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St. James', Mt. Airy
12/9/18

Advent 2C
Malachi 3:1-4
Canticle 16 (Lk 1:68-79)
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Read again with me the final sentence from today's Gospel reading from Luke –

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every hill shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

In this Advent season of anticipation of the coming of Christ, our Gospel bids us to **prepare** for the inbreaking of God's love into the world – and the ways in which it will transform it.

How do you **prepare** for something – a guest, an event, an experience?

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Do you make lists of everything that needs to be done? Do you learn everything you can about whatever it is? Do you clean the house? Do you prepare a special meal? Do you just show up and hope for the best? Do you open your heart?

The church in her wisdom through the ages has developed many ways to help us **prepare** to come close to God.

One is the circle of the church year. Beginning every year with Advent, we travel through the seasons of the church year – each with their own focus – as a way to grow deeper in faith.

Advent is blue, and it's about hope, anticipation, and preparation.

Christmas is white, which is the color of pure celebration, and it's heart is joy.

The Epiphany, also white, is that “aha” moment when we recognize that Jesus is truly the Christ. The season that follows the Epiphany, which is green, tells stories that reveal this holy identity.

Lent is purple, and it's a season of penitence, reflection, and preparation.

Easter Day, the white of pure celebration, is the most important day of the year – when we celebrate the promise of the resurrection. The Easter season that follows, also white, is when we tell the stories of Jesus appearing and surprising his friends, along with his most essential teachings.

The Day of Pentecost, which is red – the color of the Holy Spirit – is when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit, who empowered Jesus' friends – and us – to share his message.

And the season after Pentecost – that long green swath of the year – is when we settle into telling the stories that bring us the fullness of Jesus' life and teachings.

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Another way we **prepare**, laid overtop this circle, is the circle of the Lectionary. There are different lectionaries out there, but we – along with other mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics – use the Revised Common Lectionary.

It is a three-year cycle of scripture readings (years A, B, and C) that takes us through a good portion of the Bible – setting up readings every Sunday from the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament), a Psalm, a reading of the Epistles, and from the Gospels.

Each year of the lectionary focuses on one of the synoptic Gospels: Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark, and Year C is Luke. The Gospel of John is sprinkled throughout each of the years.

Because Advent is the beginning of the church year, that is when we make the transition to a new lectionary year as well – so we have just entered Year C and Luke will be our companion in the coming months.

In returning to these circular patterns year after year, they become more than circles, they become a spiral – that is a circle in which we go deeper and deeper with every return through the seasons and the lectionary.

The framework of the seasons of the year and the scripture passages may not change – but we do, life does – and every time there is fertile ground for us to grow our faith in new ways.

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A third way we can **prepare** is through a Rule of Life.

For centuries, monastic communities have shaped their lives around rhythms and disciplines for following Jesus together. Such patterns are known as a “Rule of Life.”

But these are not spiritual tools for monks and nuns only – and in recent years Christians have turned the deep roots of our tradition, and then find ways to make fresh expressions of the wisdom of our ancient forbears.

Our Presiding Bishop, The Most Rev. Michael Curry, has invited all Episcopalians into a Rule of Life called *The Way of Love – Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life*.

The Way of Love is a framework for examining our faith lives – for seeing where we are engaged, and what needs attention – for noticing what we are most drawn to, and challenging ourselves to go deeper in new practices.

Turn – learn – pray – worship – bless – go – rest.

The order doesn't matter, they are all connected and overlap in various ways – but each of these practices invite us into living faithfully and are expressions of ways of doing so.

Turn: pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus.

Learn: reflect on scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings.

Pray: dwell intentionally with God daily.

Worship: gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God.

Bless: share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

Go: cross boundaries, listen deeply, and live like Jesus.

Rest: receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and resoration.

Several folks were able to spend time together in conversation last Sunday and Monday at our Advent workshops. For those of you who were unable to make it, you can pick up materials in the narthex for further personal reflection, including this wooden prayer token with the seven practices printed on it.

The idea with this, and any Rule of Life, is not to add one more thing to our To Do lists, but instead to give us the lattice upon which we can build our spiritual lives and our relationship with God.

As with any relationship, our relationship with God takes work. If we're praying and living our faith today the same way we were five years ago, that's a wake-up call for self-reflection.

Just as the circles of the church year and the lectionary become spirals (ways to grow deeper) when we live them, so does a Rule of Life – if we remain at the surface, we are missing the fullness of the deep abiding love God has for us.

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Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every hill shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

When we **prepare** our hearts, our minds, our hands, our lives – God will transform us.

Our paths will be made straight, our highs and lows will be filled, the rough will be made smooth.

Not because we won't experience crooked paths, the highs, the lows, or rough places – but because through our **preparation** we will **know** that God is with us no matter what.

Because we will remember that even in our darkest Lenten night, the dawn of Easter will always come.

Because we will be able to turn to touchstones of scripture to remind us we are not alone, we are a part of those stories of the people of God that span millennia.

Because we will be able to fall back into the practices of prayer, worship, and rest.

Let us **prepare** the way of the Lord – in this season of Advent and throughout the year.

~ AMEN ~