

December 5, 2020

Letter to the Arizona Branch of City of the Lord, from Az Branch Senior Coordinator Jeff Looker

Brothers and Sisters:

I think its an understatement to say *"2020 didn't work out quite like I thought it would!"* .

A year ago, my letter to the community spoke about the "Humility of God". The mystery of God becoming man and how God's ways are not our ways- His thoughts not our thoughts! (Isaiah 55:8). I spoke about the mystery of John 3:16 and why does God so love the world that he sent his only Son to save us and restore us to relationship with Himself ? To begin to plumb the depths of that mystery, we have to understand that one of the grand principles of God's nature is the He **"moves towards"** . God "moves toward" Himself in the Trinity. He initiates the incarnation with His great desire to "move toward" and dwell among His people. In the institution of marriage, He creates a desire for man and woman to "move toward" one other; the two becoming one flesh in marriage and consequently the family reflecting the life of the Trinity. In Luke 15 Jesus speaks of the three parables of God pursuing us and "moving toward" us so to speak. in the parables of the "Lost Sheep", the "Lost Coin" and finally the "Lost Son" who the Father runs toward to greet and restore into relationship with himself.

On the other hand, another broad principle of the spiritual life is that **sin separates**. C.S Lewis in the "Great Divorce" suggests that Hell is a place of ultimate separation, not just between mankind and God, but separation between one another as well. Lewis describes a series of small disputes between neighbors leading people to move away from the center of town where each person can be fully contented in their isolation with nobody to bother them or infringe upon their rights and freedoms. In this way, Hell is ultimate isolation. The opposite is true of Heaven, and that's because the opposite is true of God. God is not one to move away from relationship, rather His desire is to move *toward* us. Therefore Heaven is a place of peace and rest, not of disputes and weariness. Heaven is a place of comfort, not pain. Heaven is a place of unity, not division. If you pay attention to media sources, I think it is apparent we are seeing more of the life of Hell manifest in the world rather than the life of Heaven!

As we count down to the close of 2020 (cue the applause!) we find ourselves in the season of Advent, with the traditional theme of "Prepare" This comes from Isaiah 40:3-4

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." (Isaiah 40:3-4, RSV-CE)

Of course this prophetic word from Isaiah finds its fulfillment in John the Baptist in Matthew 3:3 heralding the coming of Jesus. The great implication of "clearing a path for the Lord", has within it the understanding that He is "moving towards" us (hopefully at a rapid rate of speed!) We don't want to slow down His movement toward us by a rough and hilly road!

One of the overarching secular culture themes of 2020, because of the pandemic, was that "moving apart will bring us together". Talk about a slogan from the evil one! We know from many studies of the affects of the pandemic, that isolation creates it's own sets of problems and ills. God designed us for "community" and communion with one another. He also designed us to be in communion with Him from the beginning! Although it has been a struggle this year to maintain our communion with one

another in City of the Lord, I have to recall the many blessings that have been present because of all of your faithfulness to our commitment, your good attitudes and perseverance in the face of inconvenience and challenges. You all remind me of the scripture from 1 Thessalonians:

"We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." (1 Thessalonians 1:2-5, RSV-CE)

Someone said to me recently that it must be very challenging to be a leader in our Community during times like this. While it is easy to look at the additional demands that are present in challenging times, I am grateful and privileged to witness a people of God, steadfast in their love of the Lord and one another. I am encouraged to observe each of you, in your own unique way, exhibiting the desire to live the Godly principle of "moving toward" one other and the Lord in unprecedented times.

Thank you, brothers and sisters, for your witness of Faith Hope and Love. I close this letter with a passage from the book of Romans that I think summarizes 2020 better than that awful slogan I quote earlier:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39, RSV-CE)

Blessings upon your Advent and Christmas! As was announced, we will have our first gathering of 2021 on January 3rd with a mass of thanksgiving for a new year, (still during the Christmas season!) and we will prepare our hearts for the Lord to "move toward" City of the Lord in new ways in 2021!

Blessings,

Jeff