

Devotions for Nov. 28 - Dec. 4, 2011

Monday, November 28, 2011: Restore Daily reading: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Most great songs have a great refrain with a hook that drives the meaning home. That's true here. "Restore us, O God" is the chorus, repeated three times. To build intensity, descriptions are added to God's name in each refrain: Restore us, O God (3); Restore us, O God of hosts (7); Restore us, O Lord God of hosts (19). The circumstances behind this psalm are unknown, but some national crisis seems to be at hand. The people feel abandoned by God and cry out for restoration. Imagine a congregation crying out this refrain together. The psalm reveals the belief that God, and only God, can change their circumstances. The people are helpless, like sheep. They ask God to "shine God's face," a biblical way of asking for God's favor. God is the shepherd who can lead the flock to safety, and the people promise faithfulness and gratitude if God will restore them. Do you feel crushed or abandoned? Ask God to shine on you today.

Tuesday, November 29, 2011: Three Things Daily reading: Mark 13:24-37

People love to dive into apocalyptic literature, to unravel the mystery, identify the symbols and create timelines. But this misses Mark's point: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." This passage stands at the center of Mark's passion narrative. Mark's intentional ambiguity points to three different "events." The first is Jesus' crucifixion. The sun will be darkened as the Light of the World is snuffed out. But with the resurrection, the Light will return with everlasting brightness. Second, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Romans. This cataclysmic event deeply marks the lives of early Christians, and it would have felt like the end of the world. "This generation" has experienced both of these events. Finally, the consummation of history. Using Old Testament language and borrowing from Daniel, Mark points to the end of all things. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God has promised a new heaven and a new earth. Ask God to give you great hope for a new heaven and new earth.

Wednesday, November 30, 2011: Light Daily reading: Revelation 22:1-5

As we move into this Advent season, we are confronted by shorter days and longer nights. We are literally plunged into darkness. Yet this season proclaims and promises the Light of the World in whom there is no darkness, and whose word will never pass away. So we watch, wait, pray, and engage our hands, feet and hearts in the work we've been called and empowered to do. In doing so, by grace, we, too, become a light of the world in the midst of this present darkness. This becomes ritual as we light a candle each week in worship. The light of Christ pushes back against the darkness. The light of Jesus will sustain us through dark times of hardship. We long for the day when there will be no more night, because the Lord God will be our light. Ask God for the gift of life and light today.

Thursday, December 1, 2011: Glimpses Daily reading: Matthew 10:40-42

How does the light and life of Jesus Christ become visible? By grace, we see glimpses of it. Whenever selflessness wins over selfishness, love over hatred, forgiveness over bitterness, generosity over greed, justice over oppression, we see the Kingdom that is already here by grace, but not yet fully revealed. Each glimpse sustains us with hope for that day when there will be no more darkness, tears, sadness, or death. Every day we can glimpse the Kingdom among us, and it would serve us well to stop and give thanks to God. Over time, these glimpses of the Kingdom begin to transform us, as we become more engaged and energized by being in the middle of what God is doing in the world. Ask God to open your eyes to this transformation.

Friday, December 2, 2011: Good News Daily reading: Psalm 51:10-12

Advent draws us close to the good news of God's incredible love revealed in Jesus. Like the psalmist, we can cry out, "Restore us, O God," and know that God not only hears, but has already responded in Jesus. We are not alone. We are not without help and hope. Even when our circumstances don't change, our perspective can, because of the hope for that day when all will be made right by God's grace, action and power. In the meantime, we need not drown in despair or corrode in bitterness. We can watch and wait with our hands, feet and heart set free and empowered to do God's work in the world. Doing so makes the world a brighter place. God can create a new heart in us. God can put a new and right spirit with us. God can restore us and uphold us. This is good news! This is the power of the love of Christ within us. Ask God to fill your life with Gospel news.

Saturday, December 3, 2011: Overcome Daily reading: 1 John 5:1-5

How should the church respond to the news that heaven and earth will pass away? We could become fixated on the predictions of the end, and perhaps even write a best-selling series of fiction on the topic, but that would miss the point. The church is to watch, not with fear but with great expectation, because the power and promise found in Jesus is greater than the fear of hardship or disaster in this world. That doesn't mean that life will be easy for the faithful. Jesus promised quite the opposite. But Jesus also said that he has overcome the world, and it is the full revelation of this overcoming, the consummation of God's dreams for all creation, that sustains us with hope. This is what we watch and wait for. Ask God to help you more clearly understand what God's dream is for the world.

Sunday, December 4, 2011: Sin Daily reading: 1 John 1:8-10

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Sin is not just the bad things we do or the difficulties we experience. Life is tough, and the holiday veneer makes hardships even more painful. It's no wonder the suicide rate jumps during the holidays. But while we're tempted to use the holidays to hide from the reality of our lives, Advent invites us to lean into our sin, brokenness, pain, hardship and weakness, not in a masochistic way, but in a way that accepts that life in this broken world is hard, and that we really are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Sin is part of who we are, but it's not the whole story. Sin begs us to hide; to focus on ourselves at the expense of others. Sin hopes we'll believe that we can fix it on our own. Sin leads us to believe that we are the center of our universe. What is the power of God? To forgive sin. To overcome death. That's the power we experience in the love of Christ. Ask God for the power of love to be real in your life today.