

Links for the Recording of the Service from 12-6-2020 and for the Upcoming Service of 12-13-2020 are at the end of the News Blast

Dear members and friends of Idylwood Presbyterian Church,

Session News

The Session voted unanimously Monday night to extend a contract to **Briana Stewart to be our new Religious Education Director**, beginning in **January**. **Briana** is a student at **The John Leland Center for Theological Studies** in Falls Church, VA. This fall I had sent information about our position to all of the local seminaries in the consortium of divinity schools and Briana responded. We were a bit slow on the uptake, but we finally got it together and interviewed Ms. Stewart and invited her to visit our church on a Sunday morning. A committee of parents and I interviewed her and felt that she has the requisite qualification to do the job.

A huge thank you to **Kate Untiedt**, who has held the fort down from mid-summer through the fall after Katie Adam left for Prague. Kate's idea of focusing on animals of the Bible was brilliant. The kids have really responded well to this theme and we've all learned a lot, both kids and adults. I've been meeting with the older kids when they were available before church, so that we could cover a wider age range. It seems to have worked out and we are confident that Briana will find her place among us as she gets acquainted with our congregation and kids. Please give her a big welcome when she arrives and make her feel at home. In next week's News Blast we will have **Briana's bio and pic**.

In other news, the Session decided that we would have a **Christmas Eve service**, virtual of course, at 7:30. It will be a somewhat adapted traditional **Lessons and Carols** service. We also decided to try something new on New Year's Eve and do what is called a **Watch Night Service**, also beginning at 7:30. In Black Churches, this service was both a way of praising God for liberation from slavery and keeping people from going to parties where they might do things that they shouldn't.

We will honor the concern for social justice by remembering both the origins of Watch Night Services, but also some of the events that have marked this year. I would also like us to use this time together to remember and reflect on what this strange year has meant to us and what our hopes and dreams are for the coming year.

So, I would like to ask each of you to think about something you would like to share, a picture, a poem, a drawing. Maybe you have a favorite scripture that you would like to reflect on. Send them to me to include in the PowerPoint for the service. Since my mother died in August I want to remember her. I have a picture of her with special meaning that I want to share with you all. Let's make this a special time and not just a time to sit and watch Netflix and veg out.

One more bit of Session news. For quite a while we have been negotiating with a neighbor who wanted to buy a small parcel of land that IPC owns behind his house. We have finally worked out all the details and will soon go to settlement. It will net the church about \$2500. Thanks to **Greg Gallopoulos** for taking the lead on this.

One more thing we talked about is the shape and length of our service. It has morphed from a **one-hour service with a coffee hour afterward** to a ninety minute service with a coffee hour **built** into it. That seems to be working, but for as long as we are virtual we thought we should advertise ourselves as having a 90 minute service rather than an hour one so that people will know what to expect. Last Sunday we went overtime for a number of reasons, but most Sundays we should be finished around 12:30.

Volunteers Needed

First I want to thank **Leslie Osman** who has already agreed to take responsibility for **recording our weekly worship attendance, which Don Palmer takes each week, into the Excel spreadsheet that I've been keeping.** The reason we do this is so that if someone who comes regularly stops coming we will know to check on them to make sure they are doing alright. This fits into the Deacons' responsibility and will be one less thing that the new Pastor will need to do, although Leslie will let the other deacons and/or me and/or the new pastor know when a regular attender needs a call. **Leslie** has also agreed to take over recording the worship elements each week (i.e. scripture, hymns, and sermon title) **in another spreadsheet, so that we will know what we've used in the past and not use the same pieces too often.** Thanks so much **Leslie.** I really appreciate it!

Another area that a volunteer is needed for is to edit the **News Blast.** As it is now, I am serving in that role and there will always be many things that the pastor needs to contribute to this publication, but it would be better if a member were editing it so that everyone in the church would send their announcements to that person rather than the pastor. The pastor really has other priorities ideally. The ideal candidate is someone with a computer, internet, and some writing and organizational skills. A couple hours a week is probably all that is required spread out over the whole week. Any takers?

Last, but not least, we really need a new **Treasurer,** as Cara Dobbins is ready to step down. I believe we also need to purchase some financial software and get advice from Presbytery about what is appropriate for a church our size. Whoever is willing to become the next Treasurer can help us decide what to purchase and how to make the transition from our current Excel based approach to the new software. You do not need to be an accountant to do this. Cara says it takes her about ten hours a month to do the job.

Have you **pledged** yet for 2021? If not, please go to <https://www.idylwoodpresbyterian.org/> and find the burgundy pledge button. Then enter pledge of **time, talent, and treasure** or 2021.

We thank you for your financial and time gifts. They are both necessary to make IPC the caring community that it is.

It's not too late to give to **Homeshare Adoption Program**, the program through which we help two local programs with Christmas presents. This year due to Covid, we are providing gift cards. You can send your donations to the church with a **Homeshare Adoption Program** written in the memo line. We thank you for your generosity.

It is too late to purchase a Christmas tree or wreath or greens from the **Marshall High School Boosters** club at the church. They are all sold out, having received a smaller supply than in previous years. We are so glad that we were able to host them and we thank the **Osmans** for supervising.

New Joys and Concerns

First: Concerns

Among new concerns this week, **Ceresa Haney's** eight month old niece **Brandi** has **Covid**.

One of the roommates of one of **Julie Tutwiler's** sons, **Scott**, has tested positive for **Covid**.

Linda Dono's family friend, the **Rev. Tom Wade** in Owensborough, KY has **kidney failure, congestive heart failure, and leukemia**.

But Also: Joys

Linda Dono reported that on the third try she and her husband finally were successful in getting her brother's car fixed so that he would have transportation for the winter. What a relief!

Kate Untiedt reported the joy of reconnecting with an old friend from more than fifty years ago through her genealogical work. She also was giving thanks that she was able to get a protective order for three abused kids in her legal work. Way to go, Kate!

And to top it all off, **Jen Jacobs** reported that through the organization she created (**with IPC members Cara Dobbins and Katie Adams**), **Connect Our Kids**, which is in the middle of a pilot, they have been able to connect many kids with their families and supporters. Examples include a boy in Florida, who thought he had no family. He turned out to have five relatives ready to give him a permanent home. A pregnant twenty-year old who also thought she had no relatives took a DNA test using 23&Me, put those results into Connect Our Kids' software, and discovered six relatives in the same town that did not know she existed. Within a short time, her newly found kin showed up with diapers, supplies, and a message that she belonged. **Jen** thinks that in an odd way the pandemic helped her software get used more while people are stuck at home and once social workers are used to this new tool, they won't forget it. (www.ConnectOurKids.org)

Devotion for the third week of Advent: “The Journey to Joy” adapted from Amy-Jill Levine’s third chapter of *The Light of the World: A Beginner’s Guide to Advent*

This is also the subject of our Tuesday night Bible study at 7 pm. All are welcome. The zoom link is at the end of the devotion.

Luke 2:1-40

The Birth of Jesus

(Mt 1:18–25)

² 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.

The Shepherds and the Angels

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.

Jesus Is Named

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,

According to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

The Journey to Joy

John, the Baptizer’s birth, was in Judea’s hill country, and his message was primarily for Judea’s people. Jesus was born locally – like John, in Nazareth, a city in Galilee. Jesus’s birth during the Roman census (2:1) signals that his message will be not just for Jews but also for the whole world.

The Census

Historically there was no census under Augustus, the Caesar at the time of Jesus's birth. Luke is painting a theological picture rather than a historical one. There was a census in 6 CE (AD), but that is too late for Jesus's birth. Today we take a census to determine voting representation and social services, but then the government took a census to decide the tax base and military conscription. It showed their power and sovereignty over people's lives. It could take their money and their bodies for service. Luke says everyone went to their native cities to be taxed (2:3). That also did not happen, but it provided the author with a way of indicating Jesus's Davidic ancestry. Back to the census, the one in 6 CE occurred in the same year as a certain Judas, known as Judas the Galilean, revolted against Rome. The Romans killed him and all of his followers, but the memory of this event probably lingered. By setting Jesus's birth in the time of a census, Luke may have been contrasting the kingdom Jesus was coming to establish and the one kind that revolutionaries like Judas were fighting for. Luke depicts Joseph and Mary as following the order to go to their hometown to enroll in the census like good law-abiding citizens.

The Birth of Jesus

In the Lukan version of the story, there is no room in the inn, so Mary and Joseph go to a barn where they lay Jesus in a manger, i.e., a crib from which animals eat. Whether this story is historically accurate or not, what Luke was doing was suggesting that Jesus would be nourishment for many. The beginning of Jesus's story connects with his feeding the five thousand. It also relates to the Last Supper, and more broadly, to his whole message, a kind of food for the soul.

The Shepherds

Angels appear to shepherds in the fields and tell them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." First of all, the emphasis is again on "all people." Secondly, shepherds are peasants; they are not elite. Matthew has the magi come, but Luke is more interested in ordinary folk. Our manger scenes combine elements from all of the Gospels but do not represent the picture of any single Gospel by itself. And what is it that should bring such joy as the angel announced? The angel says that a savior has been born. When we hear the word savior, we immediately think of salvation from sin, and that is what Jesus has come to mean, but that is not what the word originally meant. In its Jewish context, it had social and even political overtones. Salvation meant deliverance from enemies; in Jesus's time, that was the Romans. In Old Testament times, the Assyrians, later the Babylonians, and then the Greeks. The people yearned for someone who could save them from the oppression under which they were living.

Marking Jewish Identity

In 2:21, Jesus is circumcised and named, marking his Jewish identity. A month later, following proper Jewish practice, they take Jesus to the Temple to redeem him. He is entirely part of the

Jewish community, just as baptism marks Christians as part of the Christian communion. They make the simple offering of turtle doves stipulated for poor people. Jesus did not come from an affluent family. Like the ones we follow at IPC, these rituals are straightforward (though they require some interpretation). When we visit faith communities different from our own, we find their varying personalities because of the various worship and sacramental patterns. The diversity provides a rich tapestry of human experience.

Simeon's Consolation

While in the Temple, Joseph and Mary meet an old priest named Simeon, who has been waiting for a long time for the "consolation of Israel." When he holds the infant Jesus, Simeon rejoices because he knows that Jesus is the person he has been waiting for. His prayer, called the Nunc Dimittis (Latin for now you dismiss), speaks of the coming of salvation, again with this word meaning something a little different from what we hear today. In 2:34c, he says that the child will be a sign that generates opposition. Since Jesus did not fit what many Jews were looking for, they did not believe he could be the messiah. Amy Jill says the Second Coming appears to be a great deal like traditional Jewish messianic hopes. So, she suggests that we work together for justice and peace rather than arguing over this. Simeon also tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul (2:35c). The pain of letting go is unbearable, but the consolation that Jesus brings is joyful.

Anna the Prophet

Luke does not tell us anything about Simeon's background, but we get a full genealogical report on Anna. She is a childless widow who lives in the Temple – it turns out this is not a male-only preserve. No prayer of hers is extant, but like Simeon, she praises God exuberantly for the extraordinary child.

Ending and Beginning

Mary and Joseph take Jesus home to Nazareth in Galilee to raise him. They have done everything required by the Torah – Luke is not going to let go of those requirements. Jesus grows in wisdom and divine favor. They will have to let go of their son when he grows up, but he can grow up like any other boy for now.

Zoom Link for Bible Study:

Please download and import the following iCalendar (.ics) files to your calendar system.

Daily:

[https://zoom.us/meeting/tJAvde2srj0pGdxSMCASQJOLHHhLR0LNQzJC/ics?icsToken=98tyKuCsRDkuHtSTsxqPRowIAIjoLOjziCFejadFrzLGIhNiSCzaHspKH0AvPPbh](https://zoom.us/join/https://zoom.us/meeting/tJAvde2srj0pGdxSMCASQJOLHHhLR0LNQzJC/ics?icsToken=98tyKuCsRDkuHtSTsxqPRowIAIjoLOjziCFejadFrzLGIhNiSCzaHspKH0AvPPbh)

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Dr. Blair Alexander, Sr.'s Sermon from 12-6-2020

“The Certainty of God during Uncertain Times”

Isaiah 41:10

Fear not, for I am with you;

Be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (ESV)

One of the wonders of the word of God, and magnificent truths of the Bible are the consistency and constancy of how God honors and respects God's Holy word. This consistency and dependability about God, is what speaks about the trustworthiness of the word of God and ultimately compels you and I to believe in a faithful and righteous God. Some theologians call this the immutability of God which is an important attribute of who God is. Immutability infers and implies that "God is unchanging in God's character, God's nature, God's will, and God's covenant promises." In other words, the good news of "holding to God's unchanging hands", as the song says, is that God is the same yesterday, today and forever more. Therefore, when God declares a promise to God's people and makes a commitment to do something, we can be certain, assured and comforted knowing that "it is so" because God's promises are based on the will of God, the wonder of God, and the worth of a Holy and Mighty God.

One author declares that "God has never made a promise that was too good to be true." The Italian Dominican friar, St. Thomas Aquinas calls God the immovable mover indicating that while God is steady, consistent and permanent, God has the capacity to easily and readily move

us into the places and spaces that fit the plans and ideas of an all knowing God. God therefore is the ultimate cause of all change, while God's self, remaining unchanged.

Throughout the Bible, women and men of God have depended on the promises of God's word and have been the recipient of the power, the perfection and the possibilities of a God who is able, a God who is available, and a God who is accessible. Why is God able, available and accessible? Because the power of God is unknowable, the grace and mercies of God are unconceivable and the love of God is unimaginable. God is....my Idylwood brothers and sisters, a present help in the time of trouble. God is....a way maker when we cannot find or make a way. And God is, as one popular song says,.....my all and all.

Consider with me a few of the women in the Bible who God made a way for and who provide us meaningful examples of the power and promises of God. These women serve as an important reminder that.....if God did it before, God can do it again, the same God back then, the same God right now.

When the matriarch Sarah was old, barren, infertile and without any expectation of having a child, God stepped in and asked a question of Abraham and Sarah that only God could answer saying "*Is there anything too hard for the Lord*"? God's question was not simply a rhetorical question easily answered and understood by God. No, God's question about God's own self was asked so that Sarah, Abraham and the world could see and witness the power of a sovereign God. Therefore, because God's word is certain, comforting and consistent, God visits Sarah as God said he would and Sarah conceives and bares her and Abraham a child in their old age.

In a similar circumstance Hannah, like Sarah is also barren and infertile, and a woman troubled in Spirit. Therefore she came to the man of God, the priest Eli and cried out her soul. As she departs from Eli's presence he says to her "*Go in peace and the God of Israel grant you your petition you have made to him*" Like Sarah, God also visits Hannah and she conceives and has a son who we know as the prophet Samuel.

You see when God visits God's people, things start to happen. The unknown becomes known, the unimaginable becomes imaginable, and the unbelievable becomes believable. Perhaps because Sarah and Hannah both waited a lifetime to have a child, they could appreciate and understand the words of that old Sam Cooke song that says "*It's been a long.....time coming, but I know a change gon come.*" Beloved, a visitation from God may take a long.....time coming, but it will not only change your life but will also change your life circumstances. You see when God visits God's people, God remembers them with saving grace. God remembers them with new mercies and God remembers them with the love that only a "Good God" can give.

In our primary text today that was read earlier, Isaiah 41:10, we find the Southern Kingdom of Judah exiled in Babylon because of their sins and in desperate need of a visit from a God who always remembers and a God who saves and rescues. The divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah have both sinned against God year after year and God had finally had enough. It is a terrible thing when a loving, forgiving and righteous God has had enough of God's own people. Therefore God does the unthinkable, the unlikely, and yes even the unbelievable. What does God do we might ask? God takes God's hands off of God's people and as the Apostle Paul declared in a similar circumstance to the church at Rome, God gave them up. God banished the Northern Tribe of Israel from their lands by sending the Assyrians to overtake them. Then God allowed

King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, to exile and export the people of Judah to Babylon. In other words, God exercised a clause in the covenant agreement with God's own people declaring that because Israel and Judah had consistently negated and broken their contracts with God, God declared Eminent Domain on the land he gave to their forefathers and God evicted, evacuated and yes ejected his own people from their ancestral land.

And so when Second Isaiah begins to prophesy to the house of Judah, we find God's people removed from their home in Jerusalem and removed from their land. God's people are now enslaved and exiled in Babylon and are wondering; Will God visit us? Will God remember us? And will God return us back to our homes?

My brothers and sisters, perhaps during this time of protest, pandemic, and partisan political pandemonium, we too are asking ourselves similar questions. Will God visit us? Will God remember us? And yes, will God save us.....even from ourselves?

Let me hasten to the good news of this text and the good news of the message that Isaiah provides to God's people in Judah and to you and I today. You see there is something special that happens in the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah. After spending the first 39 chapters of the book writing about the things that have occurred to the house of Judah during his lifetime, when we turn the page to chapter 40, the prophetic book of Second Isaiah begins to share with us the infinite power, the inexhaustible grace, and the magnificent mercies of a loving God. Yes, as we hear in our lectionary reading for this Second Sunday in Advent, chapter 40 begins with the caring and compassionate words from God to the people of God saying "Comfort, comfort my people says your God." On the surface, these are words used to console the house of Judah, and yes they in fact do that. But these words do more than console God's people with calm and support. These prophetic words introduce and speak about the power and the position of a mighty God to a people who are in need of salvation. This important and imperative section of the book of Isaiah sets the stage for us to attempt to grasp and comprehend a divine God who reigns supreme. The prophet is trying, with all of his might and with all of his use and command of the Hebrew language, and with all of his secular and sacred examples and prophetic imagination, to show how enormously powerful and how majestic and massive God is. The prophet is attempting to show us the gulf between humanity and divinity and how extensive a divide there is between God and everything else. To fully appreciate the hopefulness of Isaiah chapter 41, we must understand the blessings of the context of chapter 40. Chapter 40 speaks about a triumphant and victorious God who may have been silent, but who has always remained present. Chapter 40 tells us of a God who gives us free will, and a God whose will and witness cannot and will not be compared to any person, place or thing.

Hear this powerful and familiar proclamation from the prophetic word in chapter 40 verses 28-31 where the prophet speaks about the power and the might of God saying "Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of his understanding. He gives power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they (yes, yes, but they.....) that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

It is this God of all, this God of the universe, this God who established a covenant with his people declaring that I am with you and I will never forsake you. It is this God that the children of Judah receive a message of hope, help and healing from. It is this God who once again remembers and reveals himself to his people who are exiled in a foreign land and says to them in our present text:

Fear not, for I am with you.

The house of Judah had a lot to fear. They were exiles being held captive in a foreign land. They were a minority group of Hebrews being held by a more powerful majority group of Babylonians. They were surrounded by a nation that worshipped idols for gods. They were unsure and uncertain if the God they worshipped, Yahweh, would respond to their prayers. And they did not know if they would ever make it back home to their lands in Judah.

You see, just as the house of Judah is experiencing these seemingly insurmountable challenges of living in Babylon, the God of all speaks to their very souls saying “Fear not. For I am with you.”

God’s message to Judah “fear not, for I am with you” reminds me of one of my favorite stories in the Bible in the book of 2 Kings Chapter 6 when the prophet Elisha and his servant find themselves surrounded by the Syrian Army. Elisha’s servant thinking they were doom by overwhelming forces becomes frighten. But when the prophet looks out towards the Syrian Army, his focus is not on the enemy, but it is on God’s army filled with horses and chariots of fire. Many times we become afraid because we focus on what others want us to see instead of on what God needs us to see. Elisha then says a word of hope, a word of inspiration and a word of everlasting power. He tells his servant “Don’t be afraid. Those that are with us are more than those that are with them.”

So today God is telling us to fear not; and don’t be afraid to stand up for what is right; don’t be afraid to speak truth to those in power, don’t be afraid to stand your ground even when others are trying to move the ground from under you, don’t be afraid to look for hope in the midst of despair; don’t be afraid to walk by faith when others walk by the sight and sounds of CNN, CNBC, MSNBC or Fox News, don’t be afraid to seek God through prayer while God may be found, don’t be afraid to find your story in the Bible story knowing that we serve a mighty God and don’t be afraid because God says “I am with you.”

Not only is God saying to Judah and to us don’t be afraid, but God also tells them; Be not dismayed, for I am your God.

Dismayed is often defined as being discouraged, distressed, demoralized, or intimidated. As God’s people were discouraged and unsettled by the presence and perceived power of the Babylonia people and by the wooden and metal idols they worshipped, God wanted God’s people to know that “I am your God” and that “I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.” God is saying to us today, whatever sickness or other challenges we are going through, don’t be discouraged. If we should happen to find ourselves exiled mentally or displaced physically, don’t be dismayed. And whatever nonsense we get from our Nation’s Capital or hear on our radio, ipad or iphone, don’t be dismayed because God says “I am your God.”

By declaring the words “I am your God,” God gives to each of us a source of ownership and a sense of entitlement that God is our present help in the time of trouble.

And because God is with us and has declared himself as our God, God says to God’s people: I will strengthen you and I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. The Hebrew understanding of the word strengthen is to encourage or fortify; and to establish or to confirm. Additionally it speaks about being strong, alert and courageous. Last summer I read Nelson Mandela’s autobiography entitled “*Long Walk to Freedom*.” Many times I erroneously referred to the book as “A long road to freedom.” But as I read more and more, I understood how resolute and purposeful Mandela’s title is. You see although Mandela wanted to take his readers along with him to hear and experience his personal journey from prison to freedom, and from prison to the presidency, he also had an even larger story to tell that involved South Africa’s long walk to freedom from the clutches of apartheid. Mandela invites his readers to witness the strength and courage required to fight for freedom. In the final chapter of his book he says “I learned that courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he that conquers that fear.” When God tells the people of Judah, I will strengthen you and I will help you, God is reminding them that through God, they too can conquer their fear of the Babylonians and that they have the capacity to be brave, fearless and courageous men and women of God.

As we seek strength, help and support from the word of God today, I am proud of our young courageous and fearless foot soldiers who were on the front lines protesting for our collective rights. They have decided, like so many did during other historical moments of protest, to sit-in, to boycott, and to face head-on the prejudice that plagues our country. They have decided “they ain’t gone let nobody turn them around.” Their inclusive protest that embraces people from an array of nationalities and colors have brought issues to the forefront such as Black Lives Matter, Brown Lives Matter, All Lives Matter, and yes Police Lives Matters, as well as issues such as fair and affordable housing, educational reforms and health care improvements. Their voices are inspiring and are much needed. And....., when we examine the history of the Christian Church, let us never forget that our protestant or pro-tes-tant faith began as pro-tes-tors. So our young warriors are in good religious company. Therefore we must encourage them and ourselves to fight on and to march on.

Conclusion

Finally my brothers and sisters, O what a glorious site to behold when God visits God’s people and remembers them with love. In their own strength, the house of Judah could not imagine escaping exile in Babylon. Perhaps, they could not imagine returning home to Jerusalem. It was hard for them to think about making a way out of no way. They could not see their way forward. They were stuck in a foreign land and many days could only ask “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

But a covenant keeping God visited and vacated Judah’s life sentence. A covenant keeping God commuted and communed with his broken vessels. A covenant keeping God returned and remembered his promise to provide his people with a land flowing with milk and honey. A

covenant keeping God returned to his people while they were in a strange land called Babylon and renewed, re-imagined and reinforced their strength. God remembered Judah and reminds us today that God is our help in a time of need and yes our healer in the midst of the struggle. In other words when we put our hope, our faith and our trust in the almighty God, and God declares that we are God's children, we get access to and are included in every good and perfect gift from God. We become the recipients of the grace of God, the hope of God, the presence of God, the joy of God, the strength of God, the help of God, the peace of God and yes the love of God.

And so as we conclude this word of God, let us be encouraged today that not only is God with us but God is for us and if God be for us, who can be against us. How do we know that God is with and for us? Because God reminds us today with a Divine Declaration and a Prophetic word saying:

Fear not, for I am with you;

Be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

This is the word of God for the people of God. May it rest upon your souls. Amen!

Lectionary Readings for December 13, 2020, the third Sunday in Advent:

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;

61:2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

61:3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

61:4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

61:8 For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

61:9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

61:11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Psalm 126

126:1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

126:2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

126:3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

126:4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

126:5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

126:6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Luke 1:46b-55

1:46b "My soul magnifies the Lord,

1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

5:16 Rejoice always,

5:17 pray without ceasing,

5:18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

5:19 Do not quench the Spirit.

5:20 Do not despise the words of prophets,

5:21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good;

5:22 abstain from every form of evil.

5:23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

5:24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

1:19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

1:20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."

1:21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."

1:22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

1:23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

1:24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

1:25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

1:26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

1:27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."
1:28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.
Sermon from last Sunday

Link for Recording from Worship Service of 12-6-2020

https://zoom.us/rec/share/jaHASgCHJxvo9q7LCv7CDiJvBVkOrStaQZhk_kUGBOg0FwfzKzGuIbjk0maoEfdk.7quic4O_NVmkVys1

Access Passcode: A!Q.03@b

Link for Worship Service of 12-13-2020

Time: Dec 6, 2020 10:30 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Every week on Sun, until Jan 31, 2021, 9 occurrence(s)

Dec 6, 2020 10:30 AM

Dec 13, 2020 10:30 AM

Dec 20, 2020 10:30 AM

Dec 27, 2020 10:30 AM

Jan 3, 2021 10:30 AM

Jan 10, 2021 10:30 AM

Jan 17, 2021 10:30 AM

Jan 24, 2021 10:30 AM

Jan 31, 2021 10:30 AM

Please download and import the following iCalendar (.ics) files to your calendar system.

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