First Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.”

— Jeremiah 33:14-16

Prayer

Dear God, help me to know myself, to love myself and to believe in myself. How much faith does it take to be who you are? How much faith does it take to listen to the voice calling out to you in the wilderness?

Reflection and Meditation

As we light the second candle on our Advent wreath, we are encouraged to think about “faith” — as Christians and as human beings who are navigating the paths of life. Sometimes, these paths lead us into places of despair, loneliness and depression — unknown territories with seemingly no way out. Alone with only ourselves and God, these places of wilderness provide an opportunity for clarity and insight into who we are and what we are capable of. Do you remember a time when you felt “in the wilderness”? How did your faith help you to overcome your fears and doubts and emerge from the wilderness?

Prayer

God, help me to know myself, to love myself and to believe in myself.

Second Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple: the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.”

— Malachi 3:1-4

“In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod tetrarch of Galilee; his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene — during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’”


Reflection and Meditation

How much faith does it take to be who you are? How much faith does it take to listen to the voice calling out to you in the wilderness? As we light the second candle on our Advent wreath, we are encouraged to think about “faith” — as Christians and as human beings who are navigating the paths of life. Sometimes, these paths lead us into places of despair, loneliness and depression — unknown territories with seemingly no way out. Alone with only ourselves and God, these places of wilderness provide an opportunity for clarity and insight into who we are and what we are capable of. Do you remember a time when you felt “in the wilderness”? How did your faith help you to overcome your fears and doubts and emerge from the wilderness?

Prayer

God, help me to know myself, to love myself and to believe in myself.

Third Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

“Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, ‘Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.’

I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you. At that time, I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. At that time, I will gather you; at that time, I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the Lord.”

— Zephaniah 3:14-20

“John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.’ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to unfasten. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”

— Luke 3:7-18

Reflection and Meditation

Today, we light the third candle on our Advent wreath — the one that symbolizes joy and love. Looking at the three candles now illuminating the room, I’m reminded of how much joy and love fill the air. At this time of year, it’s difficult not to feel your heart filling with joy and love. Why do we not always feel this way? Why do we so rarely encounter each other with that same spirit of affirmation, unconditional acceptance and love? This Advent season, let’s try to hold on to this spirit of divine love and possibility, let’s share our material and spiritual wealth with those who are lacking and most importantly, let’s remain centered in joy and love when faced with attempts to harm, oppress or exclude us.

Prayer

Dear God, help me accept your love for me so I can live with joy unwaveringly, just like your light in the world withstands all storms.
Reflection and Meditation
Our time of waiting and preparation is almost over: Today, we light the fourth candle on the Advent wreath—the one that symbolizes “peace.” In his poem “Now the work of Christmas begins,” theologian Howard Thurman explains that “the work of Christmas” is “peace work”: “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the sun sets, when the star in the sky is gone, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.” How do you engage in this “peace work”? How do you find the lost, heal the broken and make music in the heart—knowing that sometimes you are the one who is lost and broken? How do you contribute to your community’s ability to help others?

Prayer
Dear God, as we await the coming of the Prince of Peace, help me learn from you how to bring peace to my heart and to the heart of the world.