

## Reflections for December Newsletter

We have already entered the season of Advent this year. As often happens, we begin anticipating the birth of the Christ child before December arrives, although not as early as those who have commercial interests in the season. We also try to have a different focus within the church; trying to remember that the gift was the child and the promise of our reconciliation to God through his obedience which came at a very high cost. Although this is a time of joy and celebrations because of the promise of redemption the joy we have should always be tempered by the knowledge that the journey which begins in Bethlehem with angels singing of peace and good will while it also ends with joy at Easter must pass through the pain and suffering of betrayal, through the darkness of despair on Good Friday before the joy of Easter morning arrives. We often desire to spend most of our thoughts on these “bookends” of the narrative. Easter joy could not be possible without all the events which take place in the area of Palestine: the villages of Nazareth and Bethlehem, the fields around them beginning with the miracle of the annunciation. All are a part of the story which helps us understand the overflowing of love which God has for humankind...all of humankind. What we often overlook in our rush to arrive at Christmas morning so we can open our own presents is that the season of Advent, like the season of Lent which precedes Easter is meant to be a time of preparation and self-examination not a time of decoration...although I enjoy decorating my home for Christmas. If you look up Advent in the dictionary, you will find the root meaning of the word is “to come”. Currently, the definitions listed there now begin with the season we are entering. This definition which is the four Sundays before Christmas reflects Christianity’s domination of much of the culture. The second meaning listed refers to the Second Coming, which refers to the anticipated return of Christ. The original meaning of the word comes in a distant third is this list: a coming or arrival. For the first believers who began this season of preparation, the order of meanings would have been reversed. They were focused on being prepared for the soon to happen coming or arrival of Christ. These believers had a sense of urgency about being prepared to welcome their Lord back. In the span of some two thousand years we have largely lost any sense of urgency. The truth that was clearly stated that no one except the Father knows the timing of the return and the accompany judgment has led many to a sense that there is no need to prepare for an end to these “in-between times. Whether this feeling is because they no feel that there will be no return; that the return will not happen in their time since so much time has passed, or that if the return happened God’s grace will cover them and they need not be prepared to face judgment it is hard to know. Scriptures seem to tell us a very different story on all three accounts. Yet since these “in-between-times” have stretched out beyond years into centuries it is hard to maintain a sense of urgency about being prepared for something that has no scheduled time of arrival. However, we are called to that very goal in so many places in scripture. There are many places in the Hebrew texts where the prophets tell the people that the Day of the Lord which they anticipate will not be the reward they anticipate if they continue to live as they are; they must change their ways because the Day will come. An accounting will be made for their actions and although God is abounding in grace and mercy,

God is also God of justice and righteousness. The Gospels give us a narrative of Jesus' life and ministry which reveal God's love and mercy; God seeks to reconcile with humankind. However, the note sounded loud and clear is also a clear call of repentance and a return to the ways of the Lord through John the Baptist's voice heard in the wilderness. The readings which begin Advent focus on the preparations which we need in our lives for this meeting with our Lord to be a joyful one. While we may not know the day or the hour when this final ending will come; just as we do not know the day or hour when our individual ending in this life will come, we know that we need to be prepared for that ending. Advent is a time to consider both and how the way that we are living helps to prepare us and our world for the last day.

Merry Christmas

Shalom

Pastor Libby