

Covenant UMC Bible Study Notes-- December 11, 2017

for the Scripture readings for December 17, 2017

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; I Thessalonians 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8, 19-28**

How does “the spirit of the Lord God” fall upon you? Is it possible you are perhaps the voice of one calling out in the wilderness to those who wonder about the wonder of God? Use these readings in your Advent preparation to align your hearts to your baptism.

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As we approach the third Sunday of Advent, our scriptures focus on the anointing of the Spirit of the Lord, praying without ceasing, rejoicing always, and the Gospel of John’s version of the ministry of John the Baptist.

This is a culmination of long saga of prophecy and anticipation. The Israelites had God in a box, behind a curtain. A breaking open of the heavens occurred with John the Baptist. It continues with the church now.

Psalm 126

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Test everything (I Thessalonians 5:21)—every moment of our life. Be conscious. Paul gave us a way to test everything.

Test prophecy by the Word. Don’t just accept everything that comes along. There are false prophets.

Jesus told us to test the spirits and see if there is good fruit.

Discerning of spirits is a spiritual gift. Pastors are set above us to control what comes.

In all of these readings a new future is laid out in front of us. There are times of tears—tilling of the soil of potential fruitfulness—and harvest. Someone will be anointed to free the captives, free prisoners from darkness.

John the Baptist was in the wilderness crying out, this is it. This is the unfolding of the old into the new. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, test everything.

Don’t suppress the Spirit. Don’t brush it off. Examine everything. Pay attention to the detail of God. It’s like looking at something familiar and really seeing it for the first time. Spirit-inspired moments connect us to God. Don’t brush these moments off.

Every one of us has a different expression of the same giftedness. It comes from love.

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist says that among you stands the one who is to come (John 1:26-27). He is already present. John was baptizing across Jordan. The people left the Promised Land to get to him, then re-entered.

John the Baptist was the herald. Kings were preceded by a herald. The people questioning John should have been watching for the king. For us, this is a warning. Don’t make their mistake.

When John was questioned, he quoted scripture (Isaiah).

When asked if he was Elijah, John the Baptist answered that he was not (John 1:21). But Jesus later referred to him as Elijah (see Matthew 11:14, 17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13). John only partially understood his role. God can use us even if we do not fully understand our role.

John the Baptist did not take it on himself; he was humble.

We are coming up to an event, laying the groundwork. Isaiah looked to the blessing to come. The Psalm speaks of tears turned to joy, of planting and reaping (Psalm 126:5-6). What can enable us to be hopeful today in the world? In the church?

The passages from Isaiah and Psalm 126 point us to a north star to keep us on the trail. The passage in I Thessalonians is very practical. If I'm off meandering, the joy of the Lord is always there, but it is not a present reality. We need to be guided by a north star.

We have no idea how the "8 in 18" initiatives in our church will unfold. They are a call to us, a life that has to come from an investment of time and talent. Our church could become a beehive of activity.

We look to the heavens for answers while our feet are tripping over them. If we see a hungry child, we feed that child. But not to ask why the child is hungry misses the point. What does that say about us? We give spiritual food and physical food. What about justice food? It's not just about personal salvation.

John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness, alone. If we voice why children are hungry, we will be standing alone in the wilderness. There are spiritual issues involved in why we allow children to be hungry. We need to make that point.

The government's approach is impersonal. It becomes an enabler. We have seen the destruction of the family during the last fifty years. The attitude is that families don't need fathers. Mothers can get benefits without a husband or father being present.

We have a system that worships money.

The existing system addresses immediate needs only.

What is needed must be organic. In Step by Step, the women listened to each other. Each woman had to name a strength she saw in each of the others.

A task has been laid out before us. We can't be overwhelmed by the size of it. We can control our own hearts and minds, have our house in order.

Keep moving forward. Keep our hearts wide open to whoever comes.

Humans have a desire to thrive. There are kids who do well in school despite a bad home environment. The human spirit wants to break free of circumstances, but people are burdened by the impersonal way our society deals with poverty. There is an erosion of moral values, and the removal of God from schools. The point is not that society should not feed people. But at one time churches were the ones who did it, and did it better.

In a personal way.

An affirming way.

This role has been usurped by the government. Fewer resources are available to churches to do it.

But they won't do it.

We're in scripture that has deep roots in who we are. The path has been set before us.

The city is set on a hill. It is a strenuous climb.