

Welcome

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Happy Church New Year! Doesn't the sanctuary look great! My thanks to everyone who came and helped decorate this year.

Today we start a new church year, beginning with the season of Advent. Advent is not a Jewish holiday. It did not exist in Jesus' day. It was started by the early church as a period of reflection and remembrance of the gift of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Jesus' birth welcomed a new beginning for the whole world. Each week, we light more candles in our Advent wreath signifying the coming of God's Light into the world. Today, I offer a special welcome to our guests and visitors – we are grateful you chose to come and worship with us during this special season.

Sending with Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Go in peace.

Message: An Appeal to God

What's your favorite Bible quote? While you're thinking about that, let me tell you the favorite Bible quotes of some famous Americans, according to Rick Hamlin in his book "On the Journey."

Dwight D. Eisenhower "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" John 8:32

Helen Keller "*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*" John 14:6

Dear Abby - All of Psalm 23

John F. Kennedy "*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*" Isaiah 58:6

The truth of our life, the way of Christ the Good Shepherd, and the spiritual discipline to challenge the darkness of this world, you can see why these women and men are extraordinary in this life and the next. As we begin the season of Advent and a new church year, we are beginning a journey together. On our journey, we will make eight stops to see the extraordinary life God has created for us and then revealed to us in such an inspiring way.

Our first stop is Isaiah 64:1-9. This passage is an appeal to God. The prophet is appealing to God to save the people of Israel from the difficult situation they were in, just returning home from captivity in Babylon. Those returning home were finding life to be challenging as they tried to re-connect with those they had not seen for many years.

These difficulties are not unlike the difficulties service men and women have when they return home. Others who know this challenge include those who have been incarcerated for a time. For some of us, it may have been years since we saw some family members. When we do reconnect, we may find that things have changed. The person we once knew has changed and sees things differently from us. These challenges can lead to great conflict. We cry out to God for help. Our appeal is just like that of Isaiah.

“Awesome deeds we did not expect ... God came down, presence”

God did awesome, unexpected deeds to reveal God’s self to us. No one has heard, seen or known God’s presence in any other way. All other experiences are empty, hollow as God is not present. We feel God’s presence in our spirit and know there are no other gods, just one God.

“God works for those who wait for him”

God made a covenant with us and works for those who uphold that covenant, regardless of their circumstance or how much time has passed.

“God meets those who gladly do right... who remember your ways”

This is the type of relationship God wants with us. God comes to meet us when we willingly and freely go to God, doing good things because we remember God’s grace is present in all good things.

“Fire kindles brushwood...fire causes water to boil”

Fire is symbol for conflict and it burns up the debris, the dead wood of our lives – those things piled up and ready to ignite in a conflict. Conflict causes our spirit to rise up within us, like the bubbles that rise up when water boils. That’s one of the ways God’s presence is revealed to us, if we are able to feel it in the middle of a conflict.

“You were angry, we sinned ... you hid yourself so we transgressed”

When we don’t see God, we transgress. That’s the truth and we don’t like it. This is an anthropogenic image: God as divine with a human reaction – anger, for the way God’s people had turned away – intentionally and willfully, ignoring what God told them. We like to think of God as a beatific being, undisturbed by what we do, all-loving and all-giving. That sounds like an image of Santa Claus with only a “nice” list to me. Why can’t God have emotions and feelings? After all, if we are made in the image of God, wouldn’t God have made us to experience emotions in the same way God does? Without emotions, how do we love God? How does God love us?

We don’t like the idea that God could be angry with us or withdraw from us. But, perhaps we need to look at it from another view. Have you ever been in an argument, okay a fight, with someone you loved very much? You know how it goes: one party says the first thing, and then the other party joins in, there’s some quick back-and-forth

conversation which is becoming more heated. Then there's the first threat of some sort, followed by a return salvo. Now the fight is on! This continues for a time, but the sentences get shorter and shorter...perhaps even devolving to profanity and curses. And that point, there is a break, and one of parties leaves and goes away. Given that situation, I have a couple of questions: Is there anger? Yes. Have lines been crossed? Yes, certainly if there is cursing and swearing. Is the relationship broken? No, not if the relationship is a loving one.

We can love a person deeply and still get carried away with our own passions, making others angry. If you've ever been in an argument with someone you love and you want to stop arguing, what do you do? You stop talking. You might even take a break and go into another room or leave the house for a little while to allow things to cool off. That's an image that comes to mind when I read *“you were angry, and we sinned because you hid yourself we transgressed.”* In this case, one party – humanity, goes out and does all they can to get even with the other – God. When God showed anger for the hurtful things humanity did, our response was to sin even more. When God gave us some distance so we might learn and get some perspective, we got even angrier over his absence, went out and sinned even more, trying to get even in some way.

This is what Paul wrote about in Romans 1:18, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”* God's righteous anger burns against those who do things against God and then foolishly convince themselves they aren't willfully rebelling against God, that somehow, against all of God's holiness, they are in the right. Paul teaches us the truth of the matter in Romans 1:20b-21, *“So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.”*

Two metaphors show us what we are like when we rebel against God and convince ourselves that what we are doing is righteous:

First, *“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.”*

Suppose you had a really dirty cloth, like this [hold up]. And you need to clean a beautiful piece of crystal like this [hold up], would you use it to do so? No, of course not! You want to clean the cloth first. That’s a perfect description of the way God sees us in our sin. We are unclean, unfit for the wonderful work God has created us to do. We need cleaning, but all we can do on our own is to become dirtier and dirtier.

Second, *“We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”*

It’s fall and anyone who has a yard to tend knows leaves fall at this time of year, as the life-giving sap of the tree is withdrawn from the limbs to the roots, to prepare the tree for the winter ahead. The leaves dry, shrivel and fall from the tree. The leaves are then blown by the wind here and there, wherever the wind goes.

When we sin, we turn away from God, separating ourselves from God’s life-giving Spirit. God lives in the root, prepared to fill us with life, but knowing that we are about to experience a cold, dark time. Living in sin dries us up inside: our hearts harden. And we become less sensitive to God’s Spirit: we shrivel. Eventually, we fall away and we are carried here and there, wherever our sins direct us.

The saddest part is the way we lie to ourselves. Not on have we rebelled in sin, but we are masterful liars: we have convinced ourselves that we are living the way we are meant to be, that we are free when we are really in bondage, controlled by our sin. We lie to ourselves in two ways: first, we convince ourselves that we aren’t really sinning against God. And second, we convince ourselves that we really don’t deserve God’s love in the first place.

The first is just a lie. It dishonors God and it dishonors us. The second is more subtle, but just as harmful. When we tell ourselves we aren’t good enough, that we don’t deserve God’s love, we are buying into the lies of the world and evil. There are those here today who can testify to the power and evil of that lie. It’s the lie told to those who are oppressed because their skin is a different color or they are different in some way, in order to convince them they should just “accept their place in the

world” and not make waves. It is a perverse lie, destroying our self-esteem as it makes those who are oppressed feel worthless.

There is nothing further from the truth! If you have ever told yourself you are unworthy of love, particularly God’s love, you are lying to yourself and buying into the system of lies the world tells us. The apostle Paul teaches us the truth, revealed by the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:37-39, *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

“No one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you”

Because God is hidden away, we don’t see awesome deeds and we want to so we don’t go to God! There are many people in the world who have no experience of God. This is the heart of the prophet’s appeal to God for his people 600 years before Jesus: show us your awesome deeds! Don’t be silent! Please forget your anger and our sin. Remember, we are all your people. After all, you made us. Does this sound familiar today? We want to see God’s awesome deeds as well. God is still at work, but his deeds are smaller, quieter and definitely not made for TV!

“We are the clay, and you are our potter... the work of your hand”

We are not in control. We are totally dependent on what God chooses to do with us, shaped and formed by God for a purpose. The image of fire comes to me again as I read this. Fire is used to harden clay vessels so they can stand up to the ways they are used better. Kiln-fired bricks are much sturdier than those dried in the sun. Both are bricks, but the ones that are tempered by fire in a kiln are able to withstand more stress and pressure. That means they have more uses. You don’t find sun-dried bricks in cathedrals and skyscrapers.

We are the same. We are all vessels of clay, made by God for a purpose. Those of us who are tempered by the fires of conflict are better able to withstand the stress and strain of conflict. God made us for a purpose. We all live under stress and strain. The question is, “can you live under stress and strain and still love God and see God at work in your life and

the lives of others?” If the stress of life causes you to turn away from God, blown by the winds of temptation, you are like the dry, shriveled leaf, falling away from God. But if the stress of life causes you to turn toward God even more strongly, then you are still firmly attached to the tree of life.

No matter whether we have been tempered or not, there are times when we cry out to God for mercy but do not hear an answer. For those who know and trust God, they wait and watch patiently. For those who struggle and are lost in sin, that’s the true meaning of living in darkness, for we are filled with impatience, anxious and stressed out.

Dale and Anita Ryan teach us about darkness in a meditation:

“We know what it is like to walk in darkness. We know what it is like to live in the shadow of death. But we also are beginning to experience what it is like to see. The darkness of denial is giving way to the light of honesty in our lives.

Of course, when you have lived in darkness as long as we have, the light can be painfully bright. We see the truth about ourselves and our self destructive behavior. We see the truth about our refusal of love. We see the truth of our brokenness. We see old pain. We see current behaviors that damage ourselves and others. The light dawns. It is not a pretty sight.

But God does not send light into our darkness to shame us. The exposure may trigger our deep shame, but this is not God's purpose. God's light is like the light of dawn. It is a light that signals that something new is happening. A new beginning is possible. The light that God brings into our dark world is a light of hope.

Redemption is God's light coming into our darkness. The light exposes. We begin to see clearly the ways we have sinned and the ways other people have sinned against us. And the light provides hope. In the light we see the possibility for new beginnings.

Let us pray:

Lord, your light hurts my eyes. It is too bright. I see too clearly now. It is too painful for me. Help me to believe that your light is not to bring shame but to bring hope into my dark world. Light of Heaven, embrace me with your warmth. Heal me with your bright rays. Give me life. And hope. Amen.”¹

¹ Dale and Anita Ryan, nacrmad@nacronline.com, *Daily Meditation for Friday 28th of November 2014*

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV)

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37 (NRSV)

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”