

DAILY DEVOTIONAL

2015 Advent



ATONEMENT
LUTHERAN CHURCH

First Week of Advent

November 29-December 5, 2015

Sunday, November 29

2 Kings 22:1-10; 23:1-3
Josiah's Reform

Josiah Rules in Judah

²² Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother was Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah from Bozkath. ² He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight and followed the example of his ancestor David. He did not turn away from doing what was right.

³ In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and grandson of Meshullam, the court secretary, to the Temple of the Lord. He told him, ⁴ "Go to Hilkiah the high priest and have him count the money the gatekeepers have collected from the people at the Lord's Temple. ⁵ Entrust this money to the men assigned to supervise the restoration of the Lord's Temple. Then they can use it to pay workers to repair the Temple. ⁶ They will need to hire carpenters, builders, and masons. Also have them buy the timber and the finished stone needed to repair the Temple. ⁷ But don't require the construction supervisors to keep account of the money they receive, for they are honest and trustworthy men."

Hilkiah Discovers God's Law

⁸ Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the court secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the Lord's Temple!" Then Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan, and he read it.

⁹ Shaphan went to the king and reported, "Your officials have turned over the money collected at the Temple of the Lord to the workers and supervisors at the Temple." ¹⁰ Shaphan also told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a scroll." So Shaphan read it to the king.

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- ▶ King Josiah was only 8 years old, yet he showed great strength and obedience despite the long string of unfaithful kings who ruled before him. Reflect on a time when a child taught you something about the kingdom of heaven.

 - ▶ In this scripture, the Book of the Law was "re-found." How have you forgotten the Book of the Law in your own heart?

Monday, November 30

2 Kings 22:11-13

Hilkiah Finds the Book of the Law

¹¹ When the king heard what was written in the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes in despair.

¹² Then he gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Acbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the court secretary, and Asaiah the king's personal adviser: ¹³ "Go to the Temple and speak to the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah. Inquire about the words written in this scroll that has been found. For the Lord's great anger is burning against us because our ancestors have not obeyed the words in this scroll. We have not been doing everything it says we must do."

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- ▶ Sometimes we feel alive or dangerous when breaking the rules. However, Josiah felt a great deal of despair and fear of the Lord's great anger. How do you feel when you disobey? Do your feelings vary depending on who you disobey?

 - ▶ Remember what it felt like when you disobeyed your parents as a child. Have you experienced the same kind of remorse as an adult? How does it vary?

⁴ Then the king instructed Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second rank and the Temple gatekeepers to remove from the Lord's Temple all the articles that were used to worship Baal, Asherah, and all the powers of the heavens. The king had all these things burned outside Jerusalem on the terraces of the Kidron Valley, and he carried the ashes away to Bethel. ⁵ He did away with the idolatrous priests, who had been appointed by the previous kings of Judah, for they had offered sacrifices at the pagan shrines throughout Judah and even in the vicinity of Jerusalem. They had also offered sacrifices to Baal, and to the sun, the moon, the constellations, and to all the powers of the heavens. ⁶ The king removed the Asherah pole from the Lord's Temple and took it outside Jerusalem to the Kidron Valley, where he burned it. Then he ground the ashes of the pole to dust and threw the dust over the graves of the people. ⁷ He also tore down the living quarters of the male and female shrine prostitutes that were inside the Temple of the Lord, where the women wove coverings for the Asherah pole.

⁸ Josiah brought to Jerusalem all the priests who were living in other towns of Judah. He also defiled the pagan shrines, where they had offered sacrifices—all the way from Geba to Beersheba. He destroyed the shrines at the entrance to the gate of Joshua, the governor of Jerusalem. This gate was located to the left of the city gate as one enters the city. ⁹ The priests who had served at the pagan shrines were not allowed to serve at the Lord's altar in Jerusalem, but they were allowed to eat unleavened bread with the other priests.

¹⁰ Then the king defiled the altar of Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, so no one could ever again use it to sacrifice a son or daughter in the fire[b] as an offering to Molech. ¹¹ He removed from the entrance of the Lord's Temple the horse statues that the former kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun. They were near the quarters of Nathan-melech the eunuch, an officer of the court. The king also burned the chariots dedicated to the sun.

¹² Josiah tore down the altars that the kings of Judah had built on the palace roof above the upper room of Ahaz. The king destroyed the altars that Manasseh had built in the two courtyards of the Lord's Temple. He smashed them to bits and scattered the pieces in the Kidron Valley. ¹³ The king also desecrated the pagan shrines east of Jerusalem, to the south of the Mount of Corruption, where King Solomon of Israel had built shrines for Ashtoreth, the detestable goddess of the Sidonians; and for Chemosh, the detestable god of the Moabites; and for Molech, the vile god of the Ammonites. ¹⁴ He smashed the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah poles. Then he desecrated these places by scattering human bones over them.

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- Josiah tore the altars. What false Gods have you allowed into your life and how did you smash them into bits? Or maybe you haven't yet and still need to?

Friday, December 4

2 Kings 23:21-27
The Passover Celebrated

²¹ King Josiah then issued this order to all the people: "You must celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as required in this Book of the Covenant." ²² There had not been a Passover celebration like that since the time when the judges ruled in Israel, nor throughout all the years of the kings of Israel and Judah. ²³ But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah's reign, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem.

²⁴ Josiah also got rid of the mediums and psychics, the household gods, the idols, and every other kind of detestable practice, both in Jerusalem and throughout the land of Judah. He did this in obedience to the laws written in the scroll that Hilkiah the priest had found in the Lord's Temple. ²⁵ Never before had there been a king like Josiah, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength, obeying all the laws of Moses. And there has never been a king like him since.

²⁶ Even so, the Lord was very angry with Judah because of all the wicked things Manasseh had done to provoke him. ²⁷ For the Lord said, "I will also banish Judah from my presence just as I have banished Israel. And I will reject my chosen city of Jerusalem and the Temple where my name was to be honored."

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- ▶ Josiah turned to the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength. It's really hard to do this, all the time, every day. What stands in the way of you being able to obey the laws of Moses?

 - ▶ Josiah's obedience followed this pattern: (1) he recognized sin; (2) he eliminated sinful practices; (3) he attacked the causes of sin. Use this pattern on something in your own life. How will you attack the causes of temptation in your life?

Second Week of Advent

December 6-12, 2015

Sunday, December 6

Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah of the Exile

*"Comfort, comfort my people,"
says your God.*

² *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*

*Tell her that her sad days are gone
and her sins are pardoned.*

*Yes, the Lord has punished her twice over
for all her sins."*

³ *Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,*

*"Clear the way through the wilderness
for the Lord!*

*Make a straight highway through the
wasteland
for our God!*

⁴ *Fill in the valleys,
and level the mountains and hills.*

*Straighten the curves,
and smooth out the rough places.*

⁵ *Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.*

The Lord has spoken!"

⁶ *A voice said, "Shout!"
I asked, "What should I shout?"*

"Shout that people are like the grass.

*Their beauty fades as quickly
as the flowers in a field.*

⁷ *The grass withers and the flowers fade
beneath the breath of the Lord.*

And so it is with people.

⁸ *The grass withers and the flowers fade,
but the word of our God stands forever."*

⁹ *O Zion, messenger of good news,
shout from the mountaintops!*

Shout it louder, O Jerusalem.

Shout, and do not be afraid.

Tell the towns of Judah,

"Your God is coming!"

¹⁰ *Yes, the Sovereign Lord is coming in
power.*

He will rule with a powerful arm.

*See, he brings his reward with him as he
comes.*

¹¹ *He will feed his flock like a shepherd.*

He will carry the lambs in his arms,

► In this passage, we are instructed to tell the towns that Jesus is coming. How does your life live the coming of Christ out loud?

► Jerusalem is supposed to straighten out its curves and smooth out its rough spots in preparation for the coming of the Lord. What parts of your life need to be straightened out or smoothed out as we prepare to meet Jesus?

Monday, December 7

Isaiah 41:9-20

Israel Assured of God's Help

⁹ I have called you back from the ends of the earth,

saying, 'You are my servant.'

For I have chosen you

and will not throw you away.

¹⁰ Don't be afraid, for I am with you.

Don't be discouraged, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you.

I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

¹¹ "See, all your angry enemies lie there, confused and humiliated.

Anyone who opposes you will die and come to nothing.

¹² You will look in vain for those who tried to conquer you.

Those who attack you will come to nothing.

¹³ For I hold you by your right hand— I, the Lord your God.

And I say to you,

'Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.

¹⁴ Though you are a lowly worm, O Jacob, don't be afraid, people of Israel, for I will help you.

I am the Lord, your Redeemer.

I am the Holy One of Israel.'

¹⁵ You will be a new threshing instrument

with many sharp teeth.

You will tear your enemies apart, making chaff of mountains.

¹⁶ You will toss them into the air, and the wind will blow them all away; a whirlwind will scatter them.

Then you will rejoice in the Lord.

You will glory in the Holy One of Israel.

¹⁷ "When the poor and needy search for water and there is none, and their tongues are parched from thirst, then I, the Lord, will answer them.

I, the God of Israel, will never abandon them.

¹⁸ I will open up rivers for them on the high plateaus.

I will give them fountains of water in the valleys.

I will fill the desert with pools of water.

Rivers fed by springs will flow across the parched ground.

¹⁹ I will plant trees in the barren desert— cedar, acacia, myrtle, olive, cypress, fir, and pine.

²⁰ I am doing this so all who see this miracle will understand what it means— that it is the Lord who has done this, the Holy One of Israel who created it.

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- God chose the Israelites to be His people because he wanted to, not because they deserved it (Deuteronomy 7:5-8; 9:4-6). This passage describes all the ways that God will help us against the enemy. Have you realized all the ways God has helped you?

Tuesday, December 8

Isaiah 41:21-29 The Futility of Idols

²¹ "Present the case for your idols,"
says the Lord.
"Let them show what they can do,"
says the King of Israel.
²² "Let them try to tell us what happened
long ago
so that we may consider the evidence.
Or let them tell us what the future holds,
so we can know what's going to happen.
²³ Yes, tell us what will occur in the days
ahead.
Then we will know you are gods.
In fact, do anything—good or bad!
Do something that will amaze and
frighten us.
²⁴ But no! You are less than nothing and can
do nothing at all.
Those who choose you pollute
themselves.

²⁵ "But I have stirred up a leader who will
approach from the north.
From the east he will call on my name.
I will give him victory over kings and princes.
He will trample them as a potter treads on
clay.
²⁶ "Who told you from the beginning
that this would happen?
Who predicted this,
making you admit that he was right?
No one said a word!
²⁷ I was the first to tell Zion,
'Look! Help is on the way!'
I will send Jerusalem a messenger with
good news.
²⁸ Not one of your idols told you this.
Not one gave any answer when I asked.
²⁹ See, they are all foolish, worthless things.
All your idols are as empty as the wind.

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- Israel was surrounded by many nations whose gods supposedly has special powers, such as raising crops and providing victories in war. These gods, however, failed to deliver. During this holiday season, as we are tempted to put other gods (money, career, family, etc.) before our living God. When tempted or confused if your priorities are putting God first, ask yourself, "Will it unfailingly provide what I'm looking for?" God delivers. When he makes a promise, he keeps it. He is the only completely trustworthy God.

Wednesday, December 9

Isaiah 42:1-9

The Servant, a Light to the Nations

*"Look at my servant, whom I strengthen.
He is my chosen one, who pleases me.
I have put my Spirit upon him.
He will bring justice to the nations.
² He will not shout
or raise his voice in public.
³ He will not crush the weakest reed
or put out a flickering candle.
He will bring justice to all who have been
wronged.
⁴ He will not falter or lose heart
until justice prevails throughout the earth.
Even distant lands beyond the sea will
wait for his instruction.[a]"*

⁵ *God, the Lord, created the heavens and
stretched them out.
He created the earth and everything in it.
He gives breath to everyone,*

*life to everyone who walks the earth.
And it is he who says,
⁶ "I, the Lord, have called you to demonstrate
my righteousness.
I will take you by the hand and guard you,
and I will give you to my people, Israel,
as a symbol of my covenant with them.
And you will be a light to guide the nations.
⁷ You will open the eyes of the blind.
You will free the captives from prison,
releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.
⁸ "I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to anyone else,
nor share my praise with carved idols.
⁹ Everything I prophesied has come true,
and now I will prophesy again.
I will tell you the future before it happens."*

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- Part of Christ's mission on earth was to demonstrate God's righteousness and be a light for the Gentiles. Through Christ, all people have the opportunity to share in his mission. God calls us to be servants to his Son, demonstrating God's righteousness and bringing his light. Brainstorm a few specific ways you can show God's righteousness and shine his light this Christmas season.

Thursday, December 10

Isaiah 42:10-20
A Hymn of Praise

¹⁰ Sing a new song to the Lord!
Sing his praises from the ends of the earth!
Sing, all you who sail the seas,
all you who live in distant coastlands.
¹¹ Join in the chorus, you desert towns;
let the villages of Kedar rejoice!
Let the people of Sela sing for joy;
shout praises from the mountaintops!
¹² Let the whole world glorify the Lord;
let it sing his praise.
¹³ The Lord will march forth like a mighty
hero;
he will come out like a warrior, full of fury.
He will shout his battle cry
and crush all his enemies.
¹⁴ He will say, "I have long been silent;
yes, I have restrained myself.
But now, like a woman in labor,
I will cry and groan and pant.
¹⁵ I will level the mountains and hills
and blight all their greenery.
I will turn the rivers into dry land

and will dry up all the pools.
¹⁶ I will lead blind Israel down a new path,
guiding them along an unfamiliar way.
I will brighten the darkness before them
and smooth out the road ahead of them.
Yes, I will indeed do these things;
I will not forsake them.
¹⁷ But those who trust in idols,
who say, 'You are our gods,'
will be turned away in shame.
Israel's Failure to Listen and See
¹⁸ "Listen, you who are deaf!
Look and see, you blind!
¹⁹ Who is as blind as my own people, my
servant?
Who is as deaf as my messenger?
Who is as blind as my chosen people,
the servant of the Lord?
²⁰ You see and recognize what is right
but refuse to act on it.
You hear with your ears,
but you don't really listen."

► What is your favorite Christmas carol or hymn? Write down the lyrics. Can you turn these lyrics into a prayer? For example: "Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright." *Dear Father, I pray for silence this holy night. I ask that you bring calmness to the hearts of worry and for you to shine your light into the darkness. Now it's your turn :)*

Friday, December 11

Isaiah 42:21-25
Israel's Disobedience

- ²¹ *Because he is righteous,
the Lord has exalted his glorious law.*
- ²² *But his own people have been robbed and plundered,
enslaved, imprisoned, and trapped.
They are fair game for anyone
and have no one to protect them,
no one to take them back home.*
- ²³ *Who will hear these lessons from the past
and see the ruin that awaits you in the future?*
- ²⁴ *Who allowed Israel to be robbed and hurt?
It was the Lord, against whom we sinned,
for the people would not walk in his path,
nor would they obey his law.*
- ²⁵ *Therefore, he poured out his fury on them
and destroyed them in battle.
They were enveloped in flames,
but they still refused to understand.
They were consumed by fire,
but they did not learn their lesson.*

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- This passage describes how Israel refused to learn their lesson. Are there mistakes in your life that you continue to make over and over again? What stands in the way of you learning your lesson? Why do you think you keep making the same mistake over and over again? Offer God a prayer of repentance and ask him to help you not make the same mistake again.

Saturday, December 12

Isaiah 43:1-7

Restoration and Protection Promised

But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you.

*O Israel, the one who formed you says,
"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.*

²*When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.*

*When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.*

*When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.*

³*For I am the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

*I gave Egypt as a ransom for your freedom;
I gave Ethiopia[a] and Seba in your place.*

⁴*Others were given in exchange for you.
I traded their lives for yours
because you are precious to me.*

You are honored, and I love you.

⁵*"Do not be afraid, for I am with you.
I will gather you and your children from east and west.*

⁶*I will say to the north and south,
'Bring my sons and daughters back to Israel
from the distant corners of the earth.*

⁷*Bring all who claim me as their God,
for I have made them for my glory.
It was I who created them."*

► Chapter 42 ends with God's sorrow over the spiritual decay of his people. In chapter 43, God says that despite the people's spiritual failure, he will show them mercy. He will give them an outpouring of love, not wrath. When have you felt God's mercy? When have you shown someone else in your life an outpouring of love in place of wrath?

► Isaiah was speaking primarily of Israel's return from Babylon. But there is a broader meaning: all God's people will be regathered when Christ comes to rule in peace over the earth. How will you gather with God's people this holiday season?

Third Week of Advent

December 13-19, 2015

Sunday, December 13

Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13 Rebuilding the Temple

¹ In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

² "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; ⁴ and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem. ² Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. ³ They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening. ⁴ And they kept the festival of booths,[a] as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day,

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

"For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

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- ▶ During the construction of the altar, no one tried to gain praise for him or herself. Instead, everyone praised God for what has been done. All good gifts come from God - talents, abilities, strength, etc. What good gifts have you received from God?

 - ▶ Listen to Chris Tomlin's song *His Love Endures Forever* (available on YouTube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVYcDOXczus). Offer a prayer of praise to God for a gift you have received from him.

Foundation Laid for the Temple

⁵ and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia.

Foundation Laid for the Temple

⁸ In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord. ⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah[a] along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

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► Did you notice that the altar was built before the city wall? The altar was intended for spiritual purposes whereas, the wall was meant for military protection. The Jews knew that the strongest wall could not protect them if God was not with them.

► It took from September to June to just *prepare* to build the temple. The exiles took time to make plans because the project was important to them. What is important to you this month? How are you taking time to prepare for it? Remember that putting your spiritual life in front of anything material is most important (put the altar before the city wall).

Tuesday, December 15

Ezra 4:1-5

Resistance to Rebuilding the Temple

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here." ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, "You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us."

⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build,

⁵ and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia.

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- ▶ Believers can expect opposition when they do God's work. The enemy's forces are always working against God and His people. If you expect these tactics, you won't be stopped by them. Think of ways the enemy is working against you. Move forward with the work God has planned for you and trust Him to show you the way.

 - ▶ Discouragement and fear are two of the greatest obstacles in completing God's work. Disappointment eats away at our motivation and fear paralyzes us so we don't act at all. Ask for God's help to overcome these obstacles. Encouragement from a friend can help you fulfill God's purpose for your life. Think of a friend who you could ask to offer you encouragement when you are feeling discouraged. How can you offer your friend encouragement in return?

Rebuilding of Jerusalem Opposed

⁶ In the reign of Ahasuerus, in his accession year, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia; the letter was written in Aramaic and translated

⁸ Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows ⁹ (then Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the envoys, the officials, the Persians, the people of Erech, the Babylonians, the people of Susa, that is, the Elamites, ¹⁰ and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River wrote—and now ¹¹ this is a copy of the letter that they sent):

“To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the people of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now ¹² may it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. ¹³ Now may it be known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be reduced.

¹⁴ Now because we share the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, ¹⁵ so that a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors. You will discover in the annals that this is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from long ago. On that account this city was laid waste. ¹⁶ We make known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”

¹⁷ The king sent an answer: “To Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now ¹⁸ the letter that you sent to us has been read in translation before me. ¹⁹ So I made a decree, and someone searched and discovered that this city has risen against kings from long ago, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. ²⁰ Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. ²¹ Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease, and that this city not be rebuilt, until I make a decree. ²² Moreover, take care not to be slack in this matter; why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

²³ Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates, they hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. ²⁴ At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped and was discontinued until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

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- Setbacks and standstills are painful and discouraging to God’s workers. What setbacks have you experienced lately? Did you standstill in the power of the Lord? or did you let the setback fluster you? Acknowledging the truth about your reaction will help you correct (or repeat) your reaction the next time you face a setback.

Restoration of the Temple Resumed

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set out to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.

³ At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" ⁴ They also asked them this, "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" ⁵ But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it.

⁶ The copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates the envoys who were in the province Beyond the River sent to King Darius;⁷ they sent him a report, in which was written as follows: "To Darius the king, all peace! ⁸ May it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built of hewn stone, and timber is laid in the walls; this work is being done diligently and prospers in their hands. ⁹ Then we spoke to those elders and asked them, 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, for your information, so that we might write down the names of the men at their head. ¹¹ This was their reply to us: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. ¹³ However, King Cyrus of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. ¹⁴ Moreover, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem and had brought into the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. ¹⁵ He said to him, 'Take these vessels; go and put them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.' ¹⁶ Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from that time until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished.' ¹⁷ And now, if it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by King Cyrus for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter."

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- It's not always easy to speak up for our faith in an unbelieving world, but we must. How are you keeping the true meaning of Christmas alive this year?

Friday, December 18

Ezra 6:13-18

Completion and Dedication of the Temple

¹³ Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered. ¹⁴ So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia; ¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

¹⁶ The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

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- There is a time to celebrate and a time to work. Think about your holiday schedule - have you built in time for both work and celebration/praise?

The Passover Celebrated

¹⁰ so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children. ¹¹ Furthermore I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill. ¹² May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence."

Completion and Dedication of the Temple

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¹⁶ The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

The Passover Celebrated

¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover. ²⁰ For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. ²² With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

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- There are many ways to pray for God's help. The Levites prayed and God changed the heart of the king of Assyria. Have you ever considered that God would change the attitude of a person or group of people? Is there a Grinch in your life that you can pray for? Pray that God will grow their heart two sizes bigger.

Fourth Week of Advent

December 13-19, 2015

Sunday, December 20

Luke 1:5-13

Zechariah's Song

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

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- ▶ God answers prayer in his own way and in his own time. He worked in an "impossible" situation - Elizabeth's age and barrenness - to bring the fulfillment of one of his prophecies. What is a prayer you have lifted up that has not been answered? Are you staying open to what God can do in impossible situations? Are you willing to wait for God to work in his own time?

Monday, December 21

Luke 1:1-4

Dedication to Theophilus

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

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- ▶ The truth was very important to Luke. Therefore, he relied heavily on eyewitness accounts. Have you been an eyewitness to God's work? What did you see?

Tuesday, December 22

Luke 1:14-25

Zechariah's Encounter

¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

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- Because Zachariah doubted God's timing, he was made mute. Are you waiting for God to answer a request? Or to fulfill some need? Write down the request you are waiting to be answered on a separate piece of paper. Now fold it up and put the paper in a safe place. Have faith that God will answer your prayer in his own timing. Every time you start to worry about this request remind yourself that God is waiting for the right time and feel encouraged in his perfect timing.

Wednesday, December 23

Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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- ▶ Mary was young, poor, female - all characteristics that to the people of her day, would make her seem unusable by God for any major task. But God chose Mary for one of the important acts of obedience he has ever demanded of anyone. You may feel that your ability, experience, or education makes you an unlikely candidate for God's service. Don't limit God's choices. He can use you if you trust him. How will you deepen your trust in God? Or maybe you need to begin to trust God. What do you think it's so hard to give up control of our lives?

Thursday, December 24 - Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

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- Sometimes we think to ourselves, "I'm being obedient, so why aren't things going better?" We face discomfort and struggle and immediately think we have misread God's plan for us. In this passage, a quite couples heads towards Bethlehem. Joseph's bumpy road wasn't smoothed out by God, but rather Joseph was strengthened. When we do God's will, we are not guaranteed comfort and convenience. God WILL lead you and provide you what you need.

Friday, December 25 - Christmas Day

Luke 2:8-20 Shepherds Visit

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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- ▶ What a birth announcement! The shepherds were terrified, but their fear turned to joy as the angels announced the Messiah's birth. First the shepherds ran to see the baby; then they spread the word. Do you look forward to meeting him in prayer each day? Have you discovered a Lord so wonderful that you can't help sharing your joy with your friends?

 - ▶ The greatest event in history just happened! The Messiah has been born! The Jews have been waiting for ages, and when it finally happens, the news is delivered to humble shepherds. The good news about Jesus is that he comes to everyone, including the plain and ordinary. He comes to anyone with a heart to receive him. Whoever you are, whatever you do, you can have Jesus in your life. Don't think you need extraordinary qualification - he accepts you as you are.