if obedience was not associated with the training classes you take your dog to? What if obedience did not sound like Sunday morning guilt, but instead had more to do with admitting that we live in a world full of broken systems and addictions and ache for the humility to submit to God’s help and our need? In this season of anticipatory waiting, may we all have the humility to respond to God’s invitation to the obedience that brings hope and healing.

Prayer God, give us sustaining, guiding obedience to the faithfulness of Christ.

31

Sunday, January 1st

Matthew 2.13-23

Reflection—v. 13, ‘and flee to Egypt’

This is Matthew’s Christmas story—Joseph almost leaves Mary due to her mysterious pregnancy, a couple years later magi journey from the east to visit the child, and now the holy family flees to Egypt to flee political persecution (Herod wanted dead any contender for the crown)—as refugees. It’s hard enough taking a two year old to the grocery store, can you imagine traveling hundreds of miles through the desert with a baby? I cannot. But millions of people in this world can and do. Running away to a land filled with a different language and different customs wherein you are not allowed to work is a desperate response to a horrible situation. I cannot help but think that the holy family was just as devastated, scared, and lonely as many refugee families today. It’s not surprising that later Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. All refer to stressors faced by refugees—by Jesus himself in his first years of life. How quickly circumstances can change—one moment being honored by travellers from afar, the next moment fleeing for one’s life. How do we react when faced by those whose lives are in peril?

44 **Prayer** Traveling God, we pray to you for traveling mercies upon the start of a journey for ourselves and our loved ones. May we be that bestower of blessing when encountering strangers visiting for fun or fleeing from persecution.

Wednesday, December 21st

Matthew 1.18-25

Reflection—v. 18, ‘...from the Holy Spirit’

It’s much easier for us to attribute good things to the power of the Holy Spirit. When a worship service is deeply moving and without any major flaws—it’s the work of the Holy Spirit. When volunteers orchestrate a big meal—there’s the Holy Spirit at it again! These things are true, as the Holy Spirit is often up to such good and beautiful things. But what about when the Holy Spirit is inconvenient? What about when the Holy Spirit is persistently and relentlessly obnoxious? In this passage the Holy Spirit is at work in the form of an unplanned pregnancy, the fear of public ridicule, and an unwed mother. It’s not exactly the same ‘warm and fuzzy’ experience as that of a candle-lit prayer service. But sometimes it is the gritty less-than-ideal and inconvenient work that the Holy Spirit stirs us to do and we need to be attuned to it. Advent is a season of expectant paying attention. Is the Holy Spirit stirring us to spend less time in front of the TV and more time in relationship? In this and all seasons, may the Holy Spirit stir you to the sometimes less-than-glamorous but always worthy work of God.

30 **Prayer** Holy Spirit, stir our hearts and inspire us to your inconvenient work.

Saturday, December 3rd

Matthew 24.36-44

Reflection—v. 43, ‘if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert’

Why is it that we stay on edge for the bad things? Anxiety is a persistent problem for many people today—our fear can easily lead us to stay up all night and worry all day. But rarely do we spend the same amount of time anticipating the good. Somehow, the bad always seems imminent and the good is just out of reach. As Jesus describes the end of an era, and ultimately the ushering in of God’s kingdom, we cling to our systems and way of being. Change equals destruction of what is good enough. In reality, what God has dreamed up for the whole world just might be bigger and better than anything we could imagine. Oppressive regimes will have to fall if God’s reign is to take hold—heck, even the governments we like will be no more. Our work is to try and find hope in a future that is not within our control. It will require us to look with contentment, joy, and thanksgiving toward God. And to truly put our faith into God’s way of living life with love and acceptance.

Prayer Beloved, we know that you create beyond our wildest imagination. With hope, help me to surrender to you each day.

9

Thursday, December 15th

James 5.7-10

Reflection—v. 7, ‘be patient’

When I was little, patience felt like the biggest waste of time. Being patient usually meant sitting in a chair somewhere, preferably quietly (my parents’ preference, not mine). Patience has changed for me over the past few years. It’s no longer about being still. It’s about curiously watching something unfold—to allow it to develop without my interference. Things frequently develop and unfold better without my trying to force an end result. When I respond to my own anxiety or try and rush something that is in the process of happening, I’m more likely to irritate or hurt someone. And while I fancy myself a competent and detail-oriented person, I’m always amazed at what will yield when I let a situation unfurl itself. Then again, there are plenty of situations that need a little boost, a little energy—I’m happy to throw my support behind them, but I try to slow myself down in that process, allowing myself to engage the driving forces to ensure that I am acting in love. I am able to make the decision to do something, instead of feeling forced and reactive. Without having to control all the parts, patience helps me have greater control over my part. It has felt liberating to cultivate the virtue of patience.

Prayer Dear God who is above all time, give me patience to see your story unfold.

23

2nd Week of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 11.1-10

Psalms 72.1-7, 18-19

Romans 15.4-13

Matthew 3.1-12



Friday, December 16th

James 5.7-10

Reflection—v. 8, ‘strengthen your hearts’

What an odd thing to say—why does Paul so infrequently tell us how to do the things he asks of us? We can’t very well flex our hearts and pump iron. I think that strengthening our hearts means to practice being more mindful to the emotions that dwell in our heartspace. In prayer time, we practice taking time to check-in with ourselves, to notice what is stirring within us, and to allow ourselves to feel the sensation of that feeling in our bodies. The more we are able to practice sitting with our emotions, the more able we are to feel stronger emotions without reacting to them hastily or trying to push them away. To do that work of strengthening requires us to take time away from distractions and to develop the resolve not to give into our compulsions—to check our phones, or get something out of our bags, or adjust the thermostat, or wait until it’s perfectly quiet. It’s a process, but as our hearts strengthen, so does our resolve and sense of self.

Prayer Heart of our hearts, help us to turn to you, that we may become stronger and healthier and emotionally more mature and better able to do your work.

1st Week after Christmas Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 63.7-9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2.10-18

Matthew 2.13-23



Tuesday, December 20th

Matthew 1.18-25

Reflection—v. 19, ‘Joseph... a righteous man’

When Joseph learns of Mary’s pregnancy, the passage says he acted as a ‘righteous man.’ Even before divine intervention, Joseph is a good enough bloke not to subject his soon-to-be wife to public ridicule. Still, this story would be disappointing without the angel’s intervention. Because even though Joseph did the ‘righteous thing,’ he still almost left Mary high and dry. Instead, God interceded to say that God’s expectations were bigger even than those of a ‘righteous’ person. Joseph was called to be a part of God’s breaking into our world, and the messiness of doing God’s work in a human world: a world where unwed mothers are ridiculed in public, the homeless are turned away at the inn, and those in positions of political power lash out in fear and paranoia. God calls upon Joseph, and us all, to not just be ‘righteous’ but to be radically, absurdly, impractically active in the work God is doing. Fortunately, just as Joseph was by the angel, we too are assured that in this messy and relational work we need not be afraid, for it is the work of the Holy Spirit and God is with us.

Prayer Inbreaking God, empower us to be radically righteous this and every day.

Saturday, December 31st

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 17, ‘they made known the saying’

The good news we celebrate is not just for angels to sing. It is for all to tell. At first, the shepherds trembled in fear when the angel appeared and the ‘the glory of the Lord shone round about them’ (2.9). God’s glory—even God’s gracious promise to save and heal us—often fills us with fear. To enter the promised land is to leave behind everything that we know. To experience sobriety and recovery from our addictions is to give up sources of comfort we have long held. But the shepherds do not allow fear to decide their fate. Courage has less to do with banishing all our fears than with choosing to face them and to move toward wholeness despite them. The shepherds ‘go with haste’ to search out the sign they had been foretold. This is genuine faith in the face of fear, of believing the impossible just might be possible for us because of the greatness of God’s love. When the shepherds come upon the holy family, they take up the evangelizing—the good news telling—of the angels: they ‘made known the saying which had been told them concerning the child.’ Where the glory of God once terrified them, now they are the ones giving God glory for all that they had ‘heard and seen’ (2.20).

42 **Prayer** God, we tell the good news the angels sang: you have come to set us free.

Monday, December 19th

Isaiah 7.10-16

Reflection—v. 16, ‘...by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.’

Isaiah’s sign of hope is to point to a woman and promise that before her soon-to-be-born child can grow old enough to distinguish and choose between good and evil, Israel will once again be safe. But surely Isaiah’s words are merely poetic, for do any of us ever reach a point when we can say assuredly that we are able to refuse evil and choose good? If we invited Isaiah to a recovery bible study at Mercy, we might remind him that the work of ‘choosing good’ is always a process. Our relationship with God is not one-sided and full of magical life-altering moments. We aren’t going to wake up one day and suddenly be ‘old enough’ or ‘spiritually mature’ enough to not have addictions anymore. There may never be a time when we can say that we always refuse evil, but what Isaiah’s sign points to is that there is hope in the fact that God is with us in every moment of the process and empowers us to choose the good.

Prayer God of mercy, empower us today to the do hard work of choosing good.

Sunday, December 4th

Matthew 3.1-12

Reflection—v. 1, ‘preaching in the wilderness’

Every Advent, John the Baptist comes to us preaching like a wild man. We faithfully—or perhaps only dutifully—listen to the report of his prophetic actions and preaching. But I wonder if we really hear him. I wonder, amid all of our comforts, if it is even possible for us to hear him. No matter how much the good news may challenge us, it is still good news—and there is still hope for us to hear it faithfully. But to do so will require us to give up our comfort. Like those who initially heard John, travelling no small distance to do so, we must go out from what we know—and into the wilderness—if we want to hear what God is saying. For those of us living in the North American context, the wilderness is the margins of our political, economic, and social systems. In Atlanta, the streets are our wilderness. If we are going to hear and respond to John’s message, we have to be willing to go to the margins, to discover the places and the people that our systems have left outside. Only then can we, like Israel of old, hear a genuine word of hope.

Prayer God of the wilderness, you call us to yourself and out of our comfort.

Saturday, December 17th

James 5.7-10

Reflection—v. 9, ‘do not grumble against one another so that you may not be judged’

I have a confession. I’m a judger, a judgey person. Truth be told, I am typically most judgemental of other people about things which I fear in myself. If I judge you for wearing socks with sandals, it’s more so because of my doubt in my own fashion sense. If I judge your bad attitude, it’s because I’m conscious of my own moods. It’s as if I might catch whatever you have—that it will be brought out that much more strongly in myself. My sensitivities become your problem. I think this is why Paul warns us not to ‘grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.’ When I’m healthy, I don’t need to judge your behavior because I’m confident in my own. Judging one another really only breeds bitterness in our own hearts. So next time I see Chad wearing socks with sandals, as he does every winter, I can smile and appreciate his quirks—the color that he adds to our community without it being a commentary on me. Instead of judging others for our common faults, perhaps it can be a way for me to find compassion for both ourselves and others.

Prayer Oh Holy One, help me to find the mercy with which you judge us all.

Monday, December 5th

Matthew 3.1-12

Reflection—v. 6, ‘confessing their sins’

Our fragile sense of self leads us to deny the truth—even when, deep down, we know we are wrong. In the face of sin, we are inclined to run away, cover ourselves, and when all else fails, point the finger at someone else. But John calls us to confess our sins. The Greek word ‘confess’ means to agree that something is true. To confess our sins is to agree with the truth that we know deep within ourselves—that we are complicit in the evil of this world, even that evil which brings harm to ourselves. But it is one thing to confess sins. It is another thing altogether to label other groups as ‘sinners,’ without including ourselves as chief among them. The Pharisees are renowned for this trait, but the truth is, we are all Pharisees. We use power to try and set the terms of the debate. But Jesus shows us another use of power: to join with others in non-judgmental and authentic relationship, in solidarity with the condemned. It is the power of compassion. Jesus stands in solidarity with us, even in our sins. That is the point of the cross, in fact. For surely this is a greater truth: where there is sin, there is mercy.

12 **Prayer** God, help us not deny the truth, but confessing our sins, to find mercy.

4th Week of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 7.10-16

Psalms 80.1-7, 17-19

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25



Friday, December 30th

Luke 2.1-20

Reflection—v. 12, ‘a sign for you: ...a babe... lying in a manger’

Sometimes the signs we seek might be in front of us—but we miss them because they are not the signs we think they ought to be. The angel tells the shepherds their announcement of the good news is authenticated by a homeless infant. How can something so powerless, so weak, be the sign of something so powerful, so great? This is not the kind of sign we are looking for, but it is the kind of sign that God gives. It reminds us that the politics of God—the merciful way of organizing power, resources, and even ourselves as people—begins and ends among those who are most often left out and excluded. This is how God comes to save us all—in the fragile flesh of the poorest and powerless. To ignore this sign is to ignore God’s great desire to save us, to heal us, to give us new and abundant life. This sign points to other signs, that God is still found in those forgotten by our secular, this-worldly politics: women, children, and those without homes, as in the nativity itself. Can we see signs of life where we expect only death, hope where we presuppose hopelessness? Can we see our own fragile but beloved humanity in the humanity of our sisters and brothers—can we see there, in the eyes of others, the face of God?

Prayer God of the poor, help us see the signs of your presence with us.

41

Sunday, December 18th

Isaiah 7.10-16

Reflection—v. 14, ‘the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look...’

How nice it must be to have a full-time prophet hanging around, directing everyone’s attention toward fully certified signs from God. How often in the moments it seems that hope is lost do we believe that if God would only show us a ‘sign’ then we too would not have to be so afraid. But if we just had a sign, then we too would be willing to live the gospel as Christ prescribed! Not in the watered-down once-a-week way that fits into our schedule, but in that fully committed life-changing sort of way. The thing is, the sign that Isaiah points to is a reminder of Immanuel—the fact that God is with us. Pay attention: there are signs all around us that point to the truth that God is in fact here with us. When we take the time to acknowledge one another with acceptance and dignity, when we break bread together—these are all visible signs pointing to the fact that God’s very real presence among us.

Prayer God of wonder, open our eyes that we may see that you are with us.