

Devotions - December 2-8, 2007
by Carol Ontto
Faith, Rock

Sunday, December 2

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. Psalm 27:14

I am thinking back to when I first heard that we are “Easter” people, to be proclaiming the good news of Christ’s resurrection. While I am in total agreement with this, I have also felt that I am more of an “Advent” person. I am in a waiting mode most of the time. I am anxious to get things started so I am habitually early for everything – church, work, etc. I guess I have heeded my father’s advice of “allowing for a flat tire.” I probably allow enough time for an oil change and to have my tires rotated.

As a result, I wait a lot. I don’t mind – it all leaves me time for prayers, thoughts, reading and sometimes knitting. I have spent many hours in doctor’s offices in the past year, taking my parents and for myself. I make sure that I am prepared; I take along my yarn, a book to read and my Sudoku puzzle books.

Waiting is wonderful; it can be exciting and sometimes peaceful. When I have a hard time praying, I like to lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling while listening to music – some days it’s Bach and sometimes it’s Janis Joplin. Doing this centers me so then I am able to pray, to talk to God, to tell him what is in my heart. Then I am able to wait, to listen.

That is what I love about Advent - the waiting. The excitement of Christmas coming and what Santa was going to bring, in my youth, is now replaced with the “ah” moments and wonder of the season. Driving into work in the morning, seeing the houses decorated, hearing my favorite Christmas songs on the radio, watching “A Christmas Carol” every time it’s on TV. (Drives my father crazy, but after all he did name me “Carol!”)

So please wait and wonder with me, let Advent happen. Don’t be in a hurry to get Christmas over. After all we are Easter people, not Epiphany people!

*Dear God, help us to wait in wonder for the day we celebrate your first coming and await for you to come again. May we remember that during this season we are truly Easter people.
Amen.*

Monday, December 3

*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5:18*

I read a devotional a couple of years ago about a young theologian running into his mentor on campus one day. The senior member started to complain that he would have accomplished so much more in life if he would not have gotten so many interruptions. He then stated that he realized that he had a “ministry of interruptions.” Being a parish secretary for seven years, I can really relate to this story. I spend a good part of my day being interrupted. I would pretty much sum up my job the same as this pastor.

I learned very quickly that it is people that matter and the quality of time I spend with them. Even when it's an hour long phone conversation with a parishioner about something that has nothing to do with church business. The bulletin will still get done, the newsletter will still get out in time. Sometimes I have to just let go and let God.

Interruptions can be a blessing. There have been times that I have prayed for a quiet evening at home and God has blessed me with phone calls or someone dropping by. God knows what I need, his plans for our lives can be very different from what we think we need. He may side track us on a career path, interrupt our goals. I spent 10 years baking in a restaurant before I started working in my career field. You never know where the Holy Spirit is going to lead you. I know in my heart that all works out for the best. In the words of one of my favorite saints, Julian of Norwich, “all will be well, in the manner of things, all will be well.”

Dear Lord, teach us that the interruptions of our lives are truly gifts from you. May we stop and listen for your will. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

*Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation. Luke 11:4*

Being a good Lutheran girl, I have been saying the Lords Prayer all my life. It's a simple prayer but it packs a lot of punch. How many of us really pay attention to the words when we say it? Am I really able to forgive others as God forgives? Yes, I want God to forgive my sins, after all they aren't as bad as some peoples. Who am I kidding, I can sin with the best of them!

My father taught me about forgiveness last week, not by works, but by actions. He has been having a love-hate relationship with our two new mail ladies. The sub now has the route full-time and we have someone new on Saturday. The new one has had the audacity to not deliver our mail (newspapers) two Saturday's in a row. The weekday one has been coming very late.

My father cannot live without a daily newspaper. Living in a rural area, the paper comes via the mail, so it's always a day late. He does not mind this, but for the past month he has been very upset, and keeps asking me to call the post office and complain. I kept telling him that these are new employees and it will take time for things to move on schedule.

Last week she slowed down when she saw him on the road, and he was ready to tell her what he thought. She smiled and waved at him. He came in the house and said, "I am still mad at her, but I waved back." He forgave her for his lack of newspapers and late mail. I have not heard him complain at all this week. Her smile and wave was her way of asking forgiveness, I guess, and he accepted it!

I think forgiveness comes easier when someone says they are sorry. So many times we feel hurt (or have hurt others) and don't even realize it. I am so glad our heavenly father forgives us even when we don't deserve it, or realize that we are sinning.

Lord, continue to forgive us even when we don't realize that we have sinned against you or others. May you "smile and give us a wave." Amen

Wednesday, December 5

*Then the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Isaiah 35:6*

There are many references to the desert in the Bible. Not surprising when so much of the Middle East is desert. I like to look at pictures of the desert. One of my dreams is to someday go to Egypt and see the pyramids. The desert is especially appealing to me in the winter. I would much rather think of sand instead of snow. In the winter I keep a desert screen saver on my computer, helps me to cope with the cold and snow. In the summer I keep a winter screen saver to help me deal with the heat. I guess I am never satisfied.

I have been grieving the death of my mother since March. Grief is a desert experience. I find myself relating to Moses and the Exodus. I feel like I have been on a forty year journey, when it's only been seven months. Grief, like the desert, is not always barren or without life. I see glimpses of flowers or an occasional stream, family members that share memories of Mom, friends that ask me how I am doing.

I know I am not alone in my journey. God is always with me, though at times, I feel He is out to lunch. Some days it's really hard for me to feel His presence. I read a short story years ago in which the writer was comparing God to a plumber that was working in her house. You think because all is quiet that nothing is getting done. Soon the plumber appears and all is fixed. I guess we don't notice God until all is "fixed." We forget that he is grieving right along with us, trying to make our paths a little straighter; instead of seeing the water gush, we only see a trickle. Soon the mourning will turn to dancing once again.

Dear Lord, help me to remember that you are not out to" lunch." You are quietly working on my behalf, to make all things new. Amen

Thursday, December 6

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God, Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayers. How long, O men will you turn my glory into shame. How long will you love delusions and seek false God? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him. In your anger do not sin, when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Psalm 4:1-4

Psalm 4 has really helped me cope with care giving and dealing with Mom's death. For the past 2 ½ years I have read this Psalm almost every night before going to bed. It has become my evening prayer. It seems that no matter how bad things have gotten, reading Psalm 4 has gotten me through. I had originally thought about just writing all seven devotionals on this psalm but I found myself getting too bogged down in the theology of it and not what it means to me. So I decided to just split it in half and write about it for two days.

What first pops into my head when I read this psalm is my belief and trust in God. He will answer when I call, He will give me relief, He will be merciful, and He will listen. This is not something that I have to think about or worry about. God will not fail me!

The main thing that I have prayed for in the past two years was patience. I would ask God every morning and every evening for patience with Mom and Dad. God delivered, He gave me what I needed to get through another day. Like manna, I was given enough for today, it was not something that I could hoard; I would just ask for more tomorrow and He would provide. Yes, there were days that I lost patience, but these were circumstances that I could learn from. I knew it was time to ask for help or to try and have some "me" time.

The hardest thing for me to deal with now that Mom is gone is the anger. Yes, I am mad at God because Mom had Alzheimers; but I am also angry at how I walked my journey so much alone. A family member took the opportunity last Christmas to tell me how lousy of a job I had been doing. There are also some that turned their backs on me and I don't know if I will ever be able to forgive them. I do know that if I don't forgive, I will never be able to let go of the anger.

A few years ago I led a Women's bible study on the book of Ephesians and we were discussing anger. I was so surprised when Celeste, a sweet, shy woman, was going on about how hard it is for her to deal with anger. I could not believe that someone like Celeste could even get angry, let alone talk about it. I thought I was the only person that struggled with anger. In our discussion we were trying to come up with a word that was the opposite of anger. We got out a huge dictionary and spent time looking, but never came up with anything. Because we could not find an opposite we do not know what to do instead of being angry. Is it love? Is it friendship? In hindsight, I think the word would be "forgiveness." I think if you can forgive, you can then let go of your anger.

I know now that I need to forgive those who were not there for me during my time as Mom's care giver, and the cousin who made the hurtful remarks. Until I do, the anger will remain.

Dear God, help to let go of this anger that has followed me all my life. Make me someone who is able to forgive and you have forgiven me. Amen.

Friday, December 7

*Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord. Many are asking,
“who can show us any good?” Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord.
You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.
I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:5-8*

Do you remember the mattress commercial years ago with the pregnant woman that was going thru her day at work juggling? Before going to sleep, she said, “I love this bed.” That is the way I feel about my bed. I turn on my blanket warmer, adjust my contour pillow and say, “I love this bed.” I can forget about all the stresses of the day and how my joints ache, and fall to sleep. Granted some nights I have taken an herbal sleep aid or some type of prescription pain med, but I sleep well.

I know why a blanket is also called a comforter. I feel so safe when I am wrapped up in a blanket, I feel like Jesus has his arms around me. My nephew’s wife gave me a belated birthday gift this weekend of a homemade crocheted afghan, made out of the softest yarn. I spent Thanksgiving Eve all wrapped up with it on the couch. I felt so warm, safe and loved. I was thinking how I would love to have this blanket with me always, to be able to take this feeling of safety and warmth with me. I did not think about how much work was ahead of me the next day, or the problems of tomorrow.

I have to remember that Jesus, my comforter, is always with me. He is there for me when I feel scared or confused. His love is like a blanket, protecting me from the elements. My mother always said that lots of problems can be solved with a good nights sleep. For me a good night sleep comes after spending time with the great Shepherd, telling Him about my day and asking for guidance for tomorrow.

Joy comes in the morning, spending time in the scriptures, bible study and asking God to guide me through the day. The ½ hour that I give to God in the morning is worth more to me than an extra 30 minutes of sleep. The days that I am too busy or get interrupted so I don’t have my quiet time, usually makes for a bad day. Martin Luther said that he prayed an hour everyday and on a busy day prayed for two. Martin definitely knew what he was talking about!

No God, no Peace,
Know God, know Peace.

... And the peace of God that transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, December 8

From the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another. John 1:16

God bestows upon me one blessing after another. In my short time on this planet I have learned not to take anything for granted. All I have to do is watch the evening news and see how fortunate I am. As I am writing this there has been a cyclone in Bangladesh, gas prices are high, there are many foreclosures. I just thank God that I have a job, a roof over my head, and enough food to eat. Many are not this fortunate.

This weekend after celebrating a Thanksgiving feast with my father, brother and his family, we watched the movie "Amazing Grace." I had seen it when it was in the theater, and wanted very much to go and see it again. I waited very patiently for it to come out on DVD and I was at the store the first day it was for sale. It's a wonderful movie, for those not familiar with it. It is about how William Wilberforce was inspired by his pastor John Newton, who wrote the song "Amazing Grace." Wilberforce was in the House of Commons in England and spent his entire life trying to put an end to the slave trade. He finally succeeded shortly before his death. Though he didn't do it alone, it is amazing what one person can accomplish in their lifetime if they feel passionate about something. I also think that Newton did not set out to write a song that would change the world or bring so many people comfort. He was just trying to repent and ask God for forgiveness for the years that he was a slave trader. God's grace is there for all the Newton's and Wilberforce's in the world. All we have to do is ask. God grants us a new day, a time to start over.

I love to watch the sunrise in the morning. I purposely have my bed by an east window so sunrise is the first thing I see. In the summer there is a pair of Sandhill Cranes that usually nest in our field. They are such majestic birds, fascinating to watch. If I am outside doing something when they fly over, I have to stop and watch them. A couple of years ago I was keeping tabs on "Kramer" and wondering where his mate was most of the summer, knowing they had their nest well hid. Early in the fall I was on my bed reading when I heard the cranes in the field. I looked out and Kramer was there with his mate and offspring! They were getting ready to fly off to the staging area and figured they wanted to say goodbye. Again in the spring they come back and start the whole process over. Like I do every morning, I stop and pause, and thank God for my blessings.

Dear Lord, help us to remember that you will give us all we need for today, all we have to do is ask. Your grace, like the sun, is there for us every morning. Amen.