

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight O Lord, you who are rock, redeemer & Renewer of us all. Amen. (Ps 19:14)

Grace and Peace be with you, dear Friends!

Without looking at your watch - Has anyone noticed what time it is? We have a timepiece right over here...The Advent Wreath. It is fully lit...all 4 candles! No more candles to light. But wait... (**pastor moves to Advent wreath**) Stay with me, now...And there's room for one more! (**pastor places Christ Candle in center**; returns to center podium)

This is the Fourth Sunday of Advent... A space with a view of Love. The invitation to prepare hearts and lives and make room for the Promised One continues as we transition from waiting to receiving.

So, friends, an accountability moment... How did you make room in your heart this week? What one thing did you 'fast' from (let go of) to create a space to spend time drawing closer to God? In what ways is your soul rejoicing?

I am hopeful that it has become easier to let go of distractions or navigate around obstacles so that there is intentional room for God regularly.

And if it is still a challenge to keep your intention, consider this: the prophets Micah and Mary help us know that God is more than able to be with us in the most unexpected, unintended places. God's love and presence have no boundaries or barriers.

Micah is a strong prophet, a simple prophet and a contemporary of Amos. No hidden messages, his language is quite direct and to the point. Israel & Judah (the two kingdoms) are under threat. Israel (the northern kingdom-Samaria and Galilee regions) has fallen to the Assyrians. Judah (Bethel,

Jerusalem, Jericho, Hebron, Rehoboth and southern plain) is now threatened. Amos focuses on Samaria. Micah's focus is on Jerusalem.

Micah (the name means 'who is like the Lord') speaks out against the sins of idolatry and oppression of the poor, warning of coming punishment, but also the promise of forgiveness and restoration.

The verses of Micah's fifth chapter read today draw on the promise of an eternal dynasty given to David through Nathan (2 Sam 7:13, 16) that assures security in the face of the nation's danger. A new king will emerge, a descendant of David, from Bethlehem, to rule all of Israel (5:2). The agony of Israel, like labor pains until birth, will last for a time and then the people will return home.

It's easy to understand how the hope of a messiah would be repeated through the centuries. The gospel writers use this prophecy as part of Jesus' story.

John Wesley interpreted these words as the promise of Christ. Jesus is the shepherd who stands with the flock. In addition, God's people (& the church (Mt 16:18)) will dwell secure and in peace.

Here's the unlikely thing... God doesn't use the big city...glitzy & glamorous Jerusalem... no, God chooses Bethlehem... a suburb of the city (a daughter of Zion). Isn't that just like God... In the midst of the vulnerable and disregarded places, God has already been bringing us a ruler. Even if our eyes are on the capital city, on the big headlines, on the flashy things of the world, God is preparing salvation in a place we would discard. Here it is folks: in the places of helplessness, defenselessness, in the places where people don't have other choices God is alive and active. For those of us who think we're in control of our lives, much of the time, this is a hard passage because it's so much simpler than we make our lives to be. All the ruler is going to do is stand up. And they will dwell secure and be at peace.

In keeping with the vulnerability and the unlikely theme, along comes Mary. Mary is the original one to 'make room' for God in her life.

We need to really remember that in this new story that is coming before us, the ones who we think are not prophets are the prophets. Mary is a young girl. We're going to dismiss her. She is young so we dismiss her. Okay. She is not married. Okay, we dismiss her. She is pregnant and not married. I'm going to dismiss her completely. Frequently seen quietly wearing a blue scarf over her head, smiling sweetly. I don't know, but if you had a baby in a stable, I doubt you're going to be smiling sweetly. So we have been able to tame Mary. We have old social constructs. This is the stuff to let go of to make room for God.

Mary is a prophet. She will not be dismissed or go quietly. There is a new story emerging about the value of women in Luke's gospel. Mary greets Elizabeth. After listening to Elizabeth's greeting, Mary responds with her song of love, her song of vulnerability, her song of new life of hope and peace, joy & love. Mary shares a view of the kin-dom of God.

Her vulnerability is a cry from her depths that she has been overwhelmed by God and had experiences of her vulnerability that moves her to praise. Mary understands that what is happening in her is not that she has been singled out to be special or to receive a separate blessing. She knows that what is happening in her is a sign that God is always bringing new life in the lowest places of the earth. So Mary's not praising herself here. She's pointing out and saying that in the vulnerable places, God is always working and is always planting new seeds that we often forget to look for.

Elizabeth and Mary sing and their babies dance in the space that made room for them. You can almost hear that as a duet or as a call and response that John & Jesus hear from mother and aunt.

FUN FACT: when someone sings deeply, it builds muscles. It builds abdominal muscles. Singing likely built strength in preparation for labor and in preparation for the gut-wrenching business of raising a child. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months (v56). I imagine there were many moments for singing.

Joy was present in that moment even in the midst of the challenges and the uncertainty that lay ahead. Yet, Mary said yes to God anyway.

Our singing and proclaiming of these kinds of words also build our strength for the labor we are called to in making the world a more just place.

There's still work to be done to make room in our hearts and lives for Christ, and to participate in renewing relationships rooted in hope, peace, and love.

It is my prayer, dear friends, that as we make room, as we hear and see with intention, we will discern what is emerging as God's new thing for Saint James.

So church: What one thing could we do? Theologian Jon Berquist suggests the first thing is To **decide what really matters**. The best way to do that is to open our eyes and take care of the first thing we see.

Let's reflect for a moment: What does this faith community have to offer? What need is there within 5 miles of this house of prayer? What can we share for the wellbeing of our neighbors?

The invitation of Advent calls us to open ourselves, to use this time to increase our faith, and to enrich our love in outward expressions; to be bold, courageous and faithful to the call to change our way of living...

Friends, What one thing will you do differently this week because of this Word? May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Leading Into Prayer Let us **JOIN voices TOGETHER** once again, to **make room for the prayers for God's people, church & world, As we sing: verse 3** "Come and Find the Quiet Center" **TFWS 2128** (*in the hymnal, the worship guide, or on the screen.*

In the Spirit let us travel Open to each other's pain Let our lives and fears unravel Celebrate the space we gain There's a place for deepest dreaming There's a time for heart to care In the Spirit's lively scheming There is always room to spare.

THE LITURGIST, Jim Quindlen, will LEAD us in prayers for God's people, church & World ...