

Reading Schedule for December 5-11, 2016

I was drawn to reading Joshua as a forerunner to the sense of promise around the Advent season. It is fantastic that God took care of the Israelites and led them into the Promised Land. His ability to do that gives us hope for any obstacle we might be facing. The formula for being prepared and in position to receive God's blessing is found in the very first chapter, as Joshua is firmly riveted on God's Word, and confident in the presence of the Lord. He does not have to be afraid. We will wrap up Joshua and begin reading common Old Testament Scriptures that highlight the meaning of Advent . . . the coming of Christ. I know you will enjoy them.

December 5 –Joshua 11:1-23: “So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.” (v.23) The conquest of much of the land of Canaan seems to have happened quickly, as we read in this one chapter. But it actually took 7 years. It took perseverance and patience to experience God's victory. In fact, our journey with God is meant to be a lifelong process of ups and downs – victories and defeats. It is easy to grow impatient with God and feel like giving up. Sometimes when we are very close to a particular person or situation, it is difficult to see progress. The Christian life is a journey of perseverance. God is gradually helping us receive his promises as we trust in him. Do you agree? How do you respond to this chapter about the conquest of God's people?

December 6 –Joshua 23:1-16: “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.” (v.6) There are many things about this farewell speech that get my attention. But these words are identical to what we read in Joshua 1:7. However, Joshua is sharing these words with the leaders many years later. It reminds me that the truth of God remains steadfast. What we read as a promise in God's Word is still valid and significant for our lives today. You can summarize Joshua's message by following the Word of God, and obeying it, not giving into the pagan culture and idolatry surrounding them, as well as, don't intermarry with these pagan nations. This sounds very much like the theme of our sermon this past Sunday. Our associations and relationships can be temptations to us, even today. Are those who you spend time with pulling you down, or are you lifting them up? What else do you notice in this farewell message from Joshua?

December 7 –Joshua 24:1-33: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (v.15) You notice that I skipped several chapters as they outlined the conquest of Joshua and the Israelites. I moved us to these last two chapters because they are as relevant today as they were then. For many years we had a plaque on our house that had this verse, affirming the fact that we would serve the Lord as a family. The interesting emphasis of this verse is that the message from Joshua is for them to personally choose who they will serve. You might think growing up in a Christian home might automatically translate into serving God. But after a generation, Joshua was challenging the people to choose. Allegiance to God is central to God's Word. As Bob Dylan's sang, “You have to serve somebody.” Who will you and your household serve? What does that mean to you?

December 8 –Isaiah 9:1-7: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (v.6) This is probably the most famous Advent reading in all the Old Testament. I thought we would begin with this first. We know that the child who was born would be the deliverer for all people. This is a message about the Messiah, who we know is Christ Jesus. In fact, Matthew quotes these very verses in describing Jesus' ministry in Matthew 4:15, 16. These are very specific words because they referred to where the Messiah would come from. The territories of Zebulun and Naphtali represent the Northern Kingdom as a whole. This is also the area where Jesus grew up and often ministered. Jesus would come as the light of the world to shine into our darkness. There are many wonderful statements and promises in this text. Which do you enjoy the most? Why?

December 9 –Micah 5:1-5: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (v.2) Why would the religious sages of Herod's kingdom know that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? This is the verse! The ruler is Jesus. Micah accurately predicts Christ's birthplace hundreds of years before Jesus was born. He would be in the line of David, which is from Judah and David's birthplace of Bethlehem. This is a powerful prophecy, and again reminds us of God's plan to send his Son Jesus. This is a very familiar Old Testament prophecy, and very exciting, as it is one of the primary Scriptures for our emphasis at Advent. What do you like about it?

December 10 – Psalm 67:1-7: “May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth.” (v.4) The coming of Christ was for all the nations, not just for the Jewish people. Simeon prayed for Jesus as he was dedicated in the temple, and said the he would be a light to the Gentiles. Verse 7 tells us that God will bless is such a way that it will extend to the ends of the earth. There is no question that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and that God sent his Son because he loved/loves the world. The joy of Christ is meant to be spread as good news around the world. What does this say about Advent? How does this apply to your life?

December 11 – Isaiah 40:1-5: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” (v.3) This is most often used as the first reading of Advent. We understand it to be about John the Baptist, as Matthew uses these very words to describe John in Matthew 3:3. I am especially drawn to verse 4 myself, because it means that the ones who feel self-sufficient will be brought down, and those who are broken and in need will be lifted up. I love that message. The encouragement is that life is full of trials and suffering, and that God cares about our pain. We are not immune from these difficulties, and so this is meant to be used by God to strengthen our faith, and to remind us how much we need the Lord. These words are meant to challenge us to be people prepared for the coming of the Messiah even a second time. How do you respond to this short reading that is one often used to kick off the Advent season?

Prayers: Pray for spiritual renewal and deep worship during this Advent season throughout our church family.