

12.7.2022 Advent Midweek Prayer, Week 2

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Ephesians 4:25-32; Psalm 146:5-10; 1 Peter 5:6-11

“Cast your anxieties on him”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

This year’s Advent midweek theme is titled “Holy interruptions, Holy in-dwellings” reminding us that in the midst of all of the busy interruptions of our lives, God is always with us, dwelling in our lives with grace, peace and hope.

It goes without saying, but still needs to be said that this time of the year is very busy on many levels. The push to finish year-end work obligations, family and personal commitments, decorating (if you do that), and the exchange of gifts and cards can stretch many people to their limits. In addition to time and financial commitments, the expectations we often place upon this season can also leave us disappointed or even feeling a bit empty and “blue.”

Though the Christmas season is supposed to be about the advent and birth of Jesus Christ, as a society it can often feel as if the manger is empty and we are celebrating just another cultural festival without a centered focus. For me, it is always helpful to remember that at the first Christmas there was only Jesus, the babe. The joy of the song of the angels to the shepherds centered around only the reality of Jesus’ presence in this world. Nothing else was needed or even mattered.

Many of you know that I served as a missionary in Japan. The commercial Christmas also alive there, as well. Downtown Tokyo has some of the most gorgeous illumination displays and creative window decorations I have ever seen anywhere. Yet, what always struck me was how centered Christians and churches in Japan were upon the reality of Jesus, rather than the soon to disappear cultural trappings of Christmas. For the Christian communities that I worked among, the hope-giving music and hymnody of this season, and life-giving gospel story of Jesus were always what mattered the most. For all of the beauty of this season, my Japanese sisters and brothers kept their Christmas focused solely on the presence of the light of the world, Jesus Christ.

Years of living there has been a profound gift to me because it helps me distinguish between a cultural Christmas and a Christ-centered Christmas celebration. Over the years, this has helped me keep my expectations about this time of the year focused upon Christ rather than all of the other “stuff” that threatens to smother this season.

The reading from 1 Peter for this evening contains the words, “*Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.*” To be honest, I can think of no better Bible verse for this time of the

year. 1 Peter encourages us to place our expectations, fears and anxieties upon Christ Jesus alone. This is an invitation to release and let go of some of the baggage that also accompanies this time of the year. 1 Peter's words remind us that during Advent we are also beginning a new church year, and that we can always rely upon Jesus – "*because he cares for you.*"

The cultural Christmas is essentially an end-of the year festival, often accompanied by gatherings and events that end the year with a "bang." The trouble for Christians is that we are not just ending the year, rather we are looking into the promise and future of God's presence with us today, tomorrow and forever. Advent and Christmas are seasons to remember that God loves this world and by sending a Savior who "cares for you," opens to us the way to eternal life in the kingdom.

An evening service like this is an opportunity to quiet ourselves before God, letting go of our anxieties and worries, casting all of them upon Christ because he loves and cares for us. The message of Advent can also be heard in tonight's Psalm, "*The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow.*" This is a Savior who frees, opens, lifts up, loves, watches over, and upholds.

Something which is often forgotten about Advent is that it was originally a season much like Lent. Advent was a season to return to God, beginning a new year renewed in God's grace and care. Advent reminds us that we are a people always anticipating the second coming of Christ at the last day.

Our music for this evening is a helpful counterpoint to the world's constant "holiday music." Tonight's opening song, "If You but Trust in God to Guide You," reminds us that "Christ will bring you safe through every loss." And the song, "Wait for the Lord" encourages us to be strong and not fear for his day "is near."

Advent and the celebration of Christ's nativity have been and still are in their essence about the coming fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, Advent urges us to lift our eyes heavenward from all of our cares in the expectation of Christ's coming reign of peace in our lives and in this world. Advent encourages us over our entire lifetimes to "*cast our anxieties upon him,*" because he cares for us.

Take the Advent journey. Look beyond this world; cast your cares upon Christ. In doing so, Christ will care for you, so that in this world, you might care for others. Amen.