coming to our lenses

2016 Advent Devotional

bethany community church
This Advent, we focus on the theme of Coming to Our Senses. In the busyness of this season, it is often easy to wrap ourselves in the details and to-do lists of each day and miss out on the meaning and expectancy of this time of preparation. Intentionally engaging our senses—what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—is a way to prepare our hearts for our Savior and Lord. And hopefully during this series, as we do engage our senses, turning our eyes on Jesus will allow the things that matter little to “grow strangely dim.”

We invite you to sit in the stories of Jesus’s life that we have the benefit of knowing in retrospect. He was a proponent of the senses, and He reflected this in his interactions with others. May we find in His encounters, through the stories that are recorded in the gospels, our own encounters with Christ that will bring healing, restoration, joy, and peace to our open hearts.

Blessings,

Pastor Nancy Eckardt
Light shows up to Zacharias, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph.


When Zacharias rejects, then he’s silenced. When Mary receives, her response is praise. When this light shows up, it has an effect. But it’s not always a good effect. Light exposes what is in our hearts and leads to either praise or silence, depending on our responses.

Silence to song. How am I responding to light? Silence or song.

Read John 9:1–12.
Read John 9:1–2.

As Jesus and his disciples see this blind man, the disciples appeal to the cause and effect explanation for his blindness and ask Jesus whose sin caused it.

When have you seen someone in pain and tried to fit his or her situation into a cause and effect paradigm?

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Are there places of blindness or brokenness in your own life that you believe are a consequence of sin and beyond the healing work of Christ?

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What do you need to adjust in your theology to let go of the idea that we get what we deserve?

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Read John 9:1–5.

In these verses, as Jesus provides another explanation for the blind man’s suffering—that God’s works might be revealed in him. Then Jesus reminds the disciples of the work they are to do in the light, where all can see, before the dark comes and sight is hindered.

What are those places of brokenness in your life where God’s works can be revealed?

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How do you need to see your brokenness and the brokenness of those around you as a place for God’s works to be revealed?

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What blinds you to seeing the light of Christ in your context right now?

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Jesus’s act of bringing healing is bizarre, and it requires the blind man to participate as an act of faith to restore his sight.

What are you missing out on by staying in your blindness?

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What are you willing to let Jesus do to restore your sight?

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What steps of faith are before you to participate in your healing?

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Read John 9:8–9.

After having his sight returned, the formerly blind man caused a stir among those who saw him daily, not as a blind man but as a beggar.

What is the difference between being seen as blind and being seen as a beggar?

Which people might you be seeing based on how their brokenness impacts you rather than meeting them in their brokenness?

What are you missing by not seeing those around you for who they really are?
Read John 9:10–12.

Finally, the crowd decides to listen to this sight-filled man, and he testifies about what Jesus did for him.

What is your story of blindness turned to sight by Jesus?

Who needs to hear your story?

Where is Jesus in your life now? Do you know?
Read John 9:1–12.

There are so many things in this passage that we could still cover. Let’s take a few minutes and read through the full passage. What words or phrases stand out to you?

Read through the passage again.

Who do you relate to and in what way? The blind man? The disciples? The crowd?

What do you need to confess as you consider your own blindness as a participant in this story?

Read through the passage a third and final time. What new truth is Jesus inviting you to see?

Take time to journal about your experience with this passage and what you are seeing anew. Write a prayer of commitment to see with expectancy what God may be revealing to you during this time of Advent.
I think we can all agree that taste matters. It’s why we eat some foods and not others. It’s why people who lose their senses of taste have difficulty getting the nutrition they need. Jesus knew this when He was unexpectedly asked to be made a vintner and produced the best wine in only a few minutes.

Just as taste enriches the process of feeding our bodies, so Jesus enlivens the process of making meaning out of our lives. We are not invited to walk a tasteless road of obedience but to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8)

When have you been surprised by how good something tasted?

In Psalm 34:8, we are invited to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” When have you been surprised by the goodness of God?

Where do you need to see the goodness of God in your brokenness? Journal your request for His goodness, and ask Him to reveal Himself to you. Then watch for it.

Read John 2:1–12.
Read John 2:1–3.

There is a wedding, and Mary is the first one to be mentioned as guest, although Jesus and the disciples are also invited. At this point, Jesus’s ministry has not yet begun. Nevertheless, as soon as the wine runs out, Mary knows just what to do.

Who are your go-to people when something goes wrong?

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In what situation is Jesus your go-to person?

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In what ways are you waiting for your ministry or fruitfulness to begin? What are you waiting for?

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Read John 2:4–5.

Jesus expresses a bit of reluctance to step in, perhaps because He is only indirectly connected to the bride and groom. Mary is quite the initiator and pulls Him in.

Who needs you to take the initiative to invite him or her into ministry?

What do you know about Christ that inspires you to introduce Him to others in your life?

What keeps you from asking Jesus to step in and do what He can to help?

Jesus uses what is available—the pots, the willing servants, and the water—to fulfill Mary’s request and bring life to the reception.

What situations are you a part of that could use some life?

What do you have to offer to Christ so that He can sweeten the context in which you find yourself?

What keeps you from offering all you have?
Read John 2:8–9.

The servants are totally into this miracle that is happening before them. They are willing to risk all in order to see what Jesus is doing.

What is Jesus doing in your life or in your context?

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Are you all in? What is holding you back from letting Jesus change the water of your life into wine?

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Where can you risk by putting yourself out there in a way that would show others how good Jesus really is?

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Read John 2:10.

The emcee is amazed at the taste of the wine and surprised that it is coming out this late into the reception.

Taste matters. What area of your life do you need Jesus to sweeten?

Where are you settling for less than the riches that Jesus wants to give you?

Who needs to see that following Jesus is a journey filled with richness? How do you reflect that to those around you?
Read John 2:1–12

What word(s) or phrase(s) stick with you as you read the passage?

What questions come up?

Read the passage again.

Who do you resonate with in this story? Why?

Read this passage one more time. What is the take-away theme, promise, truth, or conviction for you?

Journal what you hear from Jesus in this passage about these questions.
Mark 10:35–52: Jesus hears our requests.

Imagine hanging out with a 6-year-old who loves to chat. As parents go about their work, listening to their children’s trails of words, their listening changes to hearing the words that reveal something about their children’s characters or hearts or about situations that should be addressed. Parents’ minds are now engaged, as they know something new about who their children are, and out of that knowledge, they can better care for and guide those children. There’s a difference between listening and hearing.

Active listening requires that listeners are attentive enough to be able to repeat to the speakers what they have said. Hearing requires allowing the words to sink in deep enough to alter us and our understanding of the speaker. This can be harmful when we hear lies and allow them to alter us in destructive ways. This can be transformative and restorative when we hear truth in the context of safety and trust.

In Mark 10:35–52, Jesus hears the requests of two different people. He attends to their requests with the same intensity. From these accounts, we can find hope that Jesus is not just listening to our prayers; He hears and feels our requests.

When have you felt heard? How did being heard impact your well-being and your relationship with the one who heard you?

When have you heard something that was false that you couldn’t shake? Are there lies now that have taken root in your mind or heart?

Who have you heard in a way that has brought reconciliation?
Read Mark 10:35–36.

James and John boldly approach their leader and insist that He obey them! If we are honest, we would all love for Jesus to grant every request we have.

When have you expected Jesus to answer your request in a specific way? How did it work out?

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What are you praying for now? How open are you to a different outcome than the one you hope for?

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Jesus responds, “What do you want me to do for you?” Imagine Jesus asking you that right now. Write out your audacious request with honesty and an open heart.

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Read Mark 10:37–40.

Jesus graciously uses this conversation not to shame James and John in front of the other disciples but to teach them the cost of following Him.

What deals are you in the process of making with God? In what way does your prayer request ignore the potential consequences of your request being granted?

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Why do you follow Jesus?

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What do you hear Jesus saying to you in the midst of your request?

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Read Mark 10:41–45.

Jesus heard the rumblings among His followers and knew this was a teaching moment. Imagine the gentleness in His voice as He planted seeds of His kingdom, where the leaders are servants dedicated to the empowerment of their followers.

Who are the leaders in your life? How do they fit the description of the Pharisees? Who are the leaders in Jesus’s kingdom?

If leadership is defined as influence, how do you approach those you lead? How would they describe your leadership values?

What is at stake if you live more fully into the leadership modeled by Christ?
Read Mark 10:46–48.

Due to his blindness, Bartimaeus no doubt had a strong sense of hearing. In the midst of his daily routine of begging for his livelihood, he hears something different and recognizes that this could be a life-changing day for him.

How do your limitations impact your daily life?

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What do you hope for Jesus to do badly enough to call out to Him?

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How might your daily coping with life, wherever you are at, keep you from hearing that Jesus is near?

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Read Mark 10:49–52.

Jesus heard Bartimaeus and, to the chagrin of the crowd, invited him to stand before Himself. And Jesus asked him the same question He had asked James and John: “What do you want me to do for you?”

What have you heard from “the crowd” that has shut down your hope for healing?

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Are you part of a crowd that has shut down one who is marginalized?

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How do you invite people in your life to answer the question Jesus asks: “What do you want me to do for you?”

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Read Mark 10:25–52.

This passage so richly demonstrates the grace and truth of Christ. He invites us to lay our audacious requests before Himself, and hears not just the requests but our hearts’ desires behind them. He does hear us, whether or not He answers our requests. His heart for us is transformation.

How open are you to asking Jesus for what you want Him to do for you?

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What do your requests reflect about your desires, fears, and expectations of life?

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How might Jesus want to transform you in these areas?

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There are certain scents that bring nostalgia to me. Chanel No. 5 reminds me of my husband’s grandmother. The fragrance Charlie was my go-to perfume in high school. I smell paste, and I’m back in elementary school. When I smell rubber cement, I’m gluing BBs to my earlobes in middle school, before I was allowed to pierce my ears. Christmas brings with it a whole array of smells that help usher us into the season.

There are also aromas that trigger negative feelings. I had a friend who after spending months going to the hospital for cancer treatments couldn’t enter again without experiencing a violent reaction to the familiar dreaded smells. For city folks, the idea of living in the country surrounded by the smell of bovine feces is enough to keep them close to home.

Take time this week to be attentive to the smells around you and the emotions they stir within. Are they related to Christmas? To relationships? To events? Do these smells trigger nostalgia, joy, or dread? And as you consider these smells, imagine what it means that we are called “the aroma of Christ to God.” (2 Corinthians 2:15–17)

Zechariah is a faithful priest, and he has carried the burden of barrenness with his wife for many, many years. As he enters the most holy place, he lights the incense and is surrounded by the aroma of worship. In this holy place, he is met by an angel and invited to enter the story of Jesus. Eventually he accepts his role, but no doubt the aroma of incense thereafter reminds him of his reluctance to be obedient.

In this moment, how are you being called to step into the story of Jesus in your context?

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How open are you to doing so? What are your barriers to obedience?

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Imagine yourself 20 years from now. How will you remember this season of invitation?

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Mary received the call to obedience and only later was Joseph invited to join her, at the cost of social expectations and norms. As the birth of Jesus drew near, law required Joseph and Mary to make the trip to Bethlehem, and they found themselves in a stable, and Mary was in labor. Imagine the smells that greeted them and Jesus as he took his first gasps of breath.

When have you been called to live into the story of Jesus in unfavorable circumstances?

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How did you step in in spite of the “smells?”

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Is there a situation now that you are invited to step into despite its accompanying challenges?

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Read Matthew 2:1–12.

Imagine the scents of the magi’s gifts. While the frankincense and myrrh no doubt had distinct smells and were considered appropriate gifts for a king, they were also a foreshadowing of death, being emollients used in the preparation of bodies for burial.

What aromas cause you grief?

Who or what are you missing during this Advent season?

Who needs to hear a word of encouragement from you this season? Write him or her a note or call him or her today.

Imagine the fresh air surrounding the shepherds, though it was no doubt tainted by smoke from the fire burning to keep them warm. Though it was outside the city and lonely, this was their place. And in the midst of the smoky air, angels met them and told them the good news that Jesus had been born.

When do you feel lonely? How do you find comfort in your loneliness?

When have you experienced the revelation of Christ in the midst of your day-to-day activities? What allowed you to see Him?

How are you carving out space to see Him in these few days before Christmas? What can you do today?

Mary bursts into song as she experiences the joy and hope being ushered into the world through the submission of herself and her cousin, Elizabeth. She knows that something new is coming in the form of God Incarnate.

What are the characteristics of this new kingdom initiated by Jesus?

How are you living into the reality of Jesus’s rule now?

How can you shift your priorities to reflect God’s desire for His people?

Following Jewish custom, Mary and Joseph take their son to be dedicated. But the words of prophecy that they hear from not one but two devout followers of God indicate that this is no ordinary life to which their son has been called. We, as followers of this dear child, are invited into the same life, which is made extraordinary by His indwelling power.

What might have been surprising for Mary and Joseph to hear?

What are you waiting for this Christmas?

How are you reflecting the light of Christ?
As you prepare to celebrate with friends and relatives today, take time to inhale the wonderful smells of this day. And remember the smell of incense, as you are being invited, with Zechariah, to step into the redemptive story of Christ. And remember the smell of the stable, and remember that you are being invited, with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, to participate in His work, even in sometimes unfavorable circumstances. And remember the smells of frankincense and myrrh, and with the magi, remember that the road of following Christ includes dying to self. And finally, remember that Christmas isn’t the celebration of one day, the day we remember Christ’s birth, but that we are invited to live each day into the reality of Christ’s reign in this world.

What gifts do you have to be thankful for?

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Is there something that Christ has given you that you have not fully opened?

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What can you do today to express the gratitude you have for God becoming flesh and living among us and through His death and resurrection changing the trajectory of humanity?

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