

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a rustic wooden table laden with food and drink. In the center, a large white bowl is filled with sliced bread. To its left, a smaller bowl contains a pinkish liquid. To the right, a plate of food with green vegetables and red sauce is visible. In the foreground, a glass of water and a bottle of orange juice are prominent. The background shows more plates of food, including what appears to be a salad and a dish with red sauce. The overall atmosphere is warm and inviting, suggesting a communal meal.

GATHERED AT THE TABLE

GLIMPSES AT ORDINARY PEOPLE IN SCRIPTURE

FORWARD

We do not know much about Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, but the Apostle Paul felt they deserved recognition. "They refreshed my spirit," he wrote at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:17). It is likely these three weren't seeking to be recognized. In fact, it seems it may have just been their mere presence that refreshed Paul's spirit. Whatever the case, their simple, behind-the-scenes actions renewed something in Paul's life.

Jackie White, our long-time coworker and friend, deserves similar recognition. All of us on staff at College Wesleyan Church, at some point (and often many points), had our "spirits refreshed" by Jackie. Her laughter was infectious and was often heard throughout the church office. She supplied the staff with knowledge about you, the congregation, that no one else knew. Though she didn't always tell us, we knew she was praying for us.* Jackie had the gift of discernment and always knew when someone needed encouragement. She'd often do so by sharing a verse or passage of scripture with us. While she wasn't formally a pastor, she shepherded many of us on staff and within the body of CWC.

She never wanted to be recognized for all that she did for CWC and the staff. She often deferred recognition to others as she always wanted to elevate others. She

**Many of us learned after her passing that she had been praying scripture over us at various seasons of our lives and had recorded that in her personal Bible.*

constantly worked behind the scenes to make us better individuals, a better staff, and a better church.

The idea for this Advent devotional came from Jackie's deep love for College Wesleyan Church. For years, Jackie had the idea of the CWC staff writing a devotional to be gifted to the congregation during Advent as a Christmas gift from us to you. In the months leading up to Jackie's passing, she worked with us to give direction for this devotional. She created the theme, informed the design, and picked out passages that pointed us to ordinary characters throughout scripture that played significant roles in God's story.

Jackie's passing has been difficult for us all, but as you read through this devotional allow Jackie's vision for it to refresh your spirit.

– The CWC Staff

INTRO

As we continue to move from “me to WE,” what better time than the season of Advent to think about the global church, the whole body of Christ; past present and future. This year we are asking you to think of Advent as a gathering at a table; to make space and room for those who are part of our church family around the world and those who have come before us. We want to consider those from the Old Testament who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah; and those in the New Testament through today who are anticipating the return of Christ. So through this devotional we’d like to explore the lives of those in Scripture whose acts, while they were waiting, were unheralded or even anonymous.

Our hope is that you will be challenged by the stories of the powerful, the marginalized, the influencers, the humble, the obedient, and the courageous. We hope the character you see in them will inspire and encourage your own and that you may find evidence of that same character in those with whom you do community. So this year as you observe and celebrate advent and you gather at the table may you be reminded of this timeless treasury of those whose legacy is part of our own and is woven into the lives of those we will never meet. In our waiting, may we have a heightened awareness of who WE are as the Body of Christ.

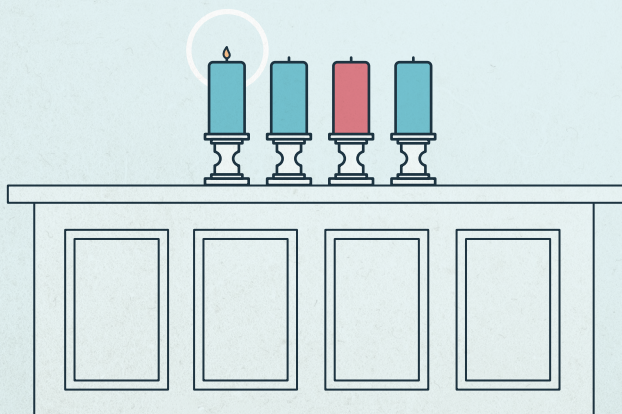


JACKIE WHITE



THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGINNING NOVEMBER 29, 2020



JOANNA

Luke 8:1-3, Luke 24:1-12

She would have sought him out. Being in the high court of Herod Antipas, Jesus would not have come to her; she would have gone to him. Though being in his presence was a betrayal to Herod's court, something about Jesus must have drawn her, despite the ruin it could bring to her name and the danger it could bring to her life. Like so many wealthy Jewish women of her time, she could have given money quietly from a distance and felt content. But where do we find her?

Within the circle of Jesus' closest companions, we find Joanna. It was absurd for a wealthy woman of her culture to not only be traveling with a ragtag band of men, but also being with and serving the lowest of low in society. This is where we find her though. Not only does she provide money for the ministry Jesus is doing in Galilee, but she provides a devoted heart. Yet, her devotion does not stop at the life of Jesus either. We find Joanna listed as one of the women who come to care for Jesus' body after he has died. When all hope seems lost, darkness has set in, and stability is gone, her commitment has not changed.

As I imagine these women walking to the tomb, I feel God press pause in this story. I need to see these emotionally exhausted, hopelessly haggard women walk to

his tomb. I need to see Joanna continuing to serve Christ, even when he is gone. While all the other disciples are in hiding, here are these women- here is Joanna- choosing to continue her service to Christ, even when it seems in vain. In one of the hardest moments, where devotion to Christ is tested and things seem too dark and unstable to carry on, what is Joanna told? "Remember His words."

Maybe we need to hear His words again. Maybe we need to walk to the tomb. Maybe we need to look at these moments of utter sadness and disappointment, knowing something sacred happens there. Maybe there is a part of the Gospel that we will miss if we do not choose to show up in our service to Christ and do the hard, heartbreaking work that others are afraid of doing. The greatest news our hearts have ever known is told to three faithful women who did just that. Perhaps, we should join them.



ELIZABETH SCULL
YOUTH PASTOR

3 MIGHTY WARRIORS

2 Samuel 23:13-17; Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

"Tell me about yourself. Are you married?" I asked the driver on my way to the airport.

"Not yet," he laughed, "but I'm working on it. I'm finally going to give her the ring."

"Good for you," I said, "So have you told her?"

"Oh yeah . . . I just can't afford the ring," he nodded, "I've been saving for more than a year."

"Wow, that's a long time. That must be some ring."

"Yeah, I know," he laughed, "but love can be expensive, man."

According to the writer of Samuel, David had thirty men who were like Seal Team Six. Their heroics are recorded here, in 2 Samuel 23. For instance, one of them took on eight hundred Philistines and killed them, by himself, in a single day (v.8). Another jumped into a pit with a lion and killed it with his bare hands (v.20). Still another squared off against a "huge Egyptian" and, like David with Goliath, took his enemy's sword and his life (v.21). All thirty of them were fierce warriors.

Of the thirty, there were three warriors in particular who stood out. Of all their exploits, the most famous was this one, near the cave of Adullam. And why did it stand out? Because this one act, more than any other, proved their love for the king. No one could doubt the courage of these warriors, but without this incident, we would never know of their love. And love can be expensive.

On this day, David was pinned in the cave near Adullam with a regiment of Philistines encamped around him. Feeling homesick, David groaned, *"Oh that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem,"* (v.15). The gate of Bethlehem was over twelve miles away. Despite the challenges, the three warriors broke through enemy lines, fetched the water, and brought it back to David who was still in the cave.

What made this act so spectacular? That's the point of the story. First, it was voluntary. David never asked for the water; he simply wanted it and these men turned his wish into their agenda. Second, it was expensive. The water itself was free, but they risked their lives for something they themselves would not enjoy. And third, it was done out of loyalty. It was motivated by love and love can be expensive.

Some years ago, when Lori's mother died, we traveled several hours to be with our family. By the time we arrived, there was drama and tension between her siblings. We spent the week counseling and planning and running errands for those who couldn't get out and, by week's end, we were exhausted emotionally and physically yet we still

had the funeral ahead of us. On the day of the funeral, we stood in the lobby catching our breath and feeling a mixture of grief with anxiety. We were surrounded by people, yet we felt all alone. Then something happened that changed the day. Thirty minutes before the service, a white van pulled into the drive and five members from College Church climbed out.

"Oh . . . my . . . word!" Lori said. After that we were speechless. They prayed with us. Cried with us. Attended the funeral. Then quietly left for home, which was five hours away.

What a gift! These five members had gone above and beyond, without being asked, all on their own. They drove ten hours that day to sit in our grief, and never once referred to the inconvenience, and they did this out of love and loyalty to our family.

When the soldiers returned with the water, David refused to drink it but instead, he poured it onto the ground. He was not worthy to drink it because it was more than just water, he said, it was *"the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives,"* (v.17). What the men intended for David really belonged to God, so he poured it onto the ground.

Many years later, the same thing would happen in a house near Bethlehem. On that day, an entourage of magi came, like David's three warriors, bearing gifts for the king that were voluntary and expensive. Some have estimated the value of their frankincense and myrrh to be in the

thousands of dollars. They did this out of reverence for and loyalty to the Son of David. It was love, and love can be expensive.

Here at the beginning of Advent, think of something you might give this year to the King you love. What do you think he wants that he hasn't asked for? Most of us have not given much thought to that. But this year, let's try. Let's volunteer to go above and beyond obedience and do something extraordinary for love.



STEVE DENEFF
LEAD PASTOR

THE WOMAN

at the well

John 4:1-26

She was alone and lacked community. She was withdrawn and likely not welcomed. She lacked hope after being passed from man to man through marriages that ended for reasons we don't know. In just trying to survive, she found herself living with another man in a dead end relationship. Maybe this man would marry her, or maybe he'd pass her off when she no longer met his expectations.

Maybe she was wrestling with her seemingly wasted life as she approached the well. She was gathering water at noon, so she didn't want company. But as the woman neared the well on this day, she discovered that she would draw her water while a stranger looked on. It was a man - a Jewish man at that. Was he just another male who would look to exploit her like the others? He was hanging at the well at midday. She would have known that a man hanging out at the well during this time of day was likely looking for something other than water.

"Will you give me something to drink?" he asked.

A surprising question, from a surprising person. Maybe she was still skeptical of his intent when she fired back the question, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" It wouldn't be long before she realized that this man wouldn't be asking her for something she didn't want to give. Rather, he was offering her something she desperately desired: hope.

Hope for purpose. Hope for the future. Hope for truth.
Hope for love that didn't come with strings attached.

In a seemingly symbolic act following her conversation with this strange man, the woman left her water jar behind, and left her past life there - at the well. She now had something to aspire to. She had been transformed, and she now saw something inside of herself that was either buried or long forgotten. The shame and despair had been removed by the stranger, the Messiah.

A desperate woman would have run from the men who subjugated her and the women who looked down at her as she did what she had to do to survive. Though, the Messiah had revealed her true identity (and all that she ever did). She had purpose and hope and a new love for her community. She now had compassion for those who once caused her to feel shame. She wanted them to encounter the Messiah in the same way she had.

Through sharing her testimony with her neighbors, many of the individuals in her town came to know the Messiah, Jesus, as the "Savior of the World."

It is easy to get stuck in a cycle of shame and regret, but it is in that place that we find Jesus waiting for us. We don't always meet Him there, but he's always present in that place. He isn't another person offering us something with strings attached. Rather, He's there to reveal to us all that we have ever done, and in doing so, uncovering all our past mistakes to reveal to us who He says we are, a new creation.



BEAU HAMNER
OUTREACH PASTOR

THE MEN

who Lowered the Paralytic Man to Christ

Luke 5:18-20

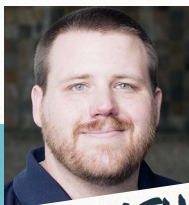
Imagine a member of your family has a medical condition that is considered incurable, and significantly impacts their quality of life. Maybe it is one that more or less confines them to your home and means they can do virtually nothing without the help of you or others. Now imagine what you would do if you received word very suddenly that a new treatment that could heal the family member would be available at a specific place and time. Not only would the treatment cure your family member's terminal condition, but several other medical conditions as well. What would you be willing to do to ensure that your family member was able to get this treatment? Would you travel across the globe or even quit your job to get it? What would you do if when you arrived, you found out that you were one second too late?

This was the plight of the four friends of the paralytic man when they came to see Jesus and ask Him to heal their friend. They had so much faith in Christ's ability to heal their friend that they dug, maybe even clawed their way through the roof of the home that Jesus was in, to ask Christ to heal their friend. I can imagine the shock of those in the home (especially the homeowner) as pieces of clay and dirt started raining down from above, and then to see

the shape of a man being lowered through the gaping hole in the roof.

While scripture does not tell us what happened to the friends, I am left to wonder if they considered the repercussions of destroying someone's home or the social impacts of barging in on Christ in such a bold manner. I'd like to believe that when seeing the friends' faith, Christ not only healed the man, but also forgave the friends of their sins... and forgave them for tearing open the roof of the house.

This story is one that reminds and calls us to never give up on our faith in Christ. It would have been very easy for the friends to say to the man they were carrying, "Well, we tried, but the crowd is just too large," and then go home. I wonder if, after seeing the crowd, the paralytic might have said something similar to his friends. But instead of giving up and doing the safe thing by going home, they boldly followed their faith in Jesus' ability to heal their friend, while being willing to accept the repercussions of their actions. Whether in the good, the bad, the ugly, or the beautiful, Christ's love for us never fails, so his path for us is always worth the risk. Our faith in Christ may not always lead us down the safe path, but we can take refuge in knowing that He is always with us.



JORDAN ASHLEY
FINANCE & IT DIRECTOR

PRISCILLA + AQUILA

Acts 18, Romans 16:3

The New Testament gives us a few brief snapshots of a displaced Jewish couple who host Paul in Corinth. They first partnered with Paul in tent-making, then in missions, and finally in looking after the newly planted churches. Along the way they instructed a fresh preacher, Apollos, and even “risk[ed] their lives” for Paul.

In all the scenes in which we find them, you won’t locate any reference to just Priscilla. Aquila is never talked about alone. In fact, in the four books of the Bible that mention them, it is always Priscilla and Aquila.

When we examine the lives of Priscilla and Aquila, the “and” between their names is not the only conjunction we find. They were refugees and missionaries. We see that they were tent makers and church planters. Their house was a home and a gathering place for other believers.

Their brief cameos in the drama of church history move the plot forward in significant ways, and further the reach of the Gospel. Priscilla and Aquila were influencers, in part, because they demonstrate the power of “and.” They added to everything they touched and everyone they encountered.

This is the heart of the shift from Me to We. It is human nature to view the community for what it can give us

before we consider what we can give to it. And yet, if our posture toward the church is one of addition, rather than subtraction, the Gospel can multiply, just as in the case of Priscilla and Aquila. In other words, the shortest distance from Me to We is “and.”

In this season of Advent, as we anticipate the great addition of Jesus, may we ask how we might add to the Body of Christ. And may we learn from Priscilla and Aquila that addition doesn’t always require more from us, it just means “and.” It means taking what we already have and reimagining how God might use it for the Kingdom of God. Just like their business that helped launch a missionary movement or their home that nurtured new believers, what in your life could you add an “and” to?



MATTHEW BECK
FAMILY MINISTRY PASTOR

You can read more about Priscilla and Aquila here: Acts 18:2-3, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; and 2 Timothy 4:19

PHOEBE

Romans 16:1

During Advent, we prepare for Christmas and at the same time we are preparing for Jesus' second coming. By preparing for Christmas through Advent, we are preparing for God's coming justice. Perhaps guests are coming to your house for Christmas. Does this remind you that justice is coming to our world? What an important message to hold in our hearts and speak with our words and lives!

Phoebe helps us. Just as we have an important message for the world, so did Paul have an important message for the church at Rome. But Paul was unable to get to Rome, pressed by other matters at Jerusalem. Who would carry his message? Phoebe, a deacon from the church at Cenchreae, seems to be the carrier of this important letter to this beloved church.

Why would Paul entrust this letter to Phoebe? What preparations did she make? She must have been qualified in character. She must have been trustworthy. She must have had the right heart. Paul commends her to the church in Rome. Someone would need to take her in their household to care for her while she was there. You might have guests coming for Christmas, but it's something else to send guests to another's house! You would only send people who would represent you well. That's Phoebe.

God sent his Son at the first Christmas with a message: God loves the world and is saving the world. Jesus is God's perfect representative. Jesus is the perfect display of God's

character, faithfulness, and righteousness. But the Son isn't sent because God cannot come to us; Jesus is God coming to be with us! And he's coming back. Between the first and second coming, God sends us. Just as Phoebe carried the letter to Rome, so do we carry God's message to Marion, Gas City, Upland, Sweetser, Swayzee, and all around.

Here are two ways to be faithful in the world with the story of Phoebe in mind:

First, you are Phoebe! You deliver God's message. Are you of the right character? The right faith? The right justice? Good News! While we can't become this person on our own, Jesus gives us his very Spirit who makes us like Jesus. God is making you into a person who possesses the character, faith, and justice of Jesus. To whom is God sending you?

Second, you are surrounded by Phoebe's. The church is filled with people who have been given a message to carry. Paul wanted the church at Rome to welcome Phoebe with hospitality. Who is in the church that you can welcome? One way that we can be hospitable to other Christians is by protecting each other's honor. We can take issues to one another privately, avoid participating in mean-spirited conversations, and ignore hearsay and rumor.

You are Phoebe and Phoebe's have been sent to you. Let's carry our message with good character and welcome others who have been sent to us. By doing this, God is preparing both us and the world to welcome Jesus at his second Advent.

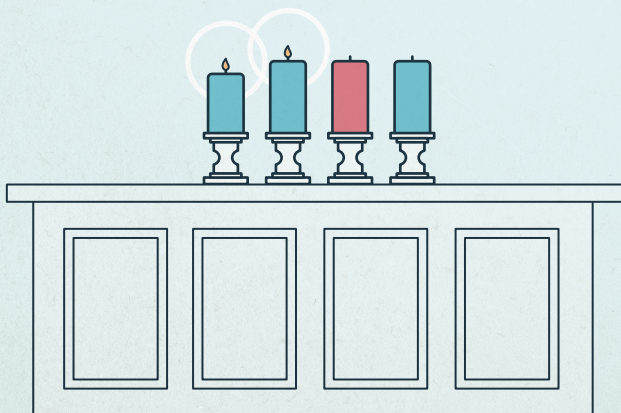


HEATHER PERRY
ASSISTANT CHILDREN'S DIRECTOR



THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGINNING DECEMBER 6, 2020



THE MAID

of Naaman's Wife

2 Kings 5:2-3

Set in the time of the prophet Elisha, we find the slave maid to Naaman's wife. She is an unnamed, young girl who had been taken from her Israelite home by a raiding party from the nation of Aram. Her slave master (Naaman) is the commander over Aram's armies, which the raiding party was likely part of. The young girl only has one line in the story, yet is taken very seriously by her mistress, then her master, and then the king of Aram himself. She says, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

Despite being a young woman who once knew freedom in Israel but was then kidnapped into slavery (most likely recently), this young follower of Yahweh still believed in the power of the God of Israel. Her only documented words are focused on healing for Naaman, her now owner. If only he would see the prophet (Elisha), then he would be healed. Because of this young slave's words Naaman is later able to be healed of his leprosy.

Though being a slave in a foreign country to a powerful leader, this young girl did not resign herself to operate as a slave. She used her continued faith in Yahweh and her identity as a foreigner for herself and for the house she

found herself in. By doing so, one of the most powerful leaders of Aram knew that “there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” God often uses those in low and marginalized positions for his work with the prophets and kings of this world.

If you find yourself in a low or marginalized position, whether at work, in your family, community, or nation, in your waiting for Christ to come in your situation, remember that as you continue to be a follower of Yahweh your voice is important and sometimes the exact thing needed for those above to learn and see there is no God in all the world except the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



TIM WITTE
SPECIAL NEEDS PASTOR

THE YOUNG SERVANT

Judges 16:26

For all the names listed in the Bible—chapters and chapters of genealogies—it always fascinates me when someone in scripture goes unnamed. In some cases, we get lists of names, but nothing about their character or action. In other stories, we're told action without a name. Such is the case of the "young servant" in Judges 16:26. Some translations call this individual a "boy," a "lad," or a "young man." Others just say, "servant." We aren't told whether or not he is a Philistine servant or an Israelite slave—all we know is that he was tasked to lead blind Samson by the hand.

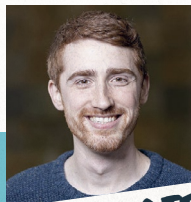
By this point in the story, the strong Samson we learned about as children has become the Philistine's laughingstock. He is weak, blind, and captive. At the request of the Philistines, the young servant leads Samson out "to entertain them." This servant has no power of his own; in fact, some scholars write that using a young servant boy to tend to Samson was another form of insult to the once unstoppable Israelite judge.

But despite Samson's condition, the Lord's favor and covenantal promise was still upon Israel. However, the climax of the story hinges on one small request: "Samson said to the young servant who was leading him by the hand, 'Place my hands against the pillars that hold up the temple.'" Once his hands are placed, Samson breaks the temple

pillars, destroying it along with “the Philistine rulers and all the people.” This cosmic act of strength and victory over Israel’s enemies occurred because an unnamed servant positioned Samson’s hands.

These seemingly small acts of courage, or perhaps compassion, are woven throughout God’s story. He is a master at using the unnamed, the powerless, and the forgettable at pivotal parts in the narrative. And in a society that glorifies the most powerful or attractive, it can be easy to miss these people. But what if we were less concerned about our own strength and appearance and more concerned with stewarding whatever position or power we do have for the sake of God and others? What if we lived every day looking for ways to “position someone else’s hands?” Perhaps what we would find is that God’s plan is not contingent upon our strength but rather our obedience. Maybe we would find that success in the Kingdom is less about our uniqueness and more about our willingness to consider others better than ourselves.

Today, try to see others through the lens of a servant. The next person you encounter, consider asking, “Is there anything I can do to help you?” We serve a God who loves to use simple acts of courageous obedience to bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth.



DANIEL RIFE
CO-WORSHIP DIRECTOR

LYDIA

Acts 16:13-15

In Acts 16:13-15, after receiving a vision, Paul and company travel to Macedonia. At the end of their journey, we find them in Philippi. Philippi is a city in the eastern part of Macedonia. This city was named after Philip II the father of Alexander the Great. It was a Roman colony with few Jews, which is one of the reasons we find them looking not for a synagogue for prayer but rather for the riverside outside the city gate. They arrive at the riverside and find a group of women.

Lydia is one of the women who has gathered at the riverside for prayer. From what we know, Lydia is a businesswoman who deals in purple cloth. She has a reputation as a worshiper of God, which is likely why we find her by the river. After hearing the message the Lord gave Paul, she and her household are baptized, and Lydia welcomes Paul and company into their home.

We do not know how long this group of women/believers has been meeting at this riverside praying, but we can imagine that this was just another day in their normal lives. From their response to the word presented to them, we could make the assumption that these women were waiting for an opportunity such as this to receive a word

from the Lord. Maybe they did not know what or who they were waiting for, but they knew they should go and pray by the riverside and so they did.

It is through this story that we can be reminded of an important truth for our lives. Until we hear a new word from God, we only need to do the one thing we know to do. For Lydia and these women, that one thing was to come to the river and pray. What is your river? Are you following His leading for you today? How long have you been coming to the river? Maybe you haven't heard; how can you posture yourself to hear from Him each day? Are you praying with anticipation for Him to come or for Him to send someone to you?



JOEL THOMAS
YOUTH PASTOR

THE BOY

who helped feed the 5,000

John 6:1-14

The small group that I'm part of gathers together for a meal and gift exchange between Thanksgiving (Dia de Accion de Gracia) and Christmas (Navidad) called "Gracidad." At one of the first Gracidad meals, I was charged with the duty of making the green bean casserole. I took my casserole contribution assignment seriously, and contacted my sister to get her recipe for my favorite green bean casserole. I realized it didn't take very long to make, so began about a half hour before the dinner was scheduled to start. As I was putting everything together I realized I didn't have enough for the 10+ people. I felt embarrassed to bring this to the meal, but even more embarrassed to come empty handed, so I brought what I had. Everyone had a good laugh at the little dish of casserole I brought, and although it may not have been a miracle of God, the casserole ended up being more than enough for everyone. Each year we have a good laugh about that green bean casserole.

Although I tell this story mostly as a humorous parallel, I think there are more things that the boy in the passage of John can teach us.

The boy in the verse acts as a humble part of living in community with others. He lives out two very simple but

powerful actions. He is present in the situation around him - enough that it allowed him to see the immediate need of the community. Because he was **present** amongst others and was able to see the need, he could take the courageous **action** of giving his meal. This gift of giving what he had, although insufficient in the eyes of man, was perfect in the eyes of the Lord. Humbly offering what he had created a space for the Lord to do the rest.

My encouragement to you is this: if it seems as though what you have to give is insufficient - be it time, skills, relationships, or something else - not sharing it with others may be denying an opportunity to see the Lord transform it into something more than sufficient. What you bring to the table, group, or community matters whether or not you know the importance of it. So bring what you have in that moment. You never know what the Lord will do with it.

What can you give that you hesitate to share because it seems that it is not enough?



JOSH RUIZ
IMMIGRANT CONNECTION
DIRECTOR

EPAPHRAS

Colosians 1:7, Colossians 4:12,
Philimon 1:23

Epaphras is not the kind of biblical character who has his own flannelgraph cut-out in Sunday school. He was a friend and co-worker of Paul, and briefly mentioned at the beginning and end of the letter to the church in Colossae. Yet this church, the church at Colossae, may owe its start to Epaphras.

It is entirely possible that Paul had never met the recipients of this letter in person, and that Paul was writing to a group of people who were discipled by Epaphras. In the context of this letter, Paul and Epaphras were working together to spread the Good News to the Gentiles all over the known world, but when Paul wrote about Epaphras, he only mentioned how focused Epaphras was on the people of Colossae. While Epaphras labored with Paul, he “pray[ed] hard” for his friends from his hometown.

Sometimes, as if all options have been explored and hope is lost, people say, “All we can do now is pray.” Epaphras reminds us that the movement of Jesus in the city of Colossae was initiated and supported by the prayers of someone focused on loving his brothers and sisters in Christ. Epaphras shows us that while we wait and work, our hearts and minds can be turned toward God and toward others in prayer. This practice of prayer actual-

ly changed the trajectory of an entire group of people toward a Holy Spirit empowered love for others. Epaphras teaches us that prayer is a constant posture of the heart, and that prayer changes lives.

These days we can look around and become overwhelmed with the fighting, the need, and the hopelessness in the world, and even in our own families and neighborhoods. We wonder if there is anything we can do.

Consider the “downtime” moments in your days. We all wait: in lines, in traffic, in the doctor’s office, or for a friend to show up for coffee. What do we think about while we wait? We all work: we mow the lawn, wash the dishes, fold laundry, and change the oil in our cars. Who is on our minds as we labor? Let’s follow the lead of Epaphras and remember to pray earnestly that God will make his people strong and perfect, following the whole will of God.



ERIC CRISP
DISCIPLESHIP PASTOR

CANAANITE WOMAN

John 4:46-54

In Matthew 15 Jesus withdrew to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, which archeologists have determined was a vacation destination for Judeans. Instead of a relaxing time away, Jesus is hounded by the cries of a local Canaanite woman. Rather than responding to this outsider, Jesus waited silently for the disciples to speak to her. In frustration, the disciples ask Jesus to send her away.

This Advent, are we like the disciples or the Canaanite woman?

When plans are interrupted by loud cries, do we want peace and quiet in the comfort of our family and friends? When strangers hound us for help, do we clap our hands over our ears and ask for deliverance from the cries we hear? When we are inconvenienced by someone who does not belong to our family, do we become annoyed and push the person away so we can get back to our time off? It can be easy to be like the disciples and react by pushing others away from us so we can enjoy the season.

In the passage, Jesus gives a challenge to the disciples. The disciples thought he came just for the house of Israel. They thought Immanuel “God with us” meant Immanuel “God with my people.” Yet Jesus came to find the sheep that the house of Israel had lost. Jesus wanted to see if the disciples would fulfill God’s call for Israel to reach the lost, but instead they refused.

Perhaps we are not pushing others away but rather are crying for help like the Canaanite woman. This woman's agony was immense, not because she was suffering, but because her daughter was unwell. When we feel tormented and our loved ones are suffering, we can cry to many places for help. When the people who are supposed to help are silent, it can make us cry louder. And when God is talking to others but not us, we can decide to give up and go home. This Canaanite mother does not give up. She models for us how to ask for help and not take divine silence as an answer.

No one yet has spoken to the woman. Finally, Jesus responds to her and mentions that it is improper to give the bread of children to dogs. The woman accepts that she should be receiving help from the children (the disciples), and not from the parent (Jesus), but then she wisely realizes that even dogs are permitted to eat crumbs that the parent dropped. She asks for scraps from Jesus believing that just a crumb would be enough. There is a word for this in Hebrew – Dayenu - meaning “it is enough.” What falls from our LORD is enough.

This Advent, we can be like the disciples who are so caught up in their own houses that they fail to care for those outside, or we can be like this Canaanite woman and have faith that when others in God's house fail us, Jesus will be enough.

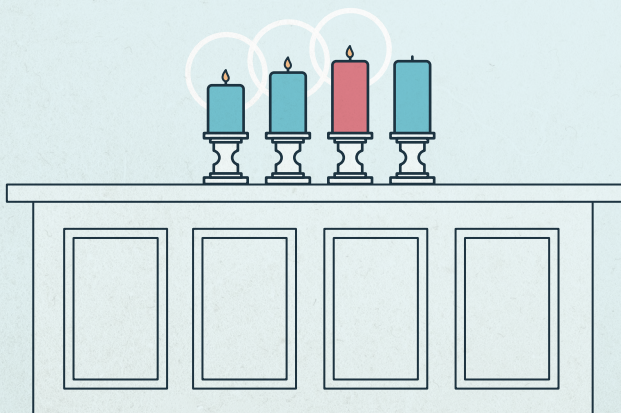


STEPHANIE FREEMYER
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY DIRECTOR



THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGINNING DECEMBER 13, 2020



MARY

of Bethany

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

We have been told many times that Jesus is coming again. Revealed in this passage of Jesus visiting the home of Lazarus, the one who Jesus raised from the dead, is an act of humility. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, did something that even to this day we wonder, why did she do this? Mary, in her gratitude to Jesus, did the unthinkable.

Perhaps within this story about an act of humility and love is a nugget of truth for us today. We live in a time of haste; things are accomplished quickly. Food is cooked in a microwave, we travel through the air at great speed, communication happens in split seconds from our hand-held devices to a satellite orbiting the earth. But here we have a story of fragrant oil that took time to prepare, and it was expensive, worth a year's wages of a working person.

Mary reveals to us the importance of her gift. The oil's significance is not how much it cost, it was not how it was delivered, it was not who she was--the gift was for the one she loved. She loved Jesus even to the point of humbling herself using her own hair to wipe the feet--dirty feet--of her deliverer, the promised one.

Today we are reminded that Jesus--the same Jesus that raised Mary's dead brother, who humbled himself to become a baby in a manger, to die on a cruel cross, to receive our sins--he is coming again. He is the promised one that made a way for us to be with him in his father's house. We will eat with him again at the table, perhaps like those in Lazarus' house. What will our humble act of giving to him be?



JOE RUDER
FACILITIES DIRECTOR

HUR

Exodus 17:8-13

Every person needs a Hur in their life. Hur is an influencer, though his influence is of value not because of his wise counsel or sage advice, but rather his tireless intercession.

Hur finds himself in the middle of God's story of delivering Israel out of bondage in Exodus. Joshua is grinding it out and fighting in the trenches. Moses is standing on the mountain, leading and listening for The Lord's instructions. Hur and Aaron are standing alongside Moses and waiting for God to deliver. Far from being sedentary, Hur's waiting is empowering those around him to do what God has called. Hur is coming alongside and literally "lifting up" another person to the Lord: lifting Moses' arms so they don't drop.

Intercession is a faith-filled action that believes prayer changes the outcome. It trusts that prayer can bring "Your Kingdom come." Intercession is recognizing that people, situations and places may not need a change in mission or focus (they know this is where God is at work!), but that endurance, strength and help is what is needed in the waiting.

Often we think that our impact for God has to be something that makes a huge splash for the world to see (parting the sea, turning water into wine). Or that we always need to be Moses in a situation: doing heroic things for God. This story reminds us that our influence can be made behind the scenes with small, simple, yet powerful activities. It reminds us that there are people and places in our life that need us to lift them up.

- When you look at your small group, family, or workplace, can you identify a person whose arms need held up?
- What are two simple acts that you can do that will help them bear the load?
- What are some specific areas around your community, nation and world where you can intercede as you wait for God to deliver?



ALEX MANDURA
CONGREGATIONAL CARE
& SAGE PASTOR

DORCAS

(Tabitha)

Acts 9:36-43

The story of Dorcas in Acts 9 tells us of a woman we know little about in regard to her background, her age, whether she was married, rich or poor. What we do know is that she is a Jewess who lived in the port city of Joppa, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Dorcas was also called Tabitha—Dorcas is a Greek name and Tabitha is the Aramaic rendering of the same name.

Dorcas, a disciple of Christ, was a charitable person who made things, especially clothing, for the needy in Joppa. In this passage, she becomes ill and dies. Her death brought great grief and pain to those who knew and were loved by her. They couldn't bear the thought of losing her, so after they prepared her body for burial, they sent two men to find Peter who was in a nearby town of Lydda. Peter agreed to go with the men to see her. When he arrives, it seems everyone is there waiting to tell Peter how much Dorcas meant to them, showing him clothes she had sewn for them.

After sending everyone out of the room, Peter walked over to her body, prays, then tells her, "Get up, Tabitha." She opened her eyes, sat up, and took Peter by the hand. He called everyone into the room, and they were amazed and told everyone what had happened, many believing on account of her story.

Notice the different ministry roles people display in this passage. Dorcas ministered by helping the poor and widows. The women ministered by washing her body and laying it in an upper room. Two unnamed men ministered by going on an errand to Lydda to fetch Peter. Peter came and ministered through faith and prayer. The widows ministered as well. Some ministered through evangelism by telling the story of what happened, and many people believed as a result.

Dorcas' life is a story of Me to We. During this time of waiting, what can you do for others? During the pandemic I wanted to make masks for people in my community. I can sew but I struggle at it and, in fact, I get very frustrated sewing. One night in my frustration I said, why am I doing this? I know people need the masks, but I'm having a hard time and I am so slow. I'm not a good seamstress, but I am a good networker. I don't know how to sew, but I know someone who can, so I called upon a few friends and asked them to make masks for our local elementary school.

As we wait for the promised Messiah, may we find ways to identify as the body of Christ in our community either by running an errand, washing dishes at a funeral dinner, sewing masks for a local elementary school or sharing our story with a neighbor.



VICKIE CONRAD
FSE PARTNERSHIP DIRECTOR

ROYAL OFFICIAL

John 4:46-54

Jesus has power. John illustrates this power not only in what Jesus does but also in what he says, as evidenced by the story of the royal official in John 4:46-54. This story takes place in Cana of Galilee where Jesus previously turned water into wine (John 2:1-12). The welcoming Jesus receives here is dishonest as they want Him for His deeds and miracles not as the Son of God bringing saving grace. The Galilians believe He can perform miracles; they do not believe that He is anything beyond a miracle-worker. Yet, Jesus has mercy on them.

Hearing that Jesus has arrived in Galilee, a royal official travels from Capernaum seeking Jesus' help for his dying son. The royal official is most likely a Galilean aristocrat and an officer in Herod's office though it is not known whether he is Jew or Gentile. The official begs Jesus, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus is gracious with the royal official, and shows him mercy, "Your son will live." The royal official trusts Jesus before he has even heard the news of his son recovering. Just like the Samaritan woman from the prior verses, the royal official believes Jesus at His words (John 4:1-26).

Jesus provides an opportunity for faith-- an opportunity to believe without seeing. He speaks with authority,

and the boy is healed immediately, showing that distance is not a limitation to the power of Christ. Jesus uses this healing to show us that He is the greatest miracle. The signs and wonders are to point to Jesus the Messiah and to demonstrate His power. The royal official recognizes this; he takes Jesus at His word before he even sees the healing of his son. The royal official demonstrates his faith when he responds to the news of Jesus' healing power. He shows the depth of his faith when he believes Jesus' declaration that his son is healed.

The miracles that Jesus performs show His true identity as the Son of God and bring His children to a saving faith. The true miracle is the power of Jesus, not the healing itself. The miracle reveals who Jesus is and provides a basis for faith. As we draw closer to God, may we not lose sight of the reverence and humility we owe to such a powerful Savior. Prayer does not often result in "great" miracles or signs, however that does not mean that prayer is in vain. How often do we trust Jesus before seeing the results? What have you asked of Jesus? Where in your life do you need to trust that what Jesus says will come to pass?



KYLE HUBER
ASSISTANT TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

JUNIA

Romans 16:7

The church has no greater asset than hidden holiness--moments of kindness, love, charity, and self-sacrifice that don't ask for attention. They're not part of a media campaign or the church's promotional strategy--just ordinary people doing beautiful things without asking for attention.

Junia may be the patron saint of hidden holiness. She is mentioned only once in the New Testament, and the lack of biographical information provided leads scholars to debate whether she was Jewish or Gentile, apostle or supporter. What is clear, however, is that Junia spurred the early church on toward greater faithfulness to God and to their communities.

Part of this, no doubt, emerged from her faithful example. We often talk about "building the Kingdom of God" without knowing what that looks like. Junia shows us that we build the Kingdom of God by ordering our lives around the things God cares about. If we do this, our relationships, finances, time, attention, and energy will proclaim God's faithfulness--and our lives will be open to the people God will call us to spur on toward Christlikeness. We also may end up suffering for it (Junia did, even to the point of imprisonment).

Another aspect of Junia's influence is rooted in her relationship with Paul, who cites her as a mentor in the faith, saying, "she was in Christ before I was." Junia's life reminds us that "noteworthy" obedience is often as simple as making space to see, hear, and linger with God on behalf of the people he gives us to love. Sometimes our greatest contribution to God's world may be in a person we nurture, not a project we accomplish. This is what hidden holiness looks like.

- As we walk through the season of Advent, consider the people you pass by each day. Who is already in your life--whether in your neighborhood, at your workplace, or in your own home--who has shown you hidden holiness? How might you--like Paul--express gratitude for them?
- And as you think about people God's calling you to love, how might you--like Junia--nurture one person's inner life through presence, encouragement, and prayer?



ETHAN LINDER
COLLEGE/YOUNG ADULTS &
CONNECTIONS PASTOR

ANNA

Luke 2:36-38

Luke seems to pack a lot into just three verses about a seemingly minor character in the gospel narrative: Anna, the prophet. An elderly woman and a widow, she spent most of her adult life living in the temple area worshipping God. Throughout the rest of his gospel, Luke uses the Pharisees, those who were supposed to be the most devout Jews, to show just how much these religious leaders were missing the mark in faithfully upholding the law, worshipping God, and diligently waiting for the Messiah. Early on, Luke establishes what patient waiting and a life full of worship looks like through Anna. Day in and day out, Anna worshiped, and as a prophet, she witnessed the work of God to the people of Israel. So, at all times, Anna was ready to hear from the Lord, looking for how he was moving in Israel; this is how she was able to witness the child Messiah's coming.

While her biography spans no more than three verses, we can learn from her example. Anna spent the better part of her adult life building a habit of worship and waiting for the coming of Israel's Messiah. However, her waiting was not passive; it was attentive through worship and listening. Anna paid attention to what God was doing in her and around her, and she responded by sharing God's work with others and praising him. In addition to her

attentive waiting, she also remained open and present to what was happening around her. She did not allow herself to become preoccupied with the future, whether that was in hopeful anticipation of what was to come or in anxious worry of what she did not know. Instead, she was present for the moment Simeon spoke his prophecy over the baby Jesus and was able to testify to God's activity.

It is easy in seasons of waiting to both isolate and numb; to disengage and worry. But what we can learn from Anna's mindful participation in the gospel is both simple and profound; she built a habit of looking for, listening to, and responding to God's work.

Reflect on the following questions; maybe you can even discuss them with your small group or family:

- If you are in a season of waiting, what are you waiting for?
- How might you actively engage your season of waiting? How will you listen and watch for God's presence and activity in you and around you?
- Whether or not you are in a season of waiting, how is your current participation in worship preparing you to listen and respond to God's activity?

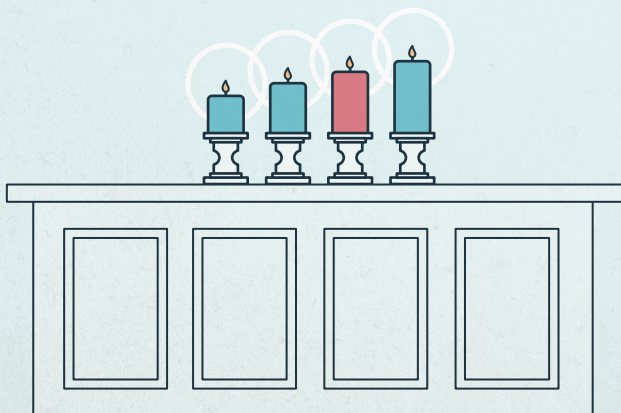


ALLISON KRUPP
RESIDENT PASTOR



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGINNING DECEMBER 20, 2020



Peter's

MOTHER-IN-LAW

Luke 4:38-41

It's a Sabbath day and synagogue (the place for worship and study) has ended. Jesus, along with James and John, heads to the home of Peter and Andrew. There, he's told of a woman in bed suffering from a high fever. Her name isn't given, but we know this: she's Peter's mother-in-law.

Jesus goes to her. Matthew says that Jesus "touched her hand," Mark that he "took her hand." Both say the fever "left her," and Luke notes that Jesus "rebuked" it. The result: she gets up and begins to wait on him and everyone else. She uses the hand that he touched to serve him and the others out of sheer gratitude.

Cynical eyes might see the healing as self-serving: the healing got her on her feet to serve the men. I wonder... did she see her recovery that way? Or did she begin to realize, having been made well, that her healing wasn't all that was remarkable that day? Did she see—and if not, can we— that the God who "is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything," (Acts 17:25) was at that table and came to serve? Did her own service respond in sheer gratitude?

Before she was my mother-in-law, when I was in the last two years of high school, Jane Smith, just like Andrew did with Peter, brought me to Jesus (John 1:42). At her viewing her face was not the one I'd known, so I looked at her hands, with the long tapered fingers and perfectly shaped nails. Her twelve-year-old hands served her father and siblings when her mother died; her wife-and-mother hands, her husband and children; her grandmother hands, the two grandchildren she helped raise. And when cancer ate away at her 64-year-old life, when it was evident there would be no healing, even then, out of gratitude and worship, she raised her hand one night and whispered, "Jesus, I love you."

Take a moment to look at your hands. How are you using them for Jesus? Why are you using them for him?

Perhaps at this season of Advent, you could look at a baby's hands and remember: we have a Savior who had infant hands. Those became carpenter hands, servant hands, impaired and forever scarred hands for us. Be reminded he calls us to The Table as friends, not servants. Be reminded he saw you, came to you, took your hand and raised you up.



TERRI SMITH
RECEPTIONIST

THE MAN

who prepared the upper room

Luke 22:8-13

“The man who owned a house with a room upstairs.” That’s how we know this man. No name. No backstory. But a simple act of humility and obedience. With that, he hosted a historically sacred event.

This man lived in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus. The tension between Jesus and the local religious rulers had just reached its breaking point, and now the rulers were plotting to kill Him. It was also the time of year for Passover, when Israelites gathered to remember how God delivered their ancestors from bondage long ago, and to hope for their own deliverance from oppression. Knowing that His death was near, Christ wanted a space where He and his disciples could celebrate Passover together. So He sent two disciples to the man with the room upstairs to say,

“The Teacher wants to know, ‘Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?’”

When the Teacher asked, the man with the room upstairs humbly moved into action. He agreed to share his space, making sure it was furnished with all that Jesus and his friends would need: a table big enough for all of them, dishes for their meal, and water and a towel to wash the dirt from their feet. These preparations may not have

felt monumental or extraordinary to that man, but when ordinary tasks are done in obedience to the Teacher, the extraordinary can happen, and eternity can be affected.

Around that table, Christ taught His followers about the upside-down nature of leadership in the Kingdom of Heaven. With those dishes, Christ served the first Communion and demonstrated His death in our place. Using that water and towel, Christ washed His disciples feet, putting on display the humility and service to which he was calling them. By asking to use the guest room, Christ invited this man to host a moment that would point others to salvation and to servant-hearted leadership.

As we look at our own lives this Advent season, in what ways might Christ invite us to obedience that seems too ordinary to be sacred? The Bible is full of commands that play out in simple daily choices, like the call to love our neighbors, to make disciples, and to live in ways that demonstrate the reality of the Gospel. So when we walk through our communities hoping for God to move and reveal Himself, may we not forget that, when done in obedience with Christ's love, something as ordinary as hosting dinner can be an opportunity for Divine action.



ANDREA SHIRLEY
GRAPHIC DESIGNER

HANNAH

1 Samuel 1:24-28

Hannah had a longing to be a mother. Hannah was the wife of Elkanah, a Levite, and Hannah was barren. Since Hannah had no children, she endured bullying, shame, and ridicule from others in her family. Hannah longed to have children like Sarah and Rebekah before her, but unlike them she never had doubts about her capacity to be a mother. Though God was silent in her grief and sadness, she never hardened her heart to Him. She endured years of waiting and silent suffering.

For years the family traveled to Shiloh to offer sacrifices to the Lord. While at the temple each year, she brought her desires to God. At the altar she knelt down, and softly and quietly she presented her requests to Him. In a humble posture she made a vow, or promise, that if God would grant her a son, she would return him to the temple and give him back to God for a lifetime of service. The scripture says, she prayed out of great anguish and sorrow. Her prayer came from the depths of her heart. In her tears she left her request at the altar of the Lord.

After worshiping at the temple, she returned to her home. After a period of time God remembered her prayer and granted her request. She conceived a son. She named him Samuel. Hannah never forgot the vow she made in the temple to God. She cared for Samuel not only be-

cause he was dear to her, but he was to be set apart for the service of God. At the appropriate age she fulfilled her vow. She returned to Shiloh and gave Samuel to Eli, the priest. Hannah says, “²⁷I asked the LORD to give me this boy, and he has granted my request. ²⁸Now I am giving him to the LORD, and he will belong to the LORD his whole life.” And they worshiped the LORD there.”

Hannah’s story teaches us that in obedience, we can humbly submit to the Father, in prayer, the deep longings of our hearts. We are invited to leave our requests at the altar of the Lord and wait. In our time of waiting, we should not harden our hearts to the voice of God. We do not turn away from Him when he seems far away, but rather in obedience, we continue to serve Him and live for Him in our silent waiting. God is listening, remember that there is purpose in everything God does, even if we don’t see what it is.



CHIP BOS
RESOURCE & TECHNOLOGY PASTOR

SHIPRAH + PUAH

Exodus 1:15-22

While very few Christians could list all the books of the Bible with ease, there's a good chance most could name the second book of the Bible: Exodus. This book is most known for its account of Israel's oppression by and liberation from Egypt (their "exodus") and of their journey to the Promised Land.

This title, Exodus, makes sense to us. It's a catchy word that offers an excellent summation of the book. The Hebrew title, however, is a bit different. The Hebrew name for this second book is "Shemot," which means "Names." This title shifts the emphasis from action to identity: the story is primarily one of Israel's covenant identity as the children of God.

The book of Names, fittingly, begins with a list of names. Most likely (if you've made it through Genesis), you've heard these names before: Jacob, Joseph, Benjamin. But the problem is that by this point, all these people have died, and the new Pharaoh of Egypt (who, interestingly enough is never named) "knew nothing about Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). This Pharaoh felt threatened by the prosperity of the Israelites and began oppressing them. When the forced labor doesn't deter Israel's growth, scripture says the "Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly" (Exodus 1:13). However, Pharaoh's

fear of Israel turned even more deadly. Here is where the first two new names, in the book of Name, are introduced: the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.

Pharaoh instructed these women to carry out a massive genocide: kill every Hebrew boy. Beyond the obvious cruelty of such a command, this order also posed an enormous threat to God's covenant with Israel and His promise to make them into a "great and blessed nation... a nation that would be a blessing to all other nations" (Genesis 12:2-3). And it's at this darkest hour that the Lord uses these two women to preserve the lives of his chosen people.

It's debated whether Shiphrah and Puah were Hebrew midwives or midwives for the Hebrews, but what the text does tell us is that they "feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Exodus 1:17). They told Pharaoh that he didn't understand how Hebrew women gave birth, and his plan was futile; thus, allowing God to use their vocational position and authority to preserve his peoples' lives. They became channels of life amidst the threat of death.

We see this pattern all throughout scripture. When God's people face oppression, he constantly and consistently uses others to be foretellers and forebearers of his hope. Salvation is near. Salvation is coming. Don't give up.

Before Moses, there was Shiphrah and Puah. Before the Messiah, there were the prophets. And before Christ comes again, there is us.

So as we wait, we wait like the midwives, we wait like the prophets: actively proclaiming and participating in God's redemption plan.

This Advent season consider how your life, right now, can be a channel of Hope. A simple practice may be to just think through your day and identify the people you'll encounter. Make your own little "book of Names" and consider praying this prayer from St. Francis with your list in mind:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.*



JORDAN RIFE
CO-WORSHIP DIRECTOR



College Wesleyan Church