

He Is Here

Advent 2023



We can hardly believe that this is our third Christmas with you. Our family made the actual move to lead the Chapel at Seaside on Dec 11th, 2020. We got here just in time to find out what Christmas Eve at the Chapel was like...during COVID of course. It was cold that evening, and wet, there were like 2 rows of seats outside facing the chapel windows, people wore masks, and I'm pretty sure we had to sit people in every other row. We had 3 services and no idea how many people would show up. Our kids hung out in the bride's room and split a burger from Great Southern while so many families came in and out together to celebrate the holiday. All night I kept asking, "God, is this how I will feel every Christmas Eve forever?"

This Advent season could not feel more different. We are expectant to see so many of you journey through this Advent guide with us and visit church and say hello over the next few weeks. We know that Christmas Eve will mean seeing so many of you who have become like family to us, some of you serving side by side with us. We are so excited and hopeful that you connect with the Lord in a special way as you anticipate Christmas morning. We mostly hope that you will



let God draw near to you as you read scripture after scripture about God making himself known to us. We pray you become ever more so familiar with God's presence in your life. We believe that God wants to do a mighty work in you.

In love, peace, and joy,
Andrew, Sarah, Foster, and
Keating Beard

Christmas Eve 2020

Christmas Eve

SERVICE TIMES 2023

This Year, Christmas Eve is on a Sunday. Our Sunday morning service at 10am will be a Christmas Eve service.

There will be no Kids Church on Christmas Eve.

We will have indoor
and outdoor seating.

Video will be streaming outside.

We will light candles at every service. We hope you join us.

10:00 am

4:00 pm

5:30 pm

What is Advent?

In short, Advent is a season of expectation, reflection, and preparation as we near the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Why do we observe Advent?

We believe this entire season can sweep us up in a frenzy of doing, partying, buying, hoping and being anxious....and none of it in the name of Jesus. Our Advent guide is designed for you to engage with the Holy in the days leading up to Christmas morning. We hope it will draw your heart, mind, body, and soul into a deeper longing to experience God daily as you prepare to celebrate the birth of the King of Glory; our actual reason for this holiday. We hope this causes you to take time to pause, reflect, notice and engage with the world around you with intention. As you read, we hope you will be drawn into deeper relationships with your friends and family as you discuss what you are thinking about.

With that said, welcome to the season of Advent. Grab a Bible, make it front and center of all the decorations to guide your heart and to have on hand.

OTHER THINGS YOU MAY WANT TO HAVE ON HAND:

Bible

Journal or notebook

Playlist

Cup of coffee (or tea)... 'cause that is how we usually do it!

What is more fun than Christmas?

A solid playlist to get us in the spirit, of course.

As we turn our focus to the coming King from commerce, decorations and presents here is a little playlist we put together to help. Just hold your open camera over the QR code and click the link that pops up.

Thanks to our worship leader, Daniel Pratt, for curating! (you can check him out on spotify too.)

This is a Chapel at Seaside Spotify playlist titled:

Chapel at Seaside Advent 23



Sunday, December 3

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From of old no one has heard

or perceived by the ear,

no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.

You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.

Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

But now, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,
and remember not iniquity forever.

Behold, please look, we are all your people.



Monday, December 4

Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What is a theophany and how do I even say it? Th-ee-awe-fin-ee. There. Now you can say it.

Now, what is it? Well to put it simply, a theophany is a manifestation of God. The name comes from the Greek words "theos," meaning God, and "phainein," meaning to show or to appear.

Theophanies are used to convey important messages or to reveal the true nature of God to the people. We believe that looking at these specific moments offer us insights into the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity.

We believe that if you look at God's encounters with humans it is helpful in understanding more about who God is and who we truly are.

This season of Advent is about waiting for God to show up in human form. We are currently living inside a promise from Jesus himself which says, "Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We have a literal word from Jesus that tells us we are living with him among us!

When do you feel like you experience the presence of God? Think of times, locations, seasons, and/or instances. Take note.

Spend a few minutes asking the Lord to give you experiences of his presence.

Using the answer above, look for times to put yourself in situations this week that give you space to encounter the presence of God.

Genesis 1:27-31

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

This poetic and beautiful chapter of Genesis walks us through the creation story and gives us insight into the first conversation between God and humanity. God created Mankind in His own image and He blessed them with identity and direction.

In your own words, what does God tell humanity to do?

What do you believe this tells us about the partnership for which God desired when he created humans?

I believe that the writer of Genesis paints a beautiful picture of how mankind was created to help order what could be chaos. As the humans tended to the things that were seemingly wild, they were ordered to keep them and subdue them. I imagine they would harvest and pick the fresh fruit and vegetation that was growing. Making sure the animals were tended to and had food. Humanity was given authority over creation.



What areas of your life do you feel like you have authority, through God, to create peace and order in a space that may feel chaotic?

Spend a few minutes in silence and then ask the Lord what it may look like to partner with the Lord to be a peacemaker in your home, workplace, and/or friend circle for this specific season of life. Truly ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you. Then spend a few minutes waiting in the silence.



Genesis 3:1-24

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

The Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Adam and Eve find themselves in perfect paradise, created in the image of God, walking with God...and yet lies from the serpent cut so easily. In this situation, the serpent tries to convince them they need something they already have. The serpent says, "you will not die, but you will be like God", but they already are like God, created in the image of God. So they fall for wanting what they already have. Now, when they experience guilt and shame and they recognize they are naked, we tend to think God shows up to punish them. But something else is going on here. God shows up and meets them in their guilt and shame, not to heap more upon them, but to free them from it. When God saw their shame, God made them clothing. Note here, God sacrifices for them. God gives up something to care for humanity. Then when God sends them out and blocks the entrance back into the Garden, it isn't because they have lost God's trust or they got banned, but now they have introduced sin and death to the equation. The perfect Garden Kingdom has been marred, creation has been fractured. If Adam and Eve ate from the other tree, the tree of Life, they would live in sin forever. On one hand, it sounds awesome to live forever...and on the other hand, never dying sounds like a punishment. It would be like being stuck in a mall at Christmas time, and never getting out. This story, right at the beginning of the scriptures, is a story that sets up Christmas.

Still today, we find ourselves often falling for what we already have. What we often fall for is a desire for more. When we reach out and take more of what we already have, we miss what God has for us. At Christmas we can fall for that same trap. Thinking we want or deserve more. And when we inevitably stumble and fall, God meets us to address our guilt and shame. God sacrifices for the sake of those he loves.

The presence of God in the Garden may at first seem like a parent catching us in the act of disobedience only to send us to our room. Though with a deeper look, there is compassion in God's eyes. God's heart seems to be broken that we would be fooled into believing lies that separate us from God. Even still, God chooses to be among us and protect us from a worse fate; staying broken and separated from God for eternity.

Can you identify a lie that the enemy entices you to believe about your identity?

Spend a few minutes imagining yourself being caught by Jesus as you spoke shame to yourself. What do you think Jesus would say to you?

Thursday, December 7

Genesis 4:1-16

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.” And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done?

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

When we read this story of Cain and Abel, we can sometimes leave a bit confused about how God seems to be on a Keto diet, loves fat and meat and hates fruits and carbs. But what we miss is that Cain brought what was easy, he brought what he would have more of. I'm not a farmer, but generally, you can grow more crops; fruit trees keep on producing. But animals, when you sacrifice an animal, it doesn't keep producing.

Our son Keating said he wants to have a pig, so he can have fresh bacon each morning. I'm not sure he understands how bacon works...But Abel, he gives what can not be replaced. He sacrifices the firstborn, the best of what he has. This story should cause us to look deep into our own lives. When we give to the Lord, do we give our excess, disposable resources, or do we give our best? Notice that Cain kind of "mailed it in" and when he sees that Abel did something more generous, more sacrificial, instead of feeling inspired, he turns towards jealousy and hate. Other people's generosity should not be a catalyst for jealousy and hatred. When we do this, God says "sin is crouching at your door". As if, sin, anger, jealousy, hatred, and more are waiting, looking for a foothold, and the best way to avoid that attack is to always bring our best, is to always do well. When Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph put their reputation on the line. The Kings from the East risk being murdered by Herod. The shepherds left their closely guarded sheep to see the newborn King.

When we follow after Jesus, we too may put our reputation on the line, we may put our life at risk, we may lose our livelihood. But this follows in the tradition of Abel, bringing our best to God.

And if we find ourselves in a season of Cain, where we give the bare minimum, we always run the risk of letting jealousy and hatred penetrate our heart, mind, and actions.



How can we be people who live more generously towards others this season?

More importantly, what might it look like for you to sacrifice something you think you can't live without for the sake of honoring the Lord?

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

At this point in the story of God, there has yet to be a nation, a people, even a specific family that God chooses to partner with...until Abram. It is important to note, most theophanies have God appearing in physical form, but theophony can also be the auditory manifestation of God. Here God calls Abram to leave what he knows, to go where God leads him. This journey will be difficult, it will, at times, be lonely, but Abram will be blessed to be a blessing to others.

As we know, Abram follows after God and leads him in a direction that is both wildly difficult, but beautifully blessed...so that he can bless others.

When Jesus first begins his public ministry, he chooses people to partner with. He takes those who may not make sense, people who seem to have a failure to launch, and Jesus tells them, "follow me". The journey they are going to go on with Jesus will at times be difficult, at times will be lonely, but they will be beautifully blessed, so that they can bless others. Jesus is still saying those same things to us today. He whispers to each of us, wherever we find ourselves, and he says, "follow me". He calls for us to partner with him.

This journey will sometimes be difficult because we will inevitably face obstacles because of our faith. This journey will be lonely because following after Jesus will cause us to not fit in anywhere perfectly. This journey will be beautifully blessed so that we can bless others.

Abram experienced the audible voice of God leading him beyond his comfort zone, blessed to be a blessing. The disciples experienced Jesus leading them beyond their comfort zone, blessed to be a blessing. This Christmas, the sound of the cries of the newborn King, calls for us to abandon what we know as we begin a journey following after Him, blessed to be a blessing. It will likely be lonely and difficult, but more beautifully blessed than you can imagine.

How can you trust God is with you as you
journey after Him?

How have you been blessed by others who are obviously on this journey?

How can you bless others?

Saturday, December 9


For our Saturdays in Advent I want to lead you through a practice of imaginative prayer in scripture. Here is how it will work.

1. Select a story from scripture - We are focusing on Jesus' birth narrative because that is what we are celebrating. (But any story from the Gospels is a great place to start)
2. Set the stage for listening in the presence of God. Take some deep breaths to ground you and clear your mind. Ask the Lord to speak to you through this prayer. Begin by saying, "Holy Spirit, come."
3. Before you read through the scripture the first time, know that you are going to focus on one person who stands out to you in the story, place yourself in his or her shoes, or imagine entering the story as yourself, as you are right now.
4. Read the passage again, this time from the perspective of your chosen person. Putting yourself into the scene, pay close attention to your surroundings and your senses. Do you notice other people, what are you hearing, do you smell or taste anything, what about the Holy? Is a Holy presence there? Is it speaking to you, what do you imagine it looks like?
5. Now that you have engaged your senses and are standing in the place of your chosen person in the story, read the passage a third time. What might God be telling you, revealing to you or showing you through this?
6. Spend some time in silence, listening to the Lord.
7. Take some time to write it down on the next page.
8. Thank the Lord for his revelation.

Read this scripture - Or open the Bible app and have
it read to you so you can imagine.

Luke:26-45

What do you feel like God might be revealing to you?



Sunday, December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." The Word of God Stands Forever. A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.



Monday, December 11

Genesis 18:1-21

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." Then the Lord said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know."

There are many things to be said of this particular encounter:

1. The Lord was clearly on a mission. He came with “men” to meet Abraham and continue his travels to Sodom. The men are served by Abraham before finding out why they’re there. There are many times that before I consider serving God, I ask, “what can you do for me?”

2. He spends the whole time with Abraham, but takes the opportunity to share the ridiculous news that this 90 year old woman, Sarah, was going to have a baby.

Do we believe that God can do the laughable?

I don’t think Sarah would have believed it if she hadn’t heard it from the Lord. She also may have been fearful that in her old age she would die, if she were to have a baby. But with the word from the Lord, she was able to move forward without fear. The Lord came in person to say, “I have made you a promise and now its time for me to fulfill, remain in me and my story. And also, by the way, I know that you doubt it can happen.”

When is a time that you didn't trust the story of God to play out in your life?

3. The Lord had an extended plan for this journey, it was to go to where there were cries of oppression, check it out, and take care of the situation.

Have you ever thought about God as one who hears the cries of the oppressed and cares enough to show up and check it out?

4. The Lord has a conversation with Himself that we are privy to. The Lord basically says, "I am going to go to Sodom and I am going to handle things...but since I called Abraham, I am going to let him in on the situation and even give him an ear and see how he may judge this situation."

God wants to participate with us. I recently heard someone say, "As a believer, you don't work for God, you work with God."

In this story what stands out to you most about this God/human encounter?

Tuesday, December 12

Genesis 32:22-32

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

When I was young, I would often get in wrestling matches with my older brother. He was obviously bigger and stronger than I, and yet, I could often put up a decent fight. Jacob finds himself at this point all alone, no family, no friends, no distractions, nothing pulling his attention...and here this man shows up and wrestles with him. Now, there is a lot of ink spilled on who or what Jacob is actually wrestling with, but no matter what it is exactly, it is from God. And anything from God is obviously bigger and stronger than Jacob...but somehow he puts up a decent fight. I think there are a few things we can learn from this. Jacob was regularly scheming and doing whatever he wanted to get what he wanted or thought he deserved. This way of life caused problems for him and others. And yet God still had great plans for Jacob. God was going to use Jacob to be the father of the nation of Israel, the 12 tribes that would lead to Jesus. So why does God wrestle with Jacob all night? It seems like God always wants Jacob to engage. God always wants Jacob to be in close proximity, to try to know and understand God, and to keep wrestling. When we wrestle, we haven't quit. We haven't given up. It isn't blind thoughtless faith, but engaged pursuit. The wrestling with God changed Jacob forever. His name was changed to Israel and he walked with a limp. Israel means, wrestles with God. No matter what we've been like up to this point, God still has great plans for us. God does not want us to quit or walk away. God wants us to engage, to stay in close proximity, to wrestle. Christmas can be a trying, hectic busy time of year. What would it look like to find time to be alone, to put away the distractions and to wait upon God? A time of wrestling with God may change you, it may change your future, but you won't know unless you spend time alone with God. Turn off the Christmas music, put away the to do list, find some time to wait in the silence...and you just might see the face of God.

Exodus 3:1-22

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you:

when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”’” And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

There is something about fire that draws us in. From backyard firepits, to beach bonfires, to flambé desserts, to fireworks in the sky. When we see fire we are drawn in. When Moses sees this bush on fire and yet not burning up, he is drawn in. It turns out, it isn't some sort of magic trick, but it is the presence of God speaking through the bush. Now, Moses had been a shepherd at this point 40 years in these hills. Everyday he gets up, leads and tends to his sheep, wanders these hills, goes to bed, and does it again. Then one day, after 40 years, in the midst of the ordinary, the extraordinary appears. God appearing in that moment calls Moses to his great task of leading the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land. We sometimes think to hear from God or to receive some great calling or task, we have to go to some extreme place. A monastery in the mountains, a peak in the Holy Land, a chapel near the beach. It seems like in this story, God chooses the average mundane ordinary moments to do the extraordinary. Notice, God knows what will draw Moses in. It wasn't some secret symbol or escape room where he was supposed to be looking for clues he didn't know existed. God will meet us in the ordinary in ways that draw us to Him. We just need to be willing to draw near and listen. This Christmas, look for God in the everyday. Listen for Jesus in the mundane. Be ready to draw near and open to what God has for you. His calling may be the greatest most extraordinary task of your life and He may show up in the ordinary and mundane.

Can you remember and reflect on a time when God met you
in an ordinary place?



Thursday, December 14

Exodus 19:1-25

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.”

When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them." And Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" And the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them." So Moses went down to the people and told them.

When I was in college visiting my parents for Thanksgiving, we were trying to figure out what to do over the break. It was Black Friday and the obvious thing was to go to the busiest mall in our area to just wander around. Very casual laid back kind of thing to do on the busiest shopping day of the year. I remember pulling up to the mall and there were police and traffic directors and crowds and crowds of people. The mall seemed alive with so many people buzzing in and around it. If we wanted to experience what the mall had for us that day, we had to enter in. Past the chaos, past the police and traffic directors, past the crowds and people.

When Moses led the Hebrew people to Mount Sinai, not only was he leading a small nation, but they were following the presence of God in a pillar of fire and smoke. That presence descended on and around Mount Sinai. If you remember, it was that same place where Moses had encountered God at the burning bush. It was that same place where God called Moses to do something extraordinary. Moses is now back, but it is no longer a bush, but the entire mountain. The mountain is covered in smoke, with a display of thunder and lightening, the deafening sound of trumpets, and the earth shaking around them. The mountain seemed alive with activity in and around it. If Moses wanted to experience what God had for him and the Hebrew people, he had to enter in. Moses has seen the power of God deliver, he has seen the protection God has for them, and now he realizes God is calling them to be a Kingdom of Priests, a Holy Nation. But for Moses to lead, for him to convey the words of God, he has to step into that place of that seemed like chaos and darkness. He has to step into that place that is a bit overwhelming.

Sometimes stepping into what God has for us feels like stepping into a storm. Peter stepped onto the water to follow after Jesus and found himself in the midst of a storm and darkness. Paul journeyed into both literal and figurative storms and darkness following after what God had for him; telling people about Jesus. Being faithful to what Jesus has for us, stepping in to encounter God, oftentimes disrupts our known comfort. It destabilizes the world we know. But it is in those moments of stepping in, we experience life, power, and we experience God. A ship is safest in the harbor, but it never experiences what it was made to do. We can live a safe life, but we will likely never experience what we were made to do. Moses could have stayed in Egypt, or stayed a shepherd, but he drew closer to God and he experienced what he was made to do. We won't always enter into smoke wrapped mountains that are shaking with thunder and lightning, sometimes the simple act of knowing and following after Jesus will look like entering a storm to others...but to us, it's the best place to be because we know if we want to experience God, we have to go in.

Could there be a journey that God is asking you to step into right now?

Joshua 5:13-15

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” And the commander of the Lord’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

I feel like every year people get worked up over various Christmas things. For example, when stores say Happy Holiday instead of Merry Christmas. Or certain coffee chains make their coffee cups just have red or green or neutral winter themed aesthetics. When these things happen, we can default to assuming these people hate Jesus, hate Christmas and by proxy hate me. This is what Joshua encounters in this story.

He assumes that if a warrior is there, he is either on Joshua's side or the other side. And if this commander is on the other side, he must hate God, hate the Promised Land, and by proxy, hate him. But notice, the commander of the Lord's army when asked which side he was on, responds with "no". That isn't a proper answer to his question because Joshua is asking the wrong question. God likely doesn't care if a big coffee chain puts obviously Christmas themes on their cups or not. You know what God does seem to care about? Mercy, love, devotion and obedience. This Christmas we will undoubtedly have a new round of things to get worked up about, but what if instead, we did what Joshua did when he encountered the Lord, take off our shoes and stand on Holy ground. Holy, means set apart for God. It means it is for God's purpose. A large coffee chain may not be set apart for God's purpose...but you are.

How are you taking time to ask God how you can actually partner with Him for His purposes?

Saturday, December 16

Imaginative Prayer

This will look just like last Saturday. We are going to do some more imaginative prayer through scripture. Here are the guidelines.

1. Today we are looking at Matthew 1:18-25
2. Set the stage for listening in the presence of God. Take some deep breaths to ground you and clear your mind. Ask the Lord to speak to you through this prayer. Begin by saying, "Holy Spirit, come."
3. Before you read through the scripture the first time, remember to pay attention to the person in the story who stands out to you. Place yourself in his or her shoes, or imagine entering the story as yourself, as you are right now and pay attention.
4. Read the passage again, this time from the perspective of your chosen person. Putting yourself into the scene, pay close attention to your surroundings and your senses. Do you notice other people, what are you hearing, do you smell or taste anything, what about the Holy? Is a Holy presence there? Is it speaking to you, what do you imagine it looks like?
5. Now that you have engaged your senses and are standing in the place of your chosen person in the story, read the passage a third time. What might God be telling you, revealing to you or showing you through this?
6. Spend some time in silence, listening to the Lord.
7. Take some time to write it down on the next page.
8. Thank the Lord for his revelation.

Read this scripture - Or open the Bible app and have
it read to you so you can imagine.

Matthew 1:18-25

What do you feel like God might be revealing to you?



Sunday, December 17

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. 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. For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.



Monday, December 18

Isaiah 6:1-13

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah’s Commission from the Lord

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant,

and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.”
The holy seed is its stump.

In this story Isaiah, who is a prophet, suddenly finds himself in the presence of God. Now, this moment is really incredible. Isaiah is aware that he is experiencing the perfect God and yet he is not perfect. He is flawed and sinful. I'm sure he feels like he sticks out...like when you thought it was an ugly Christmas sweater party... but it was actually formal attire...so instead of trying to hide it, he owns it. He calls attention to his inadequacy. He says, “hey y'all...I am severely under qualified to be here. I have unclean lips and hang out with people who have unclean lips as well...” They don't kick him out. They don't make him feel bad or stupid. They don't make him put on a formal jacket they keep in the closet. A seraphim, which is an angel, flies down and touches his mouth, his unclean lips with a hot coal and tells him his guilt is taken away and his sins are atoned. Then immediately after this, God calls for Isaiah to go and share the good news of God. It would seem that Isaiah needed to be honest about who he is, his shortcomings, faults and failures, and then God uses him to speak powerful words to the world.

When we celebrate Christmas, we find ourselves in the presence of Jesus. It's in those moments we can feel inadequate, unqualified, or like we don't fit some sort of mold people think we should be. This makes sense, whenever I feel inadequate I want to shrink and hide...but I think we are called to be like Isaiah in those moments. Fully recognize and be honest and see what God does with that. Jesus has great callings and plans for each of us. Let's be honest, we all pale in comparison to Jesus. We all fall short of the glory of God. But when we admit and recognize that, then we are primed to receive God's forgiveness and ready for God to work in and through us. Don't live in a false self. Don't project some character that you aren't. Don't pretend to be something you aren't. Admit your faults and failures, receive the forgiveness of Jesus and see what He has for you. This time of year, between Christmas cards, office Christmas Parties, or catching up with old friends and family, we can often try to "keep up with the Joneses" by trying to position ourselves as more successful than we are, but what if this year, we are honest about our shortcomings and success, our wins and our losses. In that honesty, healing and forgiveness begins...and who knows what God will call you to when you are honest.

Is there any area in your life where you feel like you need to come clean and receive new life?



Tuesday, December 19

Daniel 3:8-30

Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

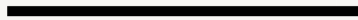
Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men.

The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

This is such a great moment. These three guys refuse to bow down to anything but the one true God. This does not sit well with the powers that be...even though they are highly cherished and valued individuals. The punishment is being thrown into the fire. When they are thrown in, this seems like it would be the end, and not only do they survive, but there is another in the fire with them. The fourth person is described as a like a son of God. This is amazing. The faithfulness and allegiance to God instead of empire brought them to the worst moment of their life, and yet God does not abandon them, but meets them there. This appearance of God shows us, He is with us in the midst of our darkest, most difficult moments. The next part of the story is also unbelievable, the King who sent them to die decides he is going to turn to that same God.

Our faithfulness doesn't just change us, but it changes the world around us. When Jesus was born, those who bowed down to worship him, those who knew him as King, were risking being killed by Herod or Ceasar. The same is true to a certain extent today. There are repercussions for following after Jesus, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't; it is a reminder that He is with us.



Make a list of a few ways that you can choose to faithfully follow after Jesus instead of bowing down to the ways of the world?

Wednesday, December 20

Judges 13:1-24

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name, but he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'"

Then Manoah prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come

again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born.” And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, “Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.” And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man and said to him, “Are you the man who spoke to this woman?” And he said, “I am.” And Manoah said, “Now when your words come true, what is to be the child’s manner of life, and what is his mission?” And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, “Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her let her observe.”

Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, “Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you.” And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.) And Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?” And the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?”

So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.

The angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.” But his wife said to him, “If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.” And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson.

The book of Judges is really quite a book. It is an incredibly difficult tragedy. Most of us know Samson...and that's about it. The whole book tells the story of God's people continuing to do whatever they wanted, ending up being controlled by foreign powers, then God raises up a Judge to help lead them to freedom. You should know, pretty much none of the Judges are super great...and they get worse and worse as the story continues. It is a downward spiral. The reading today looks at this husband and wife who are barren and a messenger of God shows up.

Messengers of God are either angelic beings...or some sort of divine moment where the presence of God communicates a message. This barren couple find themselves being promised a son who they need to raise in a way that dedicates him to the Lord. They are to follow a strict vow to raise him in a particular way because he is called to a great position. That child, ends up becoming Samson. Now, most of us think about how strong Samson was...but if you take a closer look at his story, he is really quite a disaster. His parents seemed to have done all the right things, God gifted him in incredible ways, but his story was not perfect by any means.

We can do all the right things, we can try our hardest, and sometimes things just don't turn out well. That is simply because we live in a world plagued by sin where we all have free will, and those two things combined wreak havoc in nearly every area.

At Christmas time, we can think if we do everything right, if we buy all the right gifts, and decorate in all the right ways, and watch all the best Christmas movies, and put the focus on Jesus, and on and on that things will be perfect. The truth is, Christmas can still end up being a disaster. Because again, we cannot control everything. I recently heard we actually have only 15% of the things we think we have control over. So, how can we turn our hearts and minds towards Jesus, be faithful to do our best, and yet also remember sin and freewill will have a field day with even our best laid plans?

See, the good news is that the story of Judges points to our need for Jesus. Our bulletproof plans are still penetrable. That reminds us that we need Jesus. He brings hope and restoration even when our best efforts fall apart.

Can you relate to the parents of Samson (doing everything you knew to do, only to see your child (or a relationship, or something else you felt led to start and foster) fail or struggle? Take a minute and write a prayer to the Lord. See if you can manage relinquishing control and offering the burden to the Lord.

Take a few minutes to sit in submission to the Lord.
Thank God for the work He is going to do.



Numbers 22:22-41

But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face.

And the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.” Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.” And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border. And Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?” Balaam said to Balak, “Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.” Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him.

And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people.



Balaam, is a prophet of God, headed out on a journey that was not totally aligned with what God had for him. He was determined to curse the Israelites, but God intervened in a Christmas miracle, kind of way. God used a donkey to speak to Balaam, preventing him from continuing on a rogue mission of his own desire.

This story may seem like the most bizarre theophany of them all, and yet it reminds us that God has the ability and sometimes steps in to redirect our lives, even when we are headed in the wrong direction. The donkey became a vessel for God's voice and a symbol of divine intervention.

The birth of Jesus was an unexpected journey for Mary and Joseph. They faced unbelievable challenges and uncertainties, yet God was working things for good through their lives. The journey to Bethlehem, the humble stable, and the unexpected guests, such as the shepherds and wise men...and potentially a charismatic drummer boy...all contributed to the unexpected unanticipated Christmas story.

In the midst of our Christmas preparations and festivities, let us be reminded that God often works in unexpected and unanticipated ways. Just as Balaam's donkey became a vessel of God's will, the manger in Bethlehem became a vessel for the salvation of humanity through the birth of Jesus. This Christmas, let us be open to God's unexpected unanticipated interventions in our lives. In the busyness of the season, may we listen attentively to His voice, even if it comes through unconventional unlikely means. Like Balaam, may we be willing to change our course when God redirects us, trusting that His plans are far greater than our own. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us remember that God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

May this Christmas be a time of surrender, reflection, and joy as we embrace the unexpected journey that God has prepared for each of us. Who knows what unexpected, unanticipated, unlikely vessel God may use to redirect you.



Reflecting on the last few weeks, have you been aware of any of God's attention grabbing, unexpected, unanticipated interventions in your life?

I Kings 18:20-40

So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.” And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

I have never been in any sort of street fight...but when I imagine what happens between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, it feels kind of like that. Here are the people of Israel being torn between following God or the false god, Baal. Elijah knows who is the one true God, so he throws down a challenge to see who would respond with fire from Heaven.

After Baal’s prophets cannot get him to respond, God rains down fire to display his power and silence the noise of the false god and his prophets. The presence of God falls from heaven, and it is undeniable.

On that first Christmas, the presence of God rained down, stepped into creation, and silenced the noise of the world. The birth of Jesus Christ, the ultimate manifestation of God's love and redemption for humanity.

The fire that came down on Mount Carmel is a divine presence of God, and it foreshadows the ultimate demonstration of God's glory in the person of Jesus.

Christmas is the breaking in of glory and grace to not only rain from heaven, but reign from heaven and to walk among us. We may not find ourselves in some sort of dance off or street fight to prove which god is true, but daily we will be tempted to worship the counterfeit gods.

The people of God returned their hearts to God on Mount Carmel. Christmas is an invitation for us to turn our hearts toward the divine presence of Jesus. A powerful light that shines into a dark world. It is the light of Christ that dispels darkness, in the warmth of His love that brings hope, and in the transformative power of His presence that leads us to worship and adore Him.

Can you identify any areas in your life where you are bowing to the power of something other than God?

(This sounds complicated or intense...just think through your life and take note of where you are spending the most time, and what you feel like shapes how you think about things.)

**May this Christmas be
a time of renewed
faith, a turning point in
our lives where we
embrace the fire of
God's presence with a
celebration of the
ultimate manifestation
of love in the birth of
our Savior and King,
Jesus Christ.**

Amen



Saturday, December 23

Imaginative Prayer

I feel like you are probably ready now! Here are your imaginative prayer guidelines for today.

1. Today we are looking at Luke 2:1-21
2. Set the stage for listening in the presence of God.
Take some deep breaths to ground you and clear your mind. Ask the Lord to speak to you through this prayer. Begin by saying, “Holy Spirit, come.”
3. Before you read through the scripture the first time, remember to pay attention to the person in the story who stands out to you. Place yourself in his or her shoes, or imagine entering the story as yourself, as you are right now and pay attention.
4. Read the passage again, this time from the perspective of your chosen person. Putting yourself into the scene, pay close attention to your surroundings and your senses. Do you notice other people, what are you hearing, do you smell or taste anything, what about the Holy? Is a Holy presence there? Is it speaking to you, what do you imagine it looks like?
5. Now that you have engaged your senses and are standing in the place of your chosen person in the story, read the passage a third time. What might God be telling you, revealing to you or showing you through this?
6. Spend some time in silence, listening to the Lord.
7. Take some time to write it down on the next page.
8. Thank the Lord for his revelation.

Read this scripture - Or open the Bible app and have
it read to you so you can imagine.

Luke 2:1-21

What do you feel like God might be revealing to you?

Sunday, December 24

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Now when the king lived in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"' Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.

Your throne shall be established forever.'"



On that first Christmas, we see the most beautiful theophany, Emmanuel, God with us, in the birth of our newborn King Jesus. He walked among us, called for us to abide in Him, to be changed by Him, and to embody His ways. At the end of His life, Jesus lets his followers know, the Spirit will be with them.

The Spirit will lead them and guide them.

Our God is not distant in the heavens somewhere. Our God didn't just live 33 years and then disappear. Our God is with us, among us, leading us towards everlasting life here and now that echoes into eternity.

May we experience God with us this Christmas and every day after. May we trust in His ways and live how He lived.

May we remember that there are people who will catch their first glimpse of God's incredible love, by the way that we embody His love for one another.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you this Christmas, now and forever.



THE **CHAPEL** AT
Seaside

thechapelatseaside.com

[@thechapelatseaside](https://www.instagram.com/thechapelatseaside)

podcast-TheChapelatSeaside

info@thechapelatseaside