

The Word of Prophecy

Four Lessons of Advent:

2 Peter 1:16-21

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Often people dismiss rituals and traditions as a substitute for fellowship with God.

Certainly, they can be. However, God established many rituals and traditions. Jesus, while observing one, the Passover, instituted another, Holy Communion. Ritual and tradition can bless and support our fellowship with God. With this in mind, we will light a candle from the Advent Wreath each week during Advent. This tradition goes back to Christians in the middle ages. Although there is nothing particularly righteous about lighting candles, they like eyeglasses can help us see things we might otherwise miss. On the Advent Wreath, the greenery celebrates life eternal, and the candles spotlight specific truths. There are three purple candles and one pink. At the time of Jesus' birth, purple was the rare color of royalty. Every time we light a purple candle, we declare that the King is coming. In the 1st Century, God prepared people for the King by calling them to repentance through the ministry of John the Baptist. Similarly, each purple candle calls us to repent so that we fully welcome the triumphant return of our Savior and King.

The first candle is the Prophecy Candle. It heralds powerful truth.

God illuminated Jesus' identity through his fulfillment of what prophets had spoken and compiled into Scriptures. Paul declared:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, NIV)

The message Paul received and declared was that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection were all prophesied. Jesus is the prophesied Christ. Read, hear, see the prophecies and believe!

On the day of resurrection, Jesus pointed that out to two despondent disciples. He said:

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27, NIV)

Later that day, Jesus said the same thing in his first appearance to his disciples:

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45, NIV)

Prophecy helped people identify and respond to Jesus. However, some folks charge that, though Jesus is a real figure in history, his identity and life as Christ were invented to fulfill written prophecy. That theory has many problems, and it totally disintegrates when one actually reads the prophecies. With some prophecies you can develop a script, much like the conjecture in the *Left Behind* series. However, most prophecies are given in such a way that one can't even conjecture. An event happens and then you remember a Scripture and declare, "That was prophetic!" Overwhelmingly, Jesus fulfilled that type of prophecy. The prophecies were sufficiently shadowy that only when they were fulfilled did people realize they were prophetic.

Consequently, many prophecies are given not to warn of judgment, foretell the future or provide specific direction. Instead, they help people recognize the visitation of God and respond appropriately. I first witnessed that years ago. A woman's step daughter was hopelessly lost in drug abuse and prostitution in the Chicago area. The step mother lived an hour away from a friend who attended our church's prayer group. One evening that prayer group member was so despondent over her friend's stepdaughter; she questioned whether all of our prayer made any difference. I didn't remember my response. She did. She remembered every word. I said something like, "We are doing the right thing; who knows... this girl could attend our prayer

group next week.” Well, she did. In the ensuing week, she not only returned home from Chicago, she also traveled an hour from her home to be with us at our prayer meeting.

I didn’t know my words were prophetic. I didn’t even remember them until I was reminded. They gave no specific direction. Yet when the event happened, they gave our group member immediate light that God was doing something special with this woman and something special with our prayers. Do you think that incident has affected my understanding and practice of prayer? Do you think it shapes what I do as a human being, a husband, a father, a Christian and a pastor? Prophecy not only helps us recognize the visitation of God; it also helps us respond appropriately. That was Peter’s testimony. He was deeply affected by his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. He wrote about it in 2 Peter and said:

Because of that, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. Pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a light shining in a dark place — until the day Christ appears and his brilliant light shines in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:19, NLT)

Like Peter, my experience fuels my faith so that I find myself paying close attention to the prophetic words of Scripture. They open my eyes to the world around me. They open my eyes to the presence and work of God right now. Peter declared:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21, NLT)

Prophecy is a God thing! God’s Spirit moved people to prophesy so that we could see and understand. Prophetic Scriptures help us recognize and respond to the visitation of God and prepare for Christ’s climatic return. They are words of hope! And they are words of vision!

They show us that God speaks through people. Consequently, I listen, in addition to the Scriptures, to believers who share their dreams, visions, insight and impressions. Not all prove prophetic. Peter wrote that there are false prophets and teachers. Thus, someone’s claim of a

vision, dream, insight or impression is not enough. Impure motives can dominate what we think, feel and dream. Still, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, NIV)

In Acts 21, Paul faced that very challenge, the challenge of testing prophecy when he encountered Agabus. Agabus was a believer from Jerusalem who had visions, dreams and words of prophecy. The church found him so useful, that he traveled about sharing prophecies. Earlier in Acts 11, Paul and Barnabas worked in Antioch when Agabus arrived and prophesied that a severe famine would spread over the Roman Empire. As a result, the church in Antioch took up an offering and sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem with it. Now, on Paul's final trip to Jerusalem, he was resting in Caesarea when Agabus arrived. Agabus approached Paul, took his belt off, tied it around his own hands and feet, and then said:

The Holy Spirit says, "In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles." (Acts 21:11, NIV)

Luke writes that he and others pled with Paul not to go to Jerusalem. They saw the prophecy as warning not to go. Paul's heart broke because he was ready to die in Jerusalem like Jesus. Was the Apostle Paul treating that prophecy with contempt? Were the others right in pleading with him to abort his mission? Listen to what Paul told the Ephesians before he heard from Agabus:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. (Acts 20:22-23, NIV)

Paul was hearing nothing new. Testing a prophecy is not merely checking to see whether it is from God. It is also looking to God for its meaning and purpose. Was God saying to Paul don't go? Or was the Spirit of Jesus saying, "This will be difficult. Don't be surprised at what happens to you. Call my church to pray." On this trip Paul wrote the Romans to pray for him.

That Advent Candle of prophecy reveals that God does not intend for us to wander about in the dark. God speaks to his children. Indeed, on the day of Pentecost, Peter declared that we are in the time when the following prophetic Scripture is being fulfilled:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18, NIV)

God pours his Spirit out on ordinary believers, so that we often think, see and speak the very word of God. We must we pay close attention to one another; for the hand and heart of our Savior are often revealed in our conversations.

Moreover, prophetic words both reveal and birth reality. The Bible says in the book of Amos:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7, NIV)

God gave dominion of this earth to humanity. In creation, he declared, “Let them rule!” God still works through our dominion. He has not revoked it. Thus, God rules and rescues the earth through “the Son of Man;” and by his Spirit through the sons and daughters of Man. John Wesley believed that God does nothing but in answer to prayer. That’s because we rule; and when we invite God’s will through prayer, He rules! Our prayers, our speech and our activity make a difference. Of Jesus we sing, “He rules the world with truth and grace.” Jesus does so through people like you and me.

Will he rule through you? Do you see your life in the light of prophecy? Learn this lesson of Christmas!