



Advent Devotional 2008

Disciples Christian Church

Advent is a time of preparation. Anticipation. Waiting. Expectation. As Christians, we set aside these four weeks before Christmas for all that. Historians tell us that this observance began during the 4th century. You've probably been through several Advent seasons yourself and perhaps all the waiting seems a little tiresome. Certainly, our culture wants Christmas to come, and as churchgoers, we can feel the same rush to get there. Worship teams, church musicians, and preachers are no strangers to this season's challenges!

A few years ago, I came across this prayer and found it helpful in the wait and encouraging in its energy. I share it with you to begin the season together as church and pastor.

It's hard to prepare for the journey with a fresh spirit.

Been there before, we think.

*Lord God, ruffle my packing enough to help me see the vision
you have for me along the way.*

*Please gift me with the right amount of wonder for anticipation,
a healthy degree of trepidation to know I travel
in the hands of a living God*

who can touch my yesterdays as much as my tomorrows.

Lord, make me expectant, make me new. Amen.

This booklet is my Christmas gift to you. I hope you will use it each week as you wait for Christmas to come. Perhaps the prayer above can begin or end each day. Read the scriptures and poetry aloud for full effect. I encourage you to go beyond what's on the weekly pages to find more even commentary about the poetry, poets, and paintings. I hope the beauty and creativity of the poets' words and the artists' renderings will guide your daily prayers, and the weekly scriptures, sermons, and questions will challenge you to go more deeply and expectantly into this time of preparation for our Lord's coming.

Pastor Kris

1st Week of Advent – November 30, 2008

The beginning or the end?

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all around it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?



William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

Notes: Yeats wrote *The Second Coming* while Europe and much of the rest of the world were trying to recover from World War I. This was surely an important factor for him in writing the poem. Yeats saw great social troubles all around him, and remarks on a world spinning out of control. It is listed as one of the 100 most anthologized poems in the English language.

The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.



R.S. Thomas (1913-2000)

Notes: In "The Coming," God shows his Son the tiny globe of the world, its "fierce colour," its lights and shadows, the filth of its civilization, and its brittle energies. The natural and human objects of the earth are viewed with a dispassionate regard, "as through water," the distance enforcing the integrity of the examination. Christ sees plain fact, as Thomas would say, without illusion or desire. Yet it is this realm that Christ chooses as his own, for no other reason than an impulse, or perhaps because of the echo of his own being heard within the world. As the people wait, he takes his place among them.

From "Passing Through Hard Facts: The Poetry of R.S. Thomas"
by Ephraim Radner, from *Christian Century*, November 19, 1986.

For your prayers: *Expect great things from God/attempt great things for God.* Are you sufficiently expectant? If we are disappointed by the lack of exciting things happening in our lives, our churches, our world, is that because we are not sufficiently expectant? Suppose, as a Second Coming, Jesus Christ were to come this season into your own life. What would you expect to happen?

2nd Week of Advent – December 7, 2008

Moments of Truth

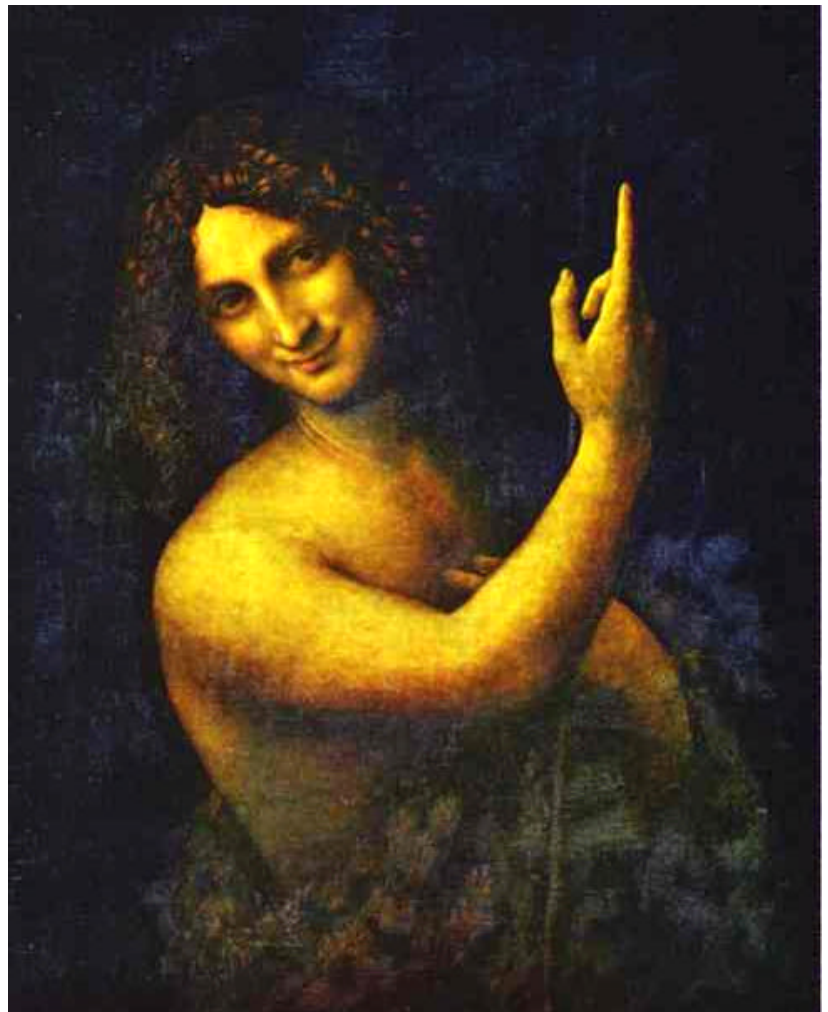
2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

This Is No Ragged Wild Man

This is no ragged wild man, haggard
and furrowed with righteous urgency.
This luminous flesh leads one to wonder
whether we might not all do well to feast
on locusts and sleep on riverbanks.
This man enjoys his mission; he dances
in the desert when no one is watching.
He leapt in the womb and his heart leaps
still in the presence of the kinsman
whose secret he harbors even as he proclaims it.
No one understands yet what it is
that makes the irony in his smile
so irritating; it will drive Herodias
to violence, and Herod to confusion.
No one knows what to make of his laughter.

Marilyn McEntyre



Notes: The image of John the Baptist has been one of the most widely reproduced in the long history of Christian art. Often he appears as a wild man, ragged, weathered, and gaunt. This particular piece painted by Leonardo da Vinci in 1516 was the inspiration for Dr. McEntyre's poem. Of the painting she writes: da Vinci's "St. John the Baptist" is recognizable by some of the usual conventions – the upraised finger, the wild animal skins – and it invites viewers to still another range of speculations. Androgynous, ambiguous, luminous against a dark background, John is riddled with mystery. This particular image snagged me into poetry some years ago, and I end this reflection with the poem it evoked.

For your prayers: The gospel of Mark seems to suggest that our salvation comes from alone time we spend in the wilderness – that long dark night might be just what our souls need in order to think about changing our priorities and behaviors. The desert – this unstructured and limitless place – is where we can acknowledge how little we know, how much more there is to learn, and how critical is our need for God to enter the darkness with us.

*Will you take time to be alone,
to be quiet,
to think,
to listen,
to patiently wait,
to be part of the mystery that is God?*

3rd Week in Advent – December 14, 2008

Being Second

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John the Baptist

Who is he in hairy raiment
Clad, i' the wilderness
Preaching freely without payment
Truth and righteousness?
Whoso hears and not despises,
Him with water he baptises,
In the contrite hour;
Whoso hears with haughty scorning,
Him he smites with holy warning,
And with prophet's power.
Swarms the city from its corners,
Motley bad and good;
Thoughtless hearts and heavy mourners
Haste to Jordan's flood:

Some for sin their souls abasing;
Some to feed their eye with gazing;
Some to search and try
With captious craft the shaggy preacher,
And themselves to teach the teacher;
Some they know not why.
Comes the Rabbi, with a stately,
Measured gravity;
With a solemn air, sedately
Comes the Pharisee;
Wide his robe, and on the border
Sacred texts, in well-marched order
Show his purpose plain,
With a nice and fenced existence,
Far to keep, at holy distance,
Every touch profane.
Comes fat priest, and pontiff portly,
With a bloated face;

Came Herodian, smooth and courtly,
With a gay grimace.
Came the Essene from his station
Of secluded contemplation
With mild gravity;
With an eye of twinkling keenness,
And a smile of cold sereneness,

Came the Sadducee.
Comes the soldier firm and steady,
Gallant, light, and gay,
With his quick hand ever ready
For the rising fray.
Comes the usurer, dry and meagre,
Comes the publican, sharp and eager
For great Cæsar's penny.
With a train of silken pages
Comes the rich man; with scant wages
Come the burdened many.

What saith he, the wayside preacher,
To this motley crew?
Doth he come a cunning teacher
Of lore strange and new?
Hath he drawn without omission,
Point for point, a long confession,
To inform the brain?
Piled a proud word-architecture,
Fenced it round with fine conjecture,
And distinctions vain?
Hath he wove a girth to measure
God, a chain to bind
The Infinite, and mapped at leisure
The omniscient Mind?
Hath he trimmed an old theogony,
Cumbrous reared a new cosmogony,
To employ the schools?
Not with speculation vainest
Preacheth he;—with wisdom plainest,
And with simplest rules.

Thus he speaks—'Repent! Repentance
Smooths Messiah's way;
'Tis an old and weighty sentence,
Weigh it well to-day.
Hast thou nursed a sin?—confess it;
Hast thou done a wrong?—redress it:
And, with just desire,
Ask no more than what is due thee:

Be content, when offered to thee,
With thy lawful hire.
'Say not, with vain pride elated,
"God's own people we,
Tracing high a hoary-dated
Patriarch pedigree."
Peopled earth is thickly studded
With the children common-blooded,
Of the great I AM;
From the hard flint, at his pleasure,
God can raise up without measure
Sons to Abraham.

'Hear, whose barren trunk hath cumbered
Now too long the ground,
Saith the Lord, your days are numbered;
Hark! with crashing sound,
Falls the axe that fells the fruitless!
Toils he not with labour bootless
Who now smites the tree.
He his winnowed wheat shall garner,
But like empty chaff the scorner
Burn with fire shall he.'

Thus he preached to great and small men,
Of the human right;
Like the blessed sun, on all men
Shedding simple light.
O! wise are they who hear such
preaching,
Not too high for common teaching
In life's common ways;
Not with proud pretence ballooning,
Not with gay parade festooning,
To catch the vulgar gaze.

Flap who will the air-borne pinion,
Sweeping far and free;
Solid earth be my dominion,
Baptist John, with thee!
In the plainest path of duty,
Stamping daily things with beauty,
I with thee will tread;
Where thy warning finger pointed
I would follow, where the anointed
Saviour lowly led!

J. S. Blackie (1809-1895)



Notes: In scripture we read of John the Baptist's life in several dramatic scenes: in his mother Elizabeth's womb, preaching in the wilderness, baptizing Jesus, trouble with the Pharisees, and his horrid death by beheading. We can only speculate about more details as the Bible is sparse with them. And, so this lengthy poem in language unfamiliar to our 21st century ears attempts to fill some of those gaps imaginatively. John Stuart Blackie, a Scotsman, wrote this poem published in 1860.

Marilyn McEntyre writes of this poem – It offers a thought-provoking list of those who came to John with their own agendas – priests, Herod's servants, Essenes, Sadducees, soldiers, usurers and publicans, the rich man, etc. Their motives may have modified their hearing, but not the message: John the Baptizer knew who he was and what he was to do. The poem, though written in verse that may sound quaint to contemporary ears, is long and rich with imaginative treatment of the life of John and its effects on his hearers, then and now. Like old hymns, it can surprise us out of our own conventions into lost rhythms of contemplation worth retrieving.

Notes about the art: Also from McEntyre: Moretto da Brescia's 1523 painting, "Christ Blessing Saint John the Baptist", puts the two in touching juxtaposition. Alone with each other in the wilderness, John kneels at the feet of Jesus whose hand is raised in blessing. His eyes are downcast, his arms crossed over his breast. The tongue of the great preacher is silenced in submission. Light rises from Jesus' head, not in a conventional circular halo, but in spikes like tongues of flame as though his body cannot contain the energy that moves through him . . . as it merges with the reddish light from the open sky. There is tenderness in their postures and gestures, an intimacy, an awareness of their respective tasks and identities, and acceptance of whom and what God has called them to be.



Copyright © 2000 National Gallery, London. All rights reserved.

For your prayers: Two of the largest players in the drama of Christ's birth and early life are Mary, his mother, and John the Baptist. What do they teach us about the values and virtues of knowing our role and how it fits into a greater, larger end. Few of us are alone and in 'first place', playing a large role in the world. Rather, we are more accustomed to 'being second' – playing a subordinate role in a larger picture.

*Reflect on your submission of self for a greater purpose,
how you can 'support rather than star'
and
how your role can serve in specific ways
to help your family,
a friend,
your church, etc.*

4th Week of Advent - December 2, 2008

A Birth Announcement

Luke 1:47-55

Luke 1:26-38

Annunciation

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished, almost always a lectern, a book; always the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings, the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering, whom she acknowledges, a guest. But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.

The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?

Some unwillingly undertake great destinies, enact them in sullen pride, uncomprehending.

More often those moments

when roads of light and storm open from darkness in a man or woman, are turned away from in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them. But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept like any other child – but unlike others, wept only for pity, laughed in joy not triumph.

Compassion and intelligence fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous than any in all of Time, she did not quail,

only asked

a simple, 'How can this be?'

and gravely, courteously,

took to heart the angel's reply,

perceiving instantly

the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb

Infinite weight and lightness; to carry

in hidden, finite inwardness,

nine months of Eternity; to contain

in slender vase of being,

the sum of power –

in narrow flesh,

the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,

push out into air, a Man-child

needing, like any other,

milk and love –

but who was God.

Denise Levertov (1923 to 1997)



Notes about the Art: This painting titled “The Annunciation and the Two Saints” by artist Simone Martini in 1333 opens one’s imagination as to what might have been going on when young Mary was approached by the angel. The angel is kneeling on the ground, his wings still up in the ready position, his crown glowing and his face serious. He’s holding out an olive branch, and one of his hands extends this branch while the other points up to heaven. Then, look at the artist’s rendition of Mary. She is sitting down with one of her hands in a book, like the angel interrupted her reading time! Her other hand clasps her robe around her as if to protect herself. Her facial expression is one of grave concern and fear. When you look at her face, you imagine the terror she must have felt. Notice that the posture of her body is tense. She’s literally on the edge of her seat – perhaps considering bolting out the door at the first opportunity!

Does this open up the theological and biblical explorations of this story? Mary is painfully human in this painting. Scripture often describes fear when people were in the company of angels. Why would we assume Mary was somehow different than anyone else? If we put her so high up on a discipleship pedestal, we can easily forget that she was probably terrified.

But, this painting also offers us insight into this invitation from God. The olive branch is extended – Mary can choose whether to take it. When she accepts, she says, *let it be with me according to your word* as if to indicate her partnership, consent, and receptiveness.

(from Shannon Johnson Kershner, Lectionary Homiletics)

Notes for poetry:

Annunciation: the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary of her conception of Christ.

Reviewed by Anthony Chiffolo

I recently happened upon *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes*. This is a surprising collection of Levertov's poems about faith and the spiritual life--surprising, for Levertov was a woman whom I had thought least likely to have anything to do with religion. As soon as I began the first poem--"Human being--walking / in doubt from childhood on . . ."--I was hooked, for she had already encapsulated my journey of faith. And so I began traveling with her once more.

The poems are arranged mostly chronologically, so they trace the blossoming of Levertov's spirituality. True, it is not necessarily a traditional religious awareness. Hers was not a pious faith. It was not a tranquil faith. Rather, it was a faith that challenges, that questions, that searches, that fears and dares and starts and stops and rages and complains and hopes and perseveres and loves and never gives up.

Levertov's spirit, living on through these religious poems, communicates something true to me and about me. They enable me to perceive, for a moment anyway, the divine spark that is both within and without--that is, the source and goal of all life.

She knows how difficult it is to believe in the Resurrection as a concept, but how easy to believe when one has firsthand experience of a resurrection. For this above all, I am grateful for *The Stream and the Sapphire*. This book has helped me embrace the joy of resurrection life.

Anthony F. Chiffolo is the author of 100 Names of Mary: Stories & Prayers, published by St. Anthony Messenger Press. He is managing editor at Fordham University Press.

For your prayers:

When a baby is born, the possibilities for his or her life seem limitless. To quote one five-year old when his new baby sister arrived: *I wish I could be brand new again!*

*Consider what has you 'on the edge of your seat' with anticipation,
worry,
fear,
or possibility.*

*If you could make a brand new decision,
turn in a new direction,
answer in a new way,
what would you say,
do,
begin, etc.?*

Do you see possibilities because God can create new in you?

Christmas Eve and Christmas Morn
The stories of Jesus' birth from the Gospels

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-20

John 1:1-14

The day is here! Our waiting is complete. Once more the Christ Child is born into our hearts. I hope this Advent season has been a time of active and hopeful waiting. I hope this booklet helped capture the beauty of the season. Our world has need of it; our world has need of you; our world has need of the good news that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*, and through the power of the Holy Spirit lives among us still.

I close with this prayer:

O God, the word you most wanted to speak to the world,
You spoke in Jesus Christ, your word made flesh.
Startle us again, in the midst of the familiar, loving customs of Christmas
With the freshness of your love made flesh.
Open our hearts and our minds to hear that good word again;
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Merry Christmas to you
and all whom you love.
May God's blessings be
yours this day and all
days. May 2009 be a
year of compassionate,
creative, and
courageous ministry
here at Disciples
Christian Church.

Rev. Kristine Eggert
December 2008

Notes and Acknowledgements:

The seed of an idea began to grow as I was researching Advent texts for December's sermons. One particular subscriber resource was especially helpful in developing this idea of using art and poetry: the print and on-line journal, *Lectioary Homiletics*, especially its weekly feature "The Lesson and the Arts." I've been a subscriber for years and have also attended the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference, associated with this journal.

Most of the paintings are by known artists, with brief descriptions given of the artist and the work. The first week's two paintings are of unknown artistry and were found on-line. The first link is: www.ministryofhealing.org/3AngelsImageLibrary/ChristsSecondComing.jpg. The second: www.npucnewsletter.wordpress.com/2008/08/27why-not-try-this-toparticles/.

Marilyn McEntyre is mentioned several times. She is a regular contributor to *Lectioary Homiletics*, PhD Princeton University, and a professor of English at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. A gifted essayist and author, she writes broadly across a number of interest areas, including American literature, spirituality and devotion, medical themes, and poetry. A former columnist for *Christianity Today*, McEntyre is the author or editor of ten books. (from July 2008, Barnes and Noble)

The beginning prayer is originally from an Advent devotional book, [On the Way to Bethlehem: Reflections on Christmas for Every Day in Advent](#), by Hilary McDowell, 2000, by Upper Room Books. The closing prayer was written by John Buchanan, editor and publisher of the *Christian Century*.

What began as a seed of an idea was embraced with enthusiasm, time, and care by Toni Laurenson. Without her willingness and skill, this would have remained a seed, rather than the full flower that it became. I am grateful.

Thanks also to my husband David, who is my partner in life and ministry. Together we are covering the cost of producing this booklet, with enough copies for our December visitors and for you to take to share with friends and family.

Rev. Kristine Eggert

Disciples Christian Church
3663 Mayfield Road
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44121
216 382-5344

www.discipleschristian.org
pastorkris@discipleschristian.org