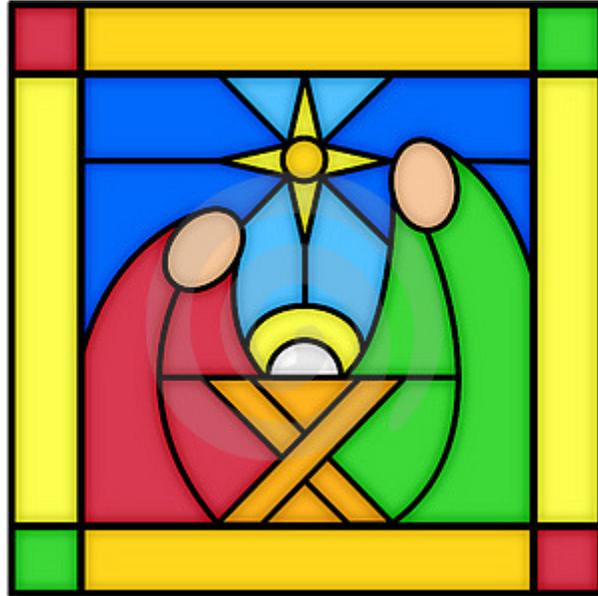


West Vancouver United Church
Advent Devotional Guide
2009



Journey towards Christmas
with reflections from members of your church family

Monday, November 30th, 2009

Please read Psalm 5

“In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”

Patience and Christmas are two words that rarely appear together in the same sentence this time of year. Whether you are in a shopping mall looking for that perfect Christmas gift amongst the crowds, parking the car in the busy downtown streets, or fighting your way towards the turkey aisle in the grocery store, patience and Christmas do not seem to work well together during this holiday season. Most of us can recall how patience and Christmas seemed like polar opposites as children as we sat anxiously, staring longingly at the gifts growing underneath the Christmas tree, being told sternly by parents that we had to be patient and wait for Christmas morning. Throughout the years it would be nice to think we’ve managed to become more patient and yet just the opposite is true for many of us, especially when we are asked to wait patiently for news of a job interview, college exams or medical test results. And yet, King David in Psalm 5 somehow reconciles his life of faith, with all its expectations and anxieties, with an ability to wait patiently in expectation for God’s action in his life. David practices the art and craft of prayer each morning offering up to God those things that are most troubling and waiting for God’s response in faithfulness and love. As we countdown the days to Christmas, both as individuals and as a church family, may God teach us once more this Advent season how to wait in expectation and faithfulness for the coming of his son Jesus Christ in our lives and this world that God loves so much.

***Prayer:** God of all generations, we praise you and bless you for your faithfulness to all who walk this earth. Teach us during this Advent season of preparation the faith-filled ability to both express our deepest longings to you and wait with expectation and patience for your answer. In the strong name of our brother Jesus we pray...Amen.*

Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

Please read Luke 19: 1-10

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

My first attempt at a Christmas turkey was a bit of a disappointment. As you might expect, Christmas is a very busy time for clergy. At the time, I was serving four wonderful little country churches outside of Sussex, New Brunswick. After four Christmas Eve services I was a little tired but still determined to cook that turkey the next day. My family was visiting from Ontario and on Christmas morning Ross was driving up from his church in Halifax for the big meal. It would be a full house (including two Airedale Terriers!) and nothing but the biggest turkey in the grocery store would do. After presents were opened on Christmas morning, coffee poured and the Queen’s address heard on CBC – I turned next to the major task of the day. The turkey somehow looked bigger in person on Christmas Day than it did in the grocery store. I struggled to get the bird in the pan and then into the oven. Even with my generous time allotment I was still surprised by mid-afternoon when the bird was clearly not done. I cranked up the heat and hoped it might come out of the oven cooked in time for my hungry guests. Just as Ross entered the house that day the juices from the bird overflowed the meager pan and started a small kitchen fire. Our little puppy ran away in fright and all hands on deck began to swat wet tea towels at the bird that somehow had transformed the holiday from Christmas to the flames of Pentecost. We had a feeling at that point that we were certainly in for a “supertime surprise.”

In today’s reading from Luke, Zacchaeus, the tax collector of small size, but large reputation, is surprised by Jesus’ presence that night at his house for supper. Zacchaeus had expected to remain a spectator that day but when he encountered Jesus his life was changed. Around the table that night Zacchaeus was moved to make amends for all the wrongs in his life and in the process discovered why a faithful translation of salvation is

wholeness. Jesus' presence at the table moved the little man from self-centred to selflessness and his life was made whole.

At Christmastime we refer to Jesus as Emmanuel which means God with us. Whenever we gather at the table with others, Jesus is present in our fellowship whether we are having a simple meal or a burnt turkey at Christmas. And just like Zacchaeus discovered the presence of Christ at the table can, and will, change lives for good.

***Prayer:** Welcoming God, you gather us around tables this time of year with family and friends to celebrate the coming of your Son in to the world. Help us to be mindful of the needs of others as well as thankful for your presence with us always. Amen.*

Rev. Laura Lockhart

Wednesday, December 2, 2009

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

"I always thank God for you..."

Suppose that Paul had through a miracle of time and distance helped to establish WVUC. And suppose that he writes to a local disciple and asks how WVUC manages during the "waiting time" of Advent when surrounded by secular culture clamouring for attention, much as history tells us the Church in Corinth faced. Here is the imagined reply.

Paul, Greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We thank you for your interest in our Congregation and its spiritual health as we work to be disciples of Jesus. In this Advent season with so many activities claiming our energy and time I too wondered how we would manage.

I have closely observed the Congregation as Advent approaches and I can report that many of our members have put aside their personal pursuits and concerns while they work at bringing Christmas to the Congregation and Community

The Youth are filling 120 "Goodie" tins for folks in a poor part of our city; the Choir is practicing special music for Advent and Christmas Services; banners are being prepared and the Sanctuary decorated; Seniors are entertained with a Christmas Party; Poinsettias are delivered to shut-ins; Children and Youth actively participate in a special worship experience, the Clay Event, and are preparing a Christmas pageant. All of these events require many hours of organization and Volunteer time and talent which is gladly and freely given.

I am convinced that these people have taken your preaching of Jesus Christ to heart and are strong in their faith so that the time of preparation in Advent is celebrated with joy and a real sense of fellowship as they share their faith in Worship and action.

In reply Paul can say as he does in his first letter to the Corinthians and as I do as a member of this Congregation that grateful thanks is given to God that "the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you and you have been enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ".

***Prayer:** Almighty God, we give thanks for your "good news Gospel". May we deliver it in many ways during this Advent season sharing the message of Your love for human kind. With Paul, we pray for Your strengthening in our daily lives that in our families, Church and Community we may undertake our seasonal tasks with good will, humour, and resolve, remembering that it is Your entry into History we celebrate. We ask this in the name of Your son, Jesus the Christ.*

Norm and Catharine A.

Thursday, December 3, 2009

Please read Mark 13: 24-37

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

“You’d better watch out, you’d better not cry, you’d better not pout, I’m telling you why – Santa Claus is coming to town.” Growing up hearing stories about Santa Claus is part of the Canadian experience. Part of the fun of Santa is going to bed at night as a kid, leaving out the milk and cookies and never really knowing the hour of Santa’s arrival. A number of years ago we took our children Vivian and Ben to a “Walk to Bethlehem” at a local church and the children (3 ½ and 1 ½ at the time) were absolutely amazed as we went from room to room experiencing the Christmas story culminating in a visit to the manger and seeing baby Jesus. When we returned home Vivian went straight to her bedroom and emerged moments later with a cozy blanket. Rummaging around in the kitchen she added a cookie and a chocolate to the pile. “This is for baby Jesus,” she said confidently placing the items in my lap. “The blanket is to keep him warm and I’m sure he’s hungry so the cookie and chocolate will make him feel better.” It was one of those “theological moments” for parents and as I tried to figure this one out Vivian added, “Now, how are we going to get this to baby Jesus?” Right. Now I was really in trouble. I could have quoted Mark’s gospel “you do not know when the owner of the house will come back” but that probably would not have helped. Instead, I realized that St. Nicholas had a standing appointment at our house on Christmas Eve with cookies and milk. “Well, why don’t we write a note to Jesus and Santa and have St. Nicholas deliver these gifts?” A broad smile crossed Vivian’s face and the joy of Christmas filled our home.

***Prayer:** Surprising God, thank you for the times and places when you show up unexpectedly in our lives. During this season of Advent, help us to remain open to your revelation in our church and in our community. In Jesus name...Amen.*

Susan S.

Friday, December 4, 2009

Please read Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

“Restore us, O God: let your face shine...”

Like many of the psalms, Psalm 80 is a song. In fact in this case, there is even specific direction given as to which tune it should be sung to. The chorus of Psalm 80, asks God to restore his people; for God’s face to shine on us.

Christmas brings to mind many images of light shining in the darkness of December. Whether it is all the bright lights that people string from the eaves or the bright lights wrapped around Christmas trees.

I think that one of the most amazing experiences of light, in particular the spreading of light, happens at our Candlelight Christmas Eve services each year. As the flame is passed from the end of the pews across from candle to candle, a place that has been dark is filled with light. As you turn to the person next to you and light his or her candle with yours, the light shines on his or her face. It is as if God’s face is shining through the light of the candle.

I have only experienced the Candlelight Service from the choir pews. It is a wondrous sight to see the one original light multiply and travel from the centre aisle all the way out and to the back corners of the sanctuary. That light is not a blinding, bright light, but one full of warmth, love and peace. As the light in the sanctuary is restored through the lighting of candles, so too are we restored in God’s love through God’s greatest gift of his Son, Jesus.

Prayer: *Gracious and loving God, as we prepare ourselves for Christmas, we thank you that during this dark time of year, your light still shines through us and touches the lives of those around us. Help us to take that light into the dark corners of our community and the greater world and to share its warmth, love and peace with those who need it most. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.*

Fiona W.

Saturday, December 5, 2009

Please read Matthew 5: 4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”

“You’re too young to be a widow.” It was November 27th with Christmas less than a month away and I was alone with my 4 and 1 year old sons. It had been a very tough year from the initial diagnosis of my husband’s colon cancer to his eventual death at the young age of 34. I had experienced every emotion during the course of that year from the initial disbelief, anger, frustration and overwhelming hopelessness to the final acceptance of a situation that I could not change. My husband accepted his fate with admirable dignity but was devastated that he would not be there for his sons.

I questioned my faith a great deal. I was angry that my childhood sweetheart - a wonderful, caring man was being taken from me just as we were starting our lives together as a family. Why him? Why now? I did receive great solace from the minister of the church I was attending and I remember his words which seemed to comfort me at my time of despair. He said we are born to a life where you may face many burdens along the way. God cannot prevent these burdens but He will comfort us while we confront them. Rather than feeling sad for not growing old with my husband I took great comfort rejoicing the years we did have together. Our loving sons remind me of him every day. He was there in spirit that Christmas and every one since.

Prayer: *Dearest God, when we lose someone we love it seems that time stands still. What moves through us is a silence, a quiet sadness, a longing for one more day, one more word, one more touch. We may not understand why our loved one left this earth so soon, or why they left before we were ready to say good-bye. Please comfort us and help us to remember not just that they died, but that they **lived** and gave us memories too beautiful to forget. And let us also be comforted knowing we will meet them again some day, in Your heavenly place where there is no parting - a place where there are no words that mean good-bye. Amen*

Linda M.

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Please read Acts 2: 43 – 47

“All who believed were together and had all things in common...”

The wonders of family and friends at Christmas! Every year siblings would return to the family fold from far-flung places of learning, work or travel. The siren call of family and this special time of year would draw them home to Winnipeg, a magical winter wonderland at Christmas. Homes of family and friends were a warm oasis lit by Christmas lights which reflected in the snow drifts. We would crowd around Mother at the piano and sing Christmas carols, feeling close to one another with smiles upon our faces. The highlight was Christmas dinner when the extended family would join us. Following the opening snap of Christmas crackers and of course, grace, a delicious meal would be enjoyed punctuated with storytelling, much laughter, warmth and love. These same feelings were shared on Christmas Eve with neighbourhood friends at an annual party – singing carols around the piano and much camaraderie. The midnight Christmas Eve service at Church which followed that party reminded us of the true meaning of Christmas in a candlelit sanctuary filled with music and the telling of the birth of Jesus. Christmas was, and is more than ever, a time of joy and goodwill, and an opportunity for sharing and community among family, friends and the Church.

There are many in our community that are alone or do not have money for food or basic necessities. It is heart-warming to see the youth at our Church filling colourful cookie tins with socks, mittens and toiletries, and delivering the tins by hand to the homeless on the Downtown Eastside. Also noteworthy is the

Endowment/Outreach Committee, with the support of the Congregation, which is providing food vouchers and gifts to two families this season through the North Shore Christmas Bureau. The support by many of the committees at West Vancouver United Church for deserving agencies locally, nationally and internationally is a meaningful example of the strength of our Church to create goodwill and caring in the broader community.

The joy, wonder and goodwill of Christmas time draw friends, family and the Christian and broader communities together. It is truly a special time!

Prayer: O Giver of All Good Gifts, we praise you for bringing us together in love in expectation of the Christ child and for filling our hearts with gladness, wonder and generosity. Thank you for the song you place in our hearts this season. We ask for your blessing of the gatherings and gifts during this season where we share your love with those close to us and in the broader community. In your name, we pray... Amen.

Mary Jo C.

Monday, December 7, 2009

Please read Hebrews 1: 1-3

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors...”

Preparing for this Advent Devotional, we feel privileged to have been part of our church families in West Vancouver, South Africa and our African families, we so enjoyed. It was a special time, preparing together for Advent and Christmas.

Once again we come, to make time, to be still, to reflect, to listen and hear once again, at a deeper level the Good News of God’s Love for all people. When our children were much younger, John used to get a real charge watching them opening their gifts, ripping away the Christmas wrappings which Joan had so carefully prepared and decorated. They were interested only in what they might find inside the parcel. The wrappings were simply a nuisance - which delayed the element of surprise and excitement of the gift.

In the same way God prepared His people as we read from the book of Hebrews:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our Fathers – through the prophets, but in these last days – he has spoken to us by a Son.

Advent is not only looking forward to one who is to come, but to celebrate again, the challenge of the One who has already come on that first Christmas Eve nearly two thousand years ago. To reflect on the meaning of that coming for us today. To remind ourselves of the mystery of that humble birth – that in that birth God’s word became an event in the stream of human history.

Maybe part of the meaning of Christmas is that we need to make it our message. The challenge is to respond with Joy to the meaning of Christ’s birth. Don’t let us discard this priceless gift as we would a Christmas wrapping.

Prayer: Transform us, O God, from being casual followers of Christ. May this season of Joy and Peace inspire within us a true commitment to His way and those values which enrich all life. Amen.

Rev. John and Joan G.

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

Please read Isaiah 40: 1-11

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever...”

One of my family’s fondest Christmas memories is one that also had the potential to be one of our worst memories. We had invited our families, parents, an aunt, uncle and a senior resident who had become very much a part of our family, as well as friends who were new to BC. In all, there would be 14 of us for dinner.

We found the largest turkey we could and started roasting it early in the day. By afternoon everyone had arrived and the aroma of turkey was filling our house. The lights on our tree glowed in the living room and we’d begun to sing our favourite Christmas carols. During one of those carols, everything came to an abrupt halt. All of the lights, twinkling or not, went out.

I rushed into the kitchen to see what was happening with the turkey. In my haste, I managed to tip the pan holding the turkey and drippings splattered through the oven. Within seconds, we had a glowing but alarming mini fire in our kitchen. Adults and children flapped towels, sprinkled the oven floor with baking soda and made a huge mess. So here we were, no power or heat, a half-cooked turkey and 14 people expecting Christmas dinner. My husband Peter added more logs to the fire, everyone gathered round the fireplace, chairs moved closer, children on the floor, candles appeared and stories were told one story after another of Christmases past, of memories that had long been forgotten, Our half-baked turkey forgotten, we rounded up leftovers from our Christmas Eve dinner, bread and cranberry jelly, and that night we had a feast that we still remember.

To paraphrase Isaiah, Christmas trees fade, poinsettias wither but the memories of God's love in Christmas lasts forever.

I wish you peace, love and caring this Christmas Season.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we prepare for Christmas we thank you for traditions and how they bind us in love. May we be ever mindful of your love for us and ever mindful of the needs of others, Amen.

Madelyne M.

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Please read Psalm 86: 6-7

"Lord hear my prayer: unto the voice of my request attend in troubled times I'll call on thee: for thou will answer send".

In the darkest days of WWII merchant ships battled U-boat infested waters carrying supplies to Great Britain, where food and clothes rationing and shortages of many necessities were a way of life.

Each evening in my home, heads bowed in silent prayer while Big Ben tolled nine o'clock. Then the steady voice of a BBC News Reader announced the 'shipping losses'.

On one trans-Atlantic convoy the merchant ship 'Clan Murdoch' developed engine trouble shortly after leaving the Eastern USA. It could not keep up speed and soon fell behind the other ships and their escorts. The Captain gathered his men to consider their options. One, return for repairs and join the next convoy. Two, lag behind and become a target.

Either way they would not be home for Christmas.

They turned and headed for St. Johns, Newfoundland, where after some days in dock the ship was made seaworthy. They were anxious to be on their way and decided to cross the treacherous ocean alone. During the next seven days and nights the Captain and his crew rarely slept. They safely arrived in port with their ship and cargo intact.

Christmas Day had come and gone

On a well earned leave, a young sailor gathered his gear and treasure trove of gifts and boarded a train for his home town. It was a joyful blessing that prayers had been answered: he was safely home with his family. Soon, the ceremony of opening his treasure trove was greeted with excited anticipation. Each item was carefully retrieved from his collection and presented with gestures of love and caring. In turn, the thoughtful gifts were graciously accepted.

The chosen items were not gold, silver or 'precious gems' but warm socks for his father, a brooch for his mother and silk stockings for his sisters. Finally, items for sharing with family, friends and neighbours, tea, coffee, sugar, jam, canned fruits and many other treats were presented.

Seven days later, the young sailor was recalled to his ship – 'to go down to the sea again'.

***Prayer:** Dear Lord. We thank you for our privileged lives and the beauty that surrounds us. Bless all who are separated from their loved ones at this time. We ask that we do not take our family and friends for granted and that we share our gifts of love, friendship and caring in the spirit of Christmas. Watch over those who are weary and in ill health, and give them comfort. Amen.*

Christine G.

Thursday, December 10, 2009

Please read 2 Peter 3: 8-15a

“...waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord...”

When I first read this passage I was struck by the theme of waiting. Waiting and what we do while we wait. As I was reading the passage I heard the roar of a rescue helicopter go over my home and I paused, as I always do when this happens, and silently prayed for whoever was waiting to be rescued and for the patient work of Tim Jones and his North Shore Rescue Team. Naturally, the theme of waiting was now stuck in my brain.

How was that person spending their waiting time? Were they regretful or content about choices in their life? Were they using the time to reflect on their lives or were they just sad, angry and frightened?

This bible passage comments on how we should act while we are waiting. It urges us to act in a positive and peaceful way. We could apply this instruction to our Advent season.

As Christians most of us remember waiting with great anticipation for Christmas when we were children. As adults we have fond memories of Christmas; but what about Advent? What did we do while we were waiting? Did we do something we think Jesus would be proud of? Will we look back with satisfaction at our actions during Advent? Maybe this season we can contemplate how best to spend our waiting time.

***Prayer:** God of surprises, help us to remain open to your loving and grace filled presence during this hectic and stressful season. Amen.*

Katherine I.

Friday, December 11, 2009

Please Read Psalm 126

“The Lord has done great things for us...”

This Psalm is one of a collection of fifteen Psalms (120-134) in a handbook for use in harvest pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple. When I read it I am reminded of a more familiar psalm in the family: “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord” (Ps. 122). How often have we heard similar words calling us to worship? The Psalms are the familiar hymns of the Temple, as important to the pilgrim as the Carols are to us at Christmas, the Hallelujah Chorus at Easter and the great Hymns of the Faith that stir our hearts. Entering the Temple, or joining in congregational worship offers more than present good feelings. In Psalm 126, pilgrims are reminded of the joyful return from captivity, of their vindication in the eyes of the oppressors and a dream fulfilled. The festival becomes a celebration of present blessings, deliverances in the past and covenant renewal for the future. Our celebration of Christmas in the Church gives opportunity for all three. Our “psalms” will be “Once in Royal David’s City”, “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, “Away in a Manger”, and “Joy to The World”. In our homes, we will welcome our scattered families to a feast and be reminded of earlier times of fellowship inspired by the birth of Jesus and the memoirs of Luke and Matthew. We will return to the fields of service and once again increase the harvest of followers of Jesus.

***Prayer:** Dear God who loves us with an everlasting love, we thank you for today. As we prepare for the celebration of Jesus’ birthday, may we know the blessing of your Spirit and grow more loving every day. Amen.*

Rev. Dr. Paul M.

Saturday, December 12, 2009

Please read Psalm 46

“Be still and know that I am God...”

This is a memory from many years ago when I was home to spend the holidays with my family in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Typically, that Christmas Eve was cold and blustery with two feet of snow on the ground and more beginning to fall. After a family dinner, my brother, sister-in-law and I headed out into the wind and snow to deliver gifts and later to attend the late Christmas Eve service at Central United Church. The sanctuary was filled with families...the children (who had been allowed to attend at such a late hour), were barely able to contain their excitement so there was a happy hum of anticipation in the air. I am sure that they (the children) could scarcely wait to get back to their warm homes, to await the arrival of Santa Claus.

The service itself was one of carols and readings (as I recall) however I was surprised and delighted when at the conclusion, the whole congregation was invited to come to the front of the sanctuary. In single file, or in family groups, we walked forward to receive a plain glass containing a lighted votive candle – our Christmas candle to take out into the dark night. We walked out into a night that had been transformed. The wind had died down and the snow had stopped falling; the sky was clear and starry, a perfect Christmas Eve.

What I remember most, though, was the stillness – although an entire church full of people had spilled out onto the freshly shoveled sidewalk, not a person was speaking and the whole world seemed to have gone silent and hushed. Lit candles bobbed away as folks silently made their way home, hands over the top of their glasses to keep the candles burning. WE, too, kept our flames alive until we were back in our own home at which time the candles were placed with care on our old, upright piano, where they burned peacefully all night.

It was that very silence and quiet which left me in such awe...and, I wondered, was it as silent and hushed that time long ago, when the baby Jesus entered our world? Had that same dark sky, lit by brightly shining stars, looked down on the manger scene below? It must have been so!

Prayer: Loving God, help us remember the birth of Jesus that we may share in the song of the angles, the gladness of the shepherds and worship of the wise men. Amen.

(prayer by RL Stevenson)

Jennie W.

Sunday, December 13, 2009

Please read Matthew 2: 2-11

“We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Three years ago, my daughter, Janet, and her husband and family invited us to join them for the Christmas holidays at their home in Whistler. She wanted us to be ready to go out at 6 o'clock on Christmas Eve. There, in front of the fireplace, we all stood in line and she gave us beautifully wrapped gifts of a scarf and large throw (blanket), all the same pattern and colour.

We drove to the bottom of Blackcomb Mountain and got on a large sled, pulled by two large Clydesdale horses who had jingle bells attached to their harnesses.

Off we went, warmly wrapped in our new scarves and throws, and in the biting cold, rode through the woods to the top of a lookout peak.

The stars were shining so brightly. It was indeed a “deep and crisp and even” moment.

We sang “We Three Kings of Orient Are, bearing gifts we travel affair, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. Ohhhh, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

Then as we looked down at the clear vision below of the Village of Whistler, the snow suddenly began to fall. Thick, white clumps landed on our upturned faces, there to mingle with our tears of joy!

Prayer: *Gracious God, you are the giver of every good gift. Grant us the wisdom to both give and receive with the grace of Christ. Amen.*

Mona C.

Monday, December 14, 2009

Please read Exodus 20: 1-21

The Ten Commandments

My sister and I were very close in age, so we were pals as well as siblings which was a very good thing since the first years of our lives we lived in isolation from other children. Our house (a converted store on busy Arbutus Street) was no place for children to play except in the fenced back yard, leaving my sister and I to fend for ourselves. As pals we occasionally ended up in a spat about something: she was invading my space in the sandbox or vice versa. Of course, as the season of Christmas approached our parents reminded us that if we didn't play nicely together, Santa might by pass our house. The radio confirmed this reality that Santa knew everything, every time the "You better watch out" song was played. "He knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!" That song was played and referred to so often as we were growing up that I can still sing it today. I must confess I sang it to our child; and it worked!

Israel, while frightened by the awesome presence of God, had the "Thou shalt nots," rather than a song about Santa Claus to guide their behaviour. When terrorized by the Holy Presence, Moses encouraged them to relax, just follow the rules; they would be fine. God had given the "Ten" as a gift. No one ever again had to worry about behaviour.

Each approaching Christmas season, the lights, music and smells remind us that Christmas is all about gifting. And the main gift is not the Chanel perfume, the new socks or another ghastly tie. It is the confirmation that in spite of our behaviour God has provided a means to forgive and embrace us, making things right. The birth of Jesus is more than just about a baby. It is about how to live in our sandbox – in loving God and one another.

Prayer: *God, we are grateful for your gifting ways. Instead of wondering what we might get You for Christmas, You pre-empt us with a gift so perfect and so liberating. You show us again and again what joy there is in being loved by You and what immense transformation there can be when we extend that love to one another. Be present with us as we celebrate this wonderful gift. Amen*

Rev. Dal M.

Tuesday, December 15, 2009

Please read Luke 14: 15-24

"Someone gave a great dinner and invited many..."

Christmas Day dinner was always a busy time around our house with many relatives and lots of children. What a different feeling I had one year when I was back in England visiting my Aunt who lived alone after the death of her husband. My Aunt lived in the beautiful seaside town of Felixstowe, a short drive from Ipswich. Christmas Day arrived and I went with my Aunt out for dinner not knowing what to expect. It turns out my Aunt had a tradition of spending Christmas dinner with a curious assortment of friends including a number of "spinsters" and a married couple. We were ushered into the dining room which, due to a lack of central heat, was colder than life in the far north of Canada. You could almost see your breath as we gathered around the table wearing sweaters and trying not to let our hands shake. The hostess buzzed around the room in a flurry of activity but unfortunately the food was cold as soon as it hit our plates. I leaned over to my aunt and asked, "Where's the cranberry sauce?" "Well dear," she replied in her proper English accent, "we don't mix savoury and sweet in this country." What a curious Christmas dinner indeed! And yet, like the parable of the Banquet in Luke's gospel we know that Jesus always gathered a curious assortment of characters around a table for food, faith and fellowship. This tradition continues every Christmas dinner in all of our homes. Who might you invite to the Christmas banquet this year to help remind someone feeling lost or lonely that they are dearly loved by God?

Prayer: God of grace and God of glory, in this season of Christmas help us to be open to your presence as we provide nourishment and care to those who sit at our table. Amen.

Betty T.

Wednesday, December 16, 2009

Please read Luke 1: 47-55 - Mary's Song

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."

We have a dear friend who was a church organist for 65 years. In addition to his Presbyterian Church position, he also played the organ at a Jewish synagogue for several decades. Gerry and I were expecting our first child, and I was due within the next 2 weeks. My back hurt almost constantly, my skin was stretched beyond what I thought was possible, and I was heartily sick of wearing the same clothes yet again. I selfishly made sure that Gerry suffered along with me.

One Sabbath evening we decided to go to the synagogue and hear our friend play organ. As we entered the synagogue we were greeted by an old, wrinkled, Jewish man. He greeted me with the words "That's what I love to see, a good and beautiful Jewish girl going to synagogue on the Sabbath". We didn't have the heart to tell him we were not even Jewish. He asked when the baby was due, and ended the conversation by saying "You never know, it might be the Messiah!" Instantly I was flooded with an amazed joy, my back ache totally eclipsed and forgotten. His words opened up an unexpected realm of possibility. Being pregnant with our baby was taken out of the everyday humdrum into a place of exciting possibility! As a Christian I already knew Jesus as the Messiah, but my inner being recognized and responded to the hope and longing in this Jewish man's voice. Being "with child" was a miracle that might bring in the long-awaited Jewish messiah.

Mary's song - called the Magnificat - is similar to Hannah's song in the Old Testament book of Daniel. At the heart of Mary's song is her deep understanding that there can be profound meaning behind the ordinary aspects of life. When we really look, with eyes of joy and amazement, our world turns upside down with possibility. Mary shows us how gratitude, humility are used by God to affect important change in the world around us.

Prayer: Dear God, as we come together with friends and family, help us to consciously bring joy and amazement into our everyday world. Teach us to look for Your presence in our lives, and see Your reflection in the presence of those around us. Amen.

Cora vW.

Thursday, December 17, 2009

Please read 1 Thess. 5: 16-24

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..."

My parents were married in 1932 at the height of the depression. Both were in their early twenties. No work was available in the Ottawa Valley, so they moved to northern Ontario where mining towns were doing relatively well. Dad's first job was a clerk in a hardware store. My sister was born ten months after they were married, and I arrived seventeen months later (my brother was born after more than three years). As a result of these humble beginnings, my family never had much of this world's goods, so Christmas presents were usually something we three children needed anyway – like a snowsuit, winter boots or second-hand skates. Sometimes relatives gave us new mitts that were store-bought – what a treat! Stockings (remember the brown ribbed ones we girls wore back in the thirties and forties?) were heavy with apples and oranges and a few little things such as crayons and colouring books. With no television to hype us up, we heard only a little about Santa Claus from other children. There was no middle of the night visit from Santa; we were told he was like a fairy-tale person who represented the spirit of giving at Christmas time. The focus was much more on the 'real' Christmas story of the birth of Jesus. Even though we had very little of life's material goods, we weren't aware that we were 'poor'. I still remember the exciting anticipation and the wonderful, happy Christmases of my childhood.

Prayer: God of abundance, thank you for all the blessings in our lives. Help us to always live with an attitude of gratitude in this world you love so much. In Jesus name...Amen.

Elinor M.

Friday, December 18, 2009

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

"...He came as a witness to...that light..."

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not that light, but came to bear witness to the light.

Proclamation of the coming of Christ

We are aware of a new exciting time ahead of us as Christmas approaches. With the special gifts of the season and the expectation of the gift of love made flesh in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. This precious gift is truly amazing and above all others, as it enables us to have the love of God in our busy lives.

John the Baptist preached that one would come who was greater by far than him, showing us a humble awareness of the greatness of Jesus. He fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah that this would come to pass. We are also humbled by the magnitude of this gift of love given to us.

One Christmas, at our church, the girls in CGIT were conducting a worship service in the chapel. Everyone was very excited to be taking part in this and all were very nervous as it was attended by the Provincial representatives of the group. As often happens, nervous young girls can be overcome with fits of giggles and of course this was a part of the program. They were humbled knowing that others were far more able to lead this service but with the joyful enthusiasm of the young it was successful. Truly it was a highlight in all their lives and a real blessing to all who attended.

Like children we are all aware of the amazing love that Christmas exemplifies in our lives, the special feelings of happiness and joy at this very exciting time. With thankfulness we hope to share an awareness of this love with all people and sincerely hope that they will experience the rich faith offered to all by accepting this amazing gift from God.

Prayer: Dear Lord and loving heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us this amazing Christmas gift. Help us to joyfully share this precious gift of love with others. We pray that you will always be with us and guide us in our humble loving service. Amen.

Sharon D.

Saturday, December 19, 2009

Please read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven..."

As the church's participants swell in anticipation of Christmas, the "devout" make jokes about the "C and Es," or the people who only attend at Christmas and Easter. We do this in jest, but there is also an underlying resentment. Who are they to come into our sacred building twice a year and claim to be members of West Van United?

Being a teenager I've discovered the discomfort of welcoming the "C and Es" in my daily life. Going to church weekly makes me somewhat of a novelty, and I have seemingly become the Christian spokesperson for all of Rockridge (hope you don't mind). As humorous as this is, it also exemplifies the need for religion among my generation, especially in times of fear or sadness.

I discovered this void when a 16 year old girl died. She was the first person taken from my grade, and it shook everyone whether they knew her or not. No one knew how to react, how to comfort, or how to express the horrible sadness overwhelming their lives. Amid the silences filled with unsaid words and unshed tears a quivering request erupted: "will you take us to church?"

The void reappeared on February 4, 2009 when Rockridge had their first lockdown. We were stuffed in a teacher's closet as heavy footsteps, helicopters, and dog's barking reverberated through the tiny space. We'd done the drill numerous times, but this was different: this time tears crawled down our teacher's face, paramedics stood by, and a phone was being passed around to tell your parents you love them. In whispers we relayed only essential things; we weren't supposed to be talking. "Hey AJ? Will you pray for us?" I thought he was kidding, I almost laughed. "Please? I never memorized God's Prayer or whatever," In the darkness I recited the Lord's Prayer, allowing its power to fill the terrified students.

Until tragedy strikes they don't want anything to do with religion. They mock the bible, condemn Christians for the evil of the world, and act superior; therefore when they use religion as a last resort, I can't help but feel a slight resentment.

That is why this passage hits me: "There is a time for everything," and Christmas is the time for joy and unity, not the time to make others feel inferior. This is a time to welcome those C and Es no matter what they did the rest of the year.

This is Christmas time.

Prayer: God of all generations, give us the patience to welcome and love every person without judgment...Amen

A.J. I.

Sunday December 20, 2009

Please read 1 Samuel 2: 1-10

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God."

The "Song of Hannah" is a psalm expressing Hannah's thanksgiving to the Lord for the birth of her son Samuel. His birth is the answer to Hannah's prayer for a son after her previous inability to produce a child. Hannah looks beyond the immediate birth of her son, rejoices and gives thanks to the Lord.

I wonder, if in this psalm, Hannah is showing us that we must gaze outside our everyday world and be thankful there is the Lord, more powerful than anything we can imagine. The idea that there has to be something beyond our everyday real world is at the very basis of our Christianity but it is a concept very difficult to explain to children grounded in the here and now. I do not pretend to know or understand the Christian roots of St. Nicholas or Santa Claus or why he has become such a focus of our celebration of the birth of Christ, but this psalm made me think that perhaps the idea of Santa Claus is a concrete way to show the mystery, wonder and awe that can come into children's lives if they believe in something beyond themselves. Certainly, I can remember the incredible sense of mystery, wonder, awe and ultimately joy I felt as a child at Christmas time. Could it be, if we, as adults, took Hannah's sense of absolute faith and thanksgiving in the Lord we could retrieve some of the mystery and awe we all felt at Christmas so many years ago in every day of our lives?

Prayer: *Dear Lord please allow our children to learn from Santa Claus that there is a mysterious and wonderful force for good in this world, and please allow us as adults to learn from the thanksgiving that Hannah felt towards the Lord for the birth of her child, that we too can reach beyond our day to day world and feel every day a sense of the mystery, wonder and joy that we felt as children at Christmas. Amen*

John M.

Monday, December 21, 2009

Please read Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26

“I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever...”

It all took place in the year 1957. It was the year that I was appointed as a probationer minister to work as an assistant to the President of the Methodist Church of South Africa on a Mission Station. The Mission Station was located in a place called Thaba Nchu near Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State – as it was called back then. My duties were to work with the students in the High School (Secondary School), be Chaplain to the Hospital, all part of the Mission, and serve the local congregation in the town not far from the Mission Station.

One morning after the High School assembly, I was returning to my study, which meant passing the Hospital. As I drew near the building a Nursing Sister called and asked me to visit a patient, an African woman in her early forties who was depressed and very distressed. Through an interpreter I talked with her and prayed with her.

About two days later, as I was once again in the vicinity of the Hospital, I saw this young African woman standing in the sunshine. She called me over as she wanted to talk to me. She told me her story, once again through an interpreter. She said, “When I came to this place something in me was dying. You spoke to me and prayed with me and that which was dying is alive again, with life and light!” Her whole face confirmed the story – life and light had come back and her face reflected that.

That lived moment in my life made me reflect again on Psalm 27. “The Lord is my light, my life and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear?”

“It is the Lord who gives light to our path and life from which nothing can separate us!”

Prayer: God of us all, help us to sing your praise wherever this day finds us. Amen.

Rev. Cliff H.

Tuesday, December 22, 2009

Please read 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever...”

At the time of the events in the story, we had been running the sandwich project with the youth group for 3 years. The third Saturday of every month we met at the church and made 15 loaves of sandwiches, traveled down to Oppenheimer Park in East Vancouver and offered our sandwiches and hopefully a little bit of a lift to the residence. Over the years I have told myself that the project is as much to teach our youth about the plight of others and their own incredible good fortune as it is feeding and engaging the residence of Canada ‘poorest postal code’. I had never had the notion that we were dramatically changing lives but in the back of my mind I hoped we were helping.

It was our ‘December’ trip a few years ago when something changed. I had decided to make this trip a little special and made up several batches of my mother’s shortbread cookies. Christmas just isn’t Christmas without shortbread and I was pretty sure none of our ‘clients’ would be as privileged as I am. With ‘White Christmas’ on the TV I baked all Friday evening until the smell permeated my house. Saturday morning we did our usual sandwich making and sojourned to down to the park. As we set up the tables the lineup began to form. Many familiar faces but also many I had never seen before....the usual. I manned the cookie distribution. As I offered my cookies, many people accepted them cheerfully but for the most part I received a polite ‘thank you’ and on to the next. Until Mike. I handed him a couple of cookies. He had never made eye contact with me before. As he accepted my offering, he stopped, looked up and asked if they were shortbread. I said yes, that they were my mother’s recipe and blathered on as I can for a minute. With tears in his eyes he told me that he hadn’t had shortbread since he was kicked out of ‘the house’ when he was 18. I guessed him to be around the same age as I am. He thanked me again and left.

As the months continued we saw Mike consistently. He continued to open up, help set up tables and engage everyone in conversation. We had made a friend. After the summer break we were back in September. I had looked forward to seeing everyone. Mike didn't show up. I asked the park workers but no one had seen him for a while. They knew he had a job and got himself a small place to live but that was it.

We decided to do Christmas in November that year. Spread the cheer early. We arrived, set up and began our routine. I was 'monitoring' from one end of the line when there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Mike. He was sober, off drugs and working steadily. He knew we would be there and wanted to come by to tell us that he was well and to say thank you.

I finally knew that we had made a difference. What a blessing, you just never know. Magic does happen around Christmas.

Prayer: God of abundance, we thank you for the blessings of life and for the ways in which we come to know your love. Help us to remain open to seeing you at work in others as well as ourselves. Amen.

Julie W.

Wednesday, December 23, 2009

Please read Romans 16: 25-27

"Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel"

I was born on a farm in Central Alberta in the early thirties, at the very low point of the great depression and attended a small one room school with about twenty students in grades one to nine.

This is a recollection of a happening which occurred every year just before Christmas at that small school. I am of course referring to the Annual Christmas Concert.

The teacher would spend a good part of the month before the concert, trying to get the students to sing Christmas Carols on key, choosing a couple of students to present a recitation and even producing a small skit with the budding actors in the school.

There was always the hustle and bustle behind the curtain, getting ready for a skit or Carol sing, with at least one or two false start openings of the curtains and then quickly closing again on a 'look' from the teacher.

You might think that just the parents of the students, then enrolled, would be the audience, however, this was certainly not the case. The whole district was in attendance.

When I hear the mention of community involvement, I often think of those Christmas Concerts, with people sitting on hard wooden benches, gathered around the pot bellied stove, waiting in anticipation for the curtain to part and the concert to begin.

I think back now of the ethnic mixture of the families, with various religious affiliations including none and all sitting together, singing Christmas carols and visiting with their neighbors and of course, applauding loudly after every act or recitation or song by the children. I remember the Christmas Concert as a very happy time in that school.

Santa would of course arrive at the end of the concert and pass out a small bag to each child, containing a mandarin orange, some peanuts and perhaps some candy. After this, the kerosene lanterns would be extinguished and every one would go out into the dark winter night with the happy thoughts of Christmas on their minds. If it was a clear night, the stars would of course be out in all their brilliance as there were no other lights to dim their intensity. I'm sure, many thoughts were on minds of the birth in a manger of baby Jesus, almost two thousand years earlier but on a similar starlit night.

Prayer: God of the ages, thank you for the memories of years gone by and your faithfulness to every generation. Amen.

Don M.

Thursday, December 24, 2009

Please read Luke 1, verses 26 -38

“For there is not a thing that God cannot do”

As we read our assigned [passage from the New Testament, Luke 1, verses 26-28] we were reminded of our impression of the Virgin Mary formed in our early years. Growing up in Ireland the Virgin Mary was usually associated with the Roman Catholic religion.

Over the years there have been many sightings: she is said to have appeared in a yucca tree, a privet hedge, a muddy field of cabbages and onions, and many other places; sometimes weeping blood, sometimes tears, sometimes oil and sometimes milk. She frequently spoke to the visionaries, delivering messages, warnings and instructions. Her image was photographed in the window of a finance company in Florida and in the dents and rust spots of a late model Camaro in Elsa, Texas. She is one of two women, separated by 2,000 years, to most often appear on the cover of Time magazine; - the other is Princess Diana.

As we approach the Christmas season we try to make sense of the commercialism of this holiday, the tragic events in all corners of the world on one hand, and the kindness, selflessness and sacrifice so many people make in their everyday lives but I find comfort in the coming of Jesus Christ and hope for the world which God loves so much.

We have all practiced the seven deadly sins of pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony and envy but also the seven virtues of faith, hope, love, prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice.

Prayer – Dear God help us to keep all these sins and virtues in proportion and help to make our homes, our neighbourhoods and the world better places, for Jesus Christ’s sake...Amen

Doreen and Cowan M.

Friday, December 25, 2009 – Christmas Day

Please read Philippians 2: 5-11

“...at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow...”

This morning will find many of us on bended knee. While some may be in prayer, most of us will be bent over reaching under the Christmas tree hauling out gifts with delight and excitement as we both give and receive tokens of love from those most near and dear to us. Christmas morning is, for many of us, an almost magical moment where time slows down and we celebrate not only where we find ourselves this year, but also experience the flood of emotions as we remember Christmases in years gone by. While every Advent season brings with it the predictable hand wringing of clergy and church goers regarding the place of Christ in the media and retail fed secular Christmas culture, *there is a sense of holiness for many* in the quiet Christmas morning gathering of family and friends.

Paul writes that when we pause to reflect on what God has done for all humanity, and indeed all creation, in the sending of Jesus to the earth, we cannot help but fall to our knees in praise. Jesus, while equal to God and the Spirit, accepted the mission of living among us to reveal the kingdom of God in our midst and suffering the limitations of our humanity including the brutal death by his jealous peers on a rough hewn wooden cross at Golgotha.

This day, when you bend down beneath the Christmas tree to retrieve yet another gift, I encourage you to remain on your knees just a moment longer. Give thanks to God for the gift of life, laughter and love you have experience throughout the years and, once again, give praise and glory for the way that the call, conversion and cross of Christ have transformed your life.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel, we thank you for this day of rest and celebration. Help us to pause and recognize the significance of your presence in our lives and may this day not pass us by without a profound sense of gratitude for your birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. Amen.*

Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart

WEST VANCOUVER UNITED CHURCH
2062 Esquimalt Avenue, West Vancouver, BC V7V 1S4
Tel. 604 922-9171
office@wvuc.bc.ca • www.wvuc.bc.ca