*DEVOTIONS*

November 28 – December 3

*The Peace of Christ*

**Monday, November 28 Luke 1:26-33**

*“You will be with child and give birth to a son”*

The announcement to Mary is similar to the announcement to Zechariah, but the differences are significant. Whereas the first announcement takes place in the temple in the center of Israelite culture, this one takes place in an obscure Galilean village well north of the capital. The humble nature of the announcement parallels the humble nature of Jesus’ birth and ministry. With her home in Nazareth, we know that Mary came from humble, agrarian roots. Galilee was not a respected region. It was hardly the expected locale for one sent from God.

Gabriel, the same angel who spoke to Zechariah, brings the divine message. Luke identifies Mary as a virgin, engaged to Joseph; that is, she was pledged to him sometime in the previous year. A Jewish betrothal involved two steps: the formal engagement including a contract and exchange of a bridal price, and then about a year later, a wedding. Mary’s age is not given but, in this culture, she was possibly in her mid-teens. Mary’s initial fear is calmed when the angel explains the reason for his presence. She has “found favor” with God.

*When I am tempted to pride, Lord, remind me of your humble birth. Amen.*

**Tuesday, November 29 Isaiah 9:6-7**

*“For to us a child is born”*

Who is this child? The titles given argue against its being merely human, such as one of the Israelite or Judean kings. No Jewish king was ever identified as “Mighty God.” Clearly the person being referred to here is the promised Messiah, who will reign over God’s people with a kind of justice and righteousness that no mere human descendant of David ever achieved. Furthermore, the government and the social and personal harmony (“peace”) he will produce will be eternal.

We can imagine Isaiah asking God just what the things he has been inspired to say mean. We are told that the Messiah will come as a child. God’s answer to the oppression and hostility of this proud and cruel world is not to come as a jack-booted warrior to smash the opposition. Somehow, although we are not told how here, he will shatter “the yoke that burdens” his people without becoming a greater oppressor than the enemy. None of these events will take place indifferently, for it will all be accomplished through the “zeal” of the Lord.

*Heavenly Father, I eagerly await the everlasting peace you will bring. Amen.*

**Wednesday, November 30 Philippians 4:4-9**

*“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding”*

The Philippian believers were suffering under opposition from their pagan neighbors, just as Paul had suffered when among them. Thus, just as Paul had earlier commanded the Philippians, despite their persecution, to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, so he returns to this theme, asking the Philippians to maintain an attitude of joy “in the Lord” at all times, urging them to adopt toward their persecutors Christ’s approach of gentle nonretaliation. Instead, they should replace their anxiety with thankful prayer.

Verse seven gives the result of the thankful prayer that Paul has described in verse six. If the Philippians follow Paul’s advice, he says, then “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” will stand guard over their hearts and minds. But what is the “peace of God”? In this context, in contrast to the anxiety mentioned earlier, it is an inner sense of contentment supplied by God. Further, it transcends understanding because God supplies an attitude in the face of adversity that does not fit our normal response.

*In the face of my daily struggles, Lord, give me your peace. Amen.*

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**Thursday, December 1 Luke 1:34-38**

*“May it be to me as you have said”*

Mary is honored by God not because she has done anything, but simply because she is the chosen vessel for this demonstration of God’s grace. God even gives a sign that his word is being fulfilled. The angel reveals that her aging relative will bear a child too, and he reminds her that “nothing is impossible with God.” As with Zechariah, this remark indicates that God can and will perform his word. His promise can be trusted.

Mary’s response reveals her character. This was no simple matter. She is being asked to bear a child as a virgin without being married. In standing up for God and his power, she will probably become the object of much doubt and ridicule. But Mary knows she is God’s servant, so she will accept God’s work through her as he wills. In this way, Mary reflects the person whom God unexpectedly chooses to use. She brings no outstanding credentials to the task other than her availability and willingness to serve. But those characteristics are the most basic ones anyone can offer God.

*With your grace behind me, Lord, I can do whatever you ask of me. Amen.*

**Friday, December 2 Psalm 122:6-9**

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”*

Given the ongoing unrest in the Middle East and the uneasiness of peace accords that have been reached, the psalmist’s invitation to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” is remarkably contemporary in its literal sense. Yet even as we pray for peace in Jerusalem and throughout the world, it is crucial to realize that Jerusalem represents in the Bible not just a place but is used as a symbol of God’s presence among humanity. To enter Jerusalem in this second sense is ultimately to experience the reality of God’s presence in one’s life.

Thus, to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is to pray for our own peace with God, and to pray for others that they too may experience peace in their relationship with God. To live for God’s sake (verse 9) and for the sake of others (verse 8) is to experience and to extend the gracious justice God intends as ruler of the world. This life-style, this commitment, is reality. To be sure, the same old so-called realities will still be present – hatred and war, trouble and turmoil – but they will no longer be the last word. That belongs to God.

*I pray for both literal and spiritual peace for our world, Lord. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 3 Numbers 6:22-27**

*“The Lord bless you and keep you”*

The act of blessing is deeply rooted in Israelite culture and it bears a wide range of meaning. On the one hand, Jacob’s stealing of Esau’s blessing shows the near magical power of blessing. Here, to bless is to bestow power for fertility and well-being, which, once spoken, takes on a life of its own. On the other hand, the expression of divine blessing can be taken as little more than an example of everyday greeting among the Israelites. The book of Ruth provides an example when the harvesters welcome Boaz with the words, “The Lord bless you”.

The priestly blessing on the congregation in this passage functions someplace between the two examples noted above. Its central message is stated in the closing Hebrew word *shalom* translated “peace.” In English, “peace” connotes the absence of war. It can also describe a state of tranquility. These meanings are also in the Hebrew. But the peace of God in the priestly blessing embraces even more aspects of life, including good health, security, wellness, material prosperity, and a long life.

*Bless me, Lord, with your protection, grace and peace. Amen.*