



# 2020 Advent Devotional

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Well, Beloveds, we made it! Advent is finally here. A new church year has begun and a new calendar year is approaching. In the spirit of calling a thing what it is, this year has been seriously crappy. The magnitude of loss and grief that is being felt in our nation and all around the world is heavy. The pandemic of COVID has taken over 250,000 lives and climbing. Health and safety practices have changed our ways of being church together. There is little that will be the same this coming season, but there is a hope on the horizon that brings a sense of relief and hope for the future. That hope is what I want you to cling to as you read this devotional.

The Advent season is all about anticipation, hope and promise. Whether it is the words of the prophets, or the imagery of the Psalms, of the stories of the Gospel or the letters from the apostles, Scripture points us to God, and reminds us of God's faithfulness throughout the ages. The relevance of those words have meaning for us today. Jesus was born. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's Promise. Jesus is coming again.

I am so thankful to all our devotion creators. Your creativity, vulnerability, and honest reflections are a testament to the continuing revelation of God's Word in our midst. There is little need for me to sermonize or theologize with your faithful witness here at hand. The beauty and truth of God's love fills these pages and for that we can all be grateful.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

This booklet and the companion postings that will happen on Facebook and Instagram are only possible because you have responded to the call, to see Christ, to be Christ, living in our midst.

So, Immanuel, as you enter into this season, I invite you to set aside the longing for what once was and embrace the possibility of what is. God is with us, Immanuel, in this booklet, online, through each other and through the world. Ponder with me the hope that is Christ. Anticipate with me the joy that is Christmas. And dwell with me in the promise of God's overflowing and everlasting, radical and redemptive, expansive and inclusive love.

Advent Blessings be with you

*Pastor Priscilla*

Thursday, November 26<sup>th</sup>

Read Micah 2:1-13

*“Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance. Therefore, the LORD says: “I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day people will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: ‘We are utterly ruined; my people’s possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.’” Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot. “Do not prophesy,” their prophets say. “Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us.” You descendants of Jacob, should it be said, “Does the LORD become impatient? Does he do such things?” “Do not my words do good to the one whose ways are upright? Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. You drive the women of my people from their pleasant homes. You take away my blessing from their children forever. Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond all remedy. If a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ that would be just the prophet for this people! “I will surely gather all of you, Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people. The One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their King will pass through before them, the LORD at their head.”*

My generation was taught to believe in the Stranger Danger, that the ones who would hurt us drove white vans and used candy to trap us. While I know that isn’t completely false (I watched Dateline every Friday evening during grad school; the stereotype holds sometimes), I know now that the kidnapper/assaulter/murderer is BY FAR more likely to be someone known to the victim. Honestly, I am more comforted by that, because the alternative is to assume that all of society’s downfalls can be attributed to a shadowy, marginalized “other”-- a Legion, if you will. We are currently living in a time where the language of naming groups of people as “other” and denying the God-in-them is leading to words, theologies, and government policies driven by irrational fear and bone-deep hate. So yeah, I would rather acknowledge that the ones who hurt us are also made in the image of God, live among us, and are in some ways genuinely decent people. It is far more dangerous to assume otherwise.

*Oh God, why are we so blinded by fear and anxiety that we can’t recognize your Spirit in all of us? Why are we so incapable of realizing the humanity in others, and admitting the ways we can hurt others? Teach us to call out the evil in our midst, but to also see that the evil can come from any one of us.*

Hakme Lee

## Friday, November 27<sup>th</sup>

### Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

*“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we shall be saved.”*

*“You have fed them with the bread of tears  
And given them tears to drink in full measure.”*

Poetic language often reveals layers of meaning well beyond those of the actual words and this complexity enriches the Psalms. The Psalm for today is no exception. In this passage the Psalmist(s) is crying out for God’s saving presence and they note that God has given them tears as bread and drink.

Tears. Let’s think of those large droplets that well up in our eyes, roll down our cheeks and fall away from our faces. A whole-body response with shuddering and gasping. An ‘ugly cry’? But in response to feeling in the deepest depths, feeling abandoned by God? Beyond reasonable. Necessary.

Tears. Sometimes it is just not possible to hold them back. Who hasn’t felt that tug at your heart or in the back of your throat? Then, a thin line of tears begins to leak from the sides of our eyes and runs down our cheeks and occasionally collecting at our chin. Sadness and loss and ‘what now?’ To be sure. But, in a sign of relief? Pride? ‘Happy tears?’ Oh, yes, sometimes this too.

Tears. The thin, clear surface of our eyes is protected by a constant, slow flow. Like blood flows through the body bringing all the chemical elements needed for life, tears, too sustain our ‘windows’ to the world. Almost always unacknowledged, virtually unknown, but for dust or onion fumes gently increasing the tide to flush out potential threats. Or, in their senescence do we feel the loss of that protection and sustenance to the eye.

*As we wait for God to arrive to us and to save us, let us give thanks for the bread and drink of tears.*

Scott Shippy

Saturday, November 28<sup>th</sup>

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Yesterday, November 27, Al and I celebrated our 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As happens with weddings, something not planned for had occurred. The ceremony was about to start and Al’s parents, dependent on out of state drivers unfamiliar with the dark country roads of south central PA, were nowhere to be seen. I carefully knelt on the floor of the choir room trying not to wrinkle my gown, attempting to contain my jitters and worries. Then the pastor came in to speak with us. “We will wait until they arrive, no matter how long it takes,” he told us. Meanwhile the organist played on. And on. And on. Twenty minutes later, Walt and Margaret showed up! The organist flipped her music to Trumpet Voluntary, and as we processed into a packed church aglow with candlelight, excitement mingled with a sense of holy relief.

On that wintery day in 1981, I had no idea that the message that would calm my anxious soul was about waiting. In this Advent, as in all others, each of us is waiting for something. As verse 7 reminds us, “...you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For what are you yearning? For what are you hoping? For what are you seeking? God’s love will pour out grace upon grace. For now, just name your need, and wait.

*Lord, you know our deepest needs and desires. Give us the patience to wait in hope. Amen.*

**Lori Roehl**

## Sunday, November 29<sup>th</sup>

### *First Sunday in Advent*

#### **Read Luke 1: 5-25**

*Priests (Dolls and stuffed animals) Walking to the temple to pray.*

*Zechariah is chosen to burn incense in the temple.*

*Angel of the Lord appears at the right side of the incense altar.*

**Angel Gabriel** (Tone): Do not be afraid, good servant of the Lord.

**Zechariah** (Mateo): *(With Fear)* Who comes before me in the Temple of the Lord?

**Angel Gabriel:** I am an Angel of the Lord, Zechariah! Your prayers have been heard, and you wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.

*Zechariah Looks at Angel with Confusion.*

**Angel Gabriel:** You must be joyous and filled with gladness, all those around you shall rejoice at his birth. He will be great before the Lord. Now, he must not drink wine nor strong drink for he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. He will turn the children of Israel to the Lord, and he will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

**Zechariah:** *(In Disbelief)* How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is...advanced in years.

**Angel Gabriel:** *(With Anger)* I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

*Zechariah leaves the temple, mute. The fellow priests are confounded by his silence.*

*Zechariah returns home to his beautiful wife, Elizabeth (Imani).*

*After a few days, Elizabeth conceives a child of the Lord.*

*Elizabeth looking off into the distance, locking all the doors.*

**Elizabeth:** The Lord has given me a great gift, and I am no longer subject to the disdain of the community...

*Fade to Black*

*Prayer: God of amazing promise, teach us to expect the impossible from you. Amaze us with your faithfulness and encourage us to anticipate your presence, always. Amen*

**The Austin Family**





Monday, November 30<sup>th</sup>

Read Isaiah 64:1-9

*"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!<sup>3</sup> When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup>From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. <sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered<sup>[c]</sup> us into the hand of our iniquity. <sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people."*

*"Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend . . . Make the mountains shudder . . . Like fire that makes the pot boil. . . Make the nations shake in their boots."*

What a year we've endured. Senseless killings, racism, pandemics, hate, injustice, terrifying leaders, hunger, homelessness, indifference . . . The list goes on. It often seems there is no end to the atrocities our nation and world have been forced to endure, seemingly at the hands of others. And I doubt I am the only one who has pleaded with God to compel people to their senses.

But that is not how God works. As the chapter goes on, God is angry with all of us for continuing to live selfish, "sin-contaminated lives;" not learning, not trusting, not believing. But God doesn't bring calamity. God will never abandoned us, nor leave us to "stew in our sins." Instead, God brings us to our knees, to seek guidance and direction. Our infinitely loving, inexhaustibly caring parent promises to continue nurturing and guiding us as a potter shaping clay, a vessel to be filled and purposed how we are intended.

Janet Watness





Tuesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>

Read Micah 4:1-13

*“In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.”*

Why, after 62 years hearing Bible passages, have I just now noticed all the people out walking? Walking everywhere: to the well, to the river, to the village, to their neighbors. Was spirituality easier for early people because of the walking?

It was late this summer and the valleys were engulfed in wildfire smoke. We headed to the hills, my dear friend and I. At the end of Mount Baker road, Carrie and I stepped out of the car and into fresh, clean air. Far below the smoke hovered, but up here on God’s mountain the trail laid clear before us. Step by step the dread of life below lifted and for a beautiful afternoon we breathed freer, rejoiced at every moss lined creek, alpine wildflower meadow, unfathomable rock formations. Instead of sitting under Micah’s vine and fig tree, we popped down for a rest in a field full of delicious wild blueberries whose leaves had turned deep red. It was such a delight to be fully awake and present to each other, laughing and singing alleluias with each step.



Micah lived in a turbulent time. We live in a turbulent time. Yet God called Micah out – not only to choose peace amongst ourselves, but also to flow to the mountains and walk in God’s paths.

*God, our light, there are so many great longings in our heart. Help us to place all our fears in your hands, walking in your path, seeing the free gifts all around us.*

**Holly Lund**

Wednesday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>

Read Luke 1:57-66

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him."*

So this past Sunday, we met Elizabeth and Zechariah, who didn't have any kids and thought they were too old to have kids. But an angel told them they would have a kid, and that the kid would be named John. When Zechariah didn't believe the angel, the angel told him he wouldn't be able to talk until it happened. What a weird complication to the story!

In this story, Elizabeth and Zechariah had their baby. How exciting! And they were going to have a really big ceremony in the temple where they would give their kid a name, and make him included in the Jewish faith. When the leaders of the temple asked what they should name their child, Elizabeth said "John", just like the angel said. But the leaders didn't believe her! They had no relatives named John, so she must be incorrect, they thought. So they asked Zechariah. He of course couldn't talk, so he wrote down "John". Right at that moment, Zechariah could talk again! And he started praising God - enough so that the people who heard him thought that this child, John, must be special. The people wondered what great things John would do for God.

What a strange twist in the story - making Zechariah unable to speak. Was it because if the angel didn't do it, Zechariah would have named him "Zechariah Jr."? Was it for dramatic effect, so that people who saw him speak right after naming the child "John" would know that John was extra significant? What do you think?

**Kevin Johnsen and Paul Algeo**

Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>

Read Micah 5:2-5a (NRSV)

*“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; <sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.”*

This passage holds deep memories for me. Each time I hear these words I’m transported through dozens of Christmas scenes, as if telescoping back through parallel mirrors. The scenes radiate far back beyond my own lifetime to the ancient days they speak of, and they project into the future, too, as these passages will be read until Jesus comes again. These memories bring the longing of Advent to light, especially when accompanied by the singing of carols, scents of pine branches—and, of course, candles.

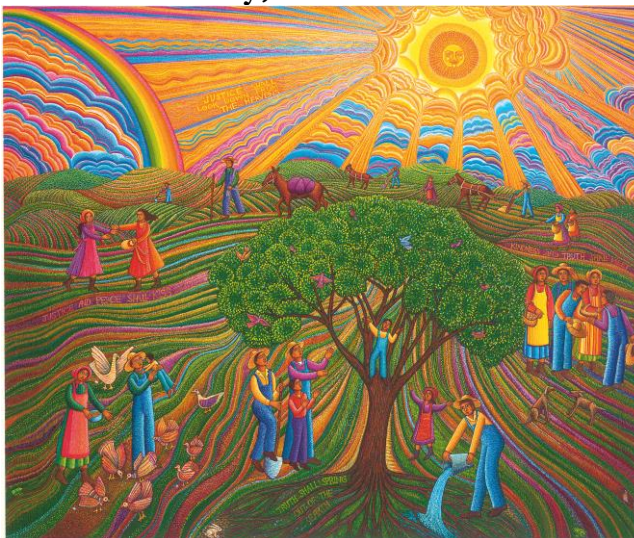
Bethlehem is a city, and *Ephratha*—a magic word we children could easily have made up—is an ancient name for that place, located in hill country of Judah. Bethlehem was chosen *of old* to be the place a savior would be born, a baby, to a world that waited long for his coming and still waits for his return.

Such expectation. Such promise, fulfilled in unpredictable ways beyond anyone’s full imagination then, or now. In a land of kings, he was born to shepherd his people, to give them hope, like his ancestor, David. And to the ends of the warring earth, to the endings of time, *he shall be the one of peace.*

*Loving God, Thank you for coming as a baby into a world waiting with eager longing for you. Help make us ready to receive the full gift of your life, the grace and love, the peace beyond understanding that you bring. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Carol Hinderlie

Friday, December 4<sup>th</sup>



PSALM 85 Copyright 2003 by John August Swanson Serigraph, 24" x 28.75 [www.JohnAugustSwanson.com](http://www.JohnAugustSwanson.com)

***Mercy and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss.***

***Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven. Psalm 85:10-11***

Israel was not alone – and neither are we! In this serigraph, John August Swanson gives us a peek into the splendid earthiness of the restoration God promises to all God’s people. John was inspired to marry the poetry of the psalm with the harvest of the American farmworkers.

This past year we’ve been challenged by the loss of a lifestyle we’ve trusted, and for many of us, hope has been stretched to the breaking point. Plagues have ransacked our harvest and left us hungry, afraid, and wondering how a barren land will nourish us. We’ve seen truth devalued, mercy disparaged, and peace trampled. We long for justice, yet we fear the knowledge that we ourselves fail to exercise the righteousness that would deserve the justice we want to see.

The psalmist sang a promise to Israel that God would not forget them – only their sin -- and in our generation, we can see *who* that promise is! We have beheld his glory and our hope is renewed by the truth that springs from the earth: our Savior Jesus.

We often have to deal with “hard truths.” How can we imagine truth and mercy thriving together, unless they abide in Jesus himself? How can we be embraced by the kiss of justice and peace when we know how harsh justice can be – unless the brilliance of God’s righteousness shines down through Jesus and becomes our peace?

*God of mercy and peace, Thank you for renewing creation and restoring our lives – over and over and over.  
Amen*

**Nancy Lund**

Saturday, December 5<sup>th</sup>

Read 2 Peter 3:8-15a

4Because not everyone has access to Eugene Peterson's "The Message" translation of the bible, I am going to include the entire passage for you as I think/hope you will find it as compelling as I did in being reminded that every day requires us to live our best lives. We chose to do this because God has provided us the spaciousness (salvation) to be all that we can be and to focus on the essentials. So please read (or listen), pause and reflect, and re-read the following:

*2 Peter 3:8-15a The Message -- "Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want any lost [emphasis mine – MLP]. He's giving everyone space and time to change. But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment. Since everything here today might be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day – but we'll [emphasis from The Message] hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness. So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation." Here ends the reading.*

*(Pause, reflect on what stood out to you. Perhaps read/listen again and see if there is something else that calls to you.)*

What an encouragement the writer (scholars are uncertain who it is) provides to us, that we have the opportunity to get our act together, repent and be prepared because God wants us to be able to receive salvation. God is generous with time, yet also warns of the actuality of the Day of God's Judgment - so what you do each day matters!

*Let us pray: We are awed at your gracious love, O God, as we discover how much you want everyone to succeed in changing, to lead a life in purity and peace, and be ready for your day of judgment whenever it comes. Thank you. Amen.*

MaryLou Pederson

## Sunday, December 6<sup>th</sup>

### *Second Sunday of Advent*

#### Read Mark 1:1-8

*“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ <sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

Narration by Wren; Cael as John the Baptist; Setting: a vista: a river flowing in the hillside

NARRATOR: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; a voice of one calling in the wilderness:

JOHN the BAPTIST: Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him

NARRATOR: And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the whole forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean country and the people of Jerusalem went out to him confessing their sins. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

*(Sounds of water, as the people come and are baptized, each one kneels before John and is dunked in the waters and comes up joyous)*

NARRATOR: John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. And he ate locusts and wild honey.

*(John the Baptist dips “locusts” in a bowl of honey. His expression shows he doesn’t really like it)*

JOHN the BAPTIST: After me comes one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

*Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus the Messiah. Amen.*

(ELW Prayer of the Day - Advent 2B)

**Powers Conover Family**

## Monday, December 7<sup>th</sup>

### Read Isaiah 40: 1-11

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, v1, ... In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, v3, ... Every valley shall be lifted up, v4. ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, v5, ... Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; v9, ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, v11, ... “ [from the RSV]*

These words were used by the composer George Frederic Handel in 1741 as he composed his oratorio Messiah, using the King James version of scripture as his guide. The work was originally planned as an Easter offering, however today we often hear it (at least the first section) at Christmas-time. The first section of his oratorio prophesied the birth of Jesus, the second section exalted His sacrifice for humankind, and the final section heralded His resurrection.

Isaiah 40 provides Handel with five pieces, with most of you probably having heard at least parts of this music some time in your lives. Reading the words of chapter 40 you begin to hear the music ringing in your ears, bringing you inspiration and encouragement. In these verses we hear the prophet’s announcement of God’s coming as written to the people of Israel in exile. Imagine the feeling as they heard the promise of being rescued and cared for by a savior who will come with glory and might and will protect them as a shepherd protects and cares for his sheep (something that they could readily identify with being mostly an agrarian society). In our 2020 world of the COVID virus, it seems as if we, too, are in exile from our ‘normal’ lives and as we yearn for rescue and relief, we can find comfort in these verses and the music based on them. Please take 11 minutes to listen to the opening prelude and three songs based on the opening verses of Isaiah 40. This link will take you to a YouTube video of “Scotland’s Dunedin Consort and Players,” led by John Butt, that is considered one of the best renditions of Handel’s Messiah (note their spelling – there are several videos and you want the one that says “MWV 56” in the listing.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JH3T6YwwU9s>

And if you listen further you will hear music based on two of the later verses in our selected passage from Isaiah 40:1-11. I hope your spirit and heart will be moved and healed as you listen.

*Let us pray: O Holy Comforter as we again prepare to celebrate the coming of our Savior at Christmas, we thank you for the gifts of Handel who opens us to hear the words of your prophet in Isaiah in a different way. We are grateful to know we too will be rescued from our current exile from ‘the before times’ to return to community with our beloved congregation. Dear Shepherd, we rejoice that you protect and care for us whatever our circumstances. Amen*

**MaryLou Pederson**



**Tuesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>**

**Read Habakkuk 2:1-5, 3:2-6, 13-19**

I had heard Habakkuk's name before but knew little about him and was perplexed about the relevance of today's text to Advent. I was also tempted to focus on verses 3-5 ("...the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright...") and apply them to the presidential election. Therefore, I am grateful for internet resources that redirected me towards some spiritual semblance of understanding.

***"<sup>17</sup>Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, <sup>1</sup>yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."***

Today apples, bananas, and oranges are the most popular fruits. But in Biblical times, dried fruits such as figs and grapes (raisins) were important as a source of nutrition during the winter. Grapes also provided wine, an alternative to sometimes unsafe drinking water. Olives were cured for later eating as well as pressed into a healthy oil that served food preparation and cosmetic purposes. Obviously, sheep and cattle were important sources of protein.

Despite the potential for catastrophe if all those food sources became unavailable, Habakkuk says "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord." Habakkuk remembered God's goodness in earlier times and concluded that God was still worthy of praise. Even if he suffers from hunger, Habakkuk will rejoice and be joyful in the Lord. Furthermore, he sees God as his Savior (v. 18) and strength (v. 19).

***"<sup>6</sup>For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."***

So now I see the relevance to Advent in verse 3: "...the revelation awaits an appointed time;...though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come." Yes indeed, the expectation of Advent heralds the revelation of our Savior.

***Merciful God, sometimes it seems that we have suffered greatly and that you will never come to our rescue. We are impatient. Yet you already have and continue to do so all our lives. We are grateful for your faithfulness.***

**Terrill Chang**

## Wednesday, December 9th

### Read Luke 1: 67-79

*Elizabeth and Zechariah walking to the Temple. John is 8 days old and in Elizabeth's arms.*

**Priests:** Zechariah, what will you name the child?

**Elizabeth:** His name will be John

**Zechariah:** *(Overjoyed with the Ability to Speak)* Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Prayer: *Holy God, your promises are sure and true. We thank you for your faithfulness. Prepare our hearts to be joyful when you return. Amen.*

**The Austin Family**

Thursday, December 10<sup>th</sup>

Read John 1:1-8

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”*

In Richard Rohr’s latest book, “The Universal Christ,” he claims Christ has always been with us throughout time and history. Our recent book study gave us time to ponder this thought. John writes that Christ was there in the beginning. ALL was created through him. The text named him the Word, the Word with God and the Word that was God. What has come into the world in him was “life,” the light for All people. Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World.” In that Jesus proclaimed God, the “I am” who spoke to God’s people Israel. The Gospel of John is filled with many “I am” statements: Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Bread of Life.”

John said, “The true light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world.” We wait to welcome “I am” into this world this Advent time as a tiny newborn. He is called Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. The Christ who was there from the beginning brings us light to reveal newness of life through one another. In the present challenges we now face, we long to let our light shine. In difficult conversations our light might be hidden as we find our differences too much to bear. A writer of a book, “Difficult Conversations,” Kern Berry, suggested, in a stressful conversation, do these things: Pause, Breathe, and Smile. “PBS.” I wonder how often Jesus did that just after he was born and into his earthly ministry.

*Immanuel, God with us, bring light to our community through your Word that points to the Christ, the Universal Christ present in each of us. Let us pause to recognize how much God loves each of us. Thank you, Christ, for Your love. Amen.*

Al Roehl

Friday, December 11<sup>th</sup>

Read Psalm 126

*“When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. <sup>2</sup>Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”<sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. <sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. <sup>5</sup>May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. <sup>6</sup>Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”*

In the midst of the pandemic isolation, one of the bright lights has been our Dinners for Eight ZOOM gatherings. This group enjoyed our fellowship so much that we made the decision to stay in the group beyond the first year. At a recent gathering, the question was posed, *“What are you looking forward to?”* At the time, my mind went to an activity during the next week.

But, as I read this psalm, I realize that we are all looking forward to *coming home with joy*. This difficult year has not allowed *our mouths to be filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy*. But, the psalmist assures us that the Lord has done great things for us and that we can look forward to a time beyond the uncertainty and stress of this year.

*We look forward to and pray for a time that is filled with laughter and joy, a time released from the bondage of sorrow. Amen*

**Cindy Jackson**

Saturday, December 12<sup>th</sup>

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*<sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil.*

*<sup>23</sup>May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”*

*“Keep on Holding Fast to what is Beautiful”* I Thessalonians 5:21

One of my not so guilty pleasures is re-reading the last chapters, final salutations, of St. Paul’s letters to his little congregations. There is Romans 16 with such a long list of folks to greet, including the Apostle, Junia (!). And there’s Galatians with “Look, at my big letters” because the new creation in Christ is everything. “The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Philippians is imprinted on our hearts, especially this year: Peace beyond understanding for sure.

Oh, I better get to the end of I Thessalonians. These folks were anxious because Jesus hadn’t returned. Of course, 20 violent centuries later, still no return. Paul tells them Jesus is the faithful one, but, in the meantime, for them and for us: Hold on to the good, the beautiful. The Greek word is ‘kalos’ –it’s Jesus word for himself as the ‘kalos’ Shepherd. “Kalos” is more than ‘good’ (Greek: ‘agathos’) –‘kalos’ is gracious, noble, lovely, winsome and more: One Scot, says “Kalos is Bonnie!”

2020 has been a horrible year, and yet, what better time to keep on holding on to the Crucified One who is the Beautiful Shepherd.

*Beautiful Savior, You Hold us and this world you love so much, in your broken hands. Keep us holding fast and reaching out. Amen*

**Paul Hinderlie**

## Sunday, December 13<sup>th</sup>

*Third Sunday in Advent*

Read Luke 1:39-45

*“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*”



*Dear God,*

*Please nurture your people that they may support their loved ones in times of anxiety.*

*In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

**Karen K.**

## Monday, December 14<sup>th</sup>

Read Isaiah 61: 1(b, c), 3, 4 (b), 8, 11(b)

Jerusalem translation

*"He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken;  
To proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison;*

*To comfort all those who mourn and to give them for ashes a garland; for mourning  
robe the oil of gladness, for despondency, praise.*

*They will restore the ruined cities,*

*For I, Yahweh, love justice, I hate robbery and all that is wrong.*

*For as the earth makes fresh things grow, as a garden makes seeds spring up,  
So will the Lord Yahweh make both integrity and praise spring up in the sight of the  
nations."*

These verses speak to me these days. The world, not just the United States, is in turmoil. The poor are poorer, hearts are broken into even smaller pieces, the captives are in greater danger than usual, and more folk are imprisoned than ever before. So many folk mourn and are despondent and many cities are in ruins.

But, there is great, immeasurable hope in these verses. Yahweh loves justice, hates all that is wrong. He gives to his people integrity and the ability for new life to spring forth and rise up. Even in the midst of terror of what is to come and uncertainty for our future, we need to trust in the Lord and do his work here on earth. Rejoice, plant, free prisoners. Feed, clothe, and house the poor, tend to broken hearts.,speak out for those who are voiceless...and love.

Advent is the season when we moan and groan, impatient for the Lord to be born among us. All the world waits, hoping, for new life. We yearn for the promise of new life, light in the darkness, for the source of our life, the promised Christ. Patience is an ancient virtue which seems out of step with our time. Yet we must practice patience and never stop praying and hoping. Patience can mean searching for God's will for us right here and now. God's word will be kept. The Lord Jesus is coming!

**Sherianne Molzahn Caldwell**



Tuesday, December 15th

Read 2 Samuel 6:1-19

SO DAVID WENT TO BRING UP THE ARK OF GOD



... WITH REJOICING

### *The Ark Brought to Jerusalem*

*<sup>6</sup>David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. <sup>2</sup>He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. <sup>3</sup>They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart <sup>4</sup>with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. <sup>5</sup>David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.*

*<sup>6</sup>When they came to the threshing floor of Nakhon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. <sup>7</sup>The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God. <sup>8</sup>Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.*

*<sup>9</sup>David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, "How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?" <sup>10</sup>He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. <sup>11</sup>The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household.*

*<sup>12</sup>Now King David was told, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. <sup>13</sup>When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. <sup>14</sup>Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, <sup>15</sup>while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets.*

*<sup>16</sup>As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she*

*despised him in her heart. <sup>17</sup>They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord. <sup>18</sup>After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty. <sup>19</sup>Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes.*

*Dear Lord,*

*May your Ark come down to us and keep all the people inside and masked up so we may dance in the streets like David in awe of your power and glory. Lord we love you, we worship you, we praise your name. May we never take your mercy for granted. Amen.*

**Mateo Austin**

**Wednesday, December 16<sup>th</sup>**

**Read Luke 1:46b-55**

***“Mary’s Song of Praise - Mary said: With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior. He cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.”***

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was clearly a strong woman. But as she is singing the praises of God, she is also showing us that the same God will help us to be strong.

*(48) God cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.*

*(49) God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy.*

*(50) He always shows mercy to everyone who worships Him.*

Certainly we all know that God has blessed Mary. But God will also bless everyone. He shows mercy to each and every one of us, without exception, and that promise will last forever. Mary is famous for the task that God asked of her, the birth of Jesus. God also has tasks for us. We are asked to become strong, to do the tasks that bring good to people’s lives. We are asked to be humble. We are asked to provide for those who have little or none. And in exchange, God promises to always be merciful to his people. Forever.

You or I will likely never become as well known as the Mother of Jesus. But we will have the opportunity for the same rewards. You are blessed by God. We can become as strong as Mary, simply by following the Savior the same way as Mary did.

**Breanna Keller**

Thursday, December 17<sup>th</sup>

*Read Malachi 3:16-4:6 —“Then those whose lives honored God got together and talked it over. God saw what they were doing and listened in. A book was opened in God’s presence and minutes were taken of the meeting, with the names of the God-fearers written down, all the names of those who honored God’s name.*

*God-of-the-Angel-Armies said, “They’re mine, all mine. They’ll get special treatment when I go into action. I treat them with the same consideration and kindness that parents give the child who honors them. Once more you’ll see the difference it makes between being a person who does the right thing and one who doesn’t, between serving God and not serving him, Count on it. The day is coming . . .” (The Message)*

How in the world did I get this passage? When I saw “Malachi,” I thought of the passage I always liked, *“Bring your full tithe into the Lord’s temple . . .”* and the Lord opens up heaven and pours down blessings beyond our wildest dreams! Who wouldn’t want to give the full tithe, to receive God’s promise when put like that?

But, no! I got a passage full of vitriol and cursing and punishment and destroying and burning, when the God we wait for is a God of peace and love. —I think I’ll skip down to Chapter 4:2-3: *“But for you, sunrise! The sun of righteousness will dawn on those who honor my name, healing radiating from its wings. You will be bursting with energy like colts frisky and frolicking.”* That’s more like an Advent passage—looking forward, waiting for the light, waiting to celebrate the infant Jesus coming into our lives once again. Malachi must have known we needed to hear this good news!

My daily thought has been,

*“This is my Father’s world; why should my heart be sad?  
The Lord is king, let heaven ring; God reigns, let earth be glad!” (ELW #824)*

So as we work through this strange 2020, we are thankful we can pray together: *God, help us to love our neighbors as ourselves; to wear our masks; keep our distances; pray for “light” to come into this world through love, honesty, thoughtfulness, concern, empathy - - - gifts of your love for us. Change the hearts of those who would continue to destroy, rather than build. Let love be our motivation, and help us to bring that light to those who are hurting and grieving and striving for good. In Jesus’ holy name, Amen!*

Maryann Lund

## Friday, December 18<sup>th</sup>

Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

*<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

My translation:

So this thing predicted the future in its time. <sup>2</sup>People who've struggled are gonna be okay. <sup>3</sup>God made more people and it's \*lit; everyone's as happy as you get when you work hard and it pays off. <sup>4</sup>God took down the Man/mean people just like Gideon took down his enemies, which probably means it wasn't expected by your average person. <sup>5</sup>All the pain people feel fighting for justice is gonna further the cause. <sup>6</sup>This kid with \*\*legit power is gonna be born and he's gonna have a lot of names: just call him Jesus. <sup>7</sup>Kid's legit power is gonna keep growing and everything's gonna be \*\*\*chill because of the Kid. Kid's gonna always promote justice and morals. Lots of energy from the \*\*\*\*holy trifacta is gonna get this done.

\*lit – adjective. Fun, awesome, amazing, best thing ever, a party

\*\*legit – real, no joke, take it seriously, factual, reputable

\*\*\*chill – relaxed, peaceful, hakuna matata, worry-free, nice

\*\*\*\*holy trifacta – God, Jesus, Holy Spirit. Amen.

This fancy prophecy sounds like something I wanna get behind. I decided to do my own translation: partially so it made sense to me, partially for it to make sense to y'all, and partially because I don't always like fancy mumbo jumbo when people write or talk. Like, just say what you mean. You don't have to use fancy words all the time to communicate what you're trying to say. I could probably dumb this down even more! "When Jesus comes, everything's gonna be okay." Simple. Sometimes, instead of using fancy words, I just go on

tangents when I talk because I like giving the full picture. But you know, sometimes it's okay to keep things light. Keep it simple. I've sometimes found that spending lots of time trying to make something the best it can be can just mess up yourself, the people around you, or what you were going for in the first place. Not to say you shouldn't ever give 200% effort; putting effort where it's needed and where it's due is super important. But maybe, you don't *always* need the fancy "zeal of the Lord" or "garments rolling in blood burning fuel for the fire." That just sounds really intense. My challenge for you is to do this quick breathing exercise, which I think is gonna be my prayer. Right now. Not kidding. If you don't do it I'll know. Lol okay: you're just gonna breath/inhale and exhale, but break it up into increments. Like taking multiple short inhales to complete one inhale. Make sense? I really hope so. Okay. Here we go.

5 inhales, 5 exhales. 4 inhales, 4 exhales. 3 inhales, 3 exhales. 2 inhales, 2 exhales. 1 inhale, 1 exhale.

Feel better? More relaxed? That was the goal. I do that sometimes when I need to calm my brain.

Now go. Simple. Amen.

**Renee Austin**



## Saturday, December 19<sup>th</sup>

Judges 13:2-24

*A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth.*

*An Angel Appears to Manoah's Wife*

**The Angel of the LORD:** You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.

*The woman went to her husband*

**Woman:** A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'

*Manoah prayed to the LORD*

**Manoah:** Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born.

*God heard Manoah*

*The Angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field*

*Her husband Manoah was not with her*

*The woman hurried to tell her husband*

**Woman:** He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!

*Manoah got up and followed his wife*

**Manoah:** Are you the man who talked to my wife?

**The Angel of the LORD:** I am

**Manoah:** When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy's life and work?

**The Angel of the LORD:** Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her.

**Manoah:** We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you.

**The Angel of the LORD:** Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD.

*Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD*

**Manoah:** What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?

**The Angel of the LORD:** Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.

*Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD.*

*And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched*

*As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame*

*Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground.*

*When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD*

**Manoah:** We are doomed to die! We have seen God!

**Woman:** If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this.

*The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson.*

*He grew and the LORD blessed him*

**Imani Austin**



## Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup>

### *Fourth Sunday in Advent*

The Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and the announcement of God's will for her resonates with me. For I see this experience as not being exceptional but typical of how God works in our lives. True, Mary's specific calling to be the mother of the Incarnated God is exceptional. But the general pattern here has often been repeated in the lives of many — mine included.

To God, Mary was more than a piece of property to be bought and sold from father to husband. God is Love (1 John 4:7-8) which reveals that God is more *relational* than transactional. God saw a priceless treasure in Mary. God places us in a universe that constantly conspires to burnish our rocky souls until they burst with brilliance.

I have seen this in my own life. On January 2<sup>nd</sup> I took my spouse of over 40 years to see her doctor. She was admitted to the hospital. I prayed that God's will be done whatever that was, in God's own time and God's own way. On March 2<sup>nd</sup> she passed. In my grief, I walked with excruciating pain and abundant peace as my co-companions. — Beth Fairchild

*"Do not be afraid, Mary,  
for you have found favor  
with God."*

Luke 1:30b New Revised Standard Version



## Monday, December 21<sup>st</sup>

### Read 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

*“Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, <sup>2</sup> the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.”<sup>3</sup> Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”<sup>4</sup> But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: <sup>5</sup> Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?<sup>6</sup> I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. <sup>7</sup> Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders<sup>[a]</sup> of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”<sup>8</sup> Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; <sup>9</sup> and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. <sup>10</sup> And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, <sup>11</sup> from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.”*

I go through my days spending a lot of focus on things I “need” to have or do, but I less often consider how necessary they are. Maybe I am worried about being tired, about the work I need to get done, someone I had a disagreement with in the recent past, a mistake I made, or food I need to bring home. These things tug at my attention, energy, and overall wear me down, when very often there won’t be a lasting impact from my concerns beyond a couple of days. What I don’t pay attention to are all the things that are taking care of me and working fine, such as close friends I can spend time with easily, transportation that gets me where I need to go throughout the day, good food to eat, communication systems that connect me to family at a moment’s notice, trees all around, and many other things. And these blessings haven’t been present just for a little while, but I’ve been well taken care of my whole life. However, this can’t be the case for everyone. For those without a stable source of income or a dependable home they can call their own, it might be hard to relate to David’s story. With the outbreak of COVID-19, it might be hard for families affected by it to believe that God has cut off their enemies from them. And whenever people are living in prolonged hardship, there will almost certainly be relationships in need of mending. The message could be that even if you are in a period of extended hardship, you are to trust that God will come through, and that worrying won’t help any. It would certainly take some guts to put one’s faith in a challenging situation when better was expected, but it is very often helpful and necessary.

*Dear God, make us bold enough to trust in your word and resilient enough to be able to handle setbacks that seem like they shouldn’t be there. Whether we are King David or anyone else, help us to see the needs of others before we get fixated on any of our own struggles. Give us the stamina to move through these periods of trouble into times worthy of thankfulness. Amen.*

**Daniel Lund**

Tuesday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>

**Read Psalm 96- “*Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth, sing to the Lord, praise God’s name. Proclaim the salvation of God day after day. Declare the glory of God among the nations, God’s marvelous deeds among all peoples.*”**

What a jubilant recognition of God’s glory and kindness among all the people around the world! Can you imagine celebrating the Love of God with hundreds, even thousands of people who are chanting these words together, “Sing to the Lord a new song!”?

Singing together is a wondrous revelation of the Presence of Christ. During these pandemic times I have wept at the loss of singing with our Immanuel community. How I miss hearing all your voices praising God with *I’m so glad Jesus lifted me*, praying to God with *It is well with my soul*, adoring God with *Beautiful Savior*. I continue to weep with the realization that it will be a very long time before we experience that again.

And yet, God, who is wandering around loose in the world, invades our weary hearts with the song of everlasting peace and joy, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and he will be called ‘*Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace*.’ Sing to the Lord! Praise God’s name!

*Holy God, our hearts sing together when our lips cannot. “We want to be ready for the tiny baby who is coming soon.”*

**Joan Lundquist**

Wednesday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>

### **Biblical Text and Commentary**

After a 50-year reign of the pagan King Manasseh in Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel), Zephaniah prophesied to the sins of the nation within the first century before Christ (during the 900's). The Prophet Zephaniah spoke against the pagan culture, immorality of the people, and the defiling of temples.

***“I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals; you will be disgraced no more.***

***And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory and fame to my former exiles, wherever they have been mocked and shamed.***

***On that day, I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction, among all the nations of the earth, as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the LORD, have spoken!” Zephaniah 3:18 – 20 (New Living Bible)***

Now, during Zephaniah's heralding, the son of the pagan king was ruling the nation in the same manner as his father; however, he was assassinated shortly in his rule. His eight-year old son, King Josiah, was installed to rule and reform the nation of Judah. Biblical scholars believe that the prophet's preaching impacted the decision of the young king who transformed the nation back to the Jewish religion and restored the temples.

### **Biblical Reflection**

Today, as we reflect on the prophetic message from the first century BCE<sup>1</sup>, I would say, there are similarities in our society which mimicked Zephaniah's cultural experiences. The pagan king, who believed in astrology (without moral interpretation), had a drastic cultural outlook from that of the Jewish people. And, by today's standards, those racial and cultural differences are mirrored in our nation. The tension, between the ruling class and the inhabitants of the land, are starkly contracted morally. Zephaniah's message is that a reformation is coming, which will restore the exiled people to their homeland and unite the nation to its former glory.

\* What 'signs of the time' do you see playing out in current history, as has happened in the past?

*Dear Lord, please bless those who have the duties of governing the nation to direct it towards the glory of your righteousness; and, please let the residents and inhabitants achieve equity in justice, economic sustainability, and humane treatment. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen!*

**Anthony Tone Austin**

Note<sup>1</sup>: BCE designates "Before the Common Era"



Thursday, December 24<sup>th</sup>

*Christmas Eve*

Read Luke 2:1-14

*“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. <sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

*Be present at our table, Lord.*

*Be here and everywhere adored.*

*These mercies bless and grand that we*

*May strengthen for thy service be.*

*[May feast in paradise with thee.]*

- Attributed to John Cennick & Louis Bourgeois

The divine and natural services we find ourselves called upon in this slice of time can be bewildering. When we remember the simplicity of a deep inhale / smiling eyes behind a mask / the giggle of a baby / the song of a child / warm sun on our faces on a brisk day / a shovel plunging into the soil / a seed growing into a month of harvest / a fresh salad / ..., we see that God's love IS the energy that unites us. Through the suffering, perils unknown, we pray for the patience of timelessness and the wisdom of the ages. At every meal we thank God for this food, this place, and the wonderful beings that surround us.

*May God be with us as we dismantle systems of oppression, may we rebuild with compassion and sustainable peace. May we unite for deeper meanings of the Nativity. Amen.*

**Elise Maupin**

**Friday, December 25th**

*Christmas Day*

**Read Luke 2:15-20**

***“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem”...and they went quickly, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger...But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart..”***

We are following stories of people whose lives are changing. Angels have visited people to give them news about Jesus’ coming. The angels have come to tell the local shepherds to visit Jesus in Bethlehem. Perhaps you also remember that an angel visited Mary to tell her she had been chosen to be Jesus’ mother.

Mary answered the angel beautifully. In the words of a song we often sing together at Immanuel, she said, “I am the servant of my God. I live to do God’s will”. Her life was about to change completely, and her answer was to say, “Yes, I will accept this huge responsibility, and I will do it with gladness and love”.

Mary saw a lot. She was Jesus’ mother, after all. She gave birth to him, she spent time with him, she stood at his cross when he died, and she visited his tomb when he was buried. She was always there with him, and our storytellers say, “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

This means Mary remembered everything that happened. She pondered everything, which means she thought about it for a long time.

Knowing that Mary thought about everything that happened makes me curious. I would like to know what she was thinking. Wouldn’t you like to know, as well?

There are many mothers who ponder things in their hearts, just like Mary. They think about their children and about their lives. Maybe sometime today, you could ask your mother what she has been pondering. She might share some very interesting thoughts.

*Dear God, Bless the mothers and caretakers of all kinds who observe and ponder all things in their hearts. Help us to remember to ask into what they are thinking, so we may benefit from their wisdom. Amen.*

**Karin Holt**

## Saturday, December 26th

Read John 1:9-18

A Blessing from Jan Richardson

### How the Light Comes

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes.

What I know  
is that it is more ancient  
than imagining.

That it travels  
across an astounding expanse  
to reach us.

That it loves  
searching out  
what is hidden,  
what is lost,  
what is forgotten  
or in peril  
or in pain.

That it has a fondness  
for finding its way  
toward flesh,  
for tracing the edges  
of form,  
for shining forth  
through the eye,  
the hand, the heart.

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes,  
but that it does.  
That it will.  
That it works its way  
Into the deepest dark  
that enfolds you,  
though it may seem  
long ages in coming  
or arrive in a shape  
you did not foresee.

And so  
may we this day  
turn ourselves toward it.  
May we lift our faces  
to let it find us.  
May we bend our bodies  
to follow the arc it makes.  
May we open  
and open more  
and open still  
to the blessed light  
that comes.

(Circle of Grace, 2015 © Jan Richardson. [janrichardson.com](http://janrichardson.com).)

Kathy Strand



Sunday, December 27<sup>th</sup>

*First Sunday of Christmas*

Read Matthew 2:1-12

*“Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. At about that time some astrologers from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in far-off eastern lands and have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed by their question, and all Jerusalem was filled with rumors. He called a meeting of the Jewish religious leaders. “Did the prophets tell us where the Messiah would be born?” he asked. “Yes, in Bethlehem,” they said, “for this is what the prophet Micah wrote:*

*‘O little town of Bethlehem, you are not just an unimportant Judean village, for a Governor shall rise from you to rule my people Israel.’”*

*Then Herod sent a private message to the astrologers, asking them to come to see him; at this meeting he found out from them the exact time when they first saw the star. Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him too!” After this interview the astrologers started out again. And look! The star appeared to them again, standing over Bethlehem. Their joy knew no bounds! Entering the house where the baby and Mary, his mother, were, they threw themselves down before him, worshipping. Then they opened their presents and gave him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But when they returned to their own land, they didn’t go through Jerusalem to report to Herod, for God had warned them in a dream to go home another way.*

When I read this text, these final words jumped out at me “God warned them to go home another way.” It seems like now with our current president, we are asked to go home another way quite often. Being told one thing that is not true, and finding our own way to the truth. This has been our way for the last four years.

Looking ahead to January, we can see the bright light of the star, lighting us to a different reality. A fresh new start, one with a new man and finally a woman bringing the light, a beautiful, cleansing light of truth, positivity and a true regard for their fellow humankind. I welcome this new child, this new nation under God moving forward as we have not moved in some time.

*Heavenly Abba/Imma, you are still with us, even if we feel so far from the light. Help us to see where we may bring cleansing light to our brothers and sisters, to carry on through these dark winter months with our eyes on the blessed new light just come into the world. Thank you for making all things possible. Amen*

**Kathleen Seymour**

Feel free to follow these devotions on Facebook and Instagram social media platforms with bonus content.



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