

## *At-Home Church Devotional - 12.10.2017*

### Opening Prayer -

I open myself up to you, O God. Let my life be a hymn, my home be a manger, my kitchen be a Fellowship Hall, my breath a hallelujah, my intentions pure and sacred. Will you fill me up this day, O Lord. Even when my community can't come together - will you stitch us together in the liturgies of life? Will hope grow, and peace spread, joy overfloweth, and love catch like wildfire...can you do all that? It is my prayer that you will, Holy one. Make of us a witness to 'On Earth as it is in Heaven'. Amen.

### Advent Wreath - "Peace"

*[If you have a candle to light, great! A candle can stand in for the wreath. If you have others joining you in this at-home devotional, I encourage everyone to read different parts]*

#### *Voice 1 –*

We are still waiting. One candle in the darkness doesn't offer much light. And with a promise to act comes responsibility to respond. Taking a risk in a threatening world goes against our need to run and hide.

#### *Voice 2 –*

Joseph is caught in a dilemma. Do what society expects and distance yourself from what appears to be scandalous. Or, stick by the young woman facing a mysterious pregnancy. What will his choice be?

*Voice 1 (or 3) –* "Mary, I am here. We'll go through this together." A second candle will now flicker in the darkness.

#### LIGHT CANDLE -

**We light this candle for *Peace*.** Will you join me in prayer? It takes courage, O God, to stand with those who would do your work – especially when that work seems messy, complicated, and unpopular. May we find the strength to offer our support and solidarity with those who faithfully live your good news. Amen.

### Anthem - "It Wasn't His Child" by Skip Ewing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwxRCEhPwsY>

### Scripture -

*Isaiah 40:31:*

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

*Mark 1:4-8:*

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Reflections -

I often wonder about the people that were flocking to John the Baptizer. We forget as Christians that baptism is not originally an exclusive Christian ritual. Before the ministry of Jesus had even begun its public phase, John was the lunatic from the wilderness washing sin away with water. We can be sure that plenty of Jewish people were getting baptized by John. But I am sure there were others too. Romans maybe, and followers of Ba'al possibly, and who knows who else. Can't you hear the critics? "Nothing special about water, John" they say. "You're getting 'clean' in the same water the livestock use to drink and wash?" they chide. "What next, a holy flame to cook our food? A sacred soil to grow our grain? A set apart shovel to dig our latrines?" ... "Come on John, you are a fraud - how much are these suckers paying you?!?"

And its true to some degree, that John was leveraging the ordinary for extraordinary purposes. But if you ask the baptized, they will tell you something different.

The passage we heard from Isaiah 40, Brueggemann tells us in our morning Advent Devotional, is a passage written while anyone who was anyone in Israel was now sitting in captivity in Babylon. The Jewish faith was centered on the Temple, in Isaiah's time. And the Temple had been destroyed. The people in exile were lost sheep, spiritual refugees who were beginning to lose the memory of any Holy communions they might have had from their old life. And in order to keep the faith of Abraham alive, the faith of Moses and Jacob and Issac, the faith of Sarah and Rebekah and Ruth alive...they needed to understand God in a new way.

And so, Isaiah writes to them, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the *everlasting* God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth. [God] does not faint or grow weary; [God's] understanding is unsearchable. [God] gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless."

In response to the critics, John concedes. He says, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John's work was not salvific, but preparatory.

Did you catch what the people brought with them to be baptized by John? It wasn't that they came on a whim. It wasn't that they heard the latest cool thing to do out in the boonies. This was no Burning Man gathering out in the desert. This was not some underground rave. Those who came to John were required to make an offering for their baptism. No, John didn't charge a fee - but he did require *confession*.

"Repent!" says John the Baptizer. "Bring to me your burdens, your sins, your missteps." "Be willing to own your mistakes, and be willing to make amends." "Stand in the reality of your life and ask God for more - more compassion, more forgiveness, more hope for what tomorrow will bring."

The power of John's baptism is in the confession. The letting go and letting God. The acknowledging that God is not locked in a razed Temple, but is bigger than that. That God is not tied to only Israel, but is bigger than that. That God is not 'on my side', but is bigger than that. That God is everlasting, Creator of heaven and earth. This is a radical claim from a guy dressed in a hair shirt and eating bugs.

Advent, too, is a radical claim. That in the waiting, the preparation, the build up to glory...we are confessing complicity in a world that has forgotten God. It is not new - as you can see from the words of Isaiah, humanity is well rehearsed in letting the experience of God slip from our minds,

and hearts, and our ears to hear. It is radical to center God again in our lives. Advent is a radical claim to the Holy.

Closing Hymn - "Rivers of Babylon" performed by Sublime  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPVTOwbWA6k>

Closing Prayer -

Creator God, maker of Heaven and Earth, we remember you today. We remember you have been present throughout all our failings, our fallings, our despair. Even when we did not know, or were not sure about you, you have been sure about us. Keep us humble and open, ready and willing, able and eager to be your people - so that you can be our God. We pray you will be relentless in your presence, blanketing over us your grace and beauty and love. We pray these words through the power of Christ's witness, through our hope for what will be in you. Amen.