



An Advent Devotional

2020

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL:

This devotional is compiled to be read one day at a time, with each week building on the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The themes will tie into the previous Sunday's worship experience, which invites the congregation to prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus through the traditions of the carols.

- ❖ **SCRIPTURE:** The verses of the text are provided for you so that you might feel free to underline, circle, asterisk and mark up the words. Read and re-read these verses listening for what God might be saying to you through these words.
- ❖ **CONSIDER:** Some articles have been reprinted for your consideration as you ponder the words of scripture and how you might think more deeply about the text presented.
- ❖ **ACTION:** The season of Advent is a season of preparation, but this isn't passive. Each day you will be invited to DO something, sometimes simply lighting a candle on the Advent wreath or sending a card. If this action doesn't make sense, please choose another way to live out the lessons of that day.
- ❖ **PRAY:** Pray for yourself, for our church, for our community, for our nation, and for our world. Feel free to journal the names of individuals who are on your heart on any given day, so at the end of the journey, you can see all the people who you've lifted in prayer over these few weeks.
- ❖ **LISTEN:** As we are listening to music to enrich our season, we will provide a link to a Christmas carol. Perhaps you have a favorite version. Allow the words, the theology of who God is to wash over your spirit. Share your favorite version with a friend or link it on Facebook. Find ways of sharing this journey with others at church and beyond.

Advent 2020

Dear Friends,

This entire year has gone much differently than any of us had imagined. There have been hurdles challenging us as individuals, as a church family, and as a society. There have been blessings - small and big. We have rediscovered the things that are important and some things that have simply been distractions. Many of us have experienced more time alone and more time at home with our families than we had in a long time. We have enjoyed different pastimes and have watched hours of movies and documentaries. We have listened to the news and have learned about how vaccines are developed. It has been quite a year!

As we enter this holy season of Advent, we pray that we will spend some time in the quiet. We pray that we will find new ways of preparing our souls for the presence of God with us. We hope that these pages of devotions and study will be helpful in your own journey of faith this season - so that we are ready to join our hearts with the songs of the angels as we welcome our Savior on Christmas morning!

*Advent Blessings,
Pastor Carol and Pastor Mollie*

THEME: HOPE**SCRIPTURE** **Isaiah 40:1-5** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Comfort, O comfort my people,

 says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

 and cry to her

that she has served her term,

 that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

 double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'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.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

 and all people shall see it together,

 for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

CONSIDER Michael J. Chan, Assistant Professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as published on workingpreacher.org

Isaiah 40:1-11 can be described in one word: "Comfort" (root: n-ch-m). This text is a word of tenderness after a very long and dark night of judgment. The text is clear about one thing though. What happened to Jerusalem happened because of the city's sin: "she has received from the Lord's hand double in exchange for [or because of] all her sins" (verse 2, my translation). But, as is often the case, the violence got out of hand. The reference here to "double" (kiflayim) likely refers to excessive violence on the part of the Babylonians, a risk that God takes when employing empires in the execution of God's will (Isaiah 10:5-15; cf. Zechariah 1:14-17). The "comfort" that Isaiah 40:1-11 offers, then, is not only an attempt to restore hope to Yhwh's relationship with Israel, it is also an acknowledgement on Yhwh's part that the judgment went too far, well beyond what Yhwh intended.

Isaiah 40:1-11 (and in fact much of 40-55) can be read as a prophetic response to outcries of pain like those voiced in Lamentations. Into this void of despair, the prophet speaks

promises, which become the basis for Judah's new future. Knowing, however, that his audience has been traumatized by war, the prophet also works hard to convince his audience that Yhwh's words are actually trustworthy. Isaiah 40:1-11, then, represents the very best kind of preaching. It is the kind of preaching that is grounded in proclamation and promise, but shaped fundamentally by careful listening to those things that afflict the hearts of his audience. Great preaching one might say involves two ears and one mouth.

A new voice joins the scene in verse 3, declaring: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." While the addressees of this text are likely exiles, or at the very least people who have been affected profoundly by the exile, the highway is not for them, it is for Yhwh. The implication of this imagery is that God has abandoned Jerusalem, leaving it to the hands of the Babylonians (cf. Ezekiel 10). Verses 3-5 seek to assure the audience that the time of Yhwh's long absence from Jerusalem has come to an end. Yhwh will return to his holy city and again be accessible: "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (verse 5). The language of revelation in verse 5 is very important. The glory of the Lord needs to be revealed because, from the exiles perspective, it has been hidden, and a hidden God is a terrifying God.

ACTION

Each Sunday in Advent, we light candles on our Advent wreath. Feel free to make your own wreath, using four candles on the outside and one on the inside. They can be flameless (battery operated), tealights, tapers, or even paper candles that you paste a flame on. As you "light" a candle each week, take time to notice the ways that the light grows as we approach Christmas.

Light one Advent candle and sing together this song, set to "Away in a Manger":

A candle is burning, a flame warm and bright;
A candle of Hope in November's dark night.
While angels sing blessings from heav'n's starry sky
Our hearts we prepare now, for Jesus is nigh.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, you have given us a hope that shines a bright light into a suffering world. We are foolish to have hope, and yet it is a gift that you have granted us. Give us eyes to see those who are suffering and hearts of compassion to go to them and offer them the gift of hope. In this way, may hope spread, a light shining and growing, until all people have found hope in the coming of your Kingdom. This Advent, we continue to search for an altogether hope for all people. Amen.

LISTEN to O Come, O Come Emmanuel <https://youtu.be/iO7ySn-Swwc>

November 30



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 40:6-11** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

CONSIDER Michael J. Chan, Assistant Professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as published on workingpreacher.org

Isaiah 40:1-11 seeks to convince its audience that the season of God's hiddenness has come to an end.

Zion herself is then called to the task of preaching: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion herald of good tidings" (verse 9). The message of Zion resembles the message given by John the Baptizer: "Here is your God!" (verse 9, cf. John 1:29-34). But the message

doesn't stop there. The God of Isaiah is never discussed in the abstract, only in terms of the particular words of demand and promise being offered. And for Zion, those promises are that:

“The Lord comes with might, and his arm rules for him” (verse 10)

“His reward is with him, and his recompense before him” (verse 10)

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms” (verse 11)

He will “carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (verse 11).

Zion is called to herald an array of promises for Isaiah 40:1-11's audience. The God announced is both powerful and gentle, able to comfort as well as defend. This God is a shepherd.

ACTION As you consider God bringing hope, gathering the flock, and feeding the hungry, collect some food items to be donated. Take them to the local food pantry or to a PRCC collection point. (Lapps, Macks, Collentines, Klimmecks) If you would rather allow the food pantry to supply fresh produce or meat, send a check made out to, and addressed to:

Maine Township – Food Pantry
1700 Ballard Road
Park Ridge, Illinois 60068

PRAY

Faithful God, we have grown weary. The challenges of the day are too much, and it seems like you are far off. Restore your hope in my heart. Give me the strength to proclaim the message that you are here. Use me this Advent season to share your hope, that all the world might experience your presence in new ways. Amen.

LISTEN to *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus* <https://youtu.be/tGImcXqCWNA>

December 1



SCRIPTURE **Mark 1:1-8** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight” ’,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

CONSIDER Julia Seymour, pastor of Big Timber Lutheran Church in Montana, as published in *The Christian Century*, November 10, 2020.

"What genre is the Bible?" she asked me, over a table full of half-empty wineglasses and scattered paperbacks.

There was a distinct breeze as the heads of everyone else in the book group turned to look at me, pastor, resident theological answer dispenser. I sipped from my glass and said, quietly, "Mythology."

Her eyes grew wide in shock, but I wouldn't retract what I said. I piled on, "Myths give meaning. Calling it mythology doesn't make it untrue. It's just what is. It becomes something more when you accept it, trust it, shape your life around it."

The air in the room had shifted. Someone else cleared their throat and brought our attention back to the book of the month, a novel of magical realism that inspired the whole discussion around genre. I knew the conservative Roman Catholic woman who had asked me the question didn't like my answer. A couple of others present might have liked to continue the discussion, but it seemed like dangerous territory. Best to retreat and live to be heretical another day.

The season of Advent underscores the mythology of our faith. We have a rogue truth teller in John the Baptizer. His wildness is symbolized by his untamed diet and his untanned clothing. His appearance prepares us for the spiritual truth he brings, undomesticated and lush with potential. The truth teller speaks of another one who will be coming at an unspecified time.

The one who is to come is promised to be even fiercer. In preparation, the truth teller moves the cleansing rituals from indoors, a controlled space, to the outdoors. In a river, an uncontrolled venue, the truth teller reshapes the washing act to be one of

reorientation. Those who participate in this ritual are reoriented to the priorities and commands of creation's life force. When they give themselves fully into the power that seeks to shape them, their whole lives will change.

Even as the truth teller pours the water, he speaks of how the one who is to come will do the same act but in a spiritual way. The anticipated fierce one will reshape by divine power, introduced as the Holy Spirit. Mark 1:1-8 states that the one who comes in fierceness comes from the one who gave words to the prophets and will be accompanied by the holy power beyond comprehension. This is not fan fiction; this is canon of the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are so used to the mythology of Christianity that we have become immune to both its power and promise. If we no longer hear the transforming quality of the stories, they shift from myths to fables. We look for the moral of the story and then we move on, lesson learned. The ongoing strength of myths is that they show us the world as it is and how it can be, how it has been, and how it will be. Advent is born out of the dynamic tension of Christian mythology—a celebratory waiting and a redeeming hope.

Joseph Campbell writes, “We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet.” The glorification of the individual in both political and spiritual life has eroded the basic purpose of Christian mythology, which is the formation of a community of the beloved. This mystic sweet communion links those at work in the Lord in the present together with one another and with those already at rest in peace. The stories of our faith are not our history, they are our present. As such, they affect the reality of creation here and now.

The stories of Advent are the myths that shape how we are called to be in the world as followers of Christ. We are the truth teller, the God-bearer, the righteous mensch, the angel-accompanied everyman, the forbearing elder, and the faithful questioner. In our life pageant, we will play all the roles and sometimes more than one at a time. We must also look to the other players around us. We are in a community of supporting roles to one another so that the story plays out to the glory of God and not to our triumph or detriment.

It will always make some people uncomfortable to think about the Bible as mythology. Surely, we must have a better word, a clearer demarcation, for a book full of the stories of how the Eternal Divine has interacted with the mundane throughout time. That is exactly why it is mythology, though. If we do not take the words seriously, they become

the same as any other story we may read, interesting to our imagination and perhaps somewhat inspiring. Nothing more.

When we take the words too seriously, we worship the book itself. Our praise is not directed at the revelation, but at the paper, the ink, and the binding. We deify translation and interpretation. From there, the life of faith becomes one of rules and past and future tense. We struggle to bring present relevance to the worship of a book.

When we hold the writings of scripture lightly, as mythology, the Bible can do what good mythology does. It connects us to the natural world. It broadens our cosmological and theological imagination. It reminds us of the heights of human goodness and the depths of human depravity. The Bible as our shaping mythology locates us in God’s universe and gives us an understanding of what it means to be located therein. It is only from this place that we can truly know what it means to prepare the way.

ACTION

What are some of the areas in your life that need to be “made straight” to prepare the way of the Lord? Write down three things you’d like to work on in your own life that could help you draw closer to God.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

PRAY

Mysterious One, help us to be able to see with our hearts to understand you more fully. We long to prepare the way for your work in our lives, but we don’t always know where to start. Guide us, we pray. Amen.

LISTEN to *Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord* <https://youtu.be/YfxDUNMfry4>

December 2



SCRIPTURE Malachi 3:1-4 *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

CONSIDER *December 6, 2015 United Church of Christ lectionary resources*

The last of the prophets to appear in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures had the benefit of a name that aptly described his function. Malachi, literally "messenger," was sent to bear God's message to the chosen community, to call them back to the holy covenant first extended to their ancestors Abram and Sarai. Malachi-the-Messenger reminded the community that God's covenant was not a burden to be endured, but a source of overwhelming delight, rooted in the knowledge that the One we seek is near.

ACTION

God has sent many messengers over the millennia. We are but the most recent who are asked to bring the good news of God's love to a weary world. So speak a word of love to everyone you talk to today. (If no one talks to you today, seek out someone whose kindness or generosity to others you have noticed and thank them.)

PRAY

Refining God, we do not like to reflect on our imperfections, and yet your cleansing care brings us hope. Allow us to release the pretense and receive your redemption. Our hope lies in you. Thank you for those messengers who have helped us on our journeys. May we shine your light for others. Amen.

LISTEN to *People, Look East* <https://youtu.be/F8GNlRcBdvs>

December 3



SCRIPTURE **Luke 1:26-38** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit

will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

CONSIDER Anne Gregory, who serves as an Ecumenical Officer with the Church of Christ in Thailand. Her appointment is made possible by your gifts to Disciples Mission Fund, Our Churches Wider Mission, and your special gifts.

Did Mary understand what God’s messenger was telling her? Did she expect her child to end up in a palace, wearing rich robes and issuing commands to his people? Did she think he was going to drive out the Roman colonizers? Did she really believe this child was going to live forever, as the messenger said?

It seems the angel left out a lot of explanations. Still, Mary said, “Yes.” And if we read on a little in Luke’s Gospel, we hear her compose a mighty psalm—one that shows much more understanding of God’s ways than many of us ever gain.

Mary knows, so early on, that God scatters the proud, and raises up the humble. That God fills the hungry with good things, but the rich are sent away with nothing. (Lk. 1:51-53)

It seems that neither Mary nor Joseph were ordinary people. At all. Each was faithful, humble, and open to God. What wonderful parents they must have turned out to be!

ACTION Mary was young, likely still a teenager, when she answered yes to God’s call. Honor her great faith by encouraging a young person from our congregation who may be struggling with not being able to be in school, missing their friends, or just feeling lost and alone. Contact Chris Chandler (773) 633-8324 or crchandler@outlook.com to get the name and address of a PRCC middle school or high school student to send a note, an email, or a text.

PRAY

Holy God, sometimes we have not been ready to hear your call, much less to say yes. We pray for faith and courage to answer the calls you place in our lives. We pray for our youth people, that they would confidently walk in their faith and provide leadership to

the whole church as only young people can. Allow each of us to see the ways that we are extraordinary and make ourselves available to You. Amen.

LISTEN to *Hail to the Lord's Anointed* <https://youtu.be/Fh6gux9DXHs>

December 4



SCRIPTURE **Luke 1:57-66** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours 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 neighbours, 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.

CONSIDER Rev. Tony Robinson, devotional written for the United Church of Christ https://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_for_small_group_discussion_only_wonder

It would be an odd person who, looking upon the face of a newborn baby, did not experience wonder. Wonder at brand new life. Wonder at the ever-changing expressions on that tiny face. Gazing on a newborn's face is akin, I've thought, to watching the shifting sky and clouds above. And wonder at what this child shall become

The particular baby of Luke's story is John, who will be John the Baptist, herald of Jesus. John's birth is attended by an extra dollop of wonder. His until-now childless parents are old when he is conceived. His father, Zechariah, had been struck instantly speechless for doubting the angel Gabriel's promise of a child. Now, suddenly, Zechariah finds his tongue when he confirms the mother, Elizabeth's, unconventional choice of a name—"John." "But no one in your family has that name!" the kinfolks protested. "His name is John," wrote Zechariah—underlines for emphasis.

A child was born to the wrong people. Speech, suddenly gone, just as suddenly returns. An unprecedented name. Something strange, something wondrous, is afoot.

Wonder abounds. Which is a good thing, a very good thing. St. Gregory of Nyssa once commented, "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder makes us fall to our knees."

ACTION

A name is powerful; to have your name remembered is a sign of respect and honor. So take a moment to honor a relative or an old friend to whom you haven't spoken in a while, and give them a call to remind them that they are loved and valued.

PRAY

For this special season of wonder that is Advent, I praise and thank you, O Lord. Let the healing magic of wonder rest upon me this day.

LISTEN to *In the Bleak Midwinter* <https://youtu.be/VAQ2MZxxlvI>

December 5



SCRIPTURE **Luke 1:67-80** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands 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
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

CONSIDER Rev. Kathryn Matthews, (matthewsk@ucc.org) is the retired dean of Amistad Chapel at the national offices of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio (<https://www.facebook.com/AmistadChapel>).

Like Mary, Zechariah uses language so lovely that we understand why this is really a song rather than a speech (even though Luke says in verse 67 that he "spoke" it), and why the church has loved it, and sung it, for centuries: this hymn connects the early Christians' story to the story of Israel, remembered, redeemed, restored. Israel, pressed down and even flattened by one empire after another (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome), is never obliterated or without hope of a future, because they know that God's promises are true. Zechariah reviews those promises, recalling the voice of God through the prophets, the gift of the great king, David, and of course mercy and salvation even in the face of sin and in the wake of suffering, destruction, and death. In his book, *Luke for Everyone*, N.T. Wright reminds us that our elders are the ones "who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumour of hope," and he notes that Zechariah "has pondered the agony and the hope for many years." In Zechariah's song, then, we hear the "larger hope" that "[t]hings will be put right" in the end.

One of the most haunting lines from this first chapter of Luke's Gospel is back in the angel Gabriel's promise to Zechariah that this child, who would of course gladden the hearts of his mother and father, would also "turn the hearts of parents to their children" (v. 17). In his sermon, "An Intrusive Absence," Walter Brueggemann recalls the long wait and deep hope of the people of Israel, who looked for Elijah the prophet to return because they remembered him as one who "upset everything, healed things, made a difference." They trusted that God would act to make things right, through one who would come into their midst to "reconcile the generations....[and] heal our families of old and young, poor and rich, of have-nots and haves...." Perhaps we could begin to reach across the divide between "the old and young" if we learn to appreciate the distinctive gifts that the different generations bring to the table. For example, the Rev. Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, calls Elizabeth and Zechariah's generation meeting with the generation of young Mary (vv. 39-56) a "Pentecostal moment" (see "Where is God's Spirit at work today?" <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/ready-set-grow/video/otis-moss.html>).

ACTION

God's grace never ends. God forgives and forgives and forgives. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you owe an apology? Seek them out and in the name of the God who never turns you away, do it. (And if you are truly so fortunate that neither of these apply to you, then think of someone whose kindness and generosity you have noticed, and thank them.)

PRAY

Out of the embrace of mercy and righteousness, you have brought forth joy and dignity for your people, O Holy One of Israel. Remember now your ancient promise: make straight the paths that lead to you, and smooth the rough ways, that in our day we might bring forth your compassion for all humanity. Amen.

LISTEN to *Gloria/ Hark the Herald* <https://youtu.be/uvgOaMBxxUE?t=68>

December 6

The Second Sunday of Advent

THEME: PEACE

SCRIPTURE Psalm 91:9-16 *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

CONSIDER Luci Shaw, as published in *The Christian Century*, November 18, 2020

Some days I notice angels everywhere—
light glancing through windows, flying
through stained glass as if through air.

A human ear shaped like a wing,
curiously curving to admit a flare
of sound, tells me of angels listening
to my listening, even as I sing.

What is that vagrant cloud, that glistening?
Often in the blue of heaven a trail
of light from a plane to me appears
as a heavenly body playing there
beyond my grasping. Or, at night, the tail-
light of a truck sends a red spark
like some twinkly being in the dark
trailing her glory robe in sight
of stationary sightseers. Yesterday, morning light
and over the marsh a winged flight,
another view—Gabriel, or a Great Blue?
But often, nightly, through the skylight
stars multiply like silver sand. And near to far
I link myself again with, Oh—there!
One bright, angelic, particular star.

ACTION

Light your second Advent candle and sing together this song, set to “Away in a Manger”:

A candle is burning, a candle of Peace;
A candle to signal that conflict must cease.
For Jesus is coming to show us the way;
A message of Peace humbly laid in the hay.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, you have given us a peace that is unlike the peace that this world gives. It is not a peace born of a lack of conflict, but a peace that means justice has been achieved for all people. We seek that peace today, knowing you have brought it into being and

that there is still so much more to do. This Advent, we continue to search for an altogether peace for all people. Amen.

LISTEN to *Angels From the Realms of Glory* <https://youtu.be/PrLoWt2tfqg>

December 7



SCRIPTURE **Luke 2:8-14** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

CONSIDER Lee Hull Moses, pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Greensboro, North Carolina. She is author of *More than Enough: Living Abundantly in a Culture of Excess* (Westminster John Knox Press), article from *The Christian Century*, December 22, 2016.

The way Luke tells the story makes me think he knew something about music. Maybe he was a singer himself. Maybe he’d been in the choir, maybe played the lute or the drum. He knew how a song can say something mere words cannot. Known for his extraordinary storytelling, Luke knows that some stories can only be told in song.

So Luke tells us about that angel choir, those angel songs that cut through the darkness of night. The one angel calling first, one voice piercing the deep blue star-studded sky. "Do not be afraid," she tells the frightened shepherds, who are afraid anyway, for who wouldn't be, when all they were doing was watching their sheep on a regular night with not much happening. Who wouldn't be frightened when the sky lights up and the voice of the first angel pierces the sky? Do not be afraid, she says, but they are afraid anyway, because the night is dark and danger lingers in the shadows.

I've been re-watching *Gilmore Girls* these past few weeks, as a light-hearted reprieve from the news of the day. In one scene early in the series, 16-year-old Rory has broken up with her boyfriend Dean, because he said "I love you" and she couldn't say it back. She wanted to, we find out later, but her tongue gets tied, her voice stuck in her throat,

and she can't find the words to tell him how she feels, so she doesn't say anything. Later, in a town meeting where some conflict arises about the town troubadour, Rory stands up to defend him. "Sometimes you need a song," she says. "Sometimes you can't find the words to say exactly how you feel, and that's when you need a song."

The shepherds need a song on this night, when the shadows surround them, and they are startled by the light of the angels. They need a song to understand the first angel's words. "Do not be afraid," she says, but that's not all she says. Do not be afraid for I bring you good news; a baby has been born. A baby has been born for you.

Then the whole sky is bright and filled with angel wings as mighty and as gentle as the strings of a violin, and a whole choir of angel songs captures the good news of the love that is born in the darkness of night.

In Aleppo this week—in the same part of the world where Mary and Joseph once wandered, looking for a place to stay, where they would soon take their baby boy and flee the terror of the king and become refugees running for their lives because their government would no longer protect them—in that same part of the world this week, the children of Aleppo fled. Those were the lucky ones; there were others who were trapped with no rescue in sight when the ceasefire would not hold and their government would not protect them.

And when I tucked my children in at night this week, in their safe, warm beds, I couldn't help but think of the mamas in Aleppo holding their children, and Mary wrapping her baby in swaddling cloth, listening for the sound of angel song.

If not for the angel song, this would be a story about any other baby, any other mama wrapping her baby up against the cold night air. Do not be afraid, the angel says, but we are afraid anyway, because the night is dark and danger lingers in the shadows, and we pray urgently for the light to come.

But the angels do sing, and the whole sky lights up with their song that captures the good news of the love born in the darkness of night. And then, by the light of the angel songs, we can see the glimpses of hope that were hidden in the darkness before: the hands of the rescue workers reaching into the bombed-out rubble, refusing to go home, even as the bombs continue to go off around them. The voices of the protesters who will not remain silent while the government stops protecting its people. The acts of ordinary kindness and generosity that mark most of our days if only we look for them.

Do not be afraid, the angel sings to the shepherds, and they go to Bethlehem to see.

ACTION

Angels are everywhere. During the last 10 months, angels of mercy have been found in many places – especially in hospitals. But even angels can get discouraged. Send a note to hospital workers, nurses, or doctors today telling them how much their dedication, sacrifice, and compassion mean to all of us.

For Lutheran General: % Nursing Staff Office - 5 South
 Advocate Lutheran General Hospital
 1775 W. Dempster St.
 Park Ridge, Il. 60068

For Amita Resurrection: c/o Holly Seletos
 Amita Resurrection Medical Center
 7435 W. Talcott Ave.
 Chicago, Il. 60631

PRAY

God of the light and the dark, surprise us with your song. Remind us of the ways you are actively bringing hope to the hopeless.

LISTEN to *Angels We Have Heard on High* <https://youtu.be/VAMzAIH12yc>



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 64:1-9** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

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!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
 you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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.
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.
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.
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 us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
 we are the clay, and you are our potter;
 we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
 and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

CONSIDER James Brenneman, president of Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, as printed in *The Christian Century*, November 18, 2008.

On the last weekend in September, I walked into a department store and was blinded by the sparkle of Christmas lights, ornaments and lawn Santas. Apparently in the stores, the longer the waiting period the better: it means more sales, increased profits and hopefully more satisfied investors. The market can always come up with another sales gimmick to entice us into the Christmas spirit. In the church, however, we are more restless, more eager to get through the waiting period. We long for the advent of Christ.

The Advent prophet, Isaiah, expresses the frustration that many of his fellow believers feel after years in exile. They are longing for God to re enter their lives in tangible, this-worldly ways. It's been a long time since God sent pillars of cloud by day and fire by night. It's been a long time since God rained manna from heaven or sent plagues upon Israel's enemies. It seems to these Jewish refugees that God is no longer minding the store.

Isaiah refuses to pretend Advent anymore. Too many years have come and gone without a sign of God's presence. In blunt and violent terms, the prophet begs God to come out of retirement: "Tear open the heavens and come down," shake up the landscape with forest fires—enough to boil water. Make the mountains quake. Isaiah seems to be saying, "Don't just stand there silently, God. Do something!"

The prophet Isaiah also laments that in their waiting, the people are emotionally withdrawn and have lost their will to stay in touch with God, to walk anymore in God's ways. Why? "Because you . . . hid yourself, we transgressed." "There is no one who calls on [God's] name" anymore. Others have described the absent God as the *Deus absconditus* or "hidden God" who is the "Elusive Presence."

Have you ever felt like Isaiah or the people of his day, wondering where in heaven or on earth God is? Have you tried to pray and felt nothing, seen nothing, sensed nothing for a long time? Have you ever been ready to throw in the towel or felt the sad weight of Bob Dylan's song, "Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door," with no one answering? If so, you've entered Advent, when we cry out to God to "tear open the heavens and come down." We beg God to come down, to enter the public squares of life, to blast our enemies to smithereens, to holler into our existence with a cosmic bullhorn. We want a loud and noisy Advent.

But most often we get *Deus absconditus*, God who hides from us, whose presence is sometimes more elusive than we want it to be. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, said of Christ's first Advent, "The Lord did not come to make a display. . . . God came to be made known according to our need and as we could bear it." G. K. Chesterton said, "God came down and slipped in the back door . . . to surprise us from behind, from the hidden and personal parts of our being . . . as if we found something at the back of our own hearts that betrayed us into good."

God sometimes chooses to enter our world in a barn at the edge of town. God breaks open the heavens and comes down through the back door of life's hovels. There Isaiah's prophecy came to pass. And here too, in a world gone awry, the prophecy of Isaiah still comes to pass. "We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Some church traditions refrain from singing Christmas carols during Advent. Purple, the color of remorse, adorns the altar. It's a ritual warning us not to greet God prematurely or presumptuously—that is, at least not until we acknowledge that we are

clay in the divine potter's hands, people chastened by God's silence, ready to be molded anew as the "work of [God's] hand."

Advent is mostly about a God who "breaks open the heavens and comes down," not stopping halfway. God in Christ comes all the way down to meet us in our sinfulness, down into a manger bed, down to the cross, down to the grave.

We spend too much time trying to work out the details of when and how Jesus will come again. In the process, we fail to grasp the truth that Christ has come not once, not twice, but hundreds of times as God-with-us, our Savior. The Advent of God happens every time we repent, turn from our sins and seek God's forgiveness. The hidden God, Deus absconditus, becomes God our Savior. Advent is worth the wait!

ACTION

Faith, like love, is as much a verb as a noun. Sometimes we forget that we need to look and listen for God. Turn off all the noise for an hour today. Go about your business listening in the silence for God as you move through these moments.

PRAY

Patient God, teach us how to wait. Help us to create space for silence and quiet as we wait. Help us to not overschedule every moment, as we are accustomed to doing. Quiet the noise so we might begin to see the ways your are among us even now. Amen.

LISTEN to *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* <https://youtu.be/JHmp7RRiUho>



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 9:2-7** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

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.
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.
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.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
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 onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

CONSIDER Erin Martin, pastor serving at Wesley United Methodist Church in Eugene, Oregon, as printed in *The Christian Century*, December 10, 2007.

The build-up to Christmas bombards our senses—the constant blinking of Christmas lights, the pervasive wafting of pine-scented potpourri, the drone of “sleigh-bells ringing.” No wonder we lose sight of what we’re really looking for in Advent, the signs of the one who is to come.

From the darkness of his prison cell, John hears about the ministry of Jesus and sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Without being able to see for himself, John must grasp the larger messianic meaning of Jesus’ ministry through his disciples. Jesus responds with a direct appeal to their senses. “Go and tell John what you hear and see.”

The proof Jesus offers that the kingdom of God has drawn near is the healing of our bodies, the restoration of our senses. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame walk. The poor hear good news. Unfortunately for John, the only glaring absence in this list of fulfillment from the prophet Isaiah is the release of the captives! John never will go free. But just in case people use John’s imprisonment to question significance of John’s life,

Jesus turns to the crowd and asks them, “When you went out into the wilderness to see John, what did you go out to look at?” Three times he tests the crowd’s ability to perceive through their senses the activity of God in the person of John. Finally, in the echoes of Isaiah once again, Jesus says, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” John is more than a prophet; he is the preparer of the way.

The challenge for us in Advent is to allow Jesus to restore our senses, to have him open our eyes and ears so that we can go and tell others what we hear and see. Admittedly, from the darkness of our prison cells, it can be hard for us to grasp the larger messianic meaning of Jesus’ ministry. That’s the problem with the darkness; we lose our way, becoming blind and deaf to the fact that the kingdom of God is all around us.

In her Advent devotional *Night Visions*, Jan L. Richardson offers this: “These days bathe us in images of abundance and happiness, but we pray for those who do not find in this time a season of goodness and light. Give us eyes to see into the shadows cast by the millions of blinking lights; ears to listen beyond the carols to hear the anguished weeping; and hearts that long for the liberation your advent truly brings.”

Ultimately, the good news of Advent is that “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2). It’s the increasing light of Advent that can help us cut through holiday haze and prepare to welcome the one who is coming.

ACTION

Rejoice today! Look for the light in the darkness, and write down three blessings.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

PRAY

God, if I am honest, the darkness is more obvious than the light. Especially at this time of year when the days are shorter and the night is longer, when we are isolated and cut off from human touch...it is easy to be consumed by despair. Shine your light in our lives. Thank you for the ways that your light, your goodness, your joy is present. Help me to focus on what I need to focus on and to let go of that which is simply dragging me down. I pray in the healing name of Jesus, the Light of the World. Amen.

LISTEN to *The First Noel* <https://youtu.be/K-FWGsfmGjw>

December 10



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 11:1-10** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

CONSIDER Rev. Kathryn Matthews (matthewsk@ucc.org) is the retired dean of Amistad Chapel at the national offices of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio (<https://www.facebook.com/AmistadChapel>).

This week's passage from the prophet Isaiah is even more powerful if we read what comes before it: at the end of chapter ten, Isaiah says that God is going to cut down all the trees, and that's why there's "a stump" when this passage begins. It's not an accident, but the result of God's sweeping movement across the land. It's also not a pretty picture--the stump appears beyond life and hope. Mary Hinkle Shore says that it's "the result of the Almighty's plan for clear-cutting"; we know that clear-cutting looks ugly, but it's a good way for the prophet to get the people's attention. Then, just when things appear to be at their worst, Isaiah holds out hope.

We aren't sure whether this text dates from the time of the threat from the Assyrians (8th c. BCE) or from the Babylonians (6th c. BCE), but in any case, the political situation of the people of Israel is in total disarray. Into this setting, just when things appear hopeless and the future looks bleak, the prophet promises that God will send a king, from the great and glorious line of Jesse, who will rule with wisdom, with justice toward all and with mercy toward the most vulnerable in society. The little ones, the defenseless ones, the innocent ones will be protected and cared for. Isaiah urges the people to remember who they are as the people of God, reminding them that their power, their life, comes from goodness, not from greed.

The promises are astounding, almost unbelievable: the order of nature that we all learned about in science class, the violence of predators that we accept as natural, will be overturned. In that great day, the rules of life will be changed, bent in the direction of gentleness and peace, of shalom. "Shalom," Walter Brueggemann says, "is creation time, when all God's creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating." Things are going to go back to the way they were originally created, the way things were meant to be, recalling the story of the Garden of Eden. Brueggemann calls this vision "the impossible possibility of the new creation!" We are told that we can actually look forward to a "detoxified" world, including nature itself, that will be safe for all, not just the strong and the armed.

A "detoxified" world: powerfully striking words when held up next to the nightly news reports about pollution, violence and climate disasters, or the state of our political discourse today. Can we even imagine such a world? Clearly, the prophet can. It's thought-provoking, and very challenging, too, to read Genesis 1:30 alongside this passage from Isaiah, for we always seem to skim over the part where God gives "every

green plant for food" to "every beast of the earth." What, indeed, was the original plan of God--perhaps, was creation meant to be free of killing? Could such a wonderful dream be true?

How will the great transformation, the great "making right of everything," happen? Shore says that the prophet is making a point about how great the promised ruler will be, so "charismatic," so wise, so good, that even nature will be "transformed"; the ruler will possess the gifts of "knowledge and the fear of the Lord," but also, Shore writes, "what is perhaps the most important characteristic a civil servant can possess: the recognition that he is not God, and that the One to whom he must give account never ceases to defend the widow and the orphan."

So, ironically, this leader who is so great and good that he up-ends the "natural" order of the strong eating the weak is himself full of humility. And humility will prove stronger than the military might of any empire. We think of Jesus, who wasted no energy on the legions of the Roman Empire, but kept his attention on the sick, the marginalized, and the broken, and exerted his power on their behalf.

We hear this beautiful text in the season of Advent, with our hearts longing for shalom, for peace and wholeness, healing and justice for all of God's children. We read it during Advent, looking forward to the fulfillment of the promises of God, a time of all things being made right. We read it as followers of Jesus, the One who was full of power yet extended mercy toward the most vulnerable and healing toward the broken, the powerful One who was humble even so.

The image of Jesus as One who disturbs the order of things doesn't sit so well with the domesticated Jesus who consoles us individually but has little to say about the way we've ordered things in society, where the strong prey on the weak and are richly rewarded for doing so. The little sweet baby Jesus is going to ask hard questions as he inaugurates the Reign of God and the unfolding of the promises of God. Indeed, we read this poem from Isaiah during this time of waiting, reflecting on what we yearn for most in our hearts, and what we are doing to prepare for the fulfillment of those hopes.

In his book, *Peace*, Brueggemann encounters these beautiful promises of peace very personally, at first rejecting them as "unimaginable!" precisely because they are "so abnormal," and yet he can't resist taking a second look, and coming to perceive what is truly "normal"--peace and unity and healing--while the strife and discord and suffering that surround us are "the real abnormalities of life" that we have come to expect and live with.

These are powerful words for this Advent season! We are wrestling in more than one arena of life with the meaning of what is "normal"--in politics, in the environment, in the economy, and we face the challenge of protecting the most vulnerable, those who are often voiceless, in each of them. Nation after nation faces division and unrest even after new leaders are put in power, and we face a new year feeling especially unsure of what is ahead. It's become normal, for example, to hear about the death toll in Syria, to hear that the last hospital in Aleppo has been destroyed and to wonder how many more children have been pulled from the rubble, dust-covered and bewildered in their pain.

The new normal continues to mean a gauntlet of security measures just to board an airplane, press releases about the latest toxic toy (a "detoxified" world would definitely protect "the little ones" from our poisons), lawsuits over miracle drugs gone awry and statistics about opiate addiction ruining our small towns--all of this so "normal" that we forget who we are, too, as children of God who have been promised better than this. In this Advent season, though, Brueggemann reminds us of "the song of the promises and the image of the poets, the voices of Moses and of Jesus, that a new world is about to be given, and we can trust ourselves to it and live as though in it."

What makes you get up in the morning, and move through your day, and, at times, deal with discouragement, injustice, and despair? If you could describe your greatest longing for your community, this nation, and the world, what would it be? What sort of leadership do the church and society and families long for? The image of a child in the Isaiah reading suggests vulnerability and gentleness. Instead of sentimentally romanticizing this child, we might recognize with hope the upside-down, unexpected ways of the Reign of God, when the mighty, the violent, and the "worldly wise" are, surprisingly, eclipsed by the emergence of peace and justice and healing, of gentleness in the littlest ones of all. Here, we hold in our mind's eye the little boy pulled from the rubble in Aleppo who touched the hearts of many around the world. Didn't the image of the little boy, rubbing his dusty eyes, have the power to inspire work for peace and the cessation of hostilities?

There is much to worry about in the world (just ask any parent or grandparent). And yet, God promises that the very last word will indeed be God's, and continues to utter a word of hope to each community of faith, in its setting, and in this moment of history, calling us today, in our own moment in history, to shape communities of justice and healing. Isaiah speaks of natural enemies living peacefully in a place where there is no more hurt. What would this holy mountain look like, for us? What would it look like, where you live, if "they" did not "hurt or destroy" any more?

You may find it helpful to read the Gospel account from Matthew (3:12) for this Sunday, too: According to Douglas Long, the Pharisees and Sadducees were "natural enemies"--at opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum--and yet they united in common cause against the threat that Jesus presented to all that they wanted to protect. Isn't it ironic that there are two different images of natural enemies in the Isaiah and Matthew readings? In the first, those who were enemies are reconciled and live peaceably in the Reign of God. In the second, those who are enemies temporarily ally themselves to resist the Reign of God as it draws near in Jesus Christ.

What are we protecting? What would cause us to join with those with whom we strongly disagree? How does the Good News preached and embodied by Jesus--and the repentance preached by John--threaten "our little world" and its values and systems, and the greater one as well?

Just before the end of World War II, a Jesuit priest was executed on false charges connected with the plot to kill Adolf Hitler. Alfred Delp did participate, however, in the resistance movement against Hitler, and his writings from the terrible experience of spending years in a Nazi prison inspire us in this Advent season, seventy years later, in whatever difficult days we may find ourselves: "Advent is the time of promise," he wrote; "it is not yet the time of fulfillment. We are still in the midst of everything and in the logical inexorability and relentlessness of destiny. Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But round about the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on them already the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and voices, not yet discernable as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening, today."

It is happening, today. Dare we believe in "the eternal realities," and trust in the "radiant fulfillment to come," and step forward in faith, walking in the light of the promises of God?

ACTION

Who couldn't use a few moments of peaceful contemplation of this beautiful vision of the world and our place in it? Tonight at 8:30 join Cindy Klimmeck for 30 minutes of Yoga Nidra. You can call in, or join the Zoom (You can turn off your camera if you don't wish to be seen.)

Here is the link: <https://us04web.zoom.us/j/9671602932>

Meeting ID: 967 160 2932

New password to enter – 227332

Or join her meditation experience tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. Same link.

PRAY

Laboring God, with axe and winnowing fork you clear a holy space where hurt and destruction have no place, and a little child holds sway. Clear our lives of hatred and despair, sow seeds of joy and peace, that shoots of hope may spring forth and we may live in harmony with one another. Amen.

LISTEN to *O Come All Ye Faithful* <https://youtu.be/XI2c9yptr4U>

December 11



SCRIPTURE **Psalm 34:1-10** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out,
and he went away.

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.

Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.

The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

O fear the Lord, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.

The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

CONSIDER Nancy deClaissé-Walford is professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Psalm 34 is classified as an Individual Hymn of Thanksgiving.

Fifteen individual Hymns of Thanksgiving occur in the book of Psalms. In them, psalm singers give thanks to God for deliverance from various life-threatening situations: illness, enemies, and dangers. Two aspects of Psalm 34 intrigue this reader.

First, the superscription of the psalm places it within a particular life situation of King David: “when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.” The only story in the biblical text that might be associated with Psalm 34’s superscription is found in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. There, David fled from Saul and went to King Achish — not Abimelech — at Gath. But Achish recognized him and David was afraid for his life, so he feigned madness to disguise his true identity.

Ascertaining a specific historical event in the life of David in which to place Psalm 34 is not as important as using the setting to gain insight into the meaning and intent of the psalm. In Psalm 34, David praises God for deliverance from a life-threatening situation — perhaps his encounter with King Achish of Gath, later remembered as Abimelech.

Second, Psalm 34 is an alphabetic acrostic. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Acrostic poems were the works of highly skilled literary artists and functioned in ancient Israelite literature in a number of ways. Acrostics were most likely memory devices to aid in private and public — that is, individual and corporate — recitation; in addition, literarily, they summarized all that could be said or that needed to be said about a particular subject, summing it up from alif to tav, from A to Z. Adele Berlin suggests further that in an acrostic, the entire alphabet — the source of all words — is marshaled in praise of God. One cannot actually use all of the words in a language, but by using the alphabet one uses all potential words.

Thus, Psalm 34 is an individual hymn of thanksgiving of David sung on the occasion of the deliverance of his very life by God, perhaps as the ultimate word about God’s help to those who are in need (a summary of all that could be said about God’s help in the face of oppression and hurt). Readers and hearers, then, should heed the words of Psalm 34, a song of thanksgiving for deliverance and find in them hope for deliverance from various oppressive situations. In the focus text, Psalm 34:1-8, the psalmist first offers praise to God:

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD (1-2).

Blessing and praising God are common themes in the Psalter. The word “bless” comes from the same root as the Hebrew word “knee.” Thus, to bless is literally “to bend the knee” — to kneel before a sovereign. The words “praise” and “boast” come from the same Hebrew root word, the word that occurs in the phrase “hallelujah.” Thus, praise will be in the mouth of psalmist; while the psalmist’s inmost being (here translated as “soul”) finds its praise (“boasts”) in the Lord.

The psalm singer then states the reasons for offering praise to God:

I sought the LORD and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears. (4)
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble. (6)

Two more common themes of the Psalter occur in these verses. God delivers (*natsal*) and God saves (*yashah*) the psalm singer when the singer cries out to God. The two verbs are similar in meaning, but carry slightly different nuances of meaning. *Natsal* suggests a “snatching away” or “pulling away.” Thus, we may picture God plucking the psalmist out of midst of fears and moving the psalmist to a safer place. *Yashah* means “to take full care of” or “to help,” suggesting that God enters the troubled situation of the psalmist and cares for the psalmist in the midst of the trouble. Note that the word “soul” occurs in verse 6, just as it does in verse 2. The inmost being (soul) of the psalmist cried out to God and was cared for (verse 6) and thus finds its praise (boasts) in the Lord.

Finally, the singer exhorts hearers/readers to join in praise of God’s deliverance with words of admonition.

The words of verse 8 are familiar words, but what does it mean to “taste and see” the goodness of the Lord? The word translated as “taste,” means “to try something by experiencing it.” The psalm singer admonishes readers/hearers to try God’s goodness for themselves and experience it as one would taste a new food. The word is used in the same metaphoric way in Job 11:12 and Proverbs 31:18. Tasting is one of our five senses. Seeing is another. We see the goodness of God powerfully displayed in the created world. Recall that in Genesis 1, after each creative act, God “saw” that it was good. And

at the end of the creation story, God saw that creation was not just good, but that it was “very good.” Psalm 34 encourages us to experience God for ourselves and to open our eyes and see the goodness of God that is all around us.

Verse 8 ends with the words, “Happy are those who take refuge in him.” The word translated here as “take refuge” means “to hide oneself.” This writer pictures a small child wrapped up in its parent’s arms — protected, warm, loved. The result? Happiness. The word “happy” occurs some twenty-five times in the Psalter (see 1:1; 2:12; 41:1; 65:4; 112:1, etc.). Some translations render the word as “blessed,” others as “happy.” Another option for translation is “content.” Taking refuge in God — being protected, warm, and loved — can result in a deep, inner sense of contentment, a feeling in the very depth of your being that all is well. Content, indeed, are those who allow themselves to be wrapped up in the arms of God.

ACTION

There are so many in our world who lack so much. Lincoln Park Community Services continues to try to feed the homeless – remotely due to the Corona pandemic. Questions? Contact Luan Zoellner at 847-525-8353 or lzoellner@ameritech.net. You can sign up for meal preparation in your own kitchen for meals on the first Thursdays of January and February either with Luan or at outreach@parkridgecommunitychurch.org.

PRAY

God of blessing, I long to take refuge in you. I long for a world of peace, where compassion reigns. Hold me close in your arms that I might experience your peace so intensely that I would radiate it into the world. Amen.

LISTEN to *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks* <https://youtu.be/k0xrkpjDG0U>

December 12



SCRIPTURE **Luke 1:46-56** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

CONSIDER John M. Buchanan is a retired Presbyterian minister and the former editor and publisher of the *Century*, as published in *The Christian Century*, December 12, 2012.

Christians have always been uncomfortable with these words sung by Mary, in the canticle known as the Magnificat. I read that when Luther translated the Bible into German, he left the Magnificat in Latin because the German princes who supported Luther’s struggles with Rome took a dim view of the mighty being brought down from their thrones.

Advent takes us places we would rather not go. It begins with a sweet story that has a decided edge to it. A young, unmarried girl was pregnant, and that was not good news. She was promised to an older man but then had a dream in which she was told that God had chosen her to bear a child. Unaccountably, bravely, Mary, perhaps only 14 years old, consented. “Let it be to me according to your word.” That moment of annunciation and consent has been painted many times, perhaps most strikingly in Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation* in the San Marco convent in Florence. But unlike the demure, submissive Mary featured in Fra Angelico’s painting, Luke’s Mary is talking about a revolution, an upheaval in values, an overturning of conventional mores.

What do those of us who are decidedly not poor make of this revolution? We invest so much creative energy in “wanting” that we become economic units listening to the cultural voices that tell us that buying, having and accumulating will make us happy and content. In his essay “Economics and Pleasure,” Wendell Berry writes: “It is astonishing

... to see economics now elevated to the position of ultimate justifier and explainer of all the affairs of our daily life.” Berry says: “Decide to live by the laws of mercy and justice.”

Since Jesus seems to have had friends and followers who were people of means, it is difficult to argue that Christianity is solely about social reform. It is more than that. It is about true human need.

The problem with the rich people in the Bible is that they don't seem to have any needs, while poor people know that they are poor and have plenty of needs. They also know, unlike their wealthier counterparts, that they are dependent on others. That's the point. Luke's Mary knows that the things of real value in this world are the gifts that we do not earn ourselves: beauty, friendship, people to love.

The Magnificat teaches a simple truth: you cannot receive a gift unless you have a place for it in your life. You cannot learn anything if you think you know it all. You cannot receive love unless you know there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it.

ACTION

God fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty. We have so much, more than we need, often more than we can use. Unburden your life – give some things away. Start with a CLEAN winter coat or two you don't need and don't wear. Put them in the donation box in the Park Place Room.

PRAY

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Help me to have space in my life for you. Help me to release burdens that hold me back, whether that's a toxic relationship or greed or past resentment. Open my heart to see the social reforms you desire, and help me to hear the words of transformation that accompany your presence in the world. Amen.

LISTEN to *There's a Song in the Air* <https://youtu.be/9fBk5H2Pkhs>

December 13

The Third Sunday of Advent

THEME: JOY

SCRIPTURE **Luke 2:1-7** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

CONSIDER “An Other Christmas Story” by Helen Marie Casey, as published in *The Christian Century*, December 9, 2019.

One small deer, perfectly still, pasture barren today and cold.
Three hawks circle overhead, searching. Sudbury’s sky dull charcoal. A lone coyote crosses leaf-filled yards. Turkeys fatten and stroll, cautious as they forage. Fragile songs in the trees. Winter’s whispers sigh in the wind and I am listening hard, Christmas coming as it does, nuanced steps in the darkness. Those Wise Men of old no longer travel. The man and his wife are coming. Their baby will arrive in the night while, all around, other mothers and babies are slain. This is a modern telling of an old story that repeats itself—killing and then, somehow, rebirth of hope. We set out soup, milk, cookies, blankets, pillows. We will not sleep until we hear the bells, wings of angels, children catching stardust as they reach, we two in the moon’s shadow, shepherds watching in the cold, cold starlight, beginning to sing.

ACTION

Light three Advent candles, including your pink one, and sing together this song, set to “Away in a Manger”:

A candle is burning, a candle of Joy;
A candle to welcome brave Mary's new boy.
Our hearts fill with wonder and eyes light and glow
As Joy brightens winter like sunshine on snow.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, you have given us a joy that lives beyond the fleeting happiness of this world. This is a joy that cuts through the noise of this world and sings a song so lovely the whole world waits with bated breath to hear. Your joy is a gift we cannot achieve, only receive. Thank you for a joy that brings light to the dark world. This Advent, we continue to search for an altogether joy for all people. Amen.

LISTEN to *O Little Town of Bethlehem* <https://youtu.be/Lj2fwME46GM>

December 14



SCRIPTURE **Jeremiah 33:14-16** *Underline/ circle verses that speak to your heart.*

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

CONSIDER Joanna M. Adams, as published in *The Christian Century*, Nov. 28, 2006.

How odd that the most hopeful season of the Christian calendar begins in the midst of darkness! When we light the first candle on the Advent wreath, it will not be a second too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one. I try not to be a crepehanger, but Lord have mercy, the war in Iraq has lasted so long. The voices of division in our land are so loud. The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.

Here is another odd thing: on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Christian church, the lectionary brings us the apocalypse. We begin our preparations for the coming of the Christ child with a heart-stopping passage that predicts the end of the world. Jesus speaks of “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” of “distress among nations,” of people who “will faint from fear and foreboding.”

That kind of talk would ordinarily make me want to crawl under the bed and stay there, but this Advent I am holding on for dear life to the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again. Jeremiah’s “little book of consolation” is reassuring: “The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made.” Apparently, with God a promise made is a promise kept. Given the empty wasteland all around, I don’t know how Jeremiah could see anything hopeful about the future. Yet he was sustained by his

conviction that the outcome of human history was in the hands of God, who could be trusted to make the city a place of safety and the land a center of salvation.

Our present day is rife with millennialists who drool over the prospect of the end of the world. Many of them are motivated less by hope for the world than by the desire to see those whom they consider to be among God's unfavored get their just desserts. A friend of mine once saw a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road that read: "Smile! Our God is a consuming fire!"

Is the promise of the coming of the Son of Man bad news for some? Good news for all? Jesus implies that it will be a fearful thing for just about everybody but then adds, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near." What a strange blend of warning and comfort.

Such news reminds me of my recent cataract surgery. Days before the procedure, I was given several kinds of drops to put into my eye daily. The drops came with complex instructions and warnings. After the procedure, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not to sleep on my back or pick up a sack of groceries or ever touch my eye. I became convinced that if I did not do exactly as I was told, I would never see again. Yet I could sense the deep care and compassion of my doctor and others on the medical staff. Every day for a week after the surgery, someone in the clinic called to inquire about my well-being and vision.

Apparently the point of the warnings and the compassionate concern, coming together as they did, was to help me see better.

Jesus had the same purpose in mind when he spoke of the end of the world and then reassured his followers with the parable of the fig tree: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." Perhaps telling us of his second coming is our Lord's way of performing spiritual cataract surgery on his followers. He wants us to be able to see things for what they are and not be fooled by the powers of this world. He wants us to be able to take the long view so that we can see the arrival of a world marked by God's justice and righteousness.

No one has ever expressed the hope of the second coming more clearly for me than Martin Luther King Jr.: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." Until then, we are bound by faith not to be weighed down by the

worries of this life. There is too much work to do, too much watchful readiness to maintain. I love the word prolepsis, which means acting as if what you expect to happen has already happened.

During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.”

Bring on the Advent candles, and let’s live in love and act in hope until our Lord comes again.

ACTION

Every day in our society a specific group of people must confront the issue of righteousness and justice in more than a merely theoretical setting. Most do a difficult job with fairness, dignity and compassion. Send a letter of thanks for their efforts to our local police officers by writing to them in care of the Chief of Police in your community. Or to the firefighters and paramedics at their individual stations.

For Park Ridge:

Chief Frank J. Kaminiski
Park Ridge Police Dept.
200 S. Vine Street
Park Ridge, Il. 60068

North Fire Station
1000 N. Greenwood Ave.
Park Ridge, Il. 60068

South Fire Station
901 W. Devon Ave.
Park Ridge, Il. 60068

PRAY

God of Light, may the light of Advent candles, may the light of your hope shine brightly. There is so much work to be done. May we be agents of your reconciliation, love, hope, peace, and joy. Amen.

LISTEN to *Once in Royal David’s City* <https://youtu.be/mNzgeSUB4fk>



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 61:1-4** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

CONSIDER Martha Spong, a United Church of Christ minister, a clergy coach, and editor of *The Words of Her Mouth: Psalms for the Struggle*. as published in *The Christian Century*, December 15, 2017.

What becomes of the brokenhearted?

Think of it as a multiple choice question:

- A. They make all-new angel wings for the Christmas pageant.
- B. They sit stiffly in the pews, biting the insides of their cheeks.
- C. They weep quietly while the candlelight is being passed.
- D. They stay home, but everyone else is too busy to notice.
- E. They wonder why no one else wonders how they are feeling.

Unless we have lived through December heartbroken, it may not cross our minds how hard the lead-up to Christmas can feel for people in the midst of loss, failure, or hopelessness. Their imprisonments can look like being stuck in a dead-end job or a bad relationship; they might be crushed by grief or weighed down by depression. The unabated cultural frivolity cannot be avoided. It decorates our grocery stores, coffee shops, and town squares. It dominates our print, digital, and broadcast advertising.

And it rules our churches. Even in places where Advent is strictly observed and carols are held back for Christmas Eve, the background preparations for Christmas must take place. We must organize ourselves to provide hats and mittens to underprivileged children in the community and gifts to the local nursing home or county jail in a timely fashion. We must schedule rehearsals of cantatas and plays and concerts in order to make a worthy offering of our talents. We must check the supply of Christmas Eve candles and circulate order forms for Christmas poinsettias.

All this happens alongside what the Grinch described as the "noise, noise, noise, noise," and we hear it not just in Whoville but in Everytown. We move through December juggling party invitations or a lack of them, Christmas TV specials, and commercial assurances that everything will fall into place if you give—or receive—the perfect diamond ring. You would have to be a hermit not to hear about Christmas, and a robot not to have some sort of feelings about the season, past or present. (Remember, the Grinch's problem was a heart problem.)

What a gift it is, then, to be reminded by Isaiah that the Messiah will not come to congratulate the happy couples, or high-five the winners, or bend an elbow with the successful. He will come to walk with the widow, to comfort the lost, and to take to his knees with the oppressed. Mark this. The prophet promises release, liberty, comfort, rebuilding, binding up of the brokenhearted, and restoration of what has been lost. This is the good news.

Let's look around, then, for who is not among us, or who is over-functioning, or who is simply too still or too quiet. Maybe we have been the ones in some years past. Maybe some Advent future will hold that time for us. In this December present, let's live out the good news in some small way. Let's wonder how other people are feeling and offer them the oil of gladness, the phone call of comfort, the chai of concern.

"May those who sow in tears," says the psalmist, "reap with shouts of joy."

ACTION

Bring a word of good news to a prisoner. Take a few minutes to contact Anita Rifkind at anitar@att.net to get the name and address of a North Park Seminary/Stateville student to send a note letting them know that they are prayed for and remembered.

PRAY

You bind up the broken-hearted, comfort those who mourn and release the captive, O God of our hearts. We struggle to understand the power of those words, the power of

your love. And yet, we are counting on your fulfillment of these promises. You are our comfort, our hope, our glimpse of joy. Amen.

LISTEN to *Good Christian Friends Rejoice!* <https://youtu.be/OIx-gVqEB4U?t=33>



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 12:1-6** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

You will say on that day:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day:

Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

CONSIDER Rolf Jacobson, Professor of Old Testament and Alvin N. Rogness Chair in Scripture, Theology, and Ministry at Luther Seminary.

Based on the style, genre, vocabulary, and theology of the passage, it is most likely a composition of the anonymous prophet we call “Second Isaiah” — who served God in Babylon during the time of Israel’s lonely exile there (around 540 BCE). That prophet’s

work of hope is largely contained in Isaiah 40-55, but it can also be found in Isaiah 12, 25-27, and 34-35.

Apparently, the anonymous prophet reworked the scroll of Isaiah, adding passages of good news for the exile in Babylon in order to fan the embers of faith into flame. That metaphor is too weak. For most of the exiles, the fire of faith had gone completely cold. The prophet's task was to preach a word so clear — to sound a certain note on trumpet of new life — so that faith could be reborn in the hearts of a people whose faith had died. To preach a word that could raise the dead.

Sound like a familiar task?

In order to create this faith, the prophet drew on a small library of literary genres. If the reading starts at Isaiah 12:1, the psalm is a song of thanksgiving (compare to Psalms 30, 40, 116, or 118). All of the traditional elements of Israel's songs of thanksgiving are present in 12:1-6. One option would be to restore v. 1 to the lection and preach on the entire psalm. If one sticks with the lectionary's curtailing of the psalm, it sounds more like a psalm of trust (such as Psalms 16, 23, 46, or 121). Here the emphasis is on trust. Either way — as a psalm of thanksgiving or a psalm of trust — the psalm works. It meets the rhetorical aim of the prophet by calling people to faith. But how does it do so?

Sing praises to the Lord, for He has done gloriously!

In this psalm, Second Isaiah's rhetorical strategy for creating faith in the faith-empty exiles was to call them to praise God.

It was that simple. Well, not simple. But it was that clear.

Ask yourself this: Is it easier to say to a person who is struggling with their faith, "You just have to believe." Or is it easier to say, "Let's pray."

Is it more effective to admonish someone, "Trust in God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength!" Or is it more effective to say, "Let's sing this hymn together: 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.'"

What Second Isaiah did in the psalm in Isaiah 12 was essentially this latter

option. In the midst of exile — with all its physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma (I mean Trauma!) — the prophet invited the exiles to sing the familiar songs that celebrate Israel’s repeated experiences of God’s deliverance. Compare:

Isaiah 12:1a I will give thanks to you O Lord

Psalm 138:1a I will give thanks to you O Lord

Isaiah 12:2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,

Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation... Of whom shall I be afraid?

And most importantly, compare the Song of Miriam in the Exodus story with Isaiah 12:5:

Isaiah 12:5 Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously!

Exodus 15:21 Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!

More comparisons could be made, but one can see in these three examples that what Second Isaiah does is, in the words of one of my favorite hymns, sing the old, old story. The prophet goes back to the hymnic well, draws up the old language and vocabulary of Israel’s experience with the God of the Exodus, and promises, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

And that’s why we sing. We sing of the coming of the Immanuel, of joy to the world, of the baby tucked away in the manger, of shepherds keeping watch by night, and angels from the realms of glory.

And in the singing, we come to believe what the songs say.

ACTION

All too often, we fail to notice God’s presence in our lives. Draw, or take a picture of a moment in your day when the spirit of God was evident. (Then, if you like, you can share it with us: office@parkridgecommunitychurch.org or on Facebook)

PRAY

God of living water, we long to drink from your wells of salvation. We sing the songs of prophets of old and prophets anew, anticipating your arrival. Fill our hearts with your song, with faith, with joy. Amen.

LISTEN to *Gentle Mary Laid Her Child* <https://youtu.be/zwCIbcfCvbU?t=9>



SCRIPTURE **Luke 2:15-20** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

CONSIDER Cleophus J. LaRue teaches homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary, as published in *The Christian Century*, November 23, 2016.

At Christmastime, are we too busy to think about Jesus? We simply cannot spare the time to trot out Luke’s well-worn birth narrative, recounting for us once again how God breaks into human history to offer a unique son and to promise that this son is the one who can make us whole and complete—the one who can restore our long-lost joy in the simple yet profound things that infuse our lives with meaning. Who has time to think about the Jesus of scripture at Christmastime?

We know all too well this history and his story. This time of year, even passersby who don’t know the language and theological claims of our faith can recognize the familiar scenes and signs of our story, from decorated church lawns to over-the-top home displays. We’ve pretty much seen and heard it all. We’ve sat through enough reenactments of the crèche in church basements and fellowship halls to skip this year’s performance with the flimsiest of excuses—even when our children are in it. We’re just too busy getting ready for Christmas to think about Jesus.

What is lost when religious hope is no longer at the center of our holiday celebration? According to Harvey Cox, Christmas becomes a family reunion, Easter a spring style show, and Thanksgiving a time when there is no one to thank. In the midst of our drummed-up joy and quickly fading delight over unwrapped gifts, we sense that something is missing.

Lincoln biographer Ronald White describes this feeling as “the presence of an absence.” We may no longer speak the language of faith into our celebration, yet we know that the celebration is lacking something crucial. All of our busyness cannot wipe out our sense of this abiding presence of an absence; it refuses to go quietly into the night. That absence is none other than the ever-present movement of God on our behalf.

God’s busyness for us (*pro nobis*) often gets lost in our busyness for one another. We believe ourselves to be justifiably busy—we have gifts to buy, food to prepare, houses to decorate, guest lists of family and friends to complete. But our year-in and year-out, uninspiring busyness is no match for the purposeful, awe-inspiring busyness of God. In Luke’s narrative we see God on the move, acting with purpose and speed to bring us into the fullness of the people God would have us to be.

In the juxtaposition of the John and Jesus birth stories, we see God’s movement between earth and the cosmic realm. The neighbors and relatives who rejoice over John’s birth are overshadowed by the more universal and expansive cosmic responses to Jesus’ birth. God’s movement is also shown in the religio-political repercussions of Jesus’ birth. The registration of “all the world” asserts Caesar Augustus’s sovereignty over that world—but the birth of God’s son is made known not to the emperor or even the governor, but instead to peasant shepherds. Jesus’ birth shows that God is on the move to dethrone the powerful and lift up the lowly. The census, even in Luke’s day, presupposed registration in the place of a person’s residence, not their hometown. But God is on the move, and Luke has Mary and Joseph travel from historical Nazareth to messianic Bethlehem.

Ironically, the one who will ascend the throne of David enters the world homeless. Forced to place her baby in a feeding trough, Mary improvises a solution for the cool night by wrapping him in cloths. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus continues to lack a permanent home. Luke’s Jesus, like Luke’s God, is constantly on the move.

Even before his birth, as an unborn child Jesus travels from Mary’s home in Nazareth to her cousin Elizabeth’s home and then back to Nazareth. The shepherds live in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. The angels appear to them suddenly—movement by the

heavenly host! Then with haste, we are told, the shepherds move to go find Mary and Joseph and the child. Through their actions, all involved demonstrate the appropriate response to the movement of the omnipotent God, who is determined to bring a savior into the world.

This season ought to remind us that we are not the only ones who are busy. God is always busy, in the best way, for us. When we push God's movement out of our celebration, we sense that something unacknowledged in the story is nonetheless present in a very real way. The disparate parts of our lives will not make sense until this presence of an absence is brought once again into our rushed and harried lives this time of year. Our movement, however well intended, will make little sense until we learn once again to reenact God's movement with praise and rejoicing.

ACTION

Like the shepherds, we can be empowered to spread the wonderful news of God's love. The Bridge project is always looking for simple notes of encouragement to include with the distribution of the donations they receive. Write a sentence or two on index cards to brighten the day of a homeless person, and leave them in an envelope marked "Bridge Notes" in the Park Place Room. Children's contributions are welcome too!

PRAY

Improvising God, burst forth into our lives once more. Interrupt our everyday movements. Expose our meaningless "busy" and invite us to participate in your Kingdom-building efforts. Help us to respond to your invitations right away. Amen.

LISTEN to *Away in a Manger* <https://youtu.be/RL1Kq8bGLfI?t=30>

December 18



SCRIPTURE **Luke 2:21-38** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

CONSIDER Madison McClendon, graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a member of North Shore Baptist Church in Chicago, as published by *The Christian Century* December 10, 2014.

The other day, a small group from my church joined others from our neighborhood in a march on Chicago's north side. As we swarmed the streets, temporarily shutting down traffic, I noticed a woman in a car. Some motorists were exasperated, trying to turn around or just glowering at us. Others were supportive, honking their horns to the rhythm of "Siyahamba" as we sang. But this woman did nothing but sit there, parked in the middle of the procession, and wipe tears from her eyes. With visible emotion, she registered shock at this small but mighty band of the faithful marching with a processional cross at our head, proclaiming that black lives matter.

While the crowd's emotion was jubilant and righteous, I couldn't help but feel sad. Broken. Young as I am, I felt like the world had rooted all the idealism out of me. And in the midst of Advent, with Christmas carols on people's lips and culturally enforced good cheer on every street corner, the disconnect was too much. Buy a television, ignore the pain. The Senate torture report is out, but pay no heed: here's another Facebook post with a cat dressed like Santa. It's two years since the Newtown shootings, and our church is having to have careful discussions about the message we send to the community by posting—or not posting—an ugly but state-mandated sign declaring the church a weapon-free zone, as if the promise that God will beat our swords into plowshares were not enough.

According to Luke's account, Simeon and Anna have had a similarly brutal Advent. They have lived long under Roman oppression. Perhaps he has been forced to carry a burden a mile for a Roman soldier. Maybe she's witnessed the insult of an idol placed near the Temple. Both have certainly watched helplessly as the Herodians, with the full support of Roman authority, round up those who are insufficiently deferential to pack them into jails or worse. Simeon has been told that before he dies, a child will appear before him as the Messiah. Anna is praying for redemption night and day. Both are getting on in years, and perhaps both are wondering if they will go to their graves without seeing the promised one.

And then, into this Advent of dwindling hope, a boy is brought into the Temple.

I don't know what light dawns on Simeon to tell him who this child is, but something draws him. And Anna follows close behind, her breath catching in her throat at what she sees. I imagine tears falling down Simeon's craggy cheeks as his hopes are realized and he cradles the sacred child at last in his arms. With joy wrapped in heavy emotion, he gasps out his blessing—a warning—and gives thanks that now he can depart, at last, in peace. And Anna, similarly moved, her face moistened with the emotion of sudden, unexpectedly fulfilled hope, blesses the boy and raises thanks to God on high.

I don't know why exactly the woman in that car was crying, but I could tell it was our witness that moved her. And I do know that as the church awaits the coming of Christ in the form of a child, we also are the body of Christ. Perhaps this woman, like Simeon and Anna, has been waiting many years for a sign that the body of Christ is alive in the world. Maybe she wanted to see that the salvation God has promised is more than dead words on a page, that it's alive in the feet and the mouths of those who claim to believe in this revelation to the nations.

As I walk through this brutal Advent, as I prepare myself to welcome into my own hardened and hurting heart the child who will redeem my soul and transform my will, I cannot forget this woman. We're told time and time again that Advent is a time of preparation, of waiting, of hoping, of yearning. But she reminded me of what we are preparing for, of the ends to which our hope is directed.

We are preparing to do more than simply welcome the body of Christ. We are purifying ourselves that we might actually be that body, incarnate and active.

The world needs to see in us this message: that Christ wins the ultimate battle not with a sword, but with sacrifice. Christ does not "stand his ground" or come to the cross with a concealed carry permit. Christ does not torture anyone to obtain actionable intelligence on when the Roman soldiers will arrive at Gethsemane. Christ faces down not an unarmed black body but the fully armed and brutal might of a police state, and not once does Christ fire a shot in self-defense. If we prepare ourselves to carry that crucifixion in the world, we are saying that the resurrection condemns all crucifixions forever.

Simeon and Anna are still in the world, waiting to see the body of Christ before their time is up. Maybe we can be the ones who show it to them.

ACTION

For what have you been yearning and waiting for? Have you seen signs of progress? Of hope? Are there movements, like black lives matter, that confuse you - could these be signs of hope for you? For someone who is different than you? Brainstorm a list of ways you could be involved in a movement toward justice here and now. What do you need to learn more about? How can our community of faith join with others in working for justice? Write down your thoughts, talk with a friend, have someone hold you accountable to acting on your thoughts and movement of the Spirit.

PRAY

Soften my hardened heart, O God. Prepare me to be ready to usher in the One for whom we have waited. I long to see Christ's movement here on earth, and I long to be a part of that movement. Open my eyes to new ways to be involved. Amen.

LISTEN to *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* <https://youtu.be/h1PfjgtPgno>

December 19



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 35:1-10** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,

nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

CONSIDER Talitha Arnold is senior minister of the United Church of Santa Fe (UCC) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as printed in *the Christian Century*, December 7, 2016

Christmas begins in the desert. It ends there, too.

I know that many of our traditional carols sing of frosty winds of the bleak midwinter, and that pine trees and evergreen wreaths are symbols of the season.

But I also know that Christmas begins—and ends—in the desert. From the cry of the prophet Isaiah in his people’s exile to the birth of Mary and Joseph’s child in that barn in Bethlehem, the Christmas story is a desert story.

It’s not even the high desert of northern New Mexico, where I live. Nazareth is only 1,200 feet in elevation, lower than Phoenix, Arizona. Bethlehem soars to 2,500—not exactly alpine. Both areas get less than 20 inches of rain annually, enough to grow crops with irrigation in the good years.

As in other desert places, winters are bitterly cold and summers hot and dry. In late spring, sand-filled Khamaseen winds from the Arabian Desert blow through the region.

Jesus was born in a desert place. He was born into a desert time, too, under Roman domination. That’s why his birth was in Bethlehem and not his parents’ hometown of Nazareth. Flexing his imperial muscle, Caesar Augustus demanded a head count of all his subjects. What Caesar wanted, Caesar got—even if a pregnant woman and her carpenter husband had to load up the donkey and head for a strange town.

A desert time, a desert place. That’s where Christmas begins. It stays there for a long time. After the child is born, the parents can’t go back home to Nazareth. Caesar’s toady king, Herod the “Great,” doesn’t want any new king around, so they must flee to Egypt, another strange desert place where nobody knows their names.

So perhaps instead of “snow on snow” at Christmas, we should sing of “rock on rock” and decorate cholla and saguaro cactus rather than pine and fir trees.

Though it may challenge some of our Christmas traditions, I believe the fact that Christmas begins in the desert, and stays there, is actually the best part of the Christmas story. If God could be born there, God can be born in the harsh landscapes of our lives and our world.

Christmas reminds us that we need not fear the desert, nor the dry times of our own lives, nor the wilderness that this world can sometimes be. In the first Christmas, new life was born even in a desert time and place. This Christmas, in the desert places and times of our lives, new life can still be born. In dry, harsh landscapes—be they of our inner world or the world around us—God is still present, just as God was present that cold night in Bethlehem. I think that’s very good news, this season and every season.

God was in the desert for Joseph and Mary that first Christmas. God will be with us, our loved ones, and our world this Christmas, too.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,” the Prophet Isaiah promised in the time of his people’s exile. “The desert shall rejoice and blossom.” That was true for Isaiah. It was true for Mary and Joseph. It is still true for us. Christ will be born even in the desert. Especially in the desert.

ACTION

Bring a little joy today to a little one in our congregation. Send a funny card, a joke, or a poem to a PRCC youth from Kindergarten through 5th Grade. Contact Ann Swindell at 847-723-6395 to get a name and address.

PRAY

God of New Life, shine forth your good news in our lives and in our world. Bring joy in the middle of the desert spaces of our lives. Help our souls to sing out with gladness. Amen.

LISTEN to *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* <https://youtu.be/kU-E46o0sp0>

December 20

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

THEME: LOVE

SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 7:10-16** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

CONSIDER James Allison, a priest and theologian whose books include *Knowing Jesus*, *Undergoing God* and *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, as published in *The Christian Century*, December 11, 2007.

We are on the very brink of the nativity. Our sense of the power of the One coming in has been stretched, challenged and recast over the past three weeks. Now the reality of that power begins to dawn more clearly, and what is astonishing about it is that, unlike any power we know, this power is confident enough to be vulnerable. And that means confident enough in us to be vulnerable to us.

King Ahaz did not have the confidence to be vulnerable. He needed the appearance of strength to help him out in his military difficulties. Isaiah challenges him to imagine what God might be like, what it would look like for this Other to put in an appearance. Ahaz can ask for the most outlandish sign from above or from below (the sign he asks for will reveal what sort of criterion Ahaz has for who God is). But the reality of what the Other might look like could be disconcerting to Ahaz with his political schemes. He doesn't really want a sign.

Isaiah gives him a sign anyhow, a sign that is unlike anything Ahaz could have imagined. There is nothing outlandish about this sign. It doesn't appear to come from heaven or to emerge from sheol. It is quiet, gentle, seemingly ordinary. At first glance a maiden is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel. This sign would appear to be totally natural, totally from the human side of things, rather than from something special, divine and portentous, thus not really a sign at all. And yet in this gesture of quietude and confidence, God will reveal himself as the one who loves his people and brings his kingdom to flourishing. It is the sort of sign not perceived by those whose attention is fixed on current affairs, on power politics, on strategic calculations.

Matthew has seen this in his Gospel. He has seen that Isaiah's promise of a sign relating to a kingdom flows into the much fuller sign that is happening now, quietly and offstage. The fullness of the power that Isaiah pointed to was revealing itself in a gentleness made available under the most delicate of circumstances. The maiden chosen to bear the son was not living in any well-protected enclave. On the contrary, the first thing that the power dared to do was to make itself visible as a provocation, inviting the maiden who was found to be with child to share the opprobrium of being a single mother in a society in which such things might easily lead to death. She was to depend for her reputation, and maybe for her life, on the good will of an untested male who knew that he was not the father of the child.

What sort of power is it that allows itself to be so vulnerable? It is prepared to trust itself to one of the most notoriously unreliable features of human existence—not only the pain and riskiness of human gestation and childbirth, but also the whole of human skittishness about male honor, and the potential for violence that goes with female dependency. Beyond this, as Matthew makes clear, this power is prepared to allow itself to be vulnerable to that most dangerous of constructs: the law. Joseph was a righteous man and knew well what Deuteronomy 22 prescribes for cases such as Mary's pregnancy: death by stoning. But Joseph's righteousness consisted in his being inclined to interpret that law in the most gentle way possible: his seeking to obey it by "putting her away quietly" was not an automatic or predictable response.

When Joseph decided to apply the law in this way, it was a fragile act of interpretation and one that would not be easy to carry out in practice, since "secrets will out." This decision was made just prior to the Lord's inviting Joseph to consider another possible interpretation: that Mary's pregnancy was not in any way something which fell foul of the law, but something that came from the Holy Spirit. Joseph had a dream, and in the light of that dream he was invited to make an interpretation with enormous practical consequences.

Again: how extraordinary is a power that is gentle and confident enough to enter into the practical consequences of a human act of interpretation? There is no sign that is not also a human act of interpretation, and there can be no riskier way than this to enter into the realm of signs. This pregnant woman is either an adulteress or a virgin blessed by God. What power is it that is prepared to trust that a human will choose the latter, infinitely less plausible interpretation, and then graciously cover over the vulnerability of his bride-to-be and allow the sign to flourish?

The fulfillment of all God's promises will come through someone who is of the now failed and insignificant line of David. This one will be declared or ordained the high priest of God, God's son, Yahweh himself, bearing the name by his passing through death in the spirit of holiness. Vulnerability to mere flesh; vulnerability to the law; vulnerability to death: these will be the signs of the power of the One coming in, the signs of his confidence in us, in what we can become, and in what he can make of us.

ACTION

Light four Advent candles and sing together this song, set to "Away in a Manger":

A candle is burning, a candle of Love;

A candle to point us to heaven above.

A baby for Christmas, a wonderful birth;

For Jesus is bringing God's Love to our earth.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, you have given us a love that loves all the parts of us, even those that we would hide. It is so easy to put on a mask and pretend to be someone more put-together, more compassionate, more perfect than we really are. But you, O God, see who we truly are. You see us and you love us anyway. Give us your eyes to truly see others and your heart to truly love them. This Advent, we continue to search for an altogether love for all people. Amen.

LISTEN to *What Child Is This?* <https://youtu.be/k9z0NpoGs0s>



SCRIPTURE Matthew 1:18-25 *Underline/ circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

CONSIDER Fred Craddock was professor of preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, as printed in *The Christian Century*, December 7, 2010.

When the lectionary tells me I can skip a few verses, I am not suspicious. I don't ask what secret is being kept from me or what doctrine is being protected. Very likely the omitted material is totally boring, or too bloody, or repeated elsewhere, or judged to offer no nourishment to faith hungering for bread. Most likely the decision to omit was a practical one: in a three-year cycle there is not enough time to ponder every verse in the Bible. It's only this and nothing more. I am not suspicious.

But I am curious. Is someone protecting me from my Bible? Not a welcome thought. Is something being forbidden, like the one tree in the Garden of Eden? I am in no condition to proceed to 1:18 until I take a peek at 1:1–17. I know it's the fourth Sunday of Advent and Bethlehem is only a short walk away, but this is important. What's in Matthew 1:1–17?

A genealogy! I should have known. President Eisenhower once said that as a boy in a religious home, he was instructed to read the entire Bible, but, he said, "I was permitted to skip the begets." Good enough for me.

I did, however, notice something unusual about verse one. It is an introduction not to the genealogy but to the whole of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 1:1 could be translated: "A Book of Genesis of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham." It is the writer's title for the book the church calls the Gospel of Matthew. The writer almost repeats the title at verse 18: "And the genesis of Jesus Christ took place in this way." In other words, the story we are about to read joins creation (genesis) and history (genealogy) to the person Jesus Christ. The story we are about to read is huge! And when we read, we are pondering the activity of God, which is to say we are in Advent.

Since Matthew could assume a reader with little need for explanations, we may want to remind ourselves of a few details about the story. First of all, this Joseph recalls another Joseph, also a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams (Gen. 37:40–41). Second, the name

Jesus is a variation of Joshua, the successor to Moses, as Jesus will be in Matthew's portrayal of him.

Finally, it's helpful to note that the reader of Matthew 1:18–25 has valuable information before the characters in the story do. For example, the reader knows that Mary is with child in verse 18; Joseph does not know until verse 20. This difference makes his behavior all the more remarkable. When he decides to protect Mary from humiliation and punishment (Deut. 22:23–27), he does so contrary to the law, and he does so because he is just (righteous). Matthew's Jesus will give repeated instruction in this justice that exceeds justice.

Yet these insights do not alter the announcement as announcement: "The genesis of Jesus Christ took place in this way." Suddenly we are launched into the season of Advent, which puts before us the twin mysteries of our faith: the mystery of the God who comes to us and the mystery of our longing for God to come. If there is a third mystery, it is the tenacity of our faith which refuses to give up hope. Some do give up hope and demand that faith become sight. They stand on street corners shouting "Lo, here" and "Lo, there." But we do not follow. Why not? Is it because it is easier to believe that a messiah will come than to believe that a messiah has come? Is it because the overwhelming powers of greed and injustice argue persuasively that God has not and will not come? I do not know.

What I do know is that every year for four weeks we wait. Ours is not a passive waiting; we wonder as we wait. We wait in the heavy joy of repentance, which cleanses us to be ready to receive the One Who Comes. We renew baptismal vows. We encourage one another in order to be a community of fresh expectancy. And we pray, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "Come, O Long Expected Jesus." At times we fuss at God: "How long, O Lord? How long will you tarry?" Our generation is impatient. Advent lasts too long. Nasty notes are passed to the choirmaster: "We don't know these Advent songs. Why don't we sing some carols? Everybody is already having Christmas except the church." The preacher is urged to dip into Luke at least one Sunday early; a few angels and a shepherd or two would surely get us out of this dark waiting room.

We are like the student who responded to Robert Frost at a poetry reading. Frost sometimes read his poetry to university audiences. On one such occasion he closed his reading with the familiar line "promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep." A hand shot up.

"You spoke of promises to keep. What promises?"

Frost replied, "If I had wanted you to know, I would have told you."

When we're tired of waiting for the promise to be revealed, Matthew is good for us. He chides us. "If you think four weeks is a long wait, join me on page one of the Book of Genesis of Jesus Christ and we will journey through 42 generations, at the end of which we will meet 'Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.'" Think of Matthew 1:18–25 as a birth announcement; it is brief—and all the words are the author's, with neither Joseph nor Mary having speaking parts.

ACTION

Joseph was expected to be a little resistant to the upheaval in his life. We can certainly relate to feeling out of sorts with surprises and change. Those feelings are exasperated by the almost constant chaos in the world as a whole. So today, turn off the television – and no news on-line either. All day. You can do it. And spend your extra time writing (a poem? a paragraph?) about dealing with change in your life. (You can share it with us if you like by sending it to office@parkridgecommunitychurch.org or posting on Facebook).

PRAY

God of Love, the waiting is almost over, and yet we wonder if it really is. Our faith in you wavers, even as we near Christmas Day. Still our worries. Help us to trust in your promises. Give us rest in your love. Amen.

LISTEN to *Go! Tell it on the Mountain!* <https://youtu.be/7ruGHkSWX84>



SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 60:1-6** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

CONSIDER Samuel D. Giere is Associate Professor of Homiletics and Biblical Interpretation at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. He is an ordained Lutheran (ELCA) pastor who has served congregations in North Dakota

In the exilic and post-exilic contexts the “glory of the Lord” was understood to be the presence of the Lord, which guided the children of Israel through the wilderness,¹ was present in the tabernacle,² and resided in the Holy of Holies.³ The prophet’s poetic parallel here equates the light which shines and the glory of the Lord. The light is the very presence of Lord.

The context wherein and whereupon this light shines is one of darkness. The image here is of a land covered with darkness and people wrapped in thick clouds.⁴ At the very least, the poetic structure here suggests that eyes are veiled from any clarity near or far. It is the darkness of a moonless night far from the ambient light of any city with clouds obscuring even the faint flickers of the stars. Such is the metaphor of darkness here.

Yet, even such pervasive darkness is not impervious to the light, the glory of the Lord.

Actually, it’s quite the opposite. This light vanquishes darkness that surrounds the returnees from Babylon. It escapes their horizon and impacts the nations and their rulers. The scattered are beckoned home. The heart swells at this gathering in. The text

speaks even of riches — the abundance of the sea, caravans of camels, and then... gold and frankincense. It is the Feast of Epiphany.

We'll come back to this, but before making this move to the afterlife of Isaiah 60 in the imagination of God's people, it is important to think carefully about what the vision is here.

It is at the same time poetic and truthful. The meaning, then, dances back-and-forth across the line of the physical eyes and the eyes of the heart.

How do we think about this light? Blinding? Something like the revolving beacon at the small airport by my hometown? Perhaps like the bright beam of the Cape Hatteras Light towering over the Outer Banks? These riches from afar, are they rare tuna steaks from the northern Pacific? Camels... I haven't a clue with what to compare the riches of camels... You get the idea. We are operating in the realm of the poet where the line between the eyes of the body and the eyes of the heart are blurred.

What is clear is that the promise is that the very presence of God that illuminates what is covered in thickest darkness.

ACTION

Arise and shine! Today bake cookies (or banana bread or whatever) and share them. (Extra credit if you share them anonymously and use butter.)

PRAY

God of Promise, shine in my life today. You are the light of the world. You ARE the light of the world. Teach me to reflect your light more fully. Amen.

LISTEN to *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* <https://youtu.be/LYDa4Kht6Eo>



SCRIPTURE 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 *Underline/ circle verses that speak to your heart.*

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do

not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

CONSIDER Bob Thompson, Pastor of Corinth Reformed Church (UCC) in Hickory, North Carolina, and President of Faithful and Welcoming Churches of the UCC, published at https://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_why_love_is_the_greatest.

I memorized 1 Corinthians 13, the whole thing, while attending boarding school in the Himalayan foothills as the son of missionaries. Its message has been ingrained in my brain for six-plus decades.

I've often found the last verse puzzling. Why does Paul say the greatest is love? Love is pretty cool, of course, but greater than faith and hope?

Faith is the heart of Christian belief. "For by grace you have been saved through faith," the apostle wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. What can be more important than faith?

And what about hope? How does anyone live a day without at least a glimmer of hope?

I'm not sure I would have dared to rank faith, hope, and love as Paul did. It's rather like ranking air, food, and water.

Then again, maybe the Holy Spirit's on to something here. Why? Because when you can't keep faith and you can't hold hope, you can always see love.

So many times I need this reminder. When I preach a funeral for a baby who died of SIDS. When I hear of the rise of the “nones” and wonder about the future of the church. When I see extreme poverty. When injustice and conflict seem to have the upper hand.

Sometimes when I have a hard time with faith or hope, I turn back to the love shown to me, especially and ultimately on the cross. And when others find faith and hope in short supply, I need to be the love they can see.

It's the greatest.

ACTION

Give yourself a Christmas gift. Something that reminds you that you are loved by God beyond measure, just as you are, at Christmas and always.

PRAY

God of Love, your love is so great for humankind that you came to earth to show us! This gift is beyond anything we could purchase or create. You show us love that is transformational. Transform my heart that I might love you and love others like you. Amen.

LISTEN to *Silent Night* <https://youtu.be/sme8N2pzRx8>

December 24

Christmas Eve

SCRIPTURE 1 John 4:11-21 *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister

whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

CONSIDER David Bartlett, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and Lantz Professor of Preaching Emeritus at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. Bartlett is an ordained American Baptist minister and has served parishes in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Oakland.

Years ago I heard William Sloane Coffin preach on this text.

He summed up its claims in a classic Coffin aphorism: “The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear.”

In the first instance, this epistle’s claim, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18), is about the relationship between believers and God who is creator and judge of the world. If God is exclusively understood as the God of power, or demand, or even justice, then we approach God with fear — both in this life and in the life to come.

But if understood first as the God of love, perfect love, then we approach God with confidence. God’s love is perfect and our love is perfected because we trust in God’s love. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Note the sentence carefully. It is not “we ought to love because he first loved us” as if God’s love were the ground for a new imperative. It is “we can love because he first loved us.” God’s love is the ground for a new possibility.

Human analogies are never entirely adequate but they are entirely unavoidable. Watch the growth of a child and notice that the child who can give love is the child who has received love. Love grows from love while from apathy grows only coldness, fear, and retreat.

Implicit in our passage, too, is the second claim. Perfect love casts out fear in human relationships and even imperfect love diminishes fear perceptibly.

A small child received a jack-in-the box for Christmas and, to the parents’ surprise, was not delighted by the puppet’s popping out but terrified. Not entirely daunted though, the child turned the handle once again until the puppet jumped out again. This time the child kissed the puppet he had feared.

The child was far from fearless. But by loving, he sought to put fear in its proper place.

Remember that for 1 John, the right understanding of Christian faith and practice lies in a right understanding of John's Gospel, surely the central scripture for the community that heard this epistle read aloud.

Try thinking of 1 John 4:9b-10 as an explanatory gloss on John 3:16:

John 3:16 – For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

1 John 4:9b-10 – God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John provides its own interpretation of the Gospel for this somewhat later community.

It suggests that “eternal life” is not only life in the world to come, but that it is life in the present, through faith in Jesus Christ. Here the epistle sounds very much like the Gospel.

But the epistle also takes on language more like that of Paul and the synoptic gospels than that of John's Gospel. Jesus is sent, not just to reveal God but to be “the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Both in this stress on Christ's atoning death and in its stress on a coming day of judgment, 1 John sounds more like emerging Christian orthodoxy than it does like the somewhat idiosyncratic theology of the gospel.

If 1 John is written in part to dissuade Christians from believing a Christology that is almost docetic and a spirituality that is almost Gnostic, the epistle writer does so by claiming for this community a reading of John's Gospel that is quite orthodox, both in its doctrine of the atonement and in its hope for last things.

Nonetheless, we continue to have in our passage two great themes of John's first epistle which are further iterations and elaborations on the gospel.

There is the distinction between those who abide in God and those who do not, the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Again, the great word “abiding” provides the link between humans and God. Loving Christians “abide” in God and God “abides in them” (1 John 4:16).

And there is the strong claim that the love of God is always manifest in love of other Christians. “Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). Again, as in John’s Gospel, this is expressed as the one true commandment.

1 John 4 is much loved by a certain strain of humanist: “If God is love why have two words for the same thing.” It is at least somewhat easier in a skeptical age to believe in love than to believe in God, they say.

But for the epistle, the affirmation is not a simple equation. God is love, but love is not God.

“Love” is an abstraction and a quality of God’s own self. “Love” is personification and God is person. Love is some thing. God does things, sends a Son, atones for the sins of the world, and gives commands.

What the author of 1 John is most worried about is that Christians will think faith is about abstractions like Truth and Love without attending to the crucified one who was and is both loving and true.

ACTION

Light all the candles, ending with the center white one, and sing together this song, set to “Away in a Manger”:

We honor Messiah with Christ-Candle flame;
Our Christmas Eve candles glad tidings proclaim.
O come, all ye faithful, rejoice on this night
As God comes among us, the Christian's true Light.

PRAY

Love-on-Earth, God-With-Us, Emmanuel, thank you for your abundant love. On this night when we remember your presence with us, keep us focused on the significance of your outpouring of love. Use this Christmas season to strengthen the love that abides in our hearts, that we might share that love more completely with our neighbors, near and far. Amen.

LISTEN to *O Holy Night* <https://youtu.be/sM7drkM5ac>

SCRIPTURE **John 1:1-14** *Underline or circle verses that speak to your heart.*

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. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

CONSIDER Cleophus LaRue, professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary, as published in *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2016.

The Fourth Gospel begins with a prologue that is quite complex—and quite unlike anything known to the other three. Interpreting it for Christmas Day worshipers requires nothing short of a reset button, if one hopes to be heard with profit. These worshipers are restless; often their attention spans allow them to grapple for just a little while with the new, the now, and the next, to say nothing of the complex. The mere mention on Christmas Day of a “word becoming flesh” is likely to cause people to wander off into the wild, blue yonder. To wade in too deeply with exegetical expertise may well reduce a preacher’s words to irrelevance—especially in the holiday season, when even the most ardent Christians still have many unchecked items on their to-do list.

Yet this passage is such an important one for contemporary listeners. And it is a preacher’s responsibility to reach some kind of a “so what” moment from John’s prologue, from grappling with this in-breaking activity on the part of God.

The prologue forms a hymn dedicated to a heavenly being who became human on our behalf. Its opening words bear witness to the life of God in Jesus and the oneness of the Word with God. This is our story—this Word who is Jesus has been sent by God into our world—and Christmas is a time for us to reaffirm its promise and hope in our lives. This story at the heart of our faith must be constantly reaffirmed.

For after all, it is not a story without opposition—in John’s day or ours. There are countless other voices making truth claims about how best to live a life filled with meaning and purpose, in obedience to a higher power. John recognizes this opposition to the Word that is Jesus Christ, and he calls on us to stake a claim and bear witness to the truth that it is indeed God who has sent Jesus into our world. In fact, the Fourth Gospel is filled with parallels and juxtapositions calling on us to take sides, to witness, to stand and be counted as believing that God has acted in a unique way on our behalf. In the prologue light and darkness are front and center, but throughout John many other oppositions exist as well: good and evil, truth and falsehood, death and life, them and us, insiders and outsiders.

This Jesus, identified by John as the *logos*, is the light that shines in darkness. As hopeful as such a declaration sounds, there is a tone of opposition here between the light and the darkness. Though the darkness does not overcome the light, it is also the case that the world does not know him and his own do not accept him. What is needed, then and now, is a witness: someone to bear witness to the truth of who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

After all, every discovery of reality awaits the willingness of a witness to share what that witness has seen and heard. So it is here in the prologue that we are introduced to the glory of the eternal Word—standing in juxtaposition to the simple witness of a mortal prophet. Herein lies John the Baptist’s importance to the coming of Jesus into the world. Though any number of scholars believe the mention of John in the prologue stems from a later hand, he nonetheless bears witness to the redemptive drama unfolding before us.

All about this hymn there is the scent of witness. Its witness to the presence of Christ is focused primarily beyond the created world of time and space. But with the coming of John, the understanding of witness moves explicitly into the realm of human history. John’s specific purpose for being in the world is to bear witness to Jesus. In the synoptic tradition John the Baptist introduces Jesus; in the Fourth Gospel his sole function is to act as a witness.

John's witness serves the same purpose as the Fourth Gospel itself: that all might believe through him. To believe through John is to receive his witness as true. And throughout the Gospel, to believe truly in Jesus is not simply to give assent to information about him. It entails a person's total allegiance to and wholehearted trust in Jesus. I wonder if it is too much for us to say to one another and to all we meet during the holiday season: Yes, I know him. He is the one sent from God, and he can indeed transform your life.

Maybe the most pertinent question before us is not unfolding the complexities of logos theology, but rather understanding what it means to bear witness to the coming of Jesus into our world. What's needed on a day like Christmas—or, maybe more importantly, what can be heard and received on such a day—is some understanding of the testimony of a witness. What is needed is a timely nod of assent that with the appearance of John the Baptist, God's story has moved from the cosmic and the eternal to a specific time and place within the arena of human history. A prophet named John has been sent from God as a human delegate on a purely human mission, that of bearing testimony to someone greater than himself.

In a way, John's witness makes our witness possible. It emboldens us: we too can bear witness to the truth of the Christ child among us.

ACTION

As you open your gifts, as you watch your loved ones open theirs, the symbol of the greatest Gift of all, pray for those who made them, those who boxed them, and those who delivered them, that God's love will fill their hearts!

PRAY

Christ-child, may my witness to your life be exactly the witness that is needed. Clarify my understanding and my words around what you have done on this day, that I might help spread your good news to the ends of the earth. Amen.

LISTEN to *Joy to the World!* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3a4UgyLFRA>