



Lectionary Connections with Forward Together in Faith December 2015

Dear partners in ministry.

(This is the second in our series of resources to help you connect December's lectionary readings with our common focus on moving Forward Together in Faith.)

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? - Isaiah 43:19

In Advent God takes doing a "new thing" to the next level, becoming human and mortal in order to show us the Light.

The life of Jesus was filled with new things:

- He entrusted a scruffy *network* of ordinary people with his holy message, and *equipped* them to change the world.
- He *communicated* the story of God's reconciliation to everyone he encountered, perhaps especially to those who had gotten it wrong.
- His *innovations* included crossing the conventional boundaries to discuss theology with a Samaritan woman, heal and eating with people labeled unclean, and speaking truth to the state and its religious collaborators.

And this pattern of networking, innovating, communicating, and equipping shapes our lives here and now. Christ calls us to keep an eye out for where God is making things new, and to join what is springing forth with our hearts, minds and hands.

Blessed Advent!

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Forward Together in Faith *themes:*

Forward Together as Networks

SEPA Synod is a network of congregations, leaders, and partner ministries. Our vision is to connect people in innovative ways to release the power of the Spirit. With more than 40 teams making our shared ministries happen, we do more together than we can alone. With resources raised through Forward Together in Faith, new networks will form, networks already in place can be strengthened, and we'll help congregations collaborate.

Forward Together as Equippers

Our vision is to equip leaders with new skills for 21st Century mission, and to provide more financial assistance to seminarians. In the last year our Synod has made it possible for 20+ congregations to receive a mission assessment to identify their readiness and passion for mission. We've brought in experts in stewardship, preaching and "dinner church" and co-sponsored a ministry resource day with the seminary. As we raise funds, we will make the assessment process available to more congregations, and develop new ways to equip leaders through group learning, online courses and more.

Forward Together as Innovators

Our Synod is a leader in the ELCA in developing innovative ministries among people living in poverty - Welcome Church's "church without walls" with people living on the streets of Philadelphia, Living Gospel's outreach to persons returning from incarceration, and Rhawnhurst Turning Point's Christian youth center. Our vision is to start even more imaginative faith communities, support ministries on the margins that are not self-sustaining, and be ready to respond to the as-yet undiscovered opportunities that God will bring us. With the campaign's proceeds, we'll continue to launch new faith communities and provide resources to help congregations create new forms of church.

Forward Together as Communicator

We have been a leader in sharing our stories in digital media and in equipping congregational communicators. Our vision is to leverage technology and build relationships to help congregations engage their communities. Through Forward Together in Faith we will provide resources for congregations to improve digital communications and innovate with new platforms and channels to keep ahead of rapidly changing technologies.

Produced by SEPA Communications Team

DECEMBER 6, 2015

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)

³ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, ...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

COMMUNICATION: Communication in all of its varied forms is present in this passage. The *word* of God *came* to John who *proclaimed* a message of salvation in fulfillment of a prophecy *spoken* by Isaiah and *written* in the book of the prophet. Communication--spoken, written, conceived or perceived--brings about action.

2nd Reading: Philippians 1:3-11 (NRSV)

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

NETWORKING: Paul and the Philippians are bound together by their common commitment to the Gospel and the mutual support of their ministry.

DECEMBER 13, 2015

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...." ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

COMMUNICATING: John the Baptist proclaims that he is not the anticipated Messiah and that one greater than he, one who baptizes with fire rather than water, is coming.

EQUIPPING: John also prepares the crowds for the coming of the Lord and instructs them in behaviors that will separate the wheat from the chaff and bear good fruit such as generosity and charity, fairness and justice, contentment and gratitude.

2nd Reading: Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

EQUIPPING: Paul instructs the Philippians that the Lord is always near and responsive to their prayers of petition and thanksgiving, that they should rejoice and find comfort in that, and turn their anxieties over to God. In doing so, they will be overcome by an inexplicable peace and gentleness that will serve as a testament of their faith and a life in Christ to others.

DECEMBER 20, 2015

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-45 (NRSV)

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

COMMUNICATION: Communication occurs even without words. Elizabeth knew that Mary was also with child and that the fruit of her womb was of God because, at the mere sound of Mary entering the house, the child in her own womb leaped with joy and the Holy Spirit filled her.

2nd Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10 (NRSV)

⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

INNOVATION: Paul reminds the Hebrews that Christ came into this world to supplant an order based on Law with that of the Gospel--to replace self-sanctification through never-ending sacrifices and offerings with justification by grace alone through the one-time sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

DECEMBER 27, 2015

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:41-52 (NRSV)

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁵ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁶ He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

EQUIPPING: Even Jesus as a child prepared for his vocation as a rabbi and his greatness as the Son of God by seeking knowledge and understanding of His Father through religious education and conversation in the temple.

2nd Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

NETWORKING: Paul describes to the Colossians the idyllic Christian community and what it takes to live in perfect harmony as one body--compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love (above all), peace, gratitude, encouragement/support, and giving glory and praise to God in song and thanksgiving.