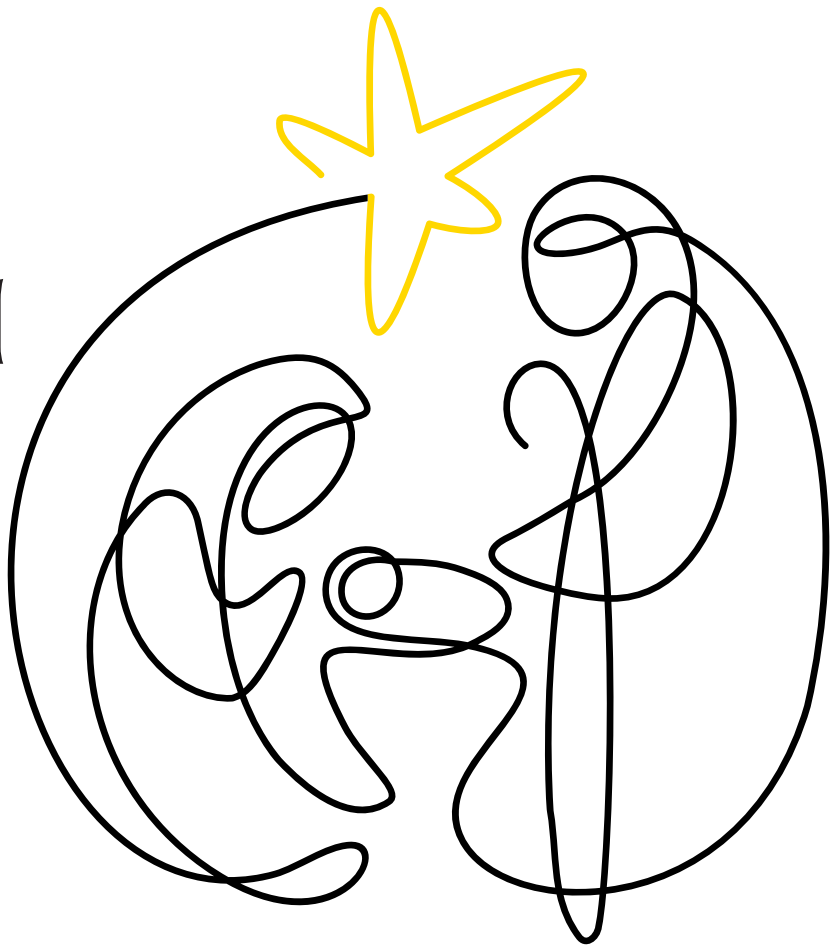


Advent Devotional 2024



We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith, and prepare your heart to celebrate the birth of Christ. This year's devotional is written by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary alumnae/i.

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Dr. Alan D. Olson '14/'24

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3:1-10

1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you 2 that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts 4 and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" 5 They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. 8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

DEVOTIONAL

The author of 2 Peter states that he is trying to arouse our "sincere attention" to remember the words of the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Does he know that this is Advent?

Does he know how busy we are?

I have it easy. I'm 53 and I don't have kids; I don't have a lot of shopping to do. Yes, I'm a pastor, so I'm busy at this time of year, but all of the planning is done. All I have left to do is show up and follow the plans that we've made.

You, dear reader, are probably much busier—between Christmas shopping and holiday parties—to think about the second coming of the Lord, or how God marks time. You are busy managing the expectations (and perhaps the anxieties) of a family for a merry Christmas. You have to get all the right gifts, the right food for Christmas Eve or Christmas

Day. You have sooooo much to think about, sooooo much planning to do. It's overwhelming! We spend so much time and energy chasing material things. Lots and lots of money, too!

Why do we do this to ourselves?

Perhaps we focus on the material things because we're attempting to see the wonder in the eyes of our children or grandchildren. Perhaps we wish to recapture that sense of wonder we felt when we were younger. Perhaps it's harder to live as these scriptures call us to do, when year after year, we wait for Jesus' return.

Wonder is a holy and sacred thing!

Don't beat yourself up for not getting the perfect gift for someone else. Also, do not beat yourself up for not being a "perfect Christian" during Advent. Or any other season. Study the scriptures as you can and remember that the Lord is patient with us (1 Peter 3:9).

Breathe.

Remember that God is merciful.

The coming of the Christ is a reminder of that mercy.

Remember that God loves you—all of us—so much that God entered the world in the person of Jesus, so that we would all know God's love and mercy. I hope that inspires some awe.

PRAYER

Lord, in this time of watching and waiting, please restore our sense of wonder. Take away our cynicism and our sense of having seen it all before. Give us new eyes and ears and hearts that we may see you, that we may see your coming and your return in all the people that we meet. Help us to share the gift of your love everywhere and to everyone. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Canon Eric McIntosh '12

SCRIPTURE

Luke 20:1-8

1 One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders 2 and said to him, "Tell us, by what

authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" 3 He answered them, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: 4 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" 5 They discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'" 6 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet." 7 So they answered that they did not know where it came from. 8 Then Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

DEVOTIONAL

By now we have a new president. Whether our new president is the one you voted for or not, the Triune God is never dethroned. God is still God, and Jesus still has all power, in heaven and earth, in his hands. I find myself seized by the questions asked of Jesus. I find that their questions are telling. They inquire about the source of Jesus' authority, or can I say, power. They ask what kind of power it is. It is indicative of a very intriguing fact: those asking these questions know neither his power nor its author.

We also face contestations of Jesus' identity today. The "American Jesus" permits us to hate one another. That is not the real Jesus. The "American Jesus" permits us to be content with division, individuality, privilege, notions of supremacy—all of which are not of Jesus. His authority does not earn us rights over others.

After Jesus returned questions with questions, the leaders' reply was that they "did not know." We today must not allow forces that "do not know" Jesus to shape our faith. Allowing partisanship to shape our faith instead of our faith shaping our partisanship is a travesty. Will we ever actually and collectively walk in the power and authority of Jesus? I reply: I do not know. Will we ever realize Beloved Community? I do not know.

God is love! Love drives Jesus! In our refusal of him, Jesus invites us to get to know him. I hear him saying: You don't know...but you can! You are divided but you don't have to be! Restoration and revival are love-inches away! The power and authority of Jesus are in his love.

Let us not permit the forces that do not know God to define who God is or how he ought to be. Let us instead get to know God better, draw closer to him, and be fashioned to be like Jesus, and walk this journey with authority in love!

PRAYER

Lord God Almighty, fall fresh upon us with a fresh wind and a fresh anointing, that we may consider and imagine what love can do. Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name,

increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Mary (Jo) Ramsey '99

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 146

1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!.

DEVOTIONAL

Every December, our church's children present an ambitious Christmas pageant. Last year, we began our first practice by reading Luke's version of the Christmas story. Little Jack drew close, his eyes wide with anticipation, but as the teacher started to read, Jack frowned. He crossed his arms. He began to pout and flick a fuzz on the carpet.

"What's wrong?" I asked when the story ended.

"It's the same old story from last year!" Jack grumbled. "I already know that one!"

Everyone chuckled. “Yep,” I said. “That’s true. We tell the same old story every year—but in the pageant we try to tell it in a fresh, fun way.”

It is the challenge and beauty of Christmas—that we tell the same old story every year: The Christ Child was born in a lowly stable surrounded by singing angels, sleepy shepherds, and kneeling kings. God’s love became flesh and dwelt among us. We know the story by heart.

How can something so familiar still overwhelm us with joy and fill us with hope? By connecting us with a Love that transcends time and place. Yes, Jesus entered human history at a specific moment and location, but the Spirit of Christmas itself is timeless.

Today’s reading features many time-related words, including lifelong, eternity, and generations. The psalmist sketches the long view of God’s amazing, ongoing activity in the world. Like Mary’s Magnificat, it celebrates God’s abundant, surprising mercy, reminding us that God has saved, is saving, and will save.

There is nothing old or stale about this Good News! God is always doing a new thing! In that is our hope! While every morning may be a little Easter, so every midnight can be a little Christmas. Poet Ann Weems put it this way:

The Christmas Spirit is that hope
which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful
and announces in the face of any Herod, the world can
produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God all things are possible,
that even now
unto us a Child is born!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you are the Alpha and Omega. We praise You for Your saving acts throughout time and space. We give thanks for the “same old stories” which reveal who You are and whose we are. Bless us as we prepare our hearts for Christmas. May we cling to the promise and possibility of Christmas Hope! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Caitlin Werth '10

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 50

1 The mighty one, God the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
3 Our God comes and does not keep silence,
before him is a devouring fire,
and a mighty tempest all around him.
4 He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
5 “Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”
6 The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge. Selah
7 “Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.
8 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
9 I will not accept a bull from your house,
or goats from your folds.
10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
11 I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
12 “If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.
15 Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”
16 But to the wicked God says:
“What right have you to recite my statutes,
or take my covenant on your lips?
17 For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.
18 You make friends with a thief when you see one,
and you keep company with adulterers.
19 “You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.
20 You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother’s child.
21 These things you have done and I have been silent;
you thought that I was one just like yourself.
But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.
22 “Mark this, then, you who forget God,
or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver.
23 Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me;
to those who go the right way
I will show the salvation of God.”

DEVOTIONAL

I invite you, after reading the scripture above, to sit for a moment, close your eyes, and take a deep breath. This is

a tough passage for the Advent season! It doesn't exactly paint a picture of hope, peace, joy, or love, at least not in the way we like to imagine while listening to Christmas music, walking past holiday lights, or drinking hot cocoa.

But the first Advent was a tough season. It didn't have the same aura we work hard to create in our culture and time. Advent, at its core, is meant to be a time of eager and recklessly hopeful waiting. It first came at a time when salvation felt greatly needed. A time when God was about to do a new, amazing, miraculous thing that no one could have expected.

We now know what Advent brings, but the celebration that comes from that realization would be better suited for the Christmas season (starting on December 25).

What if, instead, we spent the season of Advent as a time of true listening for God's voice?

Psalm 50 reminds us that God speaking is action—a creative force. God spoke this world into being and continues to speak love. God is calling for us to hear that voice and respond in kind. God is not interested in what they already have, but instead, asks for thanksgiving. I don't believe God wants gratitude in the way we do (as affirmation) but as a way to bring us deeper into connection with our Creator. Our awareness and gratitude for all that God has done draws us close to the Heart of Love and sends us out to share God's mercy.

So instead of focusing on trying to cultivate the "perfect season" this Advent, let's instead use it as a faithful preparation for the day when God broke into the world that she birthed. Instead of opening advent calendars filled with chocolates or Legos, let's look around each day at the gifts we have already been given and lift up our praise: in hope, peace, joy, and love.

PRAYER

Listen to God's voice now. Center yourself and become aware of God's presence within and around you. Sit in silence or meditate on these words: "O God, you surround me and fill me." As you feel God's presence, lift up your thanksgivings, and when you are ready, share your "Amen."

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Robin Sharp '18

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, 3 so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us — just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

DEVOTIONAL

In this earliest of his letters, Paul is overjoyed to learn of the faith and love that continues to thrive in this Thessalonian community of Christ's followers. Having to flee the city after preaching only three Sabbaths, this apostle was anxious to know if his teachings had taken root in such a short time. Was the soil fertile enough to allow the seed to grow? Were the souls of the people open to Jesus Christ and his Good News? Was this fledgling community of faith keen to hear the truth in Christ's teachings, turning their lives around to love the Lord their God and to love their neighbor as themselves?

They were. Timothy's visit to Thessalonica on behalf of Paul established that Christianity had taken root in this European city. The words and ministry were spreading. Verse eight—"For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord"—is not simply about Paul and Timothy being satisfied with the results of their mission. It is much deeper. The "we" points to all people following Jesus everywhere and at every time, enriching others in Christ's love. It demonstrates a living and growing faith. And "standing firm in the Lord" offers a glimpse of being strong enough to overcome the bondage of "living in the world."

This is the hope for those who fear that the reign of Christ is in peril. When standing “firm in the Lord,” the world is assured Christ lives.

PRAYER

Ever-living Christ,

What can be said that will make a difference in the life of another? Will a gentle prayer together help them know Christ? Will holding their hand while they face conflict and despair tell them Jesus does care? Does preaching a bold sermon on loving the Messiah introduce them to a new way of life?

Today we are reminded, Lord: when we stand firm in your name, you do the work, and we are your instruments. That is what makes the difference. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by the Rev. Dr. Scott Dennis '13

SCRIPTURE

Luke 20:41-21:4

41 Then he said to them, “How can they say that the Messiah is David’s son? 42 For David himself says in the book of Psalms, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, 43 until I make your enemies your footstool.”’ 44 David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?”

45 In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 46 “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

DEVOTIONAL

We like familiarity, because it’s comfortable. Within the church, we like to be familiar with our liturgy and our worship, our holidays and our calendars, and, naturally,

we like our Bible stories to be familiar too. There’s a comfortableness with the familiar. Yet, we have short stories from Scripture, like The Widow’s Offering, which, although familiar, are certainly not comfortable. Our familiar, annual Advent-tide journey is here again, complete with its blue liturgical color, wreath, and decorations which direct us to look forward in hope and in our comfortable anticipation that Christmas is coming! Yet what is familiar and comfortable can be taken away from us and gone in an instant.

Remember that 83 years ago today, December 6, 1941, our country was comfortable with the familiarity that the far-off war would not touch us or disrupt the ordinary lives of everyday Americans. That all changed the next day. The widow in our gospel story was probably familiar with her poverty, but that does not mean she was comfortable with it. She could have taken comfort in continuing as she was, knowing that her life would likely not improve. Out of her poverty, she gave her offering of two small coins, which even then, would not buy very much. If anything, she opened herself to even more misery and worsened her plight. So where is the hope in this story?

The widow, by willingly giving out of her poverty, gave more than those who gave out of their abundance. Her offering did more to change her familiarity and comfort than the larger offerings. During this Advent season of hope, let us take time to give beyond what’s comfortable and familiar. Researchers have found that being generous is good for our brains, makes us happier, helps us live longer, and counters depression. With verse four as our Advent challenge for today, may we all give charitably out of the great abundance with which God has blessed us that we may be a blessing to others. Who knows what was the greater blessing: the widow’s meager offering, or her generous spirit?

PRAYER

Dearest Lord Jesus, aid us this Advent-tide. Fill us with the same generous spirit that inspired a poor widow to donate the last of her wealth for others. Take our spiritual poverty, that we may be transformed by the riches of Your grace, love, and charity which we show one another. This we ask for Your Name’s sake. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: HOPE

Written by Margaret Heidenreich '24

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 4:2-6

2 On that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. 3 Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, 4 once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. 5 Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. 6 It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

DEVOTIONAL

The Advent season is often called a season of anticipation. During this season, we are imagining what it might have been like to be waiting for our savior. We can only imagine it because we've already had the ending spoiled for us. This season is also one that is often marked by busyness. If you are working for a church, it's a season for worship services, bulletins, and special events. If you are a student, it's often a season of exams and final papers. Along with all of the other responsibilities of daily life come the extra responsibilities. Suddenly, on top of work, you're asked to attend the holiday party for your office. Suddenly, on top of work, you want to join a bible study. Suddenly, on top of work, you are trying to buy gifts for your family and decorate to host your friends for a Christmas party. In the chaos of life, the hope of the season can suddenly be lost completely.

This passage points us back to God's provision for Israel during the Exodus, reminding us that God is present even when it seems that there is no sense of God. The world is scary and lonely at times. Yet God invites us into this season of hope. Some people say that hope is an intrinsic force that is within each of us and that hope cannot be lost but will simply change as life changes. We can put hope and trust in God whose salvific work will heal all nations. If we hope in the never-changing God who has been a canopy of shelter and shade over us from the very beginning, we have no reason to feel hopeless. Perhaps this season, like this passage, is a reminder of God's faithfulness that we can put our hope in. God is a refuge when we feel afraid. God is a refuge when we feel helpless. Hopeless. God continues to be faithful even in our waiting. While everything around us changes, God remains constant and faithful.

During this season of Advent that is busy and stressful, be reminded that God is faithful, and place your hope in God's provision over your life.

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, in this season of anticipation, help me to set aside a moment to be reminded of the hope of this

season. Help me to honor this season with joy—joy which I know in your salvation and love over my life. Help me to bring that joy and hope with me into every moment, that I might feel you present within the busyness of this season. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Carolyn Cranston '99, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations, D.Min. Student

SCRIPTURE

Luke 7:28-35

28 I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." 29 (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. 30 But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

31 "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' 33 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; 34 the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' 35 Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

DEVOTIONAL

Has Jesus lived up to your expectations recently?

There is a great deal of truth in the statement by Voltaire: "If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor."

Do you worship the God of creation or the God you created? We lead busy lives and map out our days to accomplish what is necessary. It is frustrating when our plan is not God's plan. Sometimes, in anguish, we question if Jesus is really the Messiah. Is our Trinitarian God even listening? We have a perfect plan, and God fails to follow our instructions. This is nothing new.

Luke tells us that the people in Jesus' day expected someone different. They hoped for a warrior to ride in on a mighty horse and free the Israelites from Roman oppression. Instead,

they got Jesus, who was healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead.

This especially did not sit well with the experts in the law. The Messiah did not fit the Messiah of their creation. In fact, they claimed John the Baptist had a “demon” and Jesus was a “glutton and a drunkard.”

Jesus described them as “children in the marketplace.” Cranky children at that. Children complaining that John and Jesus weren’t dancing to the tune they were playing. Sometimes, we are those children. Have you ever been frustrated when Jesus got the steps wrong to the dance you created?

How much easier our lives would be if we would let go of the reins we so firmly grasp and invite God to take over our lives—heart, mind, body, and soul. When we give up control, we find true peace.

This Advent season, I would invite all of us to give ourselves to Jesus. Obedient to death on a cross, Jesus already covered us with grace and secured our salvation. We can trust Jesus to care for us. Take time to read Scripture, meditate, and pray. As children of God, we are safe in God’s care.

PRAYER

Gracious, loving, creator God, keep us from trying to remake you in our image. We put our faith and trust in you, knowing that you provide far more than we could hope for or imagine. Thank you for the gift of your son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Lisa J. Lyon '92

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 67

1 May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us, Selah
2 that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
3 Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. Selah
5 Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
6 The earth has yielded its increase;

God, our God, has blessed us.
7 May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

DEVOTIONAL

In seven verses, the Psalmist uses “us” four times, “peoples” five times, “nations” three times, “all” four times, combined into “all the nations”, “all the peoples” and “all the ends of the earth.” When a Hebrew word or phrase is repeated, we need to pay attention. This message is important to our understanding of God and ourselves.

In Psalm 67, God’s saving power is for all nations. God’s blessing is for all peoples. God judges the peoples, guides the nations. In response to God’s inclusive love and care, all peoples and all nations are invited to praise God together. Perfect peace!

If God’s graciousness, blessing, salvation, judgment and guidance are all-inclusive, why are peoples and nations so exclusive? In America, Native Americans were excluded from their land. Others were excluded from our country, our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, and our laws. From 1875 on, immigration law limited or banned Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Polish, Russian, Asian Pacific, Latin American, African and Southeast European peoples. Also at times Jews, Muslims, Arabs, and women traveling alone. African Americans and women were excluded from voting, education, jobs, property ownership. Cities and towns were divided by ethnicity, national origin, religion, class.

Such exclusiveness once gave way to the Christmas spirit. It wasn’t peace, but a temporary cease-fire—a tenuous truce as people put aside their differences in an outburst of civility, charity, friendliness. At least until December 26.

I worry that the Christmas spirit will not be manifest at all this year. How can we welcome the Christ Child who came for all if we exclude members of “the other” political party, the LGBTQ community, refugees, immigrants, authors, naturalized citizens—anyone whose ideas, faith or politics are different from ours?

We can’t.

Sisters and brothers, let us repent, and embrace and share God’s all-inclusive love!.

PRAYER

God who created all people in your image and likeness, God who loves everyone everywhere: thank you. You sent your Son, the embodiment of your all-inclusive love. As we welcome baby Jesus, so may we welcome people you send our way with open minds, open hearts, and open hands. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Dr. Richard W. Wingfield '02/'13

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 146

1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

The psalm is the first of five Hallel psalms. Here, the psalmist vows his praise to God and hope in God for his entire life because of God's character, care, and concern for the most vulnerable of society.

In this broken and polarized world with its volatile rhetoric, many powerful voices are clamoring for our attention claiming to be for us. In many cases, we have lent our voices to this rhetorical fray, declaring our support for them. Yet, this psalm is a reminder not to place our trust in those who possess power, prestige, position, or prosperity. Their lives are temporary, their plans finite, and they have no control over their destiny, let alone the lives of others.

Psalm 146 is a call to orient our praise and hope toward the everlasting and sovereign God of all creation. It is God who will see to it that the most vulnerable and marginalized, of whom Howard Thurman declared, "whose backs are against the wall" are cared for. Governments and armies have their

place, but human power pales in comparison in the world where God reigns.

Yes, we are to sing the praises of our God. But the vocality of our praise must never be a substitute for our vocation of service to others. For the quality of the faith is judged by the quality of the justice in the land, i.e., how the least members of society are treated. My father often declared that we are the hands and feet of God. It is God who gives us the ability to extend the heart of God.

This psalm is God's letter of recommendation for the powerless. Notice them. Help them. Become one of them. Walk with them as the beloved community. It was Dr. James Forbes who once stated, "No one gets into heaven without a letter of recommendation from the poor."

And as we extend our hand, the voice of the Master says, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." This is indeed a life that's blessed.

PRAYER

Dear God, in a world that constantly calls for our allegiance, help us to trust you in all things. Help us to work out what you are working in us. Give us a heart like yours and help us to be an extension of your love. In Christ's name, amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Mikayla Kovacik-Doepker '19

SCRIPTURE

John 7:53-8:11

53 Then each of them went home, 1 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus

straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11 She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

DEVOTIONAL

Today’s lectionary reading, thought to be a later addition and not included in the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of John, is part of an ongoing narrative of opposition between Jesus and the legal experts and Pharisees. In an attempt to bring an accusation against Jesus, they presented a woman who was accused of adultery and raised the question of what should be done to punish her. The woman was undoubtedly faced with humiliation, shame, and fear as the judgmental eyes of the men in the temple looked on her. Perhaps the woman expected Jesus to condemn her or even to cast the first stone. Instead, Jesus bent over and wrote something on the ground. When they continued to hound him with questions, he bent over again and wrote on the ground. What exactly he wrote we don’t know, but we do know that one by one those who heard him went away. Jesus does not condemn the woman, but instead sends her out with words of blessing, “Go . . . don’t sin anymore.” Jesus takes what is meant to be a text of terror and turns it into a story of liberation for this woman. The elders, legal experts, and Pharisees were so limited by their own social constructs, binary thought processes, and clumsy theological imaginations that they missed a miracle of mercy. In place of condemnation or death, Jesus offers mercy, a new beginning, and abundant life.

During the season of advent, as we seek to prepare our hearts and minds to, once again, welcome the Christ child, we are reminded that we, too, have our own experiences of terror, shame, and sin. Still, we must acknowledge that we have been participants in others’ stories of shame and humiliation. The good news for us all is that the same God who turned the woman’s story in this text from terror to liberation is the God who has come for us. Christ comes with mercy, freeing us from sin and shame. Christ comes with mercy, freeing us to new beginnings and abundant life. Christ comes with mercy, turning our stories of shame, humiliation, and terror into stories of peace, hope, joy, and love. As we journey through this advent season, may God’s mercy extended to us in the Christ child bring us peace for our living.

PRAYER

God of mercy, thank you for your grace that transforms our stories of sin, shame, and terror. We seek Your forgiveness for the times that we have allowed our own social constructs, binary thought processes, or clumsy theological imaginations to blind us to miracles of mercy. During this season of preparation, ready us to be witnesses to transformation, to mercy, and to peace that passes all understanding. In the name of Christ who comes to us in mercy and peace we pray. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Jelty Ochotan ‘11

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 126

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

DEVOTIONAL

In the world we live in, nothing comes easily. National independence is not achieved without enduring struggles, sacrifices of time, separation from family and friends, bloodshed, death, and the tears of fighters. Similarly, no student earns an A+ without hard work—sacrificing time for reading, doing homework, field studies, extracurricular activities, volunteering, and maintaining punctuality in class. Every endeavor requires full effort to attain the desired results.

The journey of the Israelites during the exile, marked by alternating hardships and blessings, illustrates that even in times of hunger, the people were provided for, demonstrating God’s continuous care, which brought them joy. However, facing difficulties such as hunger and thirst in the hot desert was a test of their faithfulness to the Lord. During such trials, they often felt abandoned by God, leading to grumbling and rebellion.

This life process teaches us that spiritual maturity is not achieved easily. One must possess strong faith in God’s help. The psalmist’s imagery of sowing with tears symbolizes hard effort and deep trust in God’s help. Tears represent profound sorrow and the inability to overcome challenges without surrendering to God’s help and love. The ability to work hard is seen as a divine gift, leading to the joyful reaping of the fruits of one’s labor. This joyful return follows a period of sorrow and hardship.

If people rely solely on their own abilities without depending on God, they will miss the true meaning of life and the profound joy found in God. Amen.

PRAYER

God who gives joy and peace, we thank you for allowing us to experience sadness, suffering, and sacrifice. Through these trials, we understand that true joy and peace come from facing suffering with faith. We are grateful for the strength You provide in times of difficulty, enabling us to attain perfect salvation in You. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by Sarah Betzig '21, Communications Strategist

SCRIPTURE

Luke 22:14-30

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. 21 But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. 22 For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" 23 Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this.

24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

28 "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

DEVOTIONAL

I have always thought of the commandment "the greatest among you must become like the least, and the leader like one who serves" as a call to "servant leadership" as the proper way to wield power. Like Jesus, each Christian ought to seek to be a servant of others - most especially those in leadership. I wonder what would happen, though, if we flipped the equivalence in this commandment.

I recently learned of the Silent Parade, a peaceful protest in which 10,000 African Americans marched silently along New York City's Fifth Avenue in 1917 as part of an anti-lynching movement. In addition to the silence of the marchers, something notable about this particular protest is that the children led the way in the march, while men brought up the rear. That is, those with the least power were the leaders, even among this marginalized group.

It's easy to dwell on the part of this passage that promises exultation - the "I confer on you a kingdom" part, the "you will sit on thrones judging others" part. Focusing on these, I might think, "I am to be elevated to a place of power, so long as I am Christ-like enough to wield it responsibly. And, well, of course I will be, with God's help." But that, to me, sounds a lot like the disciples' arguing about who among them will be the greatest - which is precisely the thing Jesus is pushing back against.

What if instead of Jesus outlining a program for how to get into power (or how not to be jerks with the power we have), the Lord is helping us to know where to look for direction as we seek to follow him. Not "the leader should become least" but "the least should become leader." What if, like in the Silent Parade, we took our cue for the direction of our efforts for peace on earth from the little ones, from the "least of these," from the powerless. As the great magi turned their course in the direction of an infant child, perhaps the "least of these" among us can best help us, the Church, discern where God is calling us to go next. Perhaps the little ones best know the way to shalom, after all.

PRAYER

God, in your infinite love and wisdom, you chose to live among us as a little child. As we prepare to welcome you anew, give us eyes to see your leading in the least among us. Give us humility and wisdom to lay down our "greatness" at your feet. Teach us ever to follow you, and open our eyes, ears, and hearts to your call to wholeness - that is, peace - on earth. In your name we pray, amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: PEACE

Written by the Rev. Dr. Martha Murchison '09

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 90

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3 You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
4 For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
7 For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
10 The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
11 Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
13 Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands —
O prosper the work of our hands!

DEVOTIONAL

Advent means coming. Its focus is on a long-held and long-expected hope that has not lost its light. The difficulty is that we not only wait for that light in our very dark world but that we wait during the darkest and longest days of winter. Time can seem unending on those days which begin slowly

and end early. The dark nights can be stifling. We wait and hope for the promises we've read about in scripture—deserts breaking into bloom, swords beaten into plows, food and housing for everyone—we wait and hope for the promises to come, but it is dark outside. It is difficult to imagine that anything might change. How can we find a light for our wee bit of hope?

The psalmist gently broadens our vision beyond the dark December sky. He calls us to look back over the entirety of history to trace the hand of God upon our story. Before the mountains were—God was. Before the mess that is part of our world—the wars, the hatred, the degradation of the planet—God was. God was before it all. God has been dwelling with humanity through the arc of history, and God will be with us "from everlasting to everlasting."

It is in the memory of that presence that we can find light for our hope. It is by the story of what has been that we can envision what can be. It is in a tale that is larger than each of us but that is written about each of us that we can find a way to make those promises a reality. It is in the waiting and in the dark that we can imagine the ways toward peace and the steps toward life. It is then that we can join in the prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come.

PRAYER

Remind us, dear Lord, of your presence throughout history. Remind us that you have been with us and will be with us and offer us a new direction. Open our eyes to see beyond the worries of our present moment. Help us find light in the darkness. Lead us to share our light so that others might find light also. Amen.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 15, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Amanda Horan '20

SCRIPTURE

John 3:22-30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24 — John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going

to him.” 27 John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.”

DEVOTIONAL

This passage holds a sense of loss, even as it speaks of joy. The author of the gospel carefully points out that John will soon lose his freedom. Those of us who know the story also know that he will soon lose his life. His work is coming to an end, just as Jesus’ ministry gets underway. John’s disciples seem to sense that something is about to change. They are touchy and sensitive; protective of their teacher’s work. And who can blame them? They love him. And they love their shared ministry.

Even during this joyful season, many of us do not feel like raising our voices to sing out the words of the old carol “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!” It is a lonely feeling to approach Christmas while also experiencing the grief of loss.

The truth is, life is usually a pretty messy business. Things like joy and loss don’t often stay in their carefully designated times and places. They mingle and collide. Our happy memories and the legacy of meaningful work and loving relationships live on for us even as we feel the sting of a hard ending.

Perhaps this passage may be an invitation to us who have been stretched thin by the pull between grief and joy. Maybe we find here an invitation to take time to name the something or the someone we miss. Maybe here is an invitation to decide not to put on the mask of easy holiday happiness. Instead, like John, may we seek out the wisdom of honest joy. John does not let the sting of a hard ending prevent him from honoring the legacy of his work within the larger story of God’s love for the world. He does not let loss steal his joy. May it be so for all of us.

PRAYER

Help us, O God, to embrace this season with a heart that can hold both joy and sorrow. May we find solace in the truth that your presence is with us in all things. Let our hearts be both open and honest, ready to receive and to share the fullness of your joy. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Mary Catherine (Kay) Day ‘97

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

DEVOTIONAL

The Advent season brings a bustle of activities, especially finding the right gift for each person on our list. Some start to shop early while others rush at the last minute. We try to give according to the interest and desire of the recipient. Most of the gifts we give, while appreciated, are soon or eventually discarded. If we are honest, the same thing happens with the gifts we receive.

This is not the case with the gifts that God gives us. Peter says that God’s divine power has given us everything we need. These are gifts that grow with time and use. With them come His promises, His guarantee, that these will lead us closer to Christ and to eternal life. These include faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, and kindness (fruits of the Spirit). As we grow in our faith, these gifts grow in value. They become a part of our lives, treasured and preserved.

God's gifts can't be bought for any price. They can't be wrapped and put under a tree. They can't be held in our hands. They won't go out of style or break and be cast away. They are more costly than anything we could ever purchase. They are the perfect size, fitted just for us. They multiply in value as we use them. More than that, they prepare us for God's use here on earth and for His glory in all eternity. These are the only gifts we can take with us into eternity. Everything else will be left behind.

This season, I invite you to make use of the gifts God has given you as you search for the gifts you will give to others. Where can you give goodness, knowledge, self-control, and all the rest of God's magnificent gifts?

PRAYER

Gracious God, you have given us all we need to love you and serve you. You are the most generous gift-giver. Help us this season to give gifts that will last beyond the season, that will be gifts that share the divine perspective of the perfect gifts for those in our lives. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Drew Himes '13

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

DEVOTIONAL

Days of sorrow, destruction, gnashing teeth, and rending garments. These were the days of Isaiah 9. These were the days of Assyrian domination spoken of in the book of Judges (6 and 7). These were dark days of hopeless prayers not uttered and gloomy, tear-streaked faces as all eyes watched the invading Assyrians lay waste to people, plant, and animal, scouring the land with death, annihilation, and distress.

But right there . . . right in the midst of this unimaginable fear and grief . . . God does a new thing. God calls out to the people through the voice of the prophet and offers them something that seems not only improbable but also impossible: A new king; a new day; a new chance; freedom; liberation. I wonder how many of the hearers of this good news at first scoffed.

In the midst of our lives, we too face an onslaught of uncontrollable forces: illness and death; separation and break ups; loss of jobs, physical ability, economic plight, and even the loss of our human dignity.

But into these moments, God shines light. And as Isaiah tells us, it's the light of none other than God's own kavod, God's presence.

While this passage has nothing to do with the coming of Jesus Christ, it does teach us something about God and God's ways. It shows us that desperation, oppression, and hurt cause God to show up in a big way and reveal our liberation. This passage should not put us in mind of Christ's coming but instead of a pattern of God's doing: God freed the people many times before (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon) and God is doing it again in our Savior.

That which harms us and keeps us separated from God and one another has been torn asunder in the advent of our Christ, and the blood-stained clothing of our broken world is being thrown onto the fire to fuel the redemptive consummation that God is breaking forth.

This was good news for Isaiah's people. And it's good news for us too.

PRAYER

Liberating and loving God: Come. Enter into our world of sadness and hurt, pain and grief, and bring forth your light once again. Shine into all the dark places and illuminate them with your goodness and mercy. Come, Lord. Come. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Emily Cooper '19

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 147:1-11

1 Praise the Lord!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
3 He heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.
4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.
7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
8 He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
9 He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.
10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

DEVOTIONAL

There is one week left until Christmas Day. If you are like me, you might not be filled with overwhelming joy, but instead filled with anxiety about how everything will get done. Are all the cookies baked? Even the special ones that the kids like to leave for Santa? Have you finished wrapping the presents? Have you started? Have you bought the presents yet? Did you mail the things being shipped out of state? There is so much happening in this final countdown to Christmas!

The season of Advent is one of preparation. Over the past several weeks, we have been preparing our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus, our Savior. We may have also been creating a giant to-do list to make it to the big day. It is easy to get lost in the busyness of the season. Our joy can be overtaken by our quest for the perfect holiday. We can lose ourselves this time of year.

Today, as you think about all that is left on your to do list, I encourage you to stop and breathe. Read Psalm 147:1-11, then slowly read it again. God is gracious. The Christmas

carols we hear everywhere we go are praising the Divine. No matter how we feel today, no matter what our list may look like, God is with us, tending to us. God heals the brokenhearted and is understanding beyond measure. God lifts us up. There is a reason to be filled with joy! God's steadfast love is with us always, giving us what we need each and every day. So, if the chaos of the season is overpowering the peaceful preparation you'd planned on experiencing, know that you are not alone. Take a moment to allow yourself to feel the joy offered in knowing that no matter what you are experiencing, God is with you, and Emmanuel is coming once again on Christmas morning.

PRAYER

God of all seasons, thank you for today. Thank you for days filled to the brim with things needing to be done. Thank you for quiet, calm days. Thank you for seasons of life that are full beyond measure, and thank you for the days when we long for just one thing to do. Kindle your Divine joy in our hearts, so that we may share it with others as we go through our day. In Jesus' holy name we pray, amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Bill LaVelle '89

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 11:10-16

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

11 On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

12 He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

13 The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.

14 But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines in the west, together they shall plunder the people of the east. They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them.

15 And the LORD will utterly destroy
the tongue of the sea of Egypt;
and will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching wind;
and will split it into seven channels,
and make a way to cross on foot;
16 so there shall be a highway from Assyria
for the remnant that is left of his people,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from the land of Egypt.

DEVOTIONAL

Some things might seem impossible. Some traumas are just too hard to even think about the possibility of reconciliation. Family members die broken, unwilling to even express sympathy to one another. Such has been my family, from generation to generation.

When I graduated from seminary, my father told me he was ashamed of me. My niece just died from a final stroke at the age of 56, after living as a ward of the County Home for years. Her life, and her brother's life, were filled to the brim with tragedy. There wasn't even an obituary in the newspaper. It's as if her life didn't matter. But she mattered to her brother. And to me. And to the woman who raised her after my sister left. And best of all, Tracy mattered to God.

"On that Day," . . . it will be glorious! "On that Day, the Lord will extend his hand . . . to recover the remnant that is left of his people . . . He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts" . . . On that Day, Tracy will be there! And all will be glorious Joy!

I hold this promise of Joy On that Day deep, deep in my heart as tears for her most painful sojourn still bring me grief. But in the midst of my grief, there is also trust in my heart that Tracy will be among that throng of outcasts, all those nobodies, who are near and dear to the heart of the Lord. I trust that "On that Day," Tracy and I will walk together on that ". . . highway for the remnant that is left of His people."

PRAYER

O most gracious God, protector of the helpless, defender of the outcast, hope of the poor: bring love and hope and the promise of eternal Joy to all who are so badly broken. We place our trust in you, Lord, for only you can make it come to pass. We do truly believe that "On that Day," the Holy Spirit will suddenly sweep into our world and make all things new. "On that Day," there will be true, lasting Joy! Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Timothy Goodman '11

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:5-25

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

DEVOTIONAL

Silence can be a holy gift.

Obviously, not every form of silence is good, gracious, or godly. A silent response to prayer can be difficult to weather, for example. In our most honest moments, we will likely admit we are afraid of silence for what it might reveal about ourselves and reality. However, there are times when silence is not only needed but required of us in the wake of something good, beautiful, and true. For Zechariah, he needed silence after the angel Gabriel told him that his wife Elizabeth would finally conceive a son who would operate in the spirit of a revivalist. He needed silence because of his unbelief. It is easy to imagine that Zechariah had a way with words as a trained priest of Israel. Yet, Zechariah's words were getting in the way of a faith that held onto God's Word. So, God in wisdom and mercy brought Zechariah into a season of silence until John the Baptist was born. Then, Zechariah's silence broke into praise and faith by grace. What would it look like for us to enter moments and spaces of silence as we wait upon and hope again in the Son of God, the Word made flesh?

PRAYER

May the Trinity, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teach, strengthen, and change us as we enter the holy gift of silence.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: JOY

Written by the Rev. Norma Prina Murphy '93

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 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.

DEVOTIONAL

I remember when I first sensed a call to go to seminary. I had no idea whether I was to earn an M.A., which would enhance my B.S. in Music Ed. and pave the way for a full-time church musician position, or an M.Div., which would lead to something I'd never imagined.

Honestly, my first reaction was one of disbelief—who, me, God? Go to seminary, God? That's for smart people, wise people, deeply faithful people. And you're calling ME? Then came the objections—but I have a family to care for, and four choirs to direct, not to mention my 45 private students! How will my family manage if I add classes to that schedule? And where will the money to pay for it come from? Thin air?

But it didn't take long for me to get on board with the notion. The more I considered it, the more I actually got excited about it, because if God is willing it, then a way forward would be made clear, right?

That was not the first 'Mary moment' I have had in my life, nor the last one, either. There have been many during my life, but that moment was the clearest and most parallel to Mary's that I can recall.

So, what was your most memorable 'Mary moment'? When has God laid a path before you and invited you to travel it? An invitation that has caused you to react with disbelief, maybe objections, and finally with more than acceptance—with anticipation and joy?

And what is more to the point: what invitation is God yet laying before you today? That is definitely something to ponder carefully in the next few days—because God is indeed still at work in us. Even now.

PRAYER

God of the impossible, you have called us to a life that we could never imagine. But it is the life that leads to joy. Bless the ending of our Advent journey and coming celebration of Christmas anew. In the name of your Word-made-flesh. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: LOVE

Written by the Rev. Nathan Carlson '11

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 21:22-22:5

22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day - and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

DEVOTIONAL

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as "The light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5, NRSVA) In the Apocalypse of John, the apostle sees Jesus, now the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lamb of God, for who and what He truly is—the Light of the new world. This light illuminates the new creation, revealing its true, full purpose in God's presence. The uncorrupted, undefiled, eternal nature of all things steps out from the shadows to be revealed as fully part of God's reigning kingdom.

Trudging through Advent year after year only to arrive at the same manger scene, it becomes increasingly easy for us to lose sight of the immaculate in the mundane and routine. We recite words of power from rote memory. Scenes of God breaking through into humanity get wrapped in tattered cloths. The infinite becomes seasonal and disposable. How are we tempted to dust off previous year's sermon jackets, provide a touchup, and distribute the same words to the same people? After all, isn't this message eternal and in need of no refreshing?

And yet, the nature of light itself, of vision, should prohibit this from occurring in our own lives. Light illuminates the present nature of things. Stepping outside after a fresh snowfall changes the contour of one's own backyard, so that a child's imagination can see it as a new wonderland of possibilities not present yesterday. So too does the eternal light of God's Kingdom, come in the Lamb of God, shine forth from eternity always on fresh changes in our own lives and the world around us. The ongoing, transformative work that this God with us has been doing in our own lives since last we approached this season certainly means God's light falls upon new ground. Until John's vision of the New Jerusalem becomes real for us in eternity, the question each Advent season should be: what is this light hitting in us this year that has changed? What darkness and decay has this Lamb of God overcome since last we saw His sign?

PRAYER

Lamb of God, shine your light into our lives illuminating the work you have done among us this year. Show us where darkness and decay remain, that we may invite you in again. Let us find ourselves filled with wonder at your work as we approach your day, Emmanuel. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: LOVE

Written by the Rev. Andrew Tennant '12

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:57-66

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

DEVOTIONAL

The birth story of John the Baptist typically plays second fiddle to the story of the birth of Christ, but the story of and prophecy of John the Baptist is a vital part of the story of God's love made into flesh through his one and only son, Jesus the Christ. When the women present at the birth of John questioned his name and witnessed Zechariah's voice return, they were amazed and wondered what God had in store for this child.

For years, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children of their own, but their love for one another never wavered. Their love for God, and their prayers for a child, never wavered. Though when the angel appeared to Zechariah to give him the news of the coming birth of his son, he was filled with some doubt, his love and faith never wavered, and his belief in what to call his son and in his son's role never faded. John the Baptist would become a Prophet of the Most High, and he would prepare the way of the Lord. John's life and ministry were birthed out of the love his parents had for each other, the love that God had for his parents, and the path that God had for him.

Advent is a season of preparation for Christ's coming. John the Baptist spent his life preparing the people of Israel for the Messiah's coming. It was the love of God that set the meaning of the entire reason for Christmas in motion.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as we enter the pinnacle of this season, we remember how your love set things in motion which would alter the course of human history through the birth of your mighty prophet John the Baptist and through the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, who would show the world the ultimate gift of his love through the sacrifice he willingly made for all of humanity. We pray all these things in the blessed name of Jesus Christ. Amen!

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: LOVE

Written by the Rev. Rebecca L. Dix '15/'17

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 35:1-10

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 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. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the

feeble knees. 4 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."

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 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; 7 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.

8 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 traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 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. 10 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.

DEVOTIONAL

I struggle when wilderness is used as a metaphor to describe being lost, hopeless, or in despair. Living amid an arid climate, I witness the abundance of life within the wilderness. The dry and desert places hold the beauty of such a complex and diverse ecosystem. However, I had to learn to see it. I had to let go of what I thought thriving and life was supposed to look like. I had to let go of the preconceptions carried from where I had been before in order to see things anew in the place I am now.

This is the same invitation, the call, the beckoning we receive on Christmas Eve. To see the world anew. To see Love in abundance when it may appear there is none. To see anew when at first all we may see is dry and empty land. For Love is there, is here, is coming. For Love is born to us this day. A Love whose name is Emmanuel.

PRAYER

Lord, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, give us eyes that see you in this season. Open our blind hearts so we may be a faithful people who rejoice and hope in Love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2024

WEEKLY THEME: LOVE

Written by Dr. Elayne Arrington '21

SCRIPTURE

1 John 4:7-16

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 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. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

16 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.

DEVOTIONAL

The catholic epistles have not been among my favorite New Testament scriptures. Yet in considering this season in which we anticipate the arrival or advent of the Christ—when we are especially cognizant of the love shown to us by the Father sending his Son and the Son coming to live among us and to give that earthly life for our benefit—I have been especially drawn to the words of 1 John 4:12: “if we love one another . . . his love is perfected in us.” This resonating text is a proclamation that even a love so great as that of the Father and the Son is not complete. We can complete or perfect it by loving one another. I can perfect it by loving my fellow humans. I can complete the love of God by seeing all of us as lovable, by considering our faults as imperfections that are fixable or of no real consequence. One of my favorite scriptures on love has been 1 Corinthians 13. But I now see that familiar text as giving the characteristics of our love for one another and this resonating text as giving the purpose of that love. During this season when our concentration is on gifts, this resonating text is a proclamation that the proper response to the celebratory gift of love incarnate by the Father and the Son is our gift of mutual love for one another.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for opening my mind and heart to a new perspective and an appreciation of more of your word. I pray that you will guide us that we may fully receive and give the gift of love.

The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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