

ADVENT WALK

December 2011

“The story is told of a South American tribe that went on a long march that lasted many days. After walking for a number of days, still far from their destination, they stopped and made camp for a few days before going on any farther. When asked why they did this, they explained that they needed the time of rest so that their souls could catch up with them.” (1)

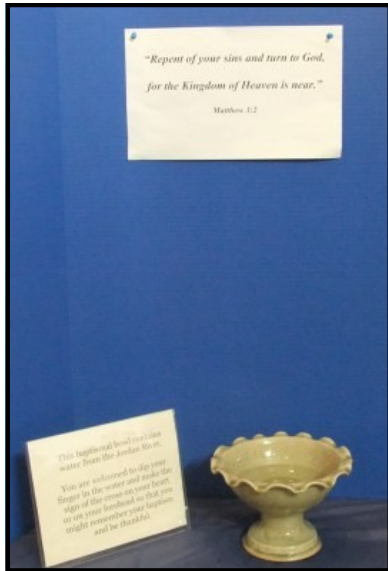
This story is an excellent representation of what this Advent Walk is meant to be. It is a time, in the midst of all your holiday activity, to stop and rest, and let your soul catch up to you. It is a time to turn the “holidays” back into “holy days.” To really consider what it means to you and to the world that God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. May it be a special time of meaning and blessing to you as you contemplate the coming of the Christ child.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus,
Master of both the light and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.
We who have so much to do, seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.
We who are anxious over many things, look forward to your coming among us.
We who are blessed in so many ways, long for the complete joy of your kingdom.
We whose hearts are heavy, seek the joy of your presence.
We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.
To you we say, “Come Lord Jesus!” Amen
Rev. Henri Nouwen

(1)Adapted from *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* by Wayne Muller.

Prayer Station 1: “The Need for a Savior.” (2)



Scripture: Matthew 3:1-3, 5-6, 11

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. He said, “I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Thoughts to consider:

“Repent” is not a word we want to hear at Christmas. We don’t want to hear about our sin and brokenness and the need for changing our ways. We want to bask in celebration and gift-giving and joy. But pastor and author, J. Ellsworth Kalas warns us how easy it is to lose sight of what Christmas is about. He writes, “We dare not lose Christmas even in music and pageants, and in talk about world peace. For although these things are beautiful and praiseworthy, they are extensions of Christmas, and not its heart. Because, you see, Jesus didn’t come to give us a sentimental holiday; he came to save us from sin. He didn’t come because we are nice people, but because we are lost people; and because if he hadn’t come, we could never be found.” Yes, we are a fallen, sinful people in a fallen, sinful world. That’s why the angel told Joseph to name the baby, “Jesus,” for his name means “The Lord saves.” And in our baptism, we are washed clean, named as children of God, and lifted up out of the darkness. In Advent, we acknowledge our need for a Savior.

Questions for reflection and prayer:

In what areas of my life do I need to repent?

What steps can I take to change my thoughts and actions?

Prayer Station 2: “The Annunciation”



Scripture: Luke 1:26-35, 38

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me according to your word.” And then the angel left her.

Thoughts to consider:

Life is full of unexpected shocks and surprises and changes. But trust in God gets us through the turmoil. Look at Mary. She is being asked not only to believe the unbelievable – that she, a virgin is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but to play a significant role in the salvation of the world. But how can this be? How can she ever make Joseph or her family or community believe her? She will be ostracized, perhaps even stoned, for they will think she’s committed adultery. What does God mean by all of this? Mary had to make a choice. In the midst of the fear and uncertainty and doubt, would she trust God, surrender her will to His will, and be faithful to go wherever God would lead her, even if it meant confusion and difficulty and perhaps even sorrow? Or would she deny God and stay in control of her own life, effectively saying “no, let someone else do it.” Her choice? “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Questions for reflection and prayer:

In what parts of your life and in what decisions, do you need to trust God’s will for your life and surrender to God in faith?

What prayer can you offer God right now that says, “Let it be with me according to your word”?

Prayer Station 3: The Angel Appears to Joseph



Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to dismiss her quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Thoughts to consider:

Joseph was a “good man” – a hard-working carpenter, full of integrity, righteousness and humility. He could have thought about his reputation and what others would think if he stayed with Mary. He could have let his pride get in the way and exerted power and control by having Mary banished or stoned, which was allowed by the law at that time. He could have been upset and angry at not being the “real” father. He could have disobeyed the angel. But, in humility and acceptance, he was willing to take on the role God gave to him and do it with grace and selflessness and devotion. He did not need to be the main character, the one in charge.

Questions for reflection and prayer:

Where might your pride get in the way and cause you to exert your opinions, your control, your influence over others?

Where might you need to step back and give others the space they need?

Is the Litany of Humility Prayer posted on the board easy or hard for you to pray and accept?

Prayer station 4: The Journey



Scripture: Luke 2:1-5

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

Thoughts to consider:

Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem, although they do not know exactly what the journey will entail or what to expect. It is a road that is long and sometimes wondrous, full of expectations and hopes for the future, yet at other times frightening and treacherous. But it is a journey of faith that results in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And we too, like Mary and Joseph, are on a journey in this life. It is a journey of expectation and confidence and blessings and love and joy, but it is also a journey filled with trials, difficult times, uncertainty, pain, and sorrow. But even as we venture forward into the unknown, we know that Christ is walking with us. As the Bishop of Lichfield wrote, "The future is always unknown; from one point of view we always seem to be traveling into the dark. But the Advent message is that the God who is Lord of past, present and future, has unveiled his plans in Jesus Christ. So, despite the darkness, we journey step by step in confident hope."

Questions for reflection and prayer:

How would you describe your journey of faith?

What helps you along the path?

What are other ways you can better sustain yourself on the journey? Times of prayer, conversation with others, attending worship more regularly, attending a study, serving others?

Prayer Station 5: No Room at the Inn



Scripture: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end.

Luke 2:7b

“Mary wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.”

Thoughts to consider:

Mary and Joseph go and knock on the door of the inn but are turned away because there is “no room” for them. We may wonder at how someone could push aside and shut out this young couple as they are about to give new life to the world. And yet, Christ stands at each one of our doors and knocks, wanting to give us new life. To be the light in our darkness. But too often we let things in our lives push Christ aside and even shut him out. We fill our days and schedules with activities and busyness. We find excuses and reasons to let other things have our time and attention, and thus we say to Jesus Christ, “Sorry, no room.”

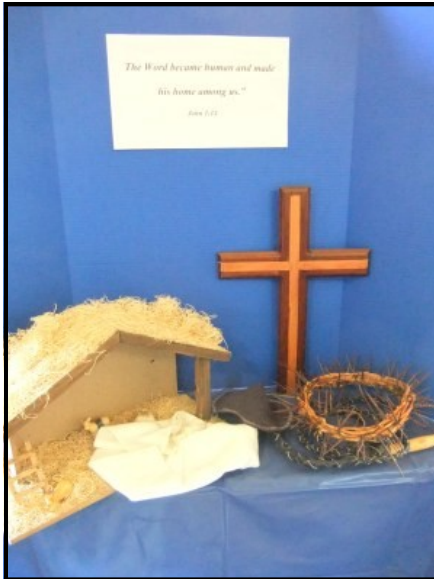
Questions for reflection and prayer:

Think of a typical day in your life. How much time do you spend being with God or praying to God or learning about God or serving God?

What is one thing you could do to simplify your life and make room for a deeper relationship with Christ?

What will you do to make sure that happens?

Prayer Station 6: The Incarnation



Scripture: John 1:1-5, 14

“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. So the Word became human and made his home among us.”

Luke 2:6-7a

“And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son.”

Thoughts to consider:

Almighty God was willing to come to earth and fully share in our humanity. To be born as a baby, and grow and play and experience life on earth. To go through what we go through, to feel what we feel – both joy and pain. Jesus loved weddings, he held children on his lap, he enjoyed sitting around a table eating and talking with people of all stages and places in life. He went to the temple to worship, he spent time with his friends and worked with his hands. He knew what it was to be hungry, to be tired, to have demands put upon him, to have people threaten and hate him, to be betrayed, to know extreme pain and suffering, and to die. And he was willing to do this so that we might have life. Life abundant through his words and teachings and love, here on this earth. As well as life eternal in his holy kingdom. Christ – fully human and fully divine.

Questions for reflection and prayer:

Why do you think God would choose to come live on earth? What does that tell you about God?

What does it mean to you that Christ experienced what we experience? How does that make your relationship with Christ more personal?

Knowing that we will never be “divine,” in what ways will you strive to be more like the human Christ?

Prayer Station 7: What Gift Will You Bring?



Scripture: Matthew 2:1b-11

About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him." King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, and he called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'" Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" After this the wise men went their way. And

the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Thoughts to consider:

The wise men knew that Jesus was the One who would bring the hope and peace and joy and love that the world so desperately needed. He was the One who would be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And they were committed to finding Jesus. Following the light of the star, they traveled the journey to get to him. And not only to see him, but to worship him by giving him the best they could offer.

We too are invited to worship Christ and offer him our gifts. It could be the gift of forgiving someone, the gift of stopping a bad habit, the gift of taking better care of the body God has given you, the gift of being more generous with your time or money, the gift of being more understanding and compassionate, the gift of prayer and study. The list is endless, for we all have something Christ wants from us.

Questions for reflection and prayer:

What will you give Christ this Christmas?