

CHRISTMAS PICTURES

GET READY FOR CHRISTMAS
BY LOOKING AT



PORTRAITS OF
JESUS CHRIST
IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

PORTRAITS OF JESUS

The season of Advent is a time to prepare our lives for Christmas. Words like expect, anticipate, prepare, and longing ring in our hearts as we really focus on what Christmas means. God stepped down from heaven and became a baby for us! He lived among us! The Word became flesh “and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, from the Message).

We each can lose site of this in the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season. It is a sad fact that often the Christmas season is not a time of preparation, but a time of stress, worry, and heartache. Our church’s Worship Team, however, has some exciting news! It doesn’t have to be that way this year!

Many people have made the book of John their favorite Bible book. The reason is simple: the Apostle John used beautiful words in His Gospel to paint a portrait of Jesus that is life-changing. John used word strokes to show Jesus to be: the Word of God, the Foot-Washing Servant of All, the Victor over Death, and the Restorer of the Faithless. We are going to turn our eyes on a few of these portraits this Advent season. It is awe-inspiring beautiful when Jesus enters our world.

Did you know that the Gospel of John does not contain one parable? John, however, has many word-pictures of Jesus. These word-paintings function in the same way that the other Gospels’ parables do: they reveal and they hide. They reveal the power, freedom, and glory of Christ to those who are searching. They also hide who Jesus is. These pictures are blinding to those who are religiously seeking what they can get out of Christ, rather than seeking Christ Himself. Just like people will get a different interpretation of an artist’s painting, the word-pictures that John use can facilitate different responses in us. When we look at each picture, we can almost hear Jesus say, “He who has an ear, let him hear.”

John's word portraits are poetry. They move not just the mind with a new idea, but evoke the response of the whole person through his arsenal of language. Some of the most powerful pictures that John uses are the "I am" statements of Jesus in His Gospel. Every time Jesus used the term, "I am..." and then painted who He was, the listeners of His day would have known what He was saying. If we are not careful, we could miss that "I am" is the name of God in the Hebrew tongue. The language that Jesus used would say that God is "Yahwah", the Great "I Am" (read John 8:58).

It is important this Advent to stop and think that Jesus is stating that He is God among us by using these "I am" statements. In fact, John uses a total of seven of them in his Gospel and once again, you might miss this significance! The number seven was important to John. Whenever John used seven of something, he was painting the picture that "here is wholeness or completeness." By giving us seven "I am" statements, John is saying that Jesus is the wholeness or completeness of God who has come to us in Christmas.

In an effort to engage the whole person (touch, taste, sight, hearing, & smell), our church will be using Prayer Stations in our worship services from November 19th until December 24th. Each of these Sundays will focus on one of the seven "I am" statements of Jesus. Jesus said, "I am..."

- ...the Bread of Life." (6:51)
- ...the Light of the World." (8:12)
- ...the Door." (10:9)
- ...the Good Shepherd." (10:11)
- ...the Resurrection and the Life." (11:25)
- ...the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (14:6)
- ...the True Vine." (15:1)

These Prayer Stations will include various "hands-on" activities. For example, we will be invited to eat a piece of bread at the "Bread of Life" station. Our hope is that this will prepare our hearts for Christmas as we actually taste the Bread of Life entering our world.

This devotional is written so that your family will be ready to celebrate the wholeness of God that has come in Jesus Christ. Here are some guidelines:

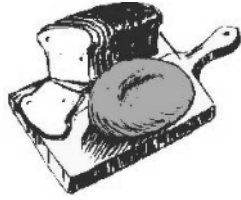
1. Take this new experience seriously. You will get out of it what you put into it. It may be new to you to prepare so much for worship. Remember: it is good to be stretched.
2. Read the devotional and the suggested Scriptures as a family. Each day includes: the "I am" statement, The Portrait as I See it, a Description of the Prayer Station, and suggested Scripture readings. Use it as a teaching tool for your children and grand-children.
3. Make sure to read the Sunday's Devotional during the week before. You may want to read it on Monday and think about it all week. You can also read it on Saturday, so that you'll remember it for Sunday. I know that I can easily forget within a few days' time what I read on Monday!
4. Jot down notes that come to mind when you read the Sunday's devotional. Try to picture what the apostle John is saying about Jesus. Let the Gospel's words portray Jesus in a new way. For the artists out there: you may even want to create an art piece each week.
5. Pray that God will get you ready for the Prayer Station during the worship service.

Thank God for Christmas. May God bless you this Advent Season through these Portraits of Jesus!

Peace in Him,

Pastor Robert E. Tevis III

For the Week Before: November 12, 2006



“I am the Bread of Life.” (John 6:35)

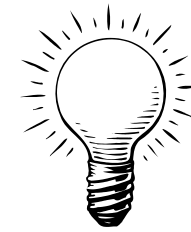
The Portrait that I See – The first of the “I Am” statements begins with a picture of the essence of communion. Jesus is saying that He is both living and life-giving. I know that his hearers in the first century would have thought of Manna (see Exodus 16:31), the bread that God gave to the Jews to sustain them during their travels in the desert. Jesus was claiming that He was both from heaven and sustaining.

Bread is also meant to be broken and then eaten. Bread that is left out eventually collects mold and can not be consumed! Eating the bread of life is a metaphor for believing in the sacrifice of Christ. This is why I believe that when He said this, many of his followers left Him. They weren't ready for a sacrifice. We must trust the Bread of Life for sustenance and believe in His sacrifice. Are you ready to eat the Bread of Life?

The Prayer Station – During this next Sunday, there will be a time in the service for our first prayer station. Music will be played while you get a chance to go to a table in the back of our sanctuary and eat a piece of bread. You will be asked to fill in the blank of this statement at the table before you eat: “Christ, you are _____ to me!” This is a chance for us to taste and smell who Christ is. Who is Jesus to you? Be ready to fill in the blank with a word or two.

Suggested Scripture Reading: John 6:35-70

For the Week Before: November 19, 2006



“I am the Light of the World.” (John 8:12)

The Portrait that I See – This second “I Am” statement harkens back again to the wanderings in the desert of the Jewish people. Jesus said “I am the light of the world.” while standing in the Court of Women at the Temple. There was a four pronged candelabra burning in the room. I can imagine Him pointing at the flicker of flame and stating that He was the same as this fire. He was saying that just as a pillar of fire led the Israelites through the wilderness, He was the light to lead people out of darkness. Jesus was to be their protection, their sign that God was present, their promise of provision, and their guide.

The Pharisees thought Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar. Jesus gave them a third option by declaring that if they follow Him, then they will be lead to real life. He was their Lord! Jesus has definitely shed light into my world. He rescued me from the darkness of anger, lust, loneliness, and pain. He shed His light and made my life a city on a hill! How is Jesus the light of your world?

The Prayer Station – During this Sunday's Prayer Station, we will be using an ancient practice of prayer. Lighting a candle while you pray is a method that says to God, “I need you to shine your light into my world.” We will be lighting small candles and laying them near a cross for prayer.

Suggested Scripture Readings:

John 8:12-20 & Matthew 5:13-16

For the Week Before: November 26, 2006



"I am the Door." (John 10:9)

The Portrait that I See – The next two weeks include "I am" statements that were closely related. Jesus said almost in the same sentence that He was both the Door for the sheep and the Good Shepherd. This week we focus on the picture of Jesus as the door (or gate) of the sheepfold.

The people hearing the words of Jesus could probably see a sheepfold right over His shoulders as He spoke. The sheepfold was usually an enclosure made of rocks, with an opening for the door. The shepherd would guard the flock, or flocks, at night by lying across the opening. Jesus said that the true shepherd comes in through the door, and the gatekeeper recognizes him. A thief or robber had to climb over the wall and enter the fold through deception. Even if they did get in, they could never get the sheep to follow them. Sheep are hard-headed: they only follow the familiar voice of their own shepherd. The false shepherds can never lead the sheep, so they must steal them away. How is Jesus your protection?

The Prayer Station – During this Sunday's station, you will have the opportunity to open small table-top doors and discover Scriptures that you can take with you to your seats. Opening a door should be done in an attitude of prayer.

Suggested Scripture Readings

John 10:1-10, Revelation 3:7-8 & Hosea 2:15

For the Week Before: December 3, 2006
The first Sunday of Advent – The candle of HOPE



"I am the Good Shepherd." (John 10:11)

The Portrait that I See – Sheep do not panic when they hear their shepherd's voice. Danger might be around, but they know they are safe and are being led by the one who has an invested interest in them. Jesus is not a hired hand who lacks commitment to the sheep. He is the shepherd, the owner of the sheep who fights off the wolves.

Jesus said that He lays down His life willingly. This paints to me the idea that His death did not happen to Him, as if it were just the circumstance He were in. He was the one who laid it down willingly, because He knew the danger His sheep were in. Jesus is committed to us, His sheep.

The astounding thing is that sheep are not intelligent animals. They lack the intelligence to even bend their knees when they run! Jesus is still committed. No matter how many times we might brainlessly stray from the one God who loves us, Jesus is there! Isn't that amazing?

The Prayer Station – This Sunday there will be a Christmas Tree at the station. There will also be a sheep ornament on another table. As you hang the ornament, you are saying to God, I have strayed, but now I cling to you, the one who makes life evergreen, ever full.

Suggested Scripture Readings

John 10:11-18, Psalm 23 & 1 Peter 2:23-25

For the Week Before: December 10, 2006
The second Sunday of Advent – The candle of PEACE



“I am the Resurrection and the Life.” (John 11:25)

The Portrait that I See – A friend of Jesus had died and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were distraught. Lazarus had been dead for four days, one day beyond hope. People were asking, “Why didn’t Jesus heal Lazarus when he was alive?” It was so that even 2000 years later, people would still be talking about how glorious Jesus was by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus showed that he had power over life and death as well as power to forgive sins. He not only said that He was life, but proved it by speaking Lazarus back to life. He said, “Come out!” and Lazarus obeyed. Lazarus was not a zombie when he came out of the grave either. He was fully restored to life! Resurrection demands a response. The Jewish leaders decided at that moment to kill Jesus (John 11:53). This was the turning point. We must decide for ourselves if Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?

The Prayer Station – At Sunday’s prayer station, there will be a cave with strips of cloth in it. This is to represent the empty tomb with the linen clothes left behind. You will be invited to take a cloth as a reminder that Christ is risen.

Suggested Scripture Reading: John 11:1-44

For the Week Before: December 17, 2006
The third Sunday of Advent – The candle LOVE



“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14:6)

The Portrait that I See – This may be the most famous of the “I am” statements. Jesus laid the essence of His message and life in a clear and concise wording. Jesus told the disciples that they know the way to the Father because they know Him, who is that way; and He is that way because He is the truth, the very person of God in human form; and as the truth of God incarnate, He is life. In Him believers find the eternal life of God Himself. I see a picture of Jesus in a path to follow (the Way), a person to embrace (Truth), and a blessed existence to live (Life).

Someone might argue that claiming that Jesus is the ONLY way is too narrow. In reality, it is wide enough for the whole world. We should be thanking God that there is a way in the first place and our situation is not hopeless.

The Prayer Station – This Sunday will bring a chance for confession. Each person will receive a slip of paper and a pen. You will then be asked to write down those areas of your life that stops you from following the way, truth, and life that Christ calls you to. There will be an enclosed fire where you will give God these hindrances by burning that paper.

Suggested Scripture Readings

John 14:6-14, Acts 3:19 & 1 John 1:5-10

For the Week Before: December 24, 2006,
The fourth and last Sunday of Advent – The candle of JOY



“I am the True Vine.” (John 15:1)

The Portrait that I See – This last “I am” statement in John is a beautiful one. Remember the first statement? It was the one of bread. This one, however, talks of the other element in communion: the juice. It is a portrait of tension between spilt blood and a prolific life.

A single vine can bear many grapes. Christ claims that He is the true Vine, while God is the gardener. The branches are those true believers who by their living union with Christ produce much fruit. Jesus notes that there are two kinds of pruning for these branches. The first is the branches that are cut off. The second is the kind that is cut back to promote growth. In other words, God sometimes disciplines us to strengthen our character and faith. Branches that don’t bear fruit are thrown away and burnt because they often infect the rest of the plant. Are you open to God’s pruning? More importantly: are you remaining in the True Vine? The best Christmas gift you can give this year is to give Jesus your life.

The Prayer Station – This last Sunday is a remarkable one since we will have a cross made of hardware cloth standing in our midst on Christmas Eve. It is important to think of Christmas in light of the cross. You will be asked to take an evergreen branch from a table and stick it in the cross. This is a symbol that when we remain in Jesus, there is life.

Suggested Scripture Readings

John 1:1-18 & 15:1-8

May you be like the Berean believers in Acts 17:11 (NLT) – And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.