

Marks of Discipleship

Daily Prayer ■ Weekly Worship ■ Bible Reading
■ Giving Time, Talents & Resources ■ Spiritual Friendships
■ Service In & Beyond the Church

December 1, 2019

Day 1: Zephaniah 3:14

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

When war is at your gates the city has to be careful not to make too much noise but in times of peace the inhabitants of the city are told to shout and make all the noise they can. Celebration is a vital part of life, without it we just exist. I noticed how nurses on a Leukemia floor in a children's hospital use to rejoice when a patient would keep down food or make any improvement. These were children who were going to live 3-5 years. In that environment it would be easy to be sad all the time but these nurses knew it was important to celebrate even in the midst of death.

Question: What are the two or three happiest songs you know?

Challenge: What would you say the difference is between praise and thanksgiving?

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-11

Day 2: Zephaniah 3:15-16

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

Have you ever been in a situation where a relationship has been broken (by you) and you were afraid it could not be fixed? If you have been in that situation you know the relief you felt when that relationship was repaired. This is how the people felt when they first disobeyed God and then found redemption by asking for forgiveness. It felt like a judgment had been canceled and that God would always be in their midst.

Question: Have you ever had a near miss at being really hurt? What happened?

Challenge: Just because the "Lord" is in my midst, why would I not be afraid if I was in danger?

Scripture: Isaiah 12:1-6

Day 3: Zephaniah 3:1

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

Our relationship to God does not depend on how we feel about it. It depends on an objective reality of Christ coming and dying on the cross and rising on the third day. Our acceptance of him as Lord is what our relationship to God is based on. We do not need to fear or become weak because of that fear--God in Christ has saved us.

Question: How heavy an object can you lift?

Challenge: Think of an image that you can use to calm yourself when you are under great stress.

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-6

Day 4: Zephaniah 3:17-18

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

We know that evil is stronger than any one of us, and out of that knowledge we can feel afraid or give up because we know we cannot win. Though it is true we cannot conquer evil on our own, we do have someone who can. God's promise is that evil will one day be destroyed (Isaiah 25:6-8) but until that day we can fight evil effectively. We do this by brining more people into the faith. As people accept Christ it changes their lives. Christians can still do acts that are evil but we now have a way (in Christ) to stop those acts from being the norm in our life.

Question: Who is very proud of you?

Challenge: What do you think of the image of the Lord as a warrior?

Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-12

Day 5: Zephaniah 3:19

I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth

The oppressors are more than foreign invaders that take away a persons liberty. They are also the attitudes that weigh us down so that we are oppressed and enslaved by them. When we are caught with a negative attitude showing it can cause shame. We may not be able to change completely our negative attitudes but in Christ we can stop acting on them. Personal bias is a problem that is very difficult to overcome. Many times the best we can do is to not act on our negative attitudes.

Question: Have you ever felt shame?

Challenge: What do you think is oppressing you right now?

Scripture: Micah 4:1-7

Day 6: Zephaniah 3:20

At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

When this was written the Prophet was referring to the people of Israel coming back to Judea from exile and establishing a new city and temple. They would be praised among all the people of the world because of the way they lived with each other and their neighbors. They were to live in peace and justice (Micah 6:6-8) to show the rest of the world the difference it makes when God is Lord of your life. The Church today shows its beliefs by how we treat each other and what a difference it can make if Christ is Lord of our life.

Question: Where do you call home?

Challenge: If your fortunes were restored what would happen to you?

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-14

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December 8, 2019

Day 1: Isaiah 11:1

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Isaiah wrote during a time of national crisis. The entire nation was looking for a sign of hope, but looking in the wrong place. Isaiah told the people that their actions over a period of time had drawn them away from God. The actions Isaiah criticizes are their lack of justice in their interactions with each other and their attitude toward the worship of God. It is these two things that have caused the current bad times. There is hope, and that hope will come from God, not from other powers in the region. David was selected by God and God would bring forth from the line of David—a Savior.

Question: 9/11 was a terrible event in the history of our country. Have you seen any sign of hope that has come out of this event?

Challenge: Jesus came from an interesting family. How far back can you trace your family? What traits or values do you see running through your family to you?

Scripture: Psalm 45

Day 2: Isaiah 11:2

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

The character of the ruler will be shaped by “the Spirit of God.” There are three pairs of gifts given to the anointed king; wisdom & understanding, counsel & might, knowledge & fear of the Lord. The Spirit represents the active creative divine presence. In the anointing the Spirit came upon the king and stayed as long as the king was just and listened to God. If the king looked somewhere else for guidance the Spirit would leave the king (see I Samuel 16:1).

Question: What pair of gifts do you think are the most important and what pair do you see in our national leaders today?

Challenge: To be a national leader today what “gifts” do you think are needed?

Scripture: Psalm 72

Day 3: Isaiah 11:3-5

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

These verses describe the king’s administration. He will judge with a deep understanding that comes from the gifts of the Spirit. His understanding will be so complete that none of the weakest in society will be denied justice. The king will have the power to enforce his rules simply by the words of his mouth. Verse 5 metaphorically tells us that the King will wear his moral code, which he has from God, around his most vital parts.

Question: In today’s world who are the weakest in society?

Challenge: Is being poor a morally better position than being rich? If not, why do think being rich can cause us to act badly?

Scripture: Psalm 110

Day 4: Isaiah 11:6-7

he wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox

The peace that the king brings is so powerful that even nature will change. The image of the animals living together is a reminder that in the beginning all were vegetarians (Genesis 1:29-30). Verse 6 describes how predator and prey shall be at peace. Verse 7 describes how animals will not fight over the same place to eat but will all eat in peace. The little child is one who can just walk.

Question: Do you think we would be better off if we were vegetarian?

Challenge: Rewrite this verse using people instead of animals.

Scripture: Ezekiel 47:1-12

Day 5: Isaiah 11:8

The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.

Now we see that even a baby will be safe from the bite of a poisonous snake. In the use of a snake we again see echoes of creation and the Fall. The asp and the adder are very dangerous because of their bite and the snake in creation was dangerous because of its cunning. Both dangers will no more be in God’s kingdom.

Question: How do you feel about snakes? Would you have one as a pet? Could you love one?

Challenge: Pick someone or something that to you is very untrustworthy. Under what circumstances could you trust them/it?

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-13

Day 6: Isaiah 11:9

They shall not hurt or destroy in my entire holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

This verse reverses the accusation made in Isaiah 1:2-3. The peace that is spoken of in verses 6-9 comes because the whole earth has knowledge of God. To know God involves understanding, intimate relationship, and acknowledgement. For the whole earth to know God, we who do know God have a lot of work ahead of us.

Question: How would you define knowledge?

Challenge: Based on your definition of knowledge - what do you really know?

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9

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December 15, 2019

Day 1: Luke 1:46

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord"

Her soul (her whole being) gave praise to God, for using her to make God more visible and real to the world. It is her belief that God was speaking to her, it was her willingness to follow God's lead, and in short it was her faith in God's love that was "magnified" in such a way to show the love of God to the world. Mary demonstrates that if we have faith then we shall show, by our whole being, the love of God to the rest of the world.

Question: What makes you "alive"?

Challenge: Notice people around you this week and see how many seem to be enjoying the season, and how many are having a hard time with it.

Scripture: Luke 1:1-25

Day 2: Luke 1:47-48

"and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;"

The spirit and soul are not two different entries in our person. When the word spirit is used it denotes some active expression of joy. When we worship it is our spirit that is expressing joy. God the Creator of all and King of the Universe has taken time to be with each of us. The humblest person on earth is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Question: How would you define humility?

Challenge: Name five people that you consider really humble.

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Day 3: Luke 1:49-50

"for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

One of the reasons for Mary's (and her cousin Elizabeth's) happiness is that in their culture to have a child was to have a future. A child was a sign of life after death. God is merciful not because God wants us to be fearful but because mercy is a characteristic of God. When we understand God's mercy we give respect and stand in awe.

Question: In our culture what would cause happiness?

Challenge: Past experiences prepare us for future events. What past experience have you learned from that will help you in the future?

Scripture: Luke 1:39-66

Day 4: Luke 1:51

"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."

God's strength is seen over time. God's love has outlasted all the former evil empires of the world and that love has continued to give life to this world. What can be confusing is that an expression of strength is usually seen in an immediate fashion. God has and will continue to scatter the proud. It may not happen as soon as we want it to happen, but it does happen.

Question: What human made structure has lasted the longest? Why has it lasted so long? Has it been useful to the world?

Challenge: What is long lasting and shrinks when not used and grows when used?

Scripture: Luke 1:67-80

Day 5: Luke 1:52-55

"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Even in Mary's time they had a number of examples of empires that had come and gone. Two thousand years later we have seen nations rise and fall. The only thing that has lasted through the centuries is the Church. As long as we continue to express the love of God we will continue to exist. The promise made to Abraham, in modern terms, is a lifestyle that will feed, cloth, shelter, and bring joy to our children.

Question: What idea or concept has the most power in our world today? Why?

Challenge: What gift can you give to God in the form of a promise?

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Day 6: Luke 1:56

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

We need to take some time to allow the word of God to sink deep within us. When we first feel God's touch we respond with joy and thanksgiving. As time goes on we come to fully realize what God's word of hope means. Mary spent time with Elizabeth to prepare herself for the years ahead. She prepared her spirit so that she could go through the future events with a sense of joy at being led by God.

Question: How do you first react when you hear good or bad news?

Challenge: How are you going to prepare for next year?

Scripture: Luke 2:21-40

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December 22, 2019

Day 1: Matthew 1:18

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

As you read the Christmas story in both Matthew and Luke notice how the persons involved had to work through their disappointments. When Joseph found that Mary, his intended wife, was expecting, the future he had planned went away. It was replaced by a very hard decision and no matter how he chose, he believed things would turn out badly. We know the end of the story but we forget that when Joseph was told his future wife was expecting he did not know how things would work out.

Question: What is the biggest surprise you have ever had?

Challenge: Find out what the story of your birth was.

Scripture: Jeremiah 30:18-24

Day 2: Matthew 1:19

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph did not take what was his by right. His response to Mary's expecting a baby is a sign of the new way Jesus called people to relate to each other. No more are relationships to be built on power or pride but rather on love and humility. Joseph did not go ahead with (what the Law demanded-a divorce) he found a way, with God's help, to not shame Mary. Jesus ushered in a new era of relationships. We who call ourselves Christian need to follow Joseph's example and treat others with grace and mercy.

Question: What is the biggest disappointment you have had?

Challenge: Look at the news or newspapers to see if you can find a current example of how Joseph acted toward Mary.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

Day 3: Matthew 1:20-21

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

It was through God's intervention that Joseph made his decision to go ahead with his plans to take Mary as his wife. Joseph again had to give up on a future in order to go ahead with the marriage. Once he was married he could not divorce her except for cause. If he married her he would live with the knowledge that the child was not his. God intervened to tell Joseph that even though the child was not his - it was from God - he was asked to follow God's lead, not knowing where God would lead him.

Question: How do you feel about adopting a child?

Challenge: What would you do in Joseph's situation? Be honest, nobody will know how you answered but you.

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1-17

Day 4: Matthew 1:22-23

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

We do not know if Joseph or Mary were aware of the words of the prophet. They may have been but we just do not know. Up to this point in history God was not very approachable. One had to give their sacrifice to a priest and the priest would do the sacrifice. One could pray but prayer was a duty, not a way to feel closer to God. We have a God who comes to us. This concept alone brings us hope. If God would come to us then we must be worth something. For the infinite God to become part of the finite universe is a miracle indeed.

Question: Which prophet said the above?

Challenge: How have you felt God being with you?

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Day 5: Matthew 1:24-25

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph is not only a forerunner of what Christian attitudes ought to be but also a forerunner of what faith would be. Faith is the action that is expressed as we follow God's lead. Faith provides the proof that we need in order to go forth in life. Just as Mary and Joseph went on a journey to Bethlehem without knowing the end result, so we go on a journey in life not knowing the end result.

Question: Do you think that God communicates with us in dreams?

Challenge: What is the most admirable aspect of Joseph's response to Mary?

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9

Day 6: Matthew 1:17

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus comes from a royal family. Jesus is the last in the line of David. From Jesus onward all who call themselves followers of Christ are a royal priesthood. We carry out God's plan of salvation by sharing the Good News - Christ is born, Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ shall come again.

Question: It is said that a person in this country is just five handshakes away from a president - is this true for you?

Challenge: Trace your line back to your great grandparents and then see what traits have come through to you.

Scripture: Luke 3:23-38

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December 29, 2019

Day 1: Luke 14:16

Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.'

In Jesus' time a great dinner would be for those with power and money. For those few who were very wealthy there was not a lot to spend their money on so they gave great dinners. A host would not go to that expense for just anybody. The dinner would be a chance to "showoff" to others of your similar social standing, your wealth and influence. If the number was large (as Jesus is implying) then the house had to be large. This dinner is not a cocktail party where guests are walking around but a meal at a table or a number of tables in a large room. Eating and drinking to excess would be normal. Pious Jews and Christians were very critical of the custom of excessive dinners.

Question: Why do you think the early Christians disapproved of great dinners?

Challenge: Who would you invite (in general) to your wedding or anniversary?

Scripture: James 2:1-7

Day 2: Luke 14:17

At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now."

People invited to the dinner would have been told ahead of time when it was to take place. The slave going out to those invited was just telling them now was the time to come. It can be assumed that the guests, being told ahead of time and called upon now, had agreed to come when they were first invited. The prophets and sages in the Old Testament have told us to get ready for the "great banquet" that is coming. When the host announced that now was the time to come, they had excuses. Jesus tells us come the dinner is ready and still people have excuses for not coming!

Question: Is it polite to ask what is being served before accepting the invitation?

Challenge: Do you think God is inviting you to do something or go someplace?

Scripture: Hebrews 4

Day 3: Luke 14:18-20

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come."

The people the host was trying to show off for turned their noses up at him. From the perspective of the host it must have felt like the guests turned him down because they got a better offer for entertainment. The guests may not have wanted to come because they thought they would owe the host some favor in the future. The excuses are very lame, especially for the first century. Jesus uses these excuses to show that the guests do not value the host or the host's hospitality. The guests do not take the host seriously.

Question: Which of the excuses above make sense?

Challenge: Look at your behavior this week and see if you have made excuses.

Scripture: Romans 1:15-25

Day 4: Luke 14:21-22

So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room."

It is interesting that even a person's anger can work to help them do what is right. Many years ago a youth told me he got into memorizing scripture out of anger. He was in a Bible memory contest and performed badly because he did not work at memorizing the chapter in the Bible. He was so mad at himself that he vowed to win the next contest - and he did. Jesus seems to be saying that instead of inviting those who can pay you back, invite those who need to eat.

Question: Why invite the poor, crippled, and blind?

Challenge: How do you explain why Jesus did not say invite everybody and see who comes?

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Day 5: Luke 14:23-24

Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

The host is learning the meaning of hospitality and is beginning to feel the joy of serving. He wants everybody to come and fill his house. He has had a change of heart. He was no different than those who he first invited. He was just as self-centered and concerned with his own enjoyment and pleasure. Now the host realizes that it is better and feels better to be one who gives rather than consumes. His house now is full and everybody is eating and drinking together without concern for wealth or social status.

Question: Would you have come to dinner without knowing the host or the guests but knowing it was great food and drink?

Challenge: Compel and invite seem like opposite ways of having guests. Why did Jesus change the terms from invite to compel?

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-10

Day 6: Luke 14:13

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Jesus ends this story by giving the order in which people will respond to the Gospel. Everybody is invited to the great feast of salvation in Christ. However those who are hurting will see the hope, offered by Jesus, and respond first. Then as others see those who were once hopeless filled with hope and joy they will come to see. Jesus said a few times in his ministry that he came to call sinners and he came to heal the sick. Not because everybody else does not need Jesus but those hurting will most likely respond first.

Question: Why is it hard for a rich person to respond to the Gospel?

Challenge: How would you define rich in our country? Think about it in terms of more than money.

Scripture: Psalm 1