

Morning Meditation – December 7

So Advent helps us practice, year after year (will we ever get it right?), letting go of our certainties. Advent waiting entails letting go of our political posturing, our fundamentalisms and finger pointing, our hashtags and hubris. Rather, it teaches us to watch quietly, wait expectantly and prepare to seek the Christ child in humble places like a stable. Gretchen E. Ziegenhals

I invite you to light two candles: one for hope and one for peace as you read today's meditation.

We enter the second week of Advent with the candles of hope and peace lighting the way. These two candles guide us and ground us. They both tell us the direction to go and teach us the way to be. As Fred Craddock said, "Hope needs one calorie a day to survive." As Maya Angelou poetically penned about peace, "We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence. It is what we have hungered for. Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace. A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies. Security for our beloveds and their beloveds."

The candles of Advent lead us to the most impossible and improbable place – a dusty, dirty, drafty barn! God's grand entry and social media strategy is as counter-cultural and counter-cultural gets! God decides that an unwed young woman, named Mary, should be the God-bearer. Rather than power, privilege, and prestige, God goes a different way. I agree with Ziegenhals' quote above, of course we don't get this right, because we need to let go of so much of what we cling to as certainty in our life. To let go of our plans for what God is up to in the world today. At its core what we hear in the Gospels at Christmas calls us let go of being in control and in charge.

But wait just a minute, you may think, does that mean I don't stand for anything? Or what about people who are on the fringe and fray? Great questions! Advent calls me to seek to stand with God's way of hope, peace, love and joy. These are not exactly the sorts of words we have been hearing much in 2020!! Advent challenges me to listen and lean into those who feel on the fringe and fray – not assume I can solve all their problems or that I am super spiritual man to their rescue. I, like the shepherds, stand in awe of what Ross Gay calls, "Structural Tenderness" and what God is up to in the world.

Advents calls each of us to:

1. Watch.
2. Wait.
3. Prepare with humility.

I need the candles of hope and peace to burn brightly before and within me to do those three tasks! It is my prayer this week, we might let the challenging words of this season sink and sing to our souls in such a way that we realize, though we many never get Advent right...but that getting Advent right isn't the point. The invitation is to witness to the mystery and marvel of God's presence with us and for us.

Prayer: O come, o come Emmanuel and enter my heart, home, and whole life this day and this week. May You find room and a welcoming, warm embrace. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 8

I invite you to light two candles: one for hope and one for peace as you read today's meditation.

When was the last time you read the Christmas story as recorded by Luke in chapter 2? Don't worry, you don't have to answer that question in the comment section! Many of us just hear these words on Christmas Eve when the sanctuary hums with the holy.

This year, such our homes are our sanctuary, I think it is good to start to weave these familiar words into the walls around us. In the sermon on Sunday, November 29 ([click here to watch](#)), I encourage you to create an altar in your home. I suggested you could put an Advent wreath there with five candles (four for the Sundays leading up to Christmas – the candles of hope, peace, love, and joy – and a fifth candle in the middle to light on Christmas Eve/Christmas day). Or you could priceless family treasures that have your grand-parents DNA and fingerprints upon them. Or you could place your nativity scene figures.

Now, I want you to place and put your Bible there open to Luke chapter 2.

Next, I want you to slowly savor the sacred story that is the reason for the season!

Read the words aloud at your altar/holy of holies.

Notice where you place the emphasis or inflection.

Notice the emotions are evoked and provoked by the words.

Notice what questions come up or new words that you had heard in the sanctuary on Christmas Eve.

Every sentence of Luke 2:1-20 has a sermon waiting within it. Between now and Christmas Eve I am going to slowly savor the story and offer a brief meditation on each of the verses.

I invite you each day to read the whole story aloud; then settle in with me into a few verses. I pray this practice will awaken us to the marvel, mystery, holy humility that hums in every word as well as the spaces in-between.

For now, find your Bible and let us begin to let the words of Luke guide us to the place where Love's pure light is born anew and afresh even this year.

Prayer: In these days, O God, let Your decree dance in my heart as I center the familiar words I have heard so many times, but need to hear afresh/anew this year. Amen.

Morning Meditation - December 9

I invite you to light two candles: one for hope and one for peace as you read today's meditation.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke starts off by naming the powerful, prestigious, and people who lived in posh palaces. Luke begins by naming the context when the sacred started stirring in a new way. To locate God's grand entry in the time of Augustus and Quirinius reminds us that God's story and our story are not different or distance. God's story gets woven into human history. God's story is still being sewn into this world right here and now.

Sometimes people like to debate or discuss if the census really happened? They want historical evidence or to prove that this is true. What I find more fascinating is the truth beneath the facts. Whether a census happened only takes me so deep into the story. To dare to dive deeper would be to acknowledge and affirm that Emperor Augustus and Quirinius had all the clout and cash to do whatever they choose. To quote my grandfather's favorite phrase, "If Augustus said jump...you didn't even dare ask how high! You just started hopping with all your might and hoped it was enough." People were afraid of the powers-that-be. The anxiety that hovered/hung in the air was contagious. People tried to keep their heads down and just went about their life.

You can stop me anytime this sounds familiar!

We still have powers-that-be that flex their might and muscle. We still have people who use that power to hurt and harm others; treat people as less-than made in God's holy image. We still have people in positions of prestige and privilege who may not go by the name "Caesar," but act like it every day.

The deep truths of this story are a song as old as time and rhyme!

If you want to switch to advance-player mode, the truth is that I can be like Emperor Augustus too. I can demand over the phone to a customer service representative that the "Customer is always right!" I can decide not to look in the eyes of the front-line worker at the grocery store and stare at my phone instead. I can throw around my privilege, such as it is, in ways I don't see because of my own bias. I can let the access I have to the basic needs as well as money shield me from others demands.

Me? Like Caesar? Say it ain't so! I don't like how uncomfortable that makes me feel.

Perhaps one of Luke's points isn't only that God entered human history in those days, but also in these days. Perhaps one of Luke's points isn't only that God's ways are different than our ways, but will challenge and call us to let go over the things that keep us separated from each other. Perhaps one of Luke's points is to bring this sacred story next to our own heart, trusting that God's grace will guide us in ways that can move us to live differently in these days.

May that paragraph above be my prayer this day, O God. Come and show me the Caesar within to let go and make more room for You. Amen.

Morning Meditation- December 10

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³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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.

Joseph only gets an honorable mention in Luke's gospel. He first shows up in Luke 1:27. Well, not physically, just named as the betrothed of Mary. The story that is really about Mary being called to be the God-bearer.

The above is the second time his name is dropped. And a third time in 2:16 (which we will hear later) where he is at the manger with Mary and Jesus. And...that is really it. He is there when Jesus is circumcised and when Jesus stays behind at the temple at age 12. Some translations name him specifically and others just have a generic, "Jesus' parents". But that is it. In Luke's gospel, Joseph is silent, but he does get a participation trophy.

Wait. What about the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream? That is found in Matthew 1:18-25. While that is certainly a great story, it is Matthew's narrative and not Luke's good news. For Luke, Joseph is important because of what where he is from and who he is related to.

We have all had those moments where we don't feel like we are being fully seen or heard. I get referred to as "Ethan or Olivia's dad" or "Just a pastor" or "From that church that so-so goes to." Moments when we feel pushed to the periphery and don't even get the participation trophy!!

What stories from your own experiences start to stir and swirl in response to the above?

This is where it is good to remember that while I am the star of the drama/comedy/musical known as "My life"; I get an honorable mention in other people's stories. While I am on center stage in my own head, from the eyes and understandings of others I am barely on stage and certainly not in the spotlight.

I celebrate Joseph as part of God's divine story, and I know that I am called to participate too. And it is good to remember where my hands and presence might be called to be part may or may not be the starring role. But I would rather be in concert and caught up with what God is doing than only counting how many times my name gets dropped. Such a way of seeing the world, as we heard in the quote on Monday, will cause us to let go of the ways we usually operate to be about God's work in the world.

Prayer: God open me to do what I can, where I can, regardless of whether anyone ever gives me an award. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 11

I invite you to light two candles: one for hope and one for peace as you read today's meditation.

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. Luke 2:5-6

Wait...where is the donkey?! Every Christmas pageant I have ever participated in or seen has Mary and Joseph with a donkey. The donkey is Mary's ride so she doesn't have to walk the 90 miles from Galilee to Bethlehem. The donkey is crucial and critical for comic relief. Plus, the donkey allows the crafty person in the congregation to turn a wagon into an animal for Joseph to pull down the center aisle. The donkey is classic and central to this story.

Who can I write to and make sure this oversight is corrected??

All that is to recognize that over the years we have added to the Christmas narrative. We have taken some creative liberties. The innkeepers who growl and groan and refuse Mary and Joseph a place to stay, not really in the story. The three Wise Ones who travel from afar are in Matthew, only that writer doesn't specify three. My prayer in pointing out the differences between what is written in the Bible and written in our hearts will help us honestly re-examine what we know.

If there was not a donkey and they had to walk, Mary being nine months pregnant, that would have been hard. On some level we can connect with that difficult journey like trying to get through this year has been an emotional/spiritual/physical stress and strain on us? While not an exact equivalent, there is something there this year.

I also wonder if Mary walked and showed incredible resilience? How have you and I shown strength this year to keep on keeping on?

What if they didn't knock on countless innkeeper doors, but tried to make the best of the space they were given? That connects to my heart.

What if the little Lord Jesus didn't lay down his sweet head in the hay – away in a manger – but was fussy and noisy like all infants can be? This gives me space to name and claim my crankiness.

What if Mary and Joseph did not gaze sweetly at Jesus in the manger, but are as scared and unsure of what is happening as I was when my kids were born and have been this year?

Sometimes shifting how and what we see changes everything.

What other questions stir within you as you have been slowly savoring the story this week? What new ideas or insights might those questions provoke and evoke within your heart. Take time today to pray the questions, to let the words we have read this week work and wiggle in your soul. And may the One who is writing these words on our hearts this year sing to your soul today in this space.

Prayer: God help me let go of what I think needs to happen for the ways You are happening and hovering and humming in my life today. Amen.