

Advent theme for Week Two: PEACE (*SHALOM*):

Peace is more than the absence of war. The Biblical word for *peace*, *Shalom*, embraces reconciled relationships, health, happiness, and wholeness. As the Prince of Peace, Jesus requires men and women to be stewards of the earth—and to take the health, happiness and wholeness of divine *Shalom* everywhere. What a privilege we have to participate in this Creation-Accountability.

In the next seven meditations we will explore aspects of the Creator's Peace and how it relates to our restored Creation-Accountability. As we grasp the meaning of *Shalom*, it is more likely that we will celebrate this great Advent season with greater joy and thanksgiving.

-  Genesis 3:1-17 = First Christmas Promise
-  Romans 8:18-30 = Revealing God's Children
-  Matthew 6:1-15 = Jesus' Model Prayer on Earth
-  Isaiah 9:1-7 = Prophetic Paradox for the Prince of Peace
-  Jeremiah 29:1-12 = Seek *Shalom* (Holistic Peace)
-  I Timothy 2 = The Childbirth That Changes Everything
-  Exodus 9:13-30 = The Lord of Earth Has Come

Creation-Accountability in Word, wonder and work

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Meditation #9: First CHRISTMAS Promise

What does it say?

STUDY: Genesis 3:1-17

GOLDEN TEXT: Genesis 3:15 and 17 = *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.* ... *And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.*

What does it mean?

All but one tree was available for our first ancestors. What an extraordinary ecology God had invited them to enjoy, improve and protect! We are not given very much information about the only tree that was forbidden—but it was tied to the choice of “knowing good and evil,” detached from an obedient personal relationship with God. Of the fruit of perhaps hundreds of trees, the forbidden fruit seemed irresistible, and the disobedient behavior of Adam and Eve had consequences. *Yet here we have the first prophecy of Christmas—that the descendant of the woman will crush the leader of evil...and the woman's descendant would suffer.*

1. On the very first day that our ancestors sinned, the Creator promised the Savior. What does that say about the Creator's kindness and planning?
2. Why is the Savior referred to as the *woman's offspring*—not the human offspring? Was the Creator already planning on a virgin birth for the Savior? Why is that significant to us?
3. Do all people know something of the burdensome toil it takes to bring home “the bread” from fields of work? Has our toil also been increased in part because of environmental stresses, pollution and depletion caused by human failures? What examples can you give?
4. The way to the Tree of Life was blocked because of the first sin (Genesis 3:24). Has our living environment been threatened ever since the Tree of Life was off limits? What has challenged your life? What has threatened the lives of others you know and love?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is the challenge and privilege of protecting and improving the environment now made more urgent by human sin? How does God's grace encourage us in that type of labor? Does this first promise of Christmas help reconnect us with Creator's purposes?
6. Adam got in trouble because he blindly followed someone else—and then foolishly tried to blame her and the Creator who made them! Is this same blame-game a risk in environmental justice and care now? Do excuses count with God?
7. The Bible may be the only “sacred book” that teaches the splendid creation and the sinful Fall *as separate events*. Even now do we experience both great good and debilitating destruction in the environment at the same time? Please give examples of this ironic mix.

Truth To Celebrate: *The Creator always has a plan for further investing his amazing grace and his best in us, even when we miss his primary plans.*

Advent-Action: *Check the insulation in your home, especially in your attic. By filling gaps and increasing insulation, you save money—and energy—in every season.*

Meditation #10: Revealing God's Children

What does it say? –

STUDY: Romans 8:18-30

GOLDEN TEXT: Romans 8:19-21 = *The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

What does it mean?

Jesus, the Son of God, was born to empower other people to become God's children, too (John 1:12). However, this passage in Romans 8 makes it clear that if we now consider ourselves children of God—and have some evidence that we truly are his children—we will serve God and labor to free creation from its being so badly “*subjected to futility*” (that is, uselessness, partly through pollution) and its being in “*bondage to decay*” (partly through depletion of resources). Ultimately, pollution and depletion are measurable results of our spiritual alienation from the Creator—and our creation-care is evidence that our alienation from God is being overcome.

1. According to the text, Romans 8:18-30, what can we do to reveal that we are God's children? How did Jesus show that he is God's unique Child?
2. Who has subjected creation to its futility and decay? Who are the assigned stewards of creation? Who is supposed to “*protect and improve*” it? (See Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:15.) Who continues to pollute and deplete the creation?
3. In what ways has creation become a victim of human mistakes? Is pollution an example of “*futility*”? Is resource depletion a kind of decay? Are there other issues implied by these key terms “*futility*” and “*decay*”?
4. How does creation feel and express its hope to be set free from its futility and decay? Why is creation in “*eager expectation*” and “*groaning as in the pains of childbirth*” (Romans 8:19 and 22)? What can we do to help “*Mother Nature*”?

What are we going to do about it?

5. How can you help bring the “*freedom of the glory of the children of God*” to those parts of God's creation that you influence? Has the Christmas message penetrated your world? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. When creation is set free from the effects of futility and decay, how will people be benefited? Is there any better way to show our love for other people than to help “*protect and improve*” everyone's environment?
7. Should we wait for Jesus to return to fix everything, or is he waiting for us to do our part as God's stewards now? What steps should we take today to help reveal that we are his children? What behavior helps bring a real “*Merry Christmas*” to his creation?

Truth To Celebrate: *Active care for God's creation is a distinguishing mark of those who truly are God's children.*

Advent-Action: *Make a phone call today to your state or local environmental protection agency or walk around your neighborhood and find out what are the main creation-care issues in your community. Post a note about these local issues on your church's web site and in next Sunday's worship folder. Others in your church or neighborhood could join you in a “task force.” Who knows what great good could be accomplished!*

Meditation #11: Jesus' Model Prayer on Earth

What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 6:1-15

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 6:10 = *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

What does it mean?

We pray that God's will—his kingdom and authority—will be done on earth just as it is in heaven. This is how Jesus taught us to pray, in perhaps the most famous prayer model ever. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus also taught that “the Kingdom of God is here.” At the first Christmas the wise Magi accurately recognized him as the King of the Jews. He is also the king of every ethnicity and of all the earth.

1. At the first Christmas was Mary also praying that the Lord's will be done? Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). How does Mary's prayer serve as a model of the best ways to celebrate Christmas?
2. How well is God's will followed in heaven? How much hesitation is there after God says what he wants? Do the heavenly beings please and honor the Creator? How often? What does God want us to do for the earth? Does praying “your will be done on earth” require also our fulfilling his requests, including improving and protecting the earth?
3. What does the word “as” mean here? Should God's authority mean one thing in heaven and something else on earth? Is it an honor to serve the Creator? To improve the creation?
4. In Matthew 10:7, after he taught this prayer, Jesus sent the Apostles out preaching that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In what sense was the kingdom near then? Is it nearer now? Does the reference to the kingdom imply something close or distant?

What are we going to do about it?

5. The sincerity of a person's requests is especially measured in terms of consistency with the person's behavior. When we pray that we want God's will done on earth, what might God be looking for in the way we relate to the earth the rest of the time?
6. How close does the kingdom have to be for us to act in its authority? How would we act if we believed that the fullness of God's authority was close? That God is watching us and even with us?
7. Some people think that they can continue to pollute and deplete the earth, since they think that Jesus will soon burn it all anyway. Even if they were right, does this avoidance of obeying Jesus please and honor him?

Truth To Celebrate: *Jesus preached concerning the Kingdom of God, and he comes back to the “Kingdom” issues repeatedly in his teachings. Obedience to him, as King of kings, always matters.*

Advent-Action: *With prayer, study your utility bills for the last three months, asking God for wisdom on how you can conserve energy—to save money and to benefit others on earth.*

Meditation #12: Prophetic Paradox for the Prince of Peace

What does it say?

STUDY: Isaiah 9:1-7

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 9:6 and 7 = *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

What does it mean?

The extraordinary paradox of Jesus' birth—fully human and fully divine—was prophesied dramatically by Isaiah some 400 years earlier. The child also would be Mighty God. The successor on David's throne would establish an eternal kingdom with unending peace. This mysterious prophecy was fulfilled at the first Christmas.

1. How did Isaiah identify the Creator as also the Redeemer? How did he see that the Mighty God is also to be the Prince of Peace?
2. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the king of all creation, then are we accountable to him? What can his humble birth in Bethlehem's stable teach us about what matters to him?
3. Why is it crucial that the promised Prince of Peace is a newborn baby? Is creation good enough to receive its Creator? What does the special baby's awesome future depend upon?
4. He is "Wonderful Counselor," meaning that he is *wonderful* at the double role of a "counselor": (1) as personal counselor guiding us and (2) as legal counselor representing us to the Father. How does Jesus (1) guide us in our lives, including the care of creation? How does he (2) represent us to the Creator and to others who care for his world?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Are you focused on pleasing the "Prince of Peace"? If so, how? The powerful Hebrew word for peace (*shalom*) includes our relationships with God, other people, and creation. How does *shalom* shape your service to Jesus now?
6. How do we honor Jesus as "Mighty God"? Do we recognize and respect his power in the creation? Do we do our part as faithful citizens of his kingdom?
7. How is the Infant of Christmas also the "Everlasting Father," the source of all births? What honor and thanks should we express to him? How do we speak of him and relate to him as the Everlasting Father?

Truth To Celebrate: *Isaiah boldly prophesied that the Creator—the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father—would become a human child, and to be called also the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace, a living part of his splendid but needy creation.*

Advent-Action: *Be accountable to the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace. Conduct a do-it-yourself energy audit for your home, Church, and work. You can learn how at www.eere.energy.gov.*

Meditation #13: Seek *Shalom* (Holistic Peace)

What does it say?

STUDY: Jeremiah 29:1-12

GOLDEN TEXT: Jeremiah 29:7 = ...*Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord for it, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.*

What does it mean?

The powerful Hebrew word *shalom* is translated “peace,” “wholeness,” “health,” “happiness” and “prosperity.” Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Creator tells the weak, punished, oppressed, enslaved people to become the channel for his gift of health and peace for all, even for their oppressors. *Shalom* can affect all aspects of our environment, others and ourselves. This concept transcends political categories of “liberal” and “conservative” because it affirms both the care of creation and the continuity of society at the same time.

1. *Shalom* is an inclusive word for our peaceful relationships with God, other people, and the creation, and it involves relationships, attitudes and actions. Why is *shalom* used here? Why do you think it became the primary word for Hebrew people greeting one another?
2. In the Christmas prophecies, why was Jesus called the “*Prince of Shalom*”? How did he bring peace? How does the *shalom* of others benefit you? Does *shalom* multiply? When does *shalom* reciprocate back to the giver?
3. Was living as captives in a pagan society a good excuse for the Hebrew people to evade civic and environmental responsibility? How did God want them to seek *shalom*? What should we do? Do we have any good excuses?
4. Why does God tell the people to seek *shalom* and to pray for it? Why seek *shalom* if you can pray for it? Why pray for it if you can seek it? What is the right combination of prayer and seeking? Could both be 100%?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is Jesus’ *shalom* itself a renewable resource? Would a culture of *shalom* sustain itself in *shalom*? How would you describe a *shalom*-culture in terms of relationships, attitudes and behaviors toward other people and toward the creation?
6. Was Jesus born in an especially friendly world? Does Biblical civic responsibility require starting with a Bible-affirming culture or society?
7. What do you think of those who profess to be the Creator’s representatives on Sunday—but who carelessly pollute and deplete his world the rest of the week? How can God’s instructions through Jeremiah—and also the story of Christmas—change this kind of selfishness?

Truth To Celebrate: *Even in enslavement and captivity, the people of God were to work for peace (shalom) in the oppressor’s capital city—shalom between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and the temporal creation.*

Advent-Action: *Recycle metal, plastic, glass and paper, because producing new products from recycled materials saves 70 to 90% of the energy and dramatically reduces pollution for us all.*

Meditation #14: The CHILDBIRTH that Changes Everything

What does it say?

STUDY: I Timothy 2:1-15

GOLDEN TEXT: I Timothy 2:12-15 = *I permit no woman to teach with tyranny over a man; she is to be calm. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through The Childbirth, provided she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.* [Literal]

What does it mean?

Tragically, subtle male chauvinism has biased many translations of this critical, liberating text. To understand the meaning that the Holy Spirit gave to the Apostle Paul, we must simply go back to the original meanings for four key words, as recorded in all our best ancient texts. The net result will be a liberating perspective for everyone—men and women, and all of creation.

1. Is child-bearing what saves women, or is it “*the birth of the Child,*” or “The Childbirth,” the birth of Jesus, as the original text says (verse 15)? Is it important that the Baby Jesus developed for nine months inside Mary, “the woman”?
2. Why is the same word for “silence” for women in verses 11 and 12 better translated “*calm*” when earlier applied to men in verse 2? Would “calm” men and women be better able to handle the personal and environmental issues we should be addressing?
3. Why is the original word for “authority” here “*tyranny*” (verse 12)—an extreme word that is used nowhere else in the Bible? Is tyranny all that Paul here prohibits for women? Can non-tyrannical women now add needed leadership for creation-care?
4. Does the human birth of our Savior Jesus affirm the creation? Is it significant that the Creator himself chose the normal nine-month process of fetal development? Would any other entrance into humanity have been superior? What differences might alternative means of his coming into humanity have made for the redemption of us humans? And the redemption of creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Are we tempted to try to ignore natural processes—and their consequences—and willfully try to push for our preferred “results”? How important is respect for creation and its God-ordained processes? Does Christmas help celebrate God’s creation? Should we also honor the Creator’s chosen processes? How?
6. Since the Apostle Paul lived in a more biased and less informed time, why did he still elevate women and honor all of the creation? What excuses do we have if we silence women or suppress the creation? What should we do instead?
7. When Gabriel first explained the divine plan, why did Mary say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)? Is this a great model for following the Lord’s instructions? Should we obey the Creator’s creation-care commands with the same level of commitment? What might be the results?

Truth To Celebrate: *Jesus Christ’s birth can cancel all curses and bring peace into all relationships, starting with the relationships among men and women and with the Creator, and his creation.*

Advent-Action: *Either eat it—or compost it for a garden—your non-meat meal leftovers and food scraps, and reduce your solid waste garbage by 23%.*

Meditation #15: The Lord of Earth Has Come

What does it say? –

STUDY: Exodus 9:13-30

GOLDEN TEXT: Exodus 9:29 and 30 = *Moses replied, "When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the LORD. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God."*

What does it mean?

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come.” This great carol reminds us at Christmas that we celebrate an *extraordinary reclaiming* of the Lord’s earthly authority—and the establishment of his means of peace. The angel Gabriel prophesied to Mary that Jesus would restore God’s earthly throne (Luke 1:33). The wise Magi also came to acknowledge that. No wonder the main theme of Jesus’ message was the authority of God on earth (Luke 4:43), but by any measure, the earth has always belonged to the Lord. What King David taught us to sing as an inspiring exclamation of worship in Psalm 24:1 was first used by Moses as part of a dire warning to the arrogant and oppressive Pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus 9:29). So, “*The earth is the Lord’s*” was first a standard for *liberation* and *social transformation*, long before it became an eloquent expression of Godly worship.

1. Because the earth is the Lord’s, is the birth of the Lord Jesus a cosmic event? Did Mary and Joseph know the whole story? Did the myriad of angels know? Did the shepherds know? Did the Magi know? Do we fully recognize the significance of this cosmic event?
2. Are there differences between ownership and stewardship? What do we truly own? What do we steward for the LORD? Why was it crucial for Jesus to demonstrate his mastery over the earth, including his special birth, the fish and the weather?
3. Does God care as much now—as he did in Moses’ time—about how people treat other people and how they handle the rest of his creation? Does he send “plagues” anymore when his Word is ignored? Why or why not?
4. Why was Moses’ message of God’s authority so hard for the Pharaoh and his officials to accept? Do our present government leaders do any better? Please be specific.

What are we going to do about it?

5. If every day you remembered that the earth is the Lord’s and that you are accountable to him, how would your behavior change? How would your life and relationships change? How would your community change?
6. Do governmental leaders need a reminder that the earth belongs to the LORD? Our business leaders? Our education leaders? The leaders of the arts and sciences? Our media and entertainment leaders? How would that change policies and programs? Who will be like Moses and tell them?
7. Since all the earth belongs to the LORD, how should we enjoy it more? How should we celebrate Christmas differently? How should we share earth’s resources more fairly and faithfully? How should we take better care of the creation?

Truth To Celebrate: *The simple fact that “the Earth is the Lord’s” is an enduring truth that transforms all relationships—and redefines all behavior. We are on his Earth.*

Advent-Action: *To save both paper and plastic—and to conserve the energy to produce, transport and recycle paper and plastic bags—buy reusable canvas bags for shopping. While you are at it, ask your Church to order some bags with Scripture verses or the Church’s name on them.*

