

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

Saturday, December 12th

"I don't want to"

Matthew 21:28-30 "*Tell me what you think of this story. A man had two sons. He went and said, 'Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.' The son answered, 'I don't want to.' Later on he thought better of it and went. The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never went.*

When I hear this story I hear myself in both sons. There are certainly times where I said aloud that I did not want to do something but ended up doing it anyways. Then there are times where I had every intention of doing something but did not follow through. We do not know the hearts of these two sons, only what they said and what they did. Ultimately, it is our actions that speak louder than our words. As Christians, what we do in the world is God's call to us to work in the vineyard. We can come to the work reluctant, but faithful, like the first son or we can come to work eager, but disloyal, like the second son. Whatever our excuses are, it is what we do when under pressure that people see. This pandemic has put a lot of pressure on churches and sadly, I have seen more eager but disloyal sons and daughters than reluctant but faithful ones. We must push ourselves to work faithfully where God calls us even if we "don't want to" because it is in those don't-want-to-moments that God's glory shines through us.

Heavenly Parent, forgive me for all the wrongs I have done and all the things that I have left undone. Help me to think and do better in the way of Christ. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

Sunday, December 13th

"God's Justice"

Isaiah 61:8a "*For I the LORD love justice.*"

Justice is such an interesting idea but it is a lot easier to comprehend as a theory and less easy to practice. In the United States, we have a "justice" system. The commonly agreed upon idea is that we all need to follow laws and when we break those laws or rules there needs to be some type of reform. But fear from these punishments should not be the only reason to follow the law; there needs to be a moral and ethic drive for us as citizens.

I was about 6 or 7 when I learned that stealing was not acceptable. My mom had taken me to a department store and at the checkout, I swiped a little toy bear from a shelf and put it in my pocket without paying for it. When we got outside and my mother saw me playing with it, we went back inside and gave it back to the cashier. I don't remember if I got an ear-lashing or a more persuasive punishment but I knew after that day that stealing was more than just a legal issue that you may be able to circumvent, rather we had an ethical obligation to not take something that is not ours. Above our laws and legal systems, God holds us to a higher sense of justice. If we simply live by human standards we can fall short of God's expectations. That is one of the beautiful things about being a Christian: we can see the world for what it is and hold ourselves to a higher standard because God calls us to love our neighbor, something that society does not require.

God, help me to follow your ways, which are above the ways of the world. Lead me to truly love my neighbor and seek justice. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

Monday, December 14th

"Fire and Water"

Psalm 125:1 "*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.*"

Often in Scripture, mountains are depicted as holy places in which people had extraordinary encounters with God. High places were then equated with being close to divine beings and essentially making mountain-tops the best place to be close to God. Also, volcanoes (fiery mountains) have long been places of fear and folklore which have been explained as points where good and evil encounter one another.

I have visited Guatemala twice and both times I have seen the beauty and power of the volcanoes near Antigua. These mountains are currently named *Fire and Water*. The dormant volcano, *Water*, was often held as a sacred space by the early Mayan inhabitants and was originally called *The Place of Flowers*. *Fire* was also a holy place but due to its regular eruptions, it has been seen as dangerous and is avoided. The volcano, *Water*, got its name when a mudslide(lahar) in 1541 destroyed the capital city. The northside of the mountain has been used for agriculture for centuries and the fertile soil has been seen as a gift from the earth but it comes with the danger of possibly being wiped out again. These stark realities are places where we can see the manifestation of God's gifts and how easily they can be taken away. Believing and trusting in God's goodness and grace is like living on top of a fertile mountain without the fear of losing what God has eternally given you. Although, we cannot live on that mountain all the time; we have to struggle with the mudslides and lava that can harm us or harm one another. Remember, though, that we are on those fertile slopes of God's holy place and that through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can share in our harvest of God's goodness.

God of the mountaintops, teach us to reach towards new heights and do not fear the world because you love us and remain with us. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

Tuesday, December 15th

"Fording Rivers"

2 Kings 2:14 "*Elisha took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.*"

I'm not sure if you have ever tried crossing a moving body of water, but it is not easy. When I was a kid, I loved to spend summer days walking from my family's camp into the valley where a little creek flowed through State Game Lands. I usually took my fishing pole with me trying to locate a couple trout that survived the great blue heron's spring hunting efforts. Occasionally I would find a hungry fish in a deep hole but I would usually release it back hoping that it would make it to the fall and populate the stream with more fish for the next year. One of the more adventurous parts of those trips is when I had to cross the creek. Now it was not very big or deep in most parts but for a kid, it was fun and taught me how to be independent when there is a little risk involved. As I got older, I would take on wider and deeper creeks and I even crossed a river one time while doing an adventure race a few years ago.

I simply cannot imagine what it was like for Moses at the Red Sea or for Elisha here at the Jordan when the water parted and they walked on dry land. There is no greater physical representation of God assuring your path forward. As Christians, Jesus has not parted the rivers for us but sometimes we have to step in the river, avoid the slippery rocks, and let the cool spring-fed creeks run over our shoes. Life as Christ's disciples can have its risks but ultimately when we seek our intended path, it can become clear to us like Elisha experienced.

Lord, take my hand as I walk into the river. Guide me and steady my feet as I hope in reaching the other side. Don't let me walk along the bank and ignore our calling. Help me to get my feet wet. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

**Wednesday, December 16th**  
“Martyr”

Mark 9:9 “*Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*”

Being a Christian can be dangerous. I remember when I first learned about the early martyrs of the church seminary, it reminded me that there is a difference between “practicing” our faith and “living” our faith. In the early days of the Church, people were arrested and sometimes killed for their beliefs and for their willful attempt at spreading the Gospel. The message of Christ was under oppression but the Church was growing strong as we hear in Acts 4:4. I have seen the Church under oppression in Vietnam and in Egypt but we have it easy as Americans. We literally live a life opposite of oppression: We are privileged to live in a society where our faith is normal and even expected. Sometimes that oppression, that pressure to exist, drives Christians to do remarkable things. So if we are not under oppression then are we doing remarkable things? Of course we are! However, we sometimes seem to have forgotten our sense of urgency and zeal for the Gospel. What would it look like if we took our faith to the level that we feared for our safety because of the things we are doing and saying? It is difficult to comprehend but our faith requires more of us than checking boxes on a to-do list. It is important to remember that Jesus did not suggest for us to do difficult things, he commanded us to do them. There have been times in my life where I have chosen to do remarkably difficult things but it did not come with a price. Those outcomes have been made known as “the cost of discipleship”. (A book with that title by Dietrich Boenhofer is a must read.) But that “cost” looks different for us all. Sometimes that just means that we come to

terms with the world around us, oftentimes we have to take a difficult path, or for some, it means paying the price of our lives to share the message about the one who loved us enough to die for us all. Jesus, open my eyes so that I may see what price I must pay. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

**Thursday, December 17th**  
“Fake It Until You Make It”

Psalm 89:1 “*I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.*”

When I was a teenager, I joined the choir in school. There was not a try-out or review of my singing ability so I was automatically added to the group. I went to a small rural school and they needed everyone that wanted to join so that they could have a decent group. Unfortunately for us all, I am not a good singer. When preparing for a concert there was a very difficult part of a song that required everyone to be perfectly on key for the harmonization. Only problem was that I could not stay in key. The choir director stopped in the middle of practice and asked “Who is off key?!” It was me. He joked later that I “couldn’t hold a tune even if it was in my pocket.” (Something he later disputed but I know he said it and still laugh today about it.) I was a good sport about it and I either learned the part or to just not project as much if I was out of key. Through this I learned the idea of “fake it until you make it”. Sometimes we do this as Christians when we are presented with ideas or life questions. We are singing the song of life and we come to a point where the notes are unfamiliar and do not make sense so we just try our best. Discipleship is not about following rules, it is more like improv. One of my favorite comedy shows as a kid was “Whose Line Is It Anyway”. It was based all on improvisation following a short primer or introduction. One of the funniest things in any comedy routine is when a person comes full circle and brings back a line from the beginning. As people of faith, we are told from the beginning that Jesus loves us. We learn and we grow and find meaning and purpose from every

experience and encounter. Ultimately, we come full circle back to the punchline - "Jesus loves us." Sometimes we try finding the right words along the way and fake it until we make it but the punchline always stays the same.

Thank you for your grace as we attempt to sing your song of life. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

**Friday, December 18th**

"Afraid of Heights"

Psalm 89:26 "*You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!*"

Rock climbing is such an interesting sport to me. I have been a novice climber for years but have mostly done easy stuff that was pretty safe. You may not think so but rock climbing is typically a very safe sport. My climbing friends are freaks about safety. We don't buy cheap equipment or cut corners because our life is on the line when scaling 100 foot high rocks. We double and triple check our gear and its placement and we constantly monitor our setup to ensure that if we fall, all will be well. The thing that ensures us of our safe return home from our adventure is our fear. Some people say that climbers are "fearless" but the thing that drives our decisions is the fear of falling. It's not a debilitating fear but a conscious reminder that each decision is very important to our lives. The rocks we climb are not dynamic or flexible but they are fixed and unwavering. When we put anchors up for protection, we know that the rock is not going anywhere. God, the Rock of our salvation, is the same way: when we put our trust(anchor) into God's grace, we are provided with unwavering eternal protection. But we can't be afraid of heights. When God calls us to live on the firm foundation of grace and truth we have to trust that we will be protected and not fear what God has instore for us and retreat back to our comfort. Instead, we need to

climb(grow) with Christ who is our teacher and savior as we have hope in reaching the top.

Oh the Rock of my salvation and giver of life, push me up the mountain so that I can see the world and share your love as you call us. Amen.

## **Advent Devotional 2020**

**Saturday, December 19th**

"Grandma"

Psalm 89:4 "*My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with the LORD; and in my name God's Words shall be exalted.*"

My maternal grandmother was a saint. I don't say that because she was *my* grandmother but because she truly loved people. If there was one person that I have ever encountered that lived their life as a humble, caring, and thoughtful person, it was her. My grandma, Bertha, was a young child during the Great Depression and she had a twin sister. Her life revolved around family, the church, and being a good neighbor. I have told people that if the UCC ever had saints like the Catholic Church, she would have been one. I would love the world to know of her example because what she did was simple: she cared. But that is not revolutionary, is it? It shouldn't be but it is. It is also rare to see somebody in the world that "in their name God's Words shall be exalted". Mother Teresa of Calcutta comes to mind here. Instead of realizing how far I have fallen from these examples, I use these ideals of faith to strive towards a better ethical life as a Christian.

As Christmas approaches and we seek the coming of the light of Christ, I want you to understand that Christ's light is something to share and to manifest into your own life. If your hearts are pointed towards bringing this light into the world then, friends, put your

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hope and faith in God's Word, Jesus Christ, and through your life  
may God be exalted.

Light of the world, may we be caring and loving towards all of  
your children and may we live a life where others can see your  
Word exalted through our devotion. Amen.