

Advent Devotional 2019

Preparing for the Coming of Christ

Week Three – Streams in the Desert

Can you spare a few minutes for God?



Week Three Theme: Streams in the Desert

“Waters Shall Break Forth in the Wilderness”

Dec 14/15 – Saturday/Sunday – Reflection and Template for the Week

The desert is an arid place, hot, dry and full of sand. Life-giving water is in short supply, but sometimes water is

surprisingly close. In Death Valley in the 1800s many people died of thirst. Even today, people get stranded without bringing water with them and die. In 1849, one group of Conestoga wagons made camp in the desert valley while sending a couple of able men from their group to try to find the way out. They survived for weeks on brackish water which made them sick. What they didn't know was that abundant water was only a short distance away if they only had known where to look.

After we had spent a day exploring the dry, rocky, canyons and salt flats in Death Valley, we were having dinner in the restaurant at the resort located right in the arid valley. As they

were bringing water to our table, it suddenly perplexed me. Where was this water coming from? There were no reservoirs or filtration plants or civilization of any kind for many miles around. Did they ship it in? Did they pipe it from somewhere? And so, I asked the waiter. He replied that there is an underground aquifer that runs below Death Valley. It is filled with fresh water from the snow melt and rain running off the mountains many miles away. He said there are literally millions of gallons of water just below the surface of Death Valley. It is surprising to find life-giving water so near in such a wasteland. One only needs to know where to look or where to dig.

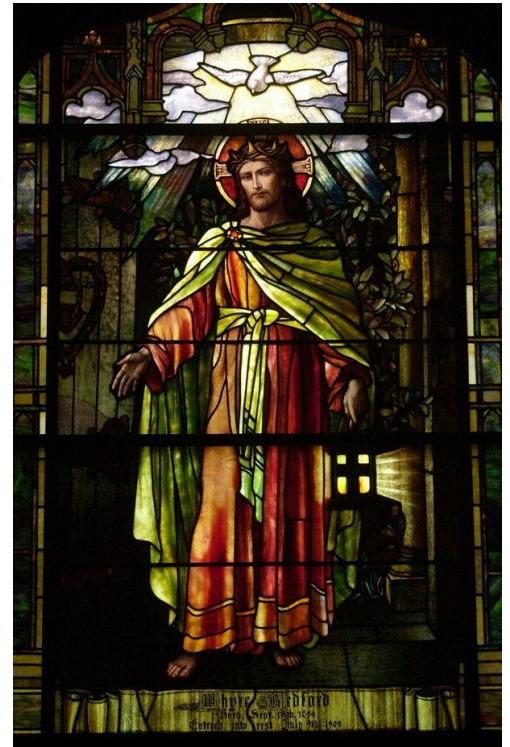
The Old Testament Scripture for this third Sunday of Advent comes from Isaiah 35. Isaiah speaks to a people who are experiencing the ravaging effects of sinful humanity. Their wandering away from the Lord has led them to a difficult and dangerous place. Their sins have left them far from the abundant life of blessing in God. They are desperately in need of spiritual “living water” for their souls. But Isaiah urges them to not lose hope. Their deliverance is coming. The Lord Himself will pay double for all the wrong-doing and come to reclaim His people for Himself. The barren wasteland of their present circumstance will be transformed like streams of water flowing in the desert. The desert will bloom and flourish. Their physical and spiritual needs will be met, and they will come home to the Lord their God with singing. Isaiah urges them to persevere in faith as they await the coming day when the Lord will burst with joy into their midst. While the Isaiah's original readers did eventually experience the return from exile, it seems that this Scripture was speaking of something more -- a time when the Lord Himself would come to His people, atone for their sins, and bring living water into their souls. In Christ the aquifer is burst and the living-water gushes forth.



Sometimes we can be in a dangerously barren place and not realize that the life-giving water and the Divine resources we need are close at hand. This week, the devotionals will focus us on the coming joy that the Christ brings. His blessings are near as the result of His first coming and they shall be even greater at His second coming. Though we may not realize that the reservoir of living water and joy for our souls is so near at hand, we must remember the words of John the Baptist and of Jesus Himself, "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near, believe in the good news!"

The Holy Spirit's Nearness As We Pray: *The Healing Light*

As we consider this week that the Lord and the living water He offers is often nearer than we realize, we will consider the insights of someone known for connecting with the Holy Spirit in prayer and seeing God miraculously heal people for whom she prayed. Decades before the charismatic renewal movement emerged, Agnes Sanford was active in healing prayer ministry. She and her husband, Episcopal priest John Sanford led workshops on prayer, healing and the Holy Spirit. In her first book, *The Healing Light*, published in 1947, Agnes talks about the importance of praying in faith, rebuking our unbelief and focusing on removing the barriers from within us that hinder our connection to God (things such as anxiety, doubt and anger). Agnes taught that we should pray in faith, not with words like "Lord, please help", but rather with words such as "thank You, Lord, for the ways you are at work in this situation." She believed that thanking God for the answer in advance resulted in greater faith within as one prays. Here is a section from her book where Agnes is talking about how to pray for God to be present within us and heal us: *"When we ask for the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit in the body, let us think of that part of the body that most needs His life. Let us imagine His light and life glowing there like a fire, shining there like a light. Then through the rest of the day let us continually give thanks that His life is at work within us accomplishing His perfect will and recreating us after His image and likeness, which is perfection... We do this, not by saying over and over again, 'Oh please, Lord,' for that sounds as though we do not believe He is really working. It is much better to keep the power flowing by continually giving thanks for it. Every time we think of a condition within ourselves that needs healing we can say, 'Thank You, Lord, that Your power is making me well.' And we can look ahead and see ourselves well and strong."*



Perhaps the Kingdom of Heaven is nearer than we often realize, and the Healing Light of Christ is ready to bring healing within us and to answer our prayers. Agnes talks about rebuking our unbelief when we doubt God will answer our prayer and thanking Him in advance for the ways He is already at work in whatever or whomever we are praying for. This week as we consider the prophecies of Christ's first coming and anticipate His second coming, let us do so in faithful expectation that the Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit is indeed at hand, within us and in our lives. Let us expect God to act in answer to our prayers and in tangible ways in our lives this week.

Opening Prayer (to use each morning as you begin)

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for coming to earth, being born a baby of humble means in Bethlehem. Let the Kingdom You ushered in, come fully within me now, through the Presence and Power of Your Holy Spirit. Be known to me, O Lord, as I pray. Come Holy Spirit, let your living water well up within my soul. Come O Lord, return to this world soon. Thank You, O God, in advance for answering this prayer and the prayers I offer to You this day. In the Name of the One Who is Coming Soon, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Scripture from Sundays Gospel Reading:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the

desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;...And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. – Isaiah 35:1-7,10

Prayer today: Spend time praying for the week ahead. Ask God to help you to know Him present with you as you use these devotions, ask Him to speak to you, to guide you and to lead you. Ask Him to make you alert to the spiritual realities all around you. Ask Him to make you expectant that He will come again.

Spiritual Practice: (to use throughout the day, each day of this week)

Try thanking God in advance for your prayers this week. Also, include among your prayers the ancient Christian prayer quoted by Paul in I Corinthians 16:22, which is “Come, O Lord”. It is a prayer inviting, asking, God to come within us but also especially that He would return to us via His second coming very soon. Though writing in Greek, Paul quotes it in Aramaic. You may wish to say this prayer this week in the original Aramaic: *Marana Tha* – Come O Lord!

Dec 16 – Monday – Living Water

Begin: with the opening prayer for the week. Then read today’s Scripture:

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” -- John 4:7-15

Ponder: The Samaritan woman is thinking in physical, literal, and concrete terms. Jesus is challenging her to look beneath the surface of things and to see the spiritual realities that He is ushering in.

1. The woman is perplexed and questions Jesus. What things puzzle you about what God is or isn’t doing in your life and in the world right now?
2. Jesus challenges her to look beyond the physical realities. How might He be challenging you to do the same in your present circumstances?

Close: Can you make the prayer of the woman your own today? “Lord, give me this water.” Ask Jesus for the living water within that only He can give you.

Remember: to use the spiritual practice from Saturday/Sunday throughout your day.

Dec 17 – Tuesday – Light to People in Darkness

Begin: with the opening prayer for the week. Then read today’s Scripture:

But in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian....For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. – Isaiah 9:1-4, 6

Ponder: Isaiah prophesies of momentous birth of a child who will bring light to the peoples walking in Galilee.

1. What is the four-fold name of this child? Consider how each name might bring blessings to you.
2. Understanding these verses as prophecy about Jesus Christ, how might the blessings of Christ be nearer to you than you realize right now? Which of these names of Christ do you need Him to be most, in your life right now?

Close: Talk to Him about these now.

Remember: to use the spiritual practice from Saturday/Sunday throughout your day.

Dec 18 – Wednesday – A Miraculous Birth in Bethlehem

Begin: with the opening prayer for the week. Then read today's Scripture:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days...The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."— Micah 5:2 and Isaiah 7:14

Ponder: The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. A young woman, a virgin will conceive.

1. Immanuel means "God with us". How have you known the Child born at Bethlehem with you?
2. When has God been with you in the past, though you didn't know it at the time?

Close: Pray thanking Christ that He lives within you. Reread Agnes Sanford's instructions and pray for the "Healing light of Christ to burn within you."

Remember: to use the spiritual practice from Saturday/Sunday throughout your day.

Dec 19 – Thursday – Surrendering to God's Surprising Will

Begin: with the opening prayer for the week. Then read today's Scripture:

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[b] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[c] ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. — Luke 1:26-38

Ponder: The Virgin Mary is told she will conceive and give birth to the Son of God.

1. How do you think Mary would have felt when being told that she will conceive a son by the Holy Spirit?
2. Mary is most likely a teenager at this time. How does she respond to this surprising announcement?
3. What in your life is God calling you to surrender to Him and "let it be with you according to His word"?

Close: Surrender to God all your unbelief, your doubts, your fears and your anxieties.

Remember: to use the spiritual practice from Saturday/Sunday at the end of your day.

Dec 20 – Friday – Joseph's Dream

Begin: with the opening prayer for the week. Then read today's Scripture:

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.— Matthew 1:18-25

Ponder: Joseph struggles to do the right thing, but comes to understand by means of a dream.

1. How would Joseph have been feeling conflicted? Has God ever spoken to you by means of a dream?
2. Dreams, angels, prophecies and miracles. All the extraordinary pieces come together in the birth of Christ. What does this suggest about God and His plan?
3. Are you open to God speaking to you in such unexpected ways? Are you really? How might His Spirit, His living water be nearer to you now than you previously realized?

Close: Ask God to show Himself to present to you in a new way today.

Remember: to use the spiritual practice from Saturday/Sunday throughout your day.