

Advent: Waiting for God to Break into Life

Matthew 2 & Luke 2

December 16, 2007

BIBLE VERSES *(Red = memory verses)*

NT Lessons: Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

Luke 2:1-20: 1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "**Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.**" 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Matthew 2:1-12: 1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.** 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Advent – a time of waiting and anticipation. Advent is the start of a new church year. Christian time is circular: the year ends celebrating Christ the King, remembering the outcome of Christ's death and resurrection; the next week we wait with anticipation for Christ to come – both as a baby in the manger and as the King triumphant at the end of time.

We last left God with Samuel and David, and with God's people demanding a human king: preferring military over religious rule, smiting their enemies with a commander-in-chief rather than asking a priest and judge to petition God for deliverance. God warned them what would happen if a king took over (see 1 Sam 8), but the people insisted. They wanted what their neighbors had and turned from God – so God granted their wish, and watched their troubles begin. Power corrupts even the best of people; the expectation of praise, adulation, and obedience based on your job is addictive for humans. David, who started out as one whose faith was in God, changed into a one who ordered people executed, even his own sons plotting to execute him, and whose son (Solomon) and grandson (Rehoboam) were huge tyrants, abusing their people and straying farther from trust in God.

After roughly 130 years ruled by kings, the internal strife finally split the nation of Israel into North and South in 922 B.C.. The North was known as Israel, and centered around Samaria, by the Sea of Galilee. The northerners felt they could worship God anywhere, and set up shrines around their territory similar to the pagan shrines of their neighbors. The South was known as Judah, and from David's design Judah determined true worshippers of God could only worship in the elaborate Jerusalem Temple Solomon.. And so the worship wars developed.

The farther Israel and Judah strayed from God the greater their problems became. The prophets Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah, each tell of how consumerism and secularism flourished, dishonest business practices attacked the poor to benefit the rich, and God became increasingly frustrated and angry with God's people. Finally, as the prophets tell it, God used outside nations to overrun both the North (conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.) and the South (conquered by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.), giving God's people a time-out as slaves in exile. By removing them from their Promised Land, and subjecting them to the abuse they had heaped on the poor in their own care, God hoped to turn their eyes around away from their possessions, power, and reliance on military might and worshiping their neighbor's false idols, and return instead to rely on God for all their needs.

Finally, in 539 B.C., Judah was released from Babylon because Cyrus of Persia captured the Babylonians. Cyrus was hailed as the savior of those in exile, and allowed them to return to their land to rebuild their cities, and especially their temple in Jerusalem. (The North, on the other hand, never did return from exile. The people were disbursed throughout the land, and many remained in Samaria – becoming the Samaritans, the sworn enemies of those who saw Jerusalem as God's Home.) After all, how can one really worship God when the temple, God's home, had been destroyed.

So, the exiles returned to Jerusalem and set about rebuilding life. Only, they now asked "What happened? Did God abandon us? Why did God do this to us?" Their answer is found in the books of the Lesser Prophets, such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: God chose us in Egypt and liberated us from our chains. God became our God, we became God's people, and we failed God by letting go of our faith and following other Gods. God had to get our attention, somehow. This then begged the next question: "But how can we avoid ever going through this pain again?" Answer: become very strict in adhering to the laws God wants you to follow. If you follow the rules, God will not punish us again.

But, can humans follow the rules? Are humans capable of making sure all people have their fair share? The exiles never did gain a kingdom like their neighbors; Israel from then on was less than the

giants to the north: Persia, Greece, and Rome. One after another the big boys walked over Israel, and Israel groaned for its savior, its messiah who would raise them back up to the stature they saw God promised them as God's Chosen People. A messiah who would once again cause Jerusalem to be the center of God, drawing all people to its midst in joyful subjugation.

And so, on a starry night, angels trumpeted to lowly shepherds, and a blazing star beacons to wise men from other countries, that the miraculous had finally happened: the messiah was born. In a dingy manger, in a stable behind an inn, God's fullness of time converged and God broke into human existence.

"But Mary treasured all these words [the shepherds told about the angels' message] and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2: 19).

"When King Herod heard [from the wise men that a child was born who was king of the Jews], he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. (Matthew 2: 3)

... Be careful what you ask for from God ... the answer may not be quite what you expected ...

A PRAYER for This Week

Unpredictable God,

You continue to surprise us every year as we once again learn about your birth. Once again, teach us to search for you with the same anticipation and wonderment that the shepherds and wise men held alike. Help us to seek you in the usual, mundane, everyday mangers of our lives, and help us to bow our knees in awe, and worship you, when you reveal yourself in such a tiny, unassuming, and wholly unexpected manner.

In Christ's name and *only* through your Holy Spirit we pray,

Amen.

Activities & Questions to Ponder

Create space and time when family faith dialogue can develop and flourish.

The activities suggested below are listed from younger to older, to foster faith activities at home, or in the car, and to help reinforce the week's lesson.

- ✦ The Sunday School recently made Advent banners and received verse boxes to use during Advent. If your child / family did not receive these kits, please see Rich. We have lots of kits and verse boxes, so share them with your neighbors! The banners can be used either as an Advent Calendar, counting down each day, or can also be used throughout the 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany, the celebration of the revelation of Christ to the wise men.

Using the verse cards, recite the Matthew and Luke nativity stories, as well as the Isaiah verses talking about the long anticipated Messiah. Over the course of Advent, read the stories many times, helping your children to act out various characters in the stories, with an ultimate goal of memorizing the storyline and actions.

- ✦ It is important at this time of the year to counter society's call to focus on what gifts we want for ourselves. As a family find ways to do things for others. The more hectic the schedules get, become more intentional in your service.
 - Thoughts:
 - gather food for the needy and bring to church;
 - make holiday goodies and homemade cards and take to shut ins and nursing homes (call Trinity's office for a list of Trinity's shut ins;
 - make gifts rather than purchasing them for friends and family;
 - join others from Trinity and go caroling as a family on Dec 16th
 - find a family on the Salvation Army Christmas tree at Trinity and purchase their gifts together

- ✦ What was Mary pondering in her heart, in Luke 2:19; and why were Herod, "and all of Jerusalem", afraid to hear the news of Jesus' birth in Matthew 2:3? How are we like "all of Jerusalem" – fearful of what God reveals to us in Scripture?

