



Covenant Presbyterian Church
2001 N Coalter Street, Staunton, VA 24401
(540) 885-2138 — Fax (540) 885-4399
www.covenantpresstaunton.org



*2020 Advent Devotion of
Covenant Presbyterian Church*

Sunday, November 29
Conversations with God - Let There Be Hope
By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)

Hope

“Creator God, tell me of another world,” I said.
“A world where bodies don’t fail and all are born healthy, so people dance for days. A world where grief sets its prisoners free and heartbroken hearts find relief.

Tell me of another world, God. A world where toddlers believe they can and clap for themselves every time they take another wobbly step.

Tell me of the end of war.
Tell me of a church whose walls become windows, and whose faith becomes a magnet— drawing people in with love’s pure pull.

Tell me again about the lion and the lamb. Tell me of another world,” I said.

Then God said, “Child, my child. You are my world. You are my heart, and you are my Church. What you speak of is hope. But you should keep speaking, and keep seeking, for it is such a beautiful prayer.”

Prayer after receiving your star:

God of ink black skies and starry nights,
Like the Magi so many years ago,
We are here, seeking you.
Step by step, we have wandered into this space
With the hope of feeling you in our midst.
And step by step, you have claimed us, loved us, and fed us.
Today we have all drawn star words.
For some of us, these words are full of meaning, challenge, and invitation already.
For others, these words are a blank canvas—inviting you into our lives.
So as a new year dawns, we pray that you would be in our dreams and in our waking. Allow us to use these star words as a tool to see you in our everyday life.
May they guide us, as the star guided the Magi.
May they illuminate your path, as light always does.
And in a year, may we find ourselves here, together again,
With a mouth full of praise for the ways in which you have been present to us.
With hearts full to the brim,
Together we pray,
Amen.

(continued on next page)

My word for this past year was “focus.” I put my word in my car so that I would see it every time I drove. It was not only a good reminder when I was driving (who doesn’t need that reminder when they’re driving?), but also when I was at stoplights, I would see the word and try to “focus” myself in prayer. I appreciated having this tangible reminder.

This year, we are mailing out the Star Words in the Covenant Connection. If you don’t receive the newsletter in the mail, stop by the church and pick out a word for yourself. Put it some place where you will see it often (a bathroom mirror, in a car console, with your keys). Pay attention to the ways that this word pops up in unexpected places. Pray for God to show you new opportunities to experience that word in the coming year.

May your year be filled with epiphanies.



Wednesday, January 6

By Sarah Wolf

Inspired by Matthew 2:1-12

On Epiphany, we celebrate the journey the Magi took to find the Christ-child. It's been a long journey. The Magi have completed their voyage and we have completed our way through this devotional to Epiphany. But we are not finished yet.

Over the years since that first Epiphany, different cultures and traditions have found ways to celebrate and observe the holiday. Some traditions actually wait to open their presents on this day. Others celebrate by holding elaborate parades. Recently, the tradition of "Star Words" has started to gather a following.

Several theological statements being made in this tradition from "A Sanctified Art":

1. The Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us—including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year—to move closer to Jesus.
2. We trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight.
3. We trust that it is often easy to miss God in our daily midst. Having an intention word to consider both in present days, as well as to reflect on at the end of the year, allows for us to see God in ways we may not have seen God before. This is the greatest gift.
4. We know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation. We believe that star words invite a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful new way to connect with God.
5. By not looking or sorting through the star words at their selection, we practice the spiritual task of receiving. It is not we who are in control in this moment. Instead, we trust that God is present, and we let go of our desire to cultivate or control.



Tuesday, January 5
By Natalie Wolf
Inspired by Psalm 27

The psalmist prays these words with such confidence and trust in the Lord. She does not live her life frozen by fear because she knows that God will be her shelter and protect her from enemies, war, and even her own parents, should they forsake her. I try my best to remember that God will always take care of me, but it is a truth that is easier to recite than to truly believe.

When I read this psalm, I wonder what the psalmist has experienced to embrace such confidence in God. This psalmist lived on the same earth that we live on today. Like all of us have, it's clear that she faced some sort of adversity in her life. She has seen how God guarded her through those hardships and continues to hold her in God's love and she uses that witness as motivation to remain strong, letting her heart take courage, and waiting for the Lord.

We know that the season of Advent was all about preparation and waiting for the arrival of Jesus. We also know that we will continue to wait for God – for God's kingdom fully come on earth as it is in heaven. But we must recall that the psalmist waited without being controlled by fear. She waited with expectancy. She waited in prayer, in song, and in action. I hope that her faith can be encouraging for us in this new year.

May we gain strength from the psalmist's words of trust to wait with intentionality. Let us listen to our hearts when they say, "Seek God's face!"

CONSIDER . . .

- What has God done for you?
- What will you do as you wait for God?

Monday, November 30
A New Heaven & New Earth
By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)
Inspired by 2 Peter 3:8-15a

This passage from 2 Peter strikes me as a bridge between two creation stories—our creation story found in Genesis, and the new creation found in Jesus' birth.

The reference to time in verse 8 drills in that connection, as the creation story found in Genesis uses time as a marker for God's greatness, just as Peter does here.

Thus, the visual for this text is a creation visual. The half circle at the top of the page represents the sun and God's light in this world. At the bottom of the page is a symbolic drawing of the earth—an earth where vines and vegetation take the place of nations' lines and boundaries, reminding us that we are all God's children, unified in creation.

In between these two reminders of creation, I included the words from verse 13, which point to our waiting. For not only in Advent, but in our everyday, we long for something better than the suffering of this world. I found great comfort in the words, "In accordance with God's promise" (2 Peter 3:13), as they remind us that indeed we wait, but we do not wait in vain. We wait for a new heaven and a new earth. We wait for the coming of the Christ child.

Tuesday, December 1
By Lee Clark
Inspired by Isaiah 40:1-11

When the darkness is complete and surrounds us, our worries increase, our fears are magnified, our doubts grow, and our strength ebbs. Often, the darkness is overwhelming and all-consuming. It is at times like these, that we often lose our way. We have no guidance or direction, we wander, and we fear.

As our fears and doubts grow, we forget to look up and we fail to see the multitude of shining lights given to us to provide a comfort in the darkness and direction to our steps. We fail to look out towards the horizon for the dawning light that will strengthen us, renew us, and expose our fears and doubts as the small things they truly are. We give too much power to the voice in our head that amplifies our fears. We are deaf to the soft and quiet sounds around providing us comfort, and letting us know the darkness will soon be over.

Isaiah 40:3-5 tells of a voice calling us and preparing us for the coming of the Son, one who will raise the valleys, lower the hills, and level the rough ground before us; one who will take away our fears and doubts and provide direction and purpose to our lives. As we enter this Advent season, we are reminded to look up and out for the shining light given to us and to listen for that voice calling us to prepare the way for the rising Son. Look to the dawning light and listen for the voices telling us the darkness will soon be past.

PRAYER: Lord, we have been in the darkness too long. We have given too much power to our fears and doubts. We have failed to see or hear the signs you have given us – the signs that tell us you will provide for us a guiding light to strengthen us and lead us. Help us to remember in this Advent season that our worries and fears will be overcome by your gift to us. Thank you Lord for your guiding light and for your voice in the wilderness leading us to the gift you are preparing for us. Give us the strength to trust your guiding light and voice and the wisdom to follow them to the glorious gift you are giving us.

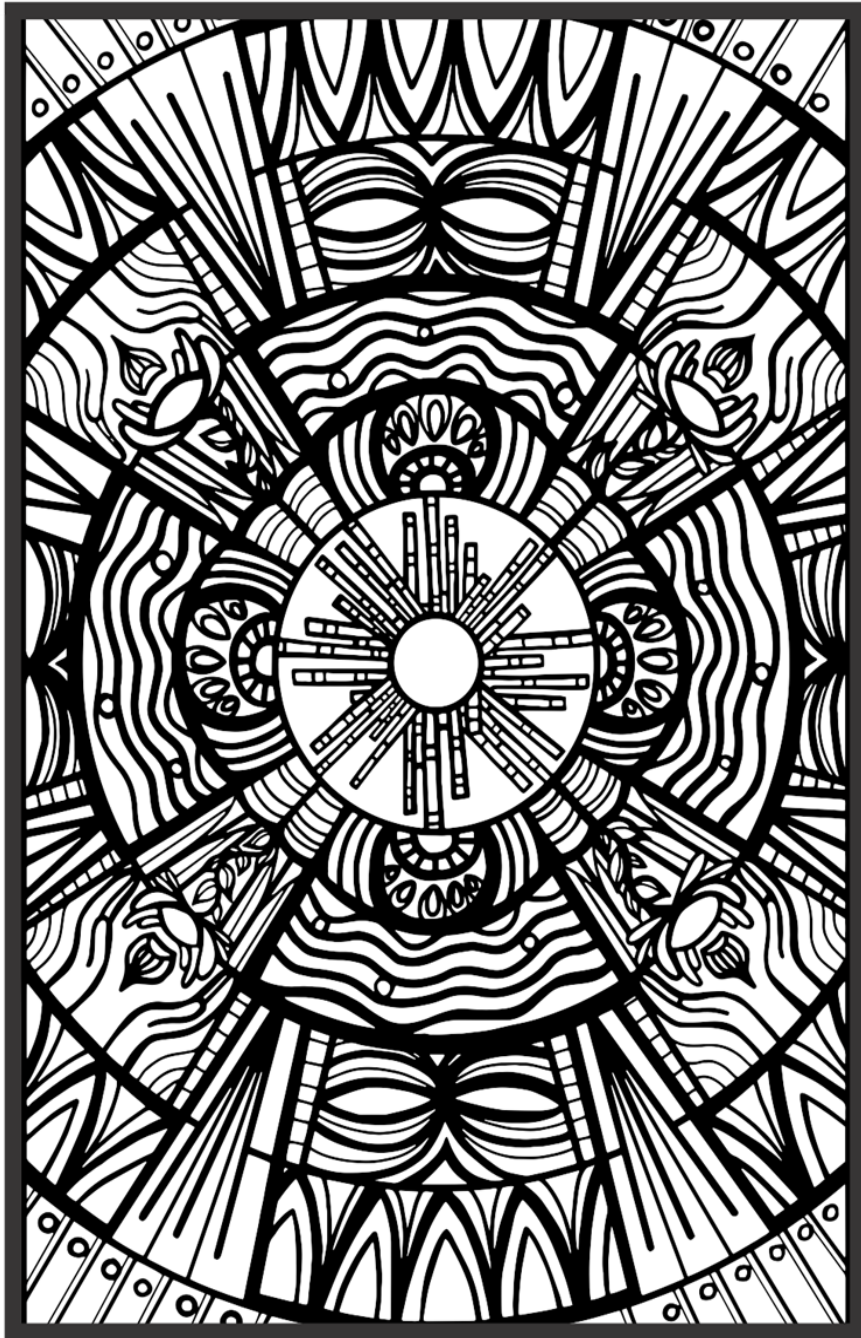
Monday, January 4 - Revelation of Mystery
By Lauren Wright Pittman
Inspired by Romans 16:25-27

This text serves as Paul's closing doxology in his letter to the Romans. He wishes them to be strengthened by his words and "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed" (Romans 16: 25). In reading this, everything seems so tidy and wrapped up in a bow. It seems almost too simple that God has been revealed through Christ, and the mystery is now disclosed.

For me, the words of Paul ring true. I do believe God has been revealed through Christ. However, I also believe our understanding of that revelation requires our action. I believe the revelation of mystery is not bound by time, or place, or context. This revelation is ongoing. God continually reveals God's self to us today as God did at the time of Paul's writings.

I felt it appropriate to image this text in a radial, mandala design. Mandalas have no end and reveal themselves one layer at a time from the center. As you color this mandala, allow it to focus your heart on this text. Each ring holds imagery pointing to Paul's doxology. Allow the mandala to give you space to reflect on this past year.

As we move into a new year, I hope that we all continue to seek after this revealed mystery. I hope that we do not grow discouraged, weary, or afraid when we do not understand, and that we revel in the beauty of continually reaching out to grasp that which we cannot fully hold. It is a beautiful journey.



Wednesday, December 2

By Karen Peterson

Inspired by Mark 13:28-37

In 1860 the French chemist, Marcel lin Berthelot said, “Within a hundred years of physical and chemical science man will know what the atom is. It is my belief when science reaches this stage, God will come down to earth with His big ring of keys and will say to humanity, ‘Gentlemen, it is closing time.’” According to Wikipedia, people have been “date setting” since the year 500 and continue to do. We want to know when. Sure God, we can be ready if you just tell was when.

Unfortunately for us and our inquiring minds, Jesus says that even he doesn’t know the date and time. Jesus uses two parables here; the parable of the fig tree and the parable of the absent master. The fig tree suggests that we can have hope; the Son of Man is really, really coming. His words give the certainty that Jesus IS going to come again. The parable of the absent master speaks to our responsibility as we wait: to be awake, to be expectant, and to be watchful. So, if we focus on the WHEN, we miss the point. Instead, be aware and be ready every day to the ways God is calling us to serve and minister to our communities, nation, and world. God wants us to live that certain hope by being alert to everything and everyone around us. So, how do we wait?

As wide awake as we know how and as fully alive as we can be.

PRAYER: Dear God, sustain us in these challenging times. Give us eager and expectant hope. Motivate us to keep alert so that we are awake to the ways in which you call us to be your disciples. Amen

Thursday, December 3

By Peggy Roberson

Inspired by Psalm 130

Who do you know who is good at waiting? Make a list! I'll guess that there are not many names on the list. Certainly not mine. I may be the world's worst at waiting. Here's another way to approach the problem of waiting: What are you waiting for? We're all waiting for this pandemic to end (after more than nine months); most of us are waiting for a "return to normal" (which may never happen); this time of year most of us are waiting for Christmas (for toys if you're a child, for decorating a beautiful tree, for carols of comfort and joy) but how many of us are waiting for Jesus, for the Lord, for the second coming?

One of the Taizé chants which we have sung at Covenant is helpful to me.

"While we are waiting, come.
While we are waiting, come.
Jesus our Lord, Emmanuel,
While we are waiting, come."

Or perhaps Hymn 90 in Glory to God:

"Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord; be strong, take heart."

While we wait for the Lord to come again, what should we do?
How should we spend these waiting days?
Sitting on our comfy couches? Playing solitaire?
Reading a good book?

These are not evil or wrong, but they may not be our best choices.

Think about what Jesus told his disciples in Gethsemane: "Watch and pray..." Or consider what we should be doing: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Doesn't that mean securing for our neighbor the same justice as we seek for ourselves? The same rights and privileges? The same

means that we can live fearless, care free lives because as God surrounded the Psalmist, God surrounds each of us. We need fear nothing! Third, each of us is woven together by a master artisan. God's works are wonderful! That's us! We are wonderful!

PRAYER: God, I praise you for your presence in my life and thank you for creating me, for choosing me! Thank you, God, for empowering me to live fearlessly and worry free because your hand is always on me. Help me live like the wonderful creation you had in mind as you wove me into me. Amen.

Sunday, January 3

By Sarah Wolf

Inspired by Ephesians 5:6-9

"I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus. God set the stars to give light to the world. The star of my life is Jesus."

At the church I served in Memphis, we would sing this verse from Hymn 377 each Sunday as the children came forward to the front of the sanctuary for Children's Church. We would sing these words and watch the children come toddling up the long aisle, collecting quarters from adults to be part of the children's offering.

The words of this relatively new hymn are so simple, but they name exactly what it means to be a child of the light: following Jesus, looking to Jesus, being with Jesus, knowing the joy of Jesus. This hymn isn't just movement music for children on Sunday. It's to remind us who is to be at the center of our lives, lighting our paths, showing us the way.

Today's text tell us that we used to be darkness. Not that we were *in* darkness. But that we *were* darkness. We used to be without a savior, without much hope. And now...everything is changed. Now we are light. We are children of light. May our fruit be good and right and true.

PRAYER: I want to see the brightness of God. I want to look at Jesus. Clear Sun of righteousness, shine on my path, and show me the way to the Father. In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city

Saturday, January 2

By Frances Craig

Inspired by Psalm 139:1-18

Let there be neither fear nor worry.

Have you heard someone say “I found God”? What does that mean? For many people, it means that they have chosen God.

Read Psalm 139: 1 – 18.

Did you notice that the Psalmist is not writing about choosing God? He is writing about God’s choosing him. The difference may seem nuanced but it is important.

You (God) know me and are thoroughly familiar with my ways.

You (God) surround me and no matter where I go, you are there with me.

You (God) created my parts - even the icky inside ones.

You (God) knitted me in my mother’s womb.

You (God) have plans that are incomprehensible to me.

Watch any television crime show and eventually, you will hear a perp threaten, “I know where you live.” Frightening, right? The Psalmist’s understanding of God is close to this but the Psalmist is not afraid! The Psalmist is saying that God knows him, where he lives, and that no matter where he is, God is there with him. In verse 18, the Psalmist says “If I came to the very end – I am still with you.” Even in the very end, you (God) will not leave me alone. There is nothing to fear. Just as God has chosen the Psalmist, God has chosen us.

The Psalmist praises God! In verse 14b, he says “Your works are wonderful - I know that very well.” The Psalmist writes of being “woven together” in verse 15. Weaving is the art in which two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced forming a fabric or cloth. Woven cloth might be decorative, utilitarian or both. It is likely to be strong and sturdy. No two woven pieces are the same. Certainly, the whole cloth is greater than the sum of its parts. Is that not like us? Are we not greater than the sum of our parts? Are we not blessed with unique qualities? Are we not strong and sturdy? Are we not useful sometimes and at other times, not so much? God’s works are, indeed, “wonderful.” Like the Psalmist, we know that “very well.”

God seeks us. God knows us. God created us. Read the first 18 verses of Psalm 139 one more time to understand what that meant for the Psalmist. But what does that mean for us? First, God seeks us and is a constant and relentless presence in our lives. Second, it

economic possibilities?

My father used to tell the story of a Presbytery in action. A storm was coming and someone stood to ask that the meeting adjourn since they should seek safety and better shelter from the storm. The moderator of the meeting replied: if this storm should mean the end of the world, what better could we be found doing than the Lord’s work?

I hope this story is metaphorical since I’m sure if I were there I’d run for cover or run home to make sure my family was okay, but it contains a truth: when Jesus comes again we should hope to be found doing the Lord’s work: seeking justice, kindness, and truth where we are. Amen

PRAYER: Lord, as we await your coming this Advent season, may we be about your work in Staunton, in Virginia, in these United States, and in the world you made and love. Amen

Friday, December 4
By Bill Von Seldeneck
Inspired by Isaiah 25:6-9

Behold the feast of the Lord
His feast of bread and wine
laid out for all God's people
no exclusions, not
sinner or saint, not
doubter or believer, not
black, brown, yellow or white, not
gay or straight, not
weak or strong, not
the needy or wealthy
no exclusions
all partake of Holy communion
take, eat and remember
take, drink and remember
all God's people are called to this table
all God's people are called
to the foot of Christ.
Rejoice and live in
intimacy with the Lord God
live in the knowledge that
creator God has swallowed up death
wiped the tears from all His peoples' eyes
rejoice in the blessed assurance of
immortality
rejoice in the everlasting love of
the Lord
live with hope
live with faith
live in the truth
live in the sure and certain promise of
the love of Jesus Christ for
all God's people
no exclusion.
Rejoice.

Friday, January 1
By Lou Dolive
Inspired by Isaiah 43:1-2, 15-21

These passages from Isaiah are filled with images of comfort, mental comfort. 1b "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." God is not responding to questions, God is giving answers for our benefit. He has seen our turmoil and is reminding us – you are mine! And who are we to question that kind of forthright response?

There follows a number of references to the Red Sea crossing, the Lord who makes a way in the sea, the Egyptians who don't make it, I, the Lord, who is the Creator of Israel. Now we have a caution, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old." Don't think about the things you remember in your past, nor even the things in history that you were taught.

¹⁹ "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Ah, here's the point -- God is doing a new thing, and we may not recognize it. Remember when the Red Sea event happened? You weren't so quick to recognize me then. I am God, I won't be pigeonholed into only doing what you expect. In the Bible, God did the same thing. He talked about salvation, we expected a warrior king, and we got a baby. Perhaps we should turn our attention to discovering what new thing God is doing today, right now, in the middle of a pandemic, in spite of what we want, and in spite of who we are. After all, being claimed by God is a tremendous blessing! We just have to remember to look and see what new thing God is doing now.

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for claiming us. May we hold our heads up and watch and help the "new things" that you are doing.
Amen

John Lewis had been one of those beacons of light for many years and in the editorial published in the New York Times after his death he talked of the Beloved Community, that global vision of Dr. Martin Luther King. In that community Dr. King envisioned a society based on justice, equal opportunity and love of one's fellow human beings, an all inclusive society where all are embraced and none are discriminated against. The second verse in our Lord's prayer is, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." For those of us felt called to be the salt and light in our time, like generations before us, what must we do to make that Kingdom of heaven more of a reality for all of us, everywhere, in our time?

Thursday, December 31 **By Beverly Riddell** **Inspired by 1 John 1:5-9**

Let there be light!

Today is the last day of 2020, a suitable time to anticipate the light to come! 2020 has been a dark year for many, and even if we haven't been personally touched by tragedy, illness or despair, it has been all around us. It's been a difficult year to 'walk in the light' as we are encouraged to do.

However, a new year can be a new beginning. We can thank 2020 for whatever light it has brought us; new life, new jobs, new opportunities to serve, and then let it go, leaving the darkness behind.

A new year for us can remind of our new life in Jesus. It's an opportunity to examine our lives, acknowledge our sin(s) and renew our commitment to God and to following Jesus to the best of our abilities. It's a time we can plan to not only walk in the light in the new year, but also to be part of the light. To be the light of God whenever and however we can. To be in fellowship with one another, to honor each other's light, and to shine with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

2021 will of course have its own dark moments, but nothing can separate us from the love of God, and nothing can keep us from walking in God's light.

Saturday, December 5 **By John Peterson** **Inspired by Luke 2:25-38**

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing. For us today it is more often a time of waiting and preparing for Christmas than waiting and preparing for Christ. At Christmas we celebrate his coming with sweet memories of angel choirs, sleepy shepherds, and a stable in Bethlehem; we tend to look back to his birth rather than ahead to his return in glory. Simeon had been looking ahead expectantly, waiting and wondering each day whether 'this might be the day when he would see the messiah, for he had been promised that he would see the messiah before he died. Into how many faces did he peer and wonder, "Might this be the one?" only to find that it wasn't? When Jesus was brought to the temple for circumcision as the law required, Simeon recognized him as the One for whom Simeon had been waiting. The Song of Simeon, as this passage is known, reveals to us who it is that Simeon was waiting for, and hence who it is whose birth we celebrate and whose return we now await. Simeon describes him as God's "salvation", "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel." That is the glorious good news of Christmas – he is the light of the world coming into the world to save us. Yet Simeon also anticipates the difficult journey that lay ahead for Jesus and for Mary:

This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

Simeon acknowledges what we often forget at Christmas – Jesus is born to and for a world that will, in time, reject him and crucify him long after the angels have stopped singing to the shepherds, long after the star has stopped shining to lead the magi. The shadow of the cross is there in the stable, for the wonder of Christmas is inextricably bound to the pain of Good Friday and the indescribable joy of Easter's dawn. As you prepare to celebrate Christmas this year, recall these words of Simeon (and the prophecy of Anna) that remind us who this is who comes on a silent night to Bethlehem – he is God's salvation for all of us, in the flesh! He is the one for whom we are waiting!

PRAYER: Holy God, may we never take for granted the great gift of your Son to us, and so may we prepare for his coming with loving, grateful, hopeful hearts. Amen

Sunday, December 6
Conversations with God - Let There Be Peace
By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)

Peace

“God,” I whispered. “What if peace isn’t possible? Then what?”

God was quiet for a minute. Then God wrapped me up in God’s arms and told me a story.

God said, “In the beginning, I knit you together. I wove strands of peace into your heart so that you might know and grow love; and your heart was beautiful, wild, and free.

That was a long time ago, but peace is part of who you are. It just gets stuck under fear, doubt, and hurt—like a bird with stones on its wings.”

“I don’t understand,” I fussed. “If peace is part of who we are, then why are we humans so bad at it?”

God held me a little tighter and said, “Little bird, remember how loved you are, and start small. Remove the stones of anger, hurt, and fear one at a time and peace will surely grow.”

Then God lifted up my arms and set me out to fly, and I realized that, grounded in God’s love, I was beautiful and wild and free, and peace was a part of me.

So I flew home, and stayed up all night writing love letters and tearing down walls so that the peace in me could fly to the peace in you. Let me know when you get it.

Wednesday, December 30
By Cliff Gilcrest
Inspired by Matthew 5:13-16

This year’s Advent theme, Let There Be.....focuses on God’s intention and desire that there actually BE Hope, Peace, Joy, Love and Light! And this might seem especially timely and prophetic today as we near the end of this tumultuous year and prepare to “celebrate” Thanksgiving and the birth of Jesus. Hope, joy, love, peace and light, all qualities and realities of that new life in Christ, which we sorely need now here in our own little corner of the world, as well as throughout our global community, more now than ever! So given the arguably unprecedented challenges facing us as we near the end of 2020, anticipating 2021 and a New Year, what does the text in Mathew 5:13-16 have to tell us about salt and light? What is their significance for us as followers of Jesus today and in the day to come?

Salt, as we all know had two purposes in first century Palestine, preserving certain foods, especially meats and enhancing the flavor of the food it seasoned. Considering these verses are preceded by the Beatitudes, might Jesus be actually encouraging, instructing us as his followers to both preserve and affirm his teaching by the way we live and the way we individually and collectively stand out as people helping to enhance the flavor and quality of life in our communities? The presence of light in the darkness is unequivocal! Followers of Jesus need to be like a beacon, a light in the darkness, seeking justice and mercy, giving others a sense of hope, peace, joy and love, all the while walking humbly with our God!

The virus has not only altered the lives of most people around the globe but here at home it has exposed deep structural and systemic inequities. Many of us are now more acutely aware of our nation’s systemic racism, of the shameful lack of affordable housing and increasing number of our neighbors who are homeless, the reality of growing food insecurity and minimum wages that are not living wages, and for too many of us confronted with the threats of this virus, the lack of basic and affordable health care.

(continued on next page)

Tuesday, December 29
By Thom Jennings
Inspired by Genesis 1:1-5

One of the most beloved passages of the Bible, Genesis's creation story sets the tone for the sacred books that follow it: God has always been, God alone is the creator, God is present in his creation, and God is in control. I am particularly drawn to the last part of verse two of the first chapter, when the writer introduces us to the Spirit.

Somewhere deep inside my brain rests an image of the Holy Spirit, one that surely originated when I was a child in Sunday School at Central Methodist here in Staunton. That image is of an elderly white-haired male face extending from a cotton ball clouded sky...the face of the Spirit of God! I now know that this image is not an adequate description, but I still can't erase it. I suppose this is a testament to the impact of Sunday School.

The Jerusalem Bible's interpretation of Genesis 1:2 says "God's Spirit hovered over the water." I find that a most appealing description of the Holy Spirit, one perhaps not so far removed from that childhood image stuck in my brain. Yet, how comforting! The Spirit of God hovered not only over creation, but also hovered over the manger in Bethlehem, and hovers over us, even today.

PRAYER: Come Holy Spirit, come into our lives. Hover over us and let there be peace, hope, and joy for all your creation. Amen.





Monday, December 28 - Planted By Lisle Gwynn Garrity (A Sanctified Art) Inspired by 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Jesus' birth narrative seems to unfold entirely on the move—Mary and Joseph are getting registered in Bethlehem when labor begins, Jesus is born in a feeding trough out of sheer desperation, the new family flees to Egypt soon after Jesus' birth for protection from king Herod's threat. There's no time to crown this new baby king, to build him a grand palace or home, to celebrate the promise of his birth with marks of success and materiality. And this is fitting, of course, for a baby king who would later lead a homeless ministry of wandering place to place, seeking out those most in need. His presence—and promises—are uncontainable.

In this text, we're reminded that God has always been on the move. This part of the story begins with rest and safety. The Israelites have finally recaptured Jerusalem as their home, and David has led the ark of the Covenant into the city center with triumphant dancing and full-body praise. God has done a new thing, and now David feels as if they must mark this new promise with materiality and grandeur, building for God a palace like the one in which David himself lives. But Yahweh proclaims a message of uncontainable promises—God is in the business of going where the people are, not sitting still in a throne in a city's center like the gods other tribes worshiped. God is always on the move—with us, in us, beyond us. A home will come, but David must lead the Israelites to live into that promise, knowing first and foremost that God's presence lives in them.

And here we are, about to step into a new year. Looking back, it's tempting to measure the past 12 months with visible, tangible marks of success and progress. Did we finally buy that house? Did I get into grad school? Did I lose the weight? Did I get a promotion at work? Did I make enough money? Did I make sure all the kids got straight A's? It's easy to perceive promises only in these visible, societal successes. But what if we're called to instead look for the ways God's promises are boundless, to measure the ways God is working in us and through us no matter where we are in our journey? As we begin this new year, let us be less concerned with how many homes and thrones we have built, and more focused on blooming wherever we are planted.

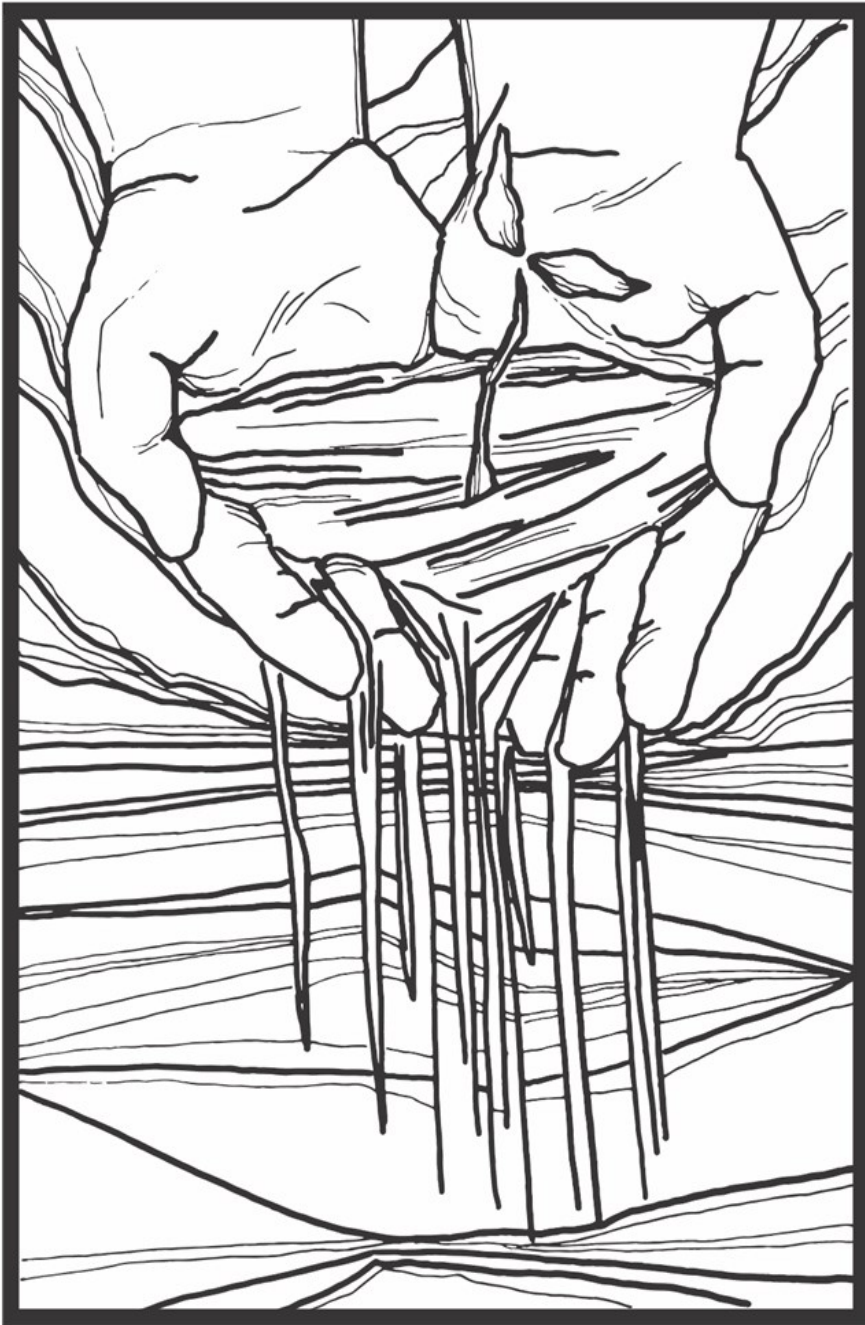
Monday, December 7 - Kiss of Peace By Lauren Wright Pittman (A Sanctified Art) Inspired by Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

The psalmist uses rich imagery that sprouts off the page, sowing a beautiful garden and filling my spirit with longing and hope for this garden to come to fruition.

When I began drawing this piece, I found flowers that symbolized steadfast love (myrtle), faithfulness (dandelion), and peace (white poppies and lavender). Righteousness took the form of the sun, looking down from the sky, letting its light unfurl and embrace the flowers below.

As this garden took shape, I thought about the purpose of a flower garden. Many would say that flower gardens are frivolous and cosmetic, but beyond the purpose of supporting the bee population (which is very important), the truth is we need beauty. Beauty sustains us. Beauty reminds us of the brilliance and mercy of our Creator. Beauty has the power to transform us and call us into the work of making more beauty in the world.

In order to manifest this beauty in the world, I think it would be helpful to hold and cultivate the hope of this garden in our hearts. With our actions, our words, and our prayers, let us image steadfast love and faithfulness springing up from the ground, and righteousness gently holding and kissing peace. Consider what this would look like in your own life and allow those images to transform you.



Tuesday, December 8
By Seth Ward
Inspired by Isaiah 11:1-10

As many would agree, Advent and Christmas would not be the same without music. Carols and hymns during this time of the year offer a chance for the listener and the musician to meditate, understand, and reflect on one another's interpretations of scripture, and what better words than from the Prophet Isaiah 11:1-10? This section is described as The Peaceful Kingdom and composers and poets have built off these ancient words for centuries. "Lo, How a Rose" is one of the many Advent hymns that paints a peaceful picture of Isaiah 11:

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

The words of the 16th century German writer interprets these words as:

"Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming,
As those of old have sung.
It came, a flow'ret bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night."

The 17th century hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," also draws from Isaiah 10:2:

"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."

H. S. Coffin uses these words in his 1916 translation writing:
"O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go"



Sunday, December 27

Conversations with God - Let There Be Light

By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)

Final Conversation with God

“God,” I asked, “What happens when I can’t find hope, peace, love or joy? What happens when Christmas comes and goes and the world still feels the same? What do I do then?”

And God, in a way that only God can, lifted my gaze to the sky.

And God said, “Look for the stars.”

And so we took a minute to stare at the stars together.
We made wishes. God told me about creation.
I tried and failed to remember constellation names.
We laughed together. We made up names of our own.

And then God said, “Child, my child, there is always light in this world.

You’ll see it when you look for the stars, like the Magi did.

You’ll feel it when you love one another.

You’ll recognize it when you recognize justice.

And you’ll trust it when you trust that you are a beloved child of God.

For there is always light in the world. So look for the stars.

Invite others to do the same.”

A more modern inspiration, sung by Nat ‘King Cole, draws from Isaiah’s words as well. “A Cradle in Bethlehem” says:

“A little child shall lead them
The prophets said of old.
In storm or tempest heed them
Until the bell is tolled”

Whether they belong to Isaiah or the various others inspired by the prophet, these words are meant to give us peace. When Isaiah was writing these words, there was turmoil in the nation, in the faith, and in society. Does this sound familiar? We too seem to live in a world that no matter where you turn, is full of hate, prejudice, and disorder. Where is the mercy, where is the refuge, where is the peace? Isaiah did not meet God Incarnate, but the Lord spoke words of peace through him for the people of his time and the people of all times. He describes the advent of Jesus the Christ, the one who would finally bring us peace on earth and goodwill to all. During the church’s new year and always, may we remember the promise of God spoken through the mouth of Isaiah and may we take the time to listen to the countless poems and songs inspired by these words of God. Let there be Peace!

Wednesday, December 9

By Rod Owen

Inspired by Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

I've enjoyed teaching a course at MBU (formerly MBC) that focuses on ethics and leadership in a cross-cultural and global context. This past semester the class has met in a socially-distanced room with face masks in place, and it has been complemented by a CANVAS web-based course site. In this class there is one student who hails from Ethiopia, another from Sierra Leone, one who has lived in Britain for the past several years, and yet another who was born and raised in Central America before her family moved to the USA. The rest of the class is an equal number of White and African American students (including several young men) from all across Virginia and this Mid-Atlantic region. I relish this diversity and seek to "tap into" the life experiences of my students to complement assigned readings and lectures. I bring up this context of global diversity and social-distancing as I reflect on Psalm 85, especially verse 10: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other." What would these late adolescence students think about this verse? What are the cross-cultural connotations of a "kiss?" . . . how ironic to think about embracing and a compassionate kiss in the midst of a pandemic.

Recently, these students had a thought-provoking discussion about touching and kissing across different cultural traditions as they sought to understand how body language is an important part of cultural intelligence and sensitivity. Such behaviors as kissing and touching (including a hug) could be viewed as an offensive affront – even harassment – but they may also serve to solidify bonds and establish trust even between those who have no kinship or familial ties. Students learn that sometimes body language, facial expressions and voice tone are just as significant as the expressed content of one's spoken words especially during times of conflict and/or when there is great diversity. Several were quite taken aback when I showed them an AP press photo of George Bush and an Arab Sheik embracing warmly and then holding hands as they walked down a path together at Camp David. This led to a brief discussion about public displays of affection not only between Arab men but also between American football players after a touchdown – celebratory behaviors that have little to do with sexual identity or orientation.

Saturday, December 26

By Jane Wimmer

Inspired by Isaiah 9:2-7

Today Christmas Day has past, it's over. Celebrations are in the rear view mirror unless you live in the British Empire where today is Boxing Day. Celebrations this year were so different from the past years that it might not have seemed much like Christmas to you. But maybe you began a new tradition or two to brighten your day.

So what is today for you? For me it is a day to relax and reflect. Catch up with friends, rereading some Christmas cards, reading a new book, and taking a nap. In one phrase – CHILL OUT! The hustle and bustle of the holiday is over and leftovers will make a great meal today with little effort.

The good news is that Christ has come to be with us and as Isaiah 9:6 says "...He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." We are promised justice and righteousness from now until forever. And "the zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." What super good news this is, but somehow maybe you aren't feeling it.

The birth of Christ, and his ministry throughout His life, showed us a new and better way to live and love. Perhaps today focusing on what Christ's birth means to you will help banish any letdown you might feel. Today can be a day of renewal and revitalization of your resolve to live a more Christ like life. To love our neighbors as ourselves. To be kind and walk gently with your Lord. Start this with those in your "pod." When this pandemic is in the rear view mirror, you will have had so much practice in loving your neighbor and being kind to all around you, it just might be easier to take this behavior out into the wider world that opens up after the pandemic is gone.

PRAY THIS PRAYER TODAY: Lord, let me do the next thing I have to do with joy and pleasure so I may glorify You and be Your messenger in my world. Grant me patience, peace and love this day and all the rest of the days of my life. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Christmas Day, Friday, December 25

By Sarah Wolf

Inspired by Luke 2:1-20

One of my all-time favorite Christmas movies is “Elf” starring Will Ferrell. It describes the journey of a naive human raised by elves who goes to New York City to find his human father. In one scene, he sees a sign on a coffee shop window proclaiming to have the world’s best cup of coffee. Buddy the Elf bursts into the shop yelling, “You did it! Congratulations! World’s best cup of coffee!”

I imagine that’s what many of us feel like on Christmas morning. We did it! We made it! We did *all the things* that are required of us each Advent — the Zoom Christmas parties, the holiday shopping, the present wrapping, devotional reading, Advent wreath lighting, etc. — we did it! Congratulations to us! World’s best Advent!

I also wonder if that’s what the shepherds’ message to Mary was. After they’d heard the angel chorus, followed the instructions to Bethlehem, and found the Christ-child lying in the manger, just as they’d been told. I wonder if they felt like saying to Mary and Joseph, “You did it! Congratulations! World’s best Savior!”

That may have been their message, but I think Mary knew that this was only the beginning. They weren’t done with anything. This baby born to her and Joseph has set some pretty important things in motion and has already started to make some world leaders very nervous. No, this is only the beginning of things.

And so she pondered these things in her heart.

On this Christmas morning, take a moment to congratulate yourself for surviving another busy season — even in the middle of a pandemic we can still find ways to stay busy! But remember that the work isn’t done. Today we’ve re-started on our own journey alongside Jesus. A journey which we know will seemingly end at the cross. That is, until a stone is rolled away and a tomb is revealed to be empty.

You did it. You made it. Now keep going.

PRAYER: On this Christmas Day, Lord, let us keep the light that the Christ-child brings us. Help us to hold on to the light, remembering to bring it with us wherever we go. Remind us that the journey is far, far from over and that we are all companions for the journey. Amen.

But what about kissing and embracing in those lyrical verses of Psalm 85? Through multiple translations over centuries these lyrical words personify divine ideals and emphasize God’s intervention in human affairs. God’s love and righteousness, divine peace and deep faith, cannot be fully captured in doctrine and dogma or expressed through reason alone. Rather, poets, singers, and visionaries seek ways to express the power and influence of the divine and the possibility of reconciliation and restoration not only for us as individuals but for the human community. While some might dismiss such verses as religious utopianism or mere allegory, instead, could we consider this embrace and kiss as a foreshadowing of God’s gift to humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth?

PRAYER: Gracious and Loving God, while in many ways your 21st century children are more connected than ever before, we still live in a troubled world that is fraught with injustice, inequality, and violent conflict. As we prepare the way for your Son, we dare ask for the courage to strengthen our faith, the wisdom to accept divine righteousness, and the hope necessary to act upon your love and peace.

Thursday, December 10
By Mason and Aubrey Lawson
Inspired by Matthew 3:1-6

When you are keeping something that no one knows about that is bad inside of you, it feels good to let it out. In this passage, John the Baptist is baptizing people, which means he wets their hair. (John did this at church before COVID.) Everyone along the Jordan comes out to repent, which means to turn around and follow the right path. This might make the people feel relieved, like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders. When the weight is lifted off your shoulders, it leaves room for peace to settle there.

Find your favorite picture of water.
It can be a river, an ocean, even a swimming pool.
Does it offer you a sense of peace?
Do you feel the weight being lifted from your shoulders?

Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24
By John Peterson
Inspired by John 1:1-5

Christmas Eve is the day before Christmas, but for many of us it is the night before Christmas that is especially treasured, a time when lights shine out from the darkness – candles held throughout a dark sanctuary amid softly sung strains of Silent Night, tree lights glowing brightly in the night as the seconds tick away toward the arrival of Christmas day. In the Christmas story too there is light that bursts into the darkness of that first Christmas night: a dazzling angelic chorus singing their glorias in excelsis deo to stunned shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, a star shining brightly in the star-studded sky leading the magi toward the Christ child. On Christmas Eve we treasure the darkness because we know that the light is coming. It is in the darkness of our Christmas Eves that the anticipation for Christmas builds, for it is in the darkness of a Bethlehem night that Jesus was born. In reflecting on the darkness, Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”¹

It is out of the darkness of the womb into the darkness of a stable night that new life is born on Christmas night, and with Jesus’ birth comes what John describes as “the light of all people.” Not content for the world to dwell in darkness, God comes to bring light to the world – the light of hope, the light of joy, the light of peace, the light of love, the light of Christ! Christ’s coming dispels the darkness, no matter how deep the darkness. The psalmist offers the hope-filled promise that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

On Christmas Eve we rejoice that God does not wait until morning, God comes into the darkness as the light of the world, and that light continues to shine across the years, across the centuries, across our lives. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, cannot, will not ever overcome it! That is the good news that we hold with great anticipation this Christmas Eve – do not fear the darkness, for the light is coming!

PRAYER: Holy God, thank you for coming among us with your light to dispel the darkness in our lives. Fill us with hope, peace, and joy this day in anticipation of his coming – and his coming again! Amen.

Wednesday, December 23

By Tom Bellamy

Inspired by 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Several years ago, my perspective on Advent fundamentally changed. In my mind, I had always thought of this time of year as Christmas, separate from the rest of the year. What I realized though, is that the story of Jesus is a constant loop. We are re-playing his life from birth through life, then death and resurrection. We are reminded every year about the details of an amazing life that ultimately saved the human race. Looking at my chosen Bible passage through this lens, I see a much different message than what I have seen in the past. This passage has always been associated with wedding ceremonies, because it speaks of love in great and varied detail. It is powerful to hear this passage as you are staring into the eyes of the person you will spend your life with. In your heart, you commit to strive for that perfect love with your partner.

Perfect love is described in 1 Corinthians. Love does not envy, boast, dishonor, or delight in evil. It is not prideful or self seeking or easily angered. It does not keep a record of wrongs done. Love is truth, protection, trust, hope, perseverance and will never fail.

Truthfully though, perfect love is unattainable for us as human beings. We are all flawed, and no matter how hard we try, we can never meet the standards spelled out in this passage. We try and fail, time and time again. It is frustrating, and understandable that some people just give up. It is difficult to think of anyone that has really been successful at achieving this perfect love.

God, however, is perfect and therefore capable of perfect love. This love was first shown to us through the birth of Jesus. God came to us in human form, to live as one of us, to face the same trials we do and realize the challenges of free will. God learned what it is to be a helpless baby, dependent on others for his very existence and to be a child learning how to navigate a complex and difficult world. Jesus was born and lived a human life, facing all of the challenges and choices that we do. He was able to achieve the definition of love that 1 Corinthians describes, showing us that it is worth persevering to live and love in this way. The birth of Jesus was the first tangible representation of perfect love in an imperfect world and reminds us each year that love will truly never fail.

Friday, December 11

By Patti Seaton

Inspired by Matthew 3:7-12

As the winnowing fork divides us and the winds of change howl, we are called to look inward to our own Pharisees and Sadducees inside us.

How have we been like them? How have we labeled others as unworthy to worship alongside us? How are we like the brood of vipers?

Shall we separate the wheat from the chaff?

We are not so different today as when John the Baptist proclaimed the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers.”

The Pharisees and Sadducees got to make all of the rules and decide who was in and who was out when it came to worshiping in the temple. We, too, (whether we care to admit it or not) like to make the rules and decisions.

Who have you kept at a distance? Who have you kept at arm’s length? Were they a different color? Did they worship differently or not at all? Did their offspring not measure up? Should we cut down the tree the bore the bitter fruit?

We know the answer. We always have. Let the Holy Spirit guide us to embrace, feed, shelter and serve all people.

This Advent season, LET IT BE, LORD, I PRAY. LET IT BE.

Saturday, December 12

By Christy Davis

Inspired by Isaiah 40:25-31

“O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth.
Long lay the world, in sin and error pining
‘til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks, a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees...”

Picture, if you will, a clear, crisp winter night sky with stars in spectacular array. You are outside gazing upward, and a voice speaks to you. “So—who is like me? Who holds a candle to me? Look at the night skies: who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name, so magnificent, so powerful—and never overlooks a single one?” (vs. 25-26).

You look around to see who is there, but you see no one. It dawns on you that you’ve just heard the voice of the Holy Night. Brazenly, you immediately begin to question God. “Where have you been? Can’t you see that our world is a mess? People are sick and dying. Families are hungry, and many have no means of support. Neighbors are fighting neighbors. It’s a weary world these days. People are pining for better times.”

Of course, this was not news for the Lord, who answers you reassuringly in the words of the prophet Isaiah. “Why would you ever complain and whine? I don’t come and go. The Creator of all you can see and imagine, I am everlasting. I don’t get tired out, neither do I pause to catch a breath. I know everything, inside and out. I energize those who get weary, and give fresh strength to those who want to drop out. Those who wait upon me, the Lord, will renew their strength. They will spread their wings and soar like eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not faint” (vs. 27-31).

sing during this special time of year! As, an old traditional Christmas song says, “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King!’” Or the simple children’s song, “Jesus, loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Yes, Jesus loves me!” May we never forget that the covenant is one of God’s love and is for each of us, every single day — a covenant established to be forever and ever!

PRAYER: Loving God, help us remember your faithfulness and unbounding love for each of us. A love that you demonstrated by sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to the earth to be our King and Savior. May we sing your praises during Advent and forevermore! Amen.

Tuesday, December 22

By Martha Pierce

Inspired by Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

There are a few things you may not know about me:

1. I love, love, love to sing!!
2. I can't carry a tune to save my life!
3. I don't even sound good singing in the shower!
4. I sing at the top of my lungs while driving my car! (when no one else can hear me)
5. Singing brings me joy!

The first verse of this passage in Psalm 89, speaks about singing of God's steadfast love. FOREVER! Should I let my lack of singing skill prevent me from doing what this passage says? Of course not! And it shouldn't prevent you from singing either. Singing in this case can be a spoken word as in proclaiming God's love to others. It can be showing God's love through actions as perhaps in giving food to the local food bank. It can be showing God's love in acceptance of others, no matter skin color, religious affiliation, etc. It can be showing God's love simply by loving others with respect and joy. Let this little light of mine shine for the world to see!

This passage also talks about a covenant between God and David, and David's descendants. This covenant tells us that even King David's descendants will have a throne showing the royal lineage. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus the Messiah is the son of David. So, Jesus is part of this royal lineage dating back to King David. But Jesus is also King because of the kingdom he will rule forever. In Luke, the angel that spoke to Mary told her this about the baby she was carrying: "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 forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

In this time of Advent, let us all (in tune or not) sing the praises of God, revel in the birth of our Savior, the Messiah, the King, Jesus Christ. Look for references of God's love in what we

There is silence. The power of this moment illuminates your heart more than any star in the night sky. A thrill of hope washes over you, and your soul feels its worth. God has not forsaken the world—it is the other way around. Rejoicing, you fall on your knees in humble prayer:

O Lord and Master of all creation, forgive us for ever doubting your presence and movement in our lives, no matter how weary we become or how much time we spend in sin and error, pining for better times. If you have named your stars, then imagine how much more you care for us who are created in your image! You call us by name to be faithful servants of your kingdom here on earth. Prepare us for the coming of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the promised strength that we can indeed spread our wings like eagles and raise our arms in rejoicing and praise. Amen.

(continued on next page)

Sunday, December 13
Conversations with God - Let There Be Joy
By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)

Joy

“God,” I asked, “What brings you joy?”

“Oh, my child,” God said. “The list is so long. Hearing you say my name and seeing you soak in this beautiful creation bring me joy.

When you stand with family, neighbors, and strangers, and sing or work together, my heart risks overflowing with joy.

When you remember the children, and the quiet, and the hurting—I swear my heart could take flight.”

“And when your heart takes flight,” I asked, leaning forward with curiosity, “then what happens?”

And God leaned back and laughed the most musical, heart-filled, soul-reaching laugh I’d ever heard, and that’s when I remembered—joy is contagious, and it is a gift.

And then I started singing.

Monday, December 21 - Tender Comfort
By Hannah Garrity (A Sanctified Art)
Inspired by Isaiah 40:1-11

The mountainous terrain of a parent and child’s embrace has so many facets. Physically, the curves and corners feel disjointed at times. We must nestle into each embrace to find the best fit. Emotionally, the bond we feel to our parents as children seems unbreakable. Even as we grow older, our bonds may loosen, but the deep connection never does. We can drift apart, we can even completely disown one another, but we cannot cleanly break away. Our family’s opinions and values affect and guide each of us long into our adulthood. But family connection is rocky. It can be thorny. Shared belief and derisive judgment are wrapped up in heart-wrenching love.

How can such things be smoothed out? How can human relationship be normalized, be flattened into sameness? How can deep love not be messy? Isaiah charges us all to make the way straight for God. I think smoothing, normalizing, and flattening cannot be the way to a straight path for God—God of so many facets; God of comfort, penalty, constancy; God of forever; God of fearlessness; God of gathering, feeding, carrying and leading. A God of so many facets must be able to take a road with many bends or breaks.

In this image, the work of our hands surround our sacred relationship with God, Mary’s sacred relationship with Jesus, and our sacred relationships in life. We can build them or we can break them. Every relationship is fragile. Every relationship is sacred. Surrounding the work of our hands is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can fill us with peace in the face of adversity. The Holy Spirit can quell our fears. The Holy Spirit can make each path passable, not by removing the brambles, but by preparing us each to talk about them and figure out how to get by.

Our world is made up of one-on-one relationships. How many of mine did I treat as sacred today? How many thorny corners did I embrace? Did I listen to understand?



Let
there
be
joy



Let
there
be
love

Sunday, December 20
Conversations with God - Let There Be Love
By Sarah Are (A Sanctified Art)

Love

“But what does love look like?” I asked.

God said,
“I love you when I open the shutters to let the light in.
And I love you when I wander through the hallways of your
mind, whistling love songs to keep nightmares at bay.

And I love you when I kneel in your garden and pull the weeds
that try to strangle you so that you can grow nothing but wild-
flowers for days. And I love you when I brush the dust off your
piano keys and stairwells so that you can once again open up
your heart to another, and maybe even invite them in to
dance.”

I whispered to God, “I don’t think I’m very good at that.”

Then God said, “It’s ok. Sometimes your heart is full of dust, and
your home is full of hatred, and the garden soil is so rocky that
not a single bit of new life can grow. But I love you anyhow, and
I will never leave you. So when you aren’t sure, listen for my
lullaby. Look for the wildflowers. I am there. I am always in the
hallways of your heart. That is love. I just can’t leave you alone.”

Monday, December 14 - My Soul Magnifies
By Lauren Wright Pittman (A Sanctified Art)
Inspired by Luke 1:46b-55

I am continually struck by the juxtaposition of Mary’s perplexing
situation with the certainty of her song. She finds out she is to
bear the son of God and also that her barren, older relative Eliza-
beth is also with child—and all of this comes from the mouth of
an angel.

Instead of all the things that I might do, like reject the whole
thing as a crazy dream, or beg not to be chosen for such a bur-
den, Mary poses a simple question and then accepts the circum-
stances. By her faithfulness, Mary, in a huge way, magnifies the
glory of God.

She takes these incredibly difficult, shocking—and to put it light-
ly, inconvenient circumstances—and cobbles together a beauti-
ful song that we still talk about to this day. The strength of this
woman to rejoice in the midst of this calling is astounding.

Though the text doesn’t hint at Mary’s inner wrestling, or even a
slight struggle on Mary’s part, I imagine none of this was easy. I
imagine Mary sang this song, not only to glorify God, but to com-
fort herself—to remind herself of all that God had done and all
that God could and would do to pull her through this too.

I decided to image Mary with her mouth open in song with her
spirit glowing. Her whole being shines as she magnifies God.
Most importantly, I drew a line in the middle of her brow to
show the strength and struggle it took to rejoice in the midst of
what must’ve felt like chaos.

Tuesday, December 15 **By Robyn Sommerfield** **Inspired by Luke 1:39-49**

I can only imagine that a first-time pregnancy 2,000 years ago, even when accompanied with divine purpose, can be a little intimidating. Especially when such divine purpose should elicit honor and humility, rather than fear and doubt. But this is the position that Mary and Elizabeth have been placed in — pregnant, blessed by the Lord — expecting their first child — two sons that will do great things (one, clearly, doing greater things than the other — but I digress).

Current expectant mothers have the benefit of modern medicine to help ease the burden of delivery, and yet, there are always anxious feelings that accompany the experience. And we have the freedom and right to express our level of discomfort. But Mary and Elizabeth are in a different boat. How can they express their feelings or adequately speak of their human emotions when they have been so blessed? And who would understand what they are going through? Complaining of pregnancy conditions and symptoms with others around them that cannot relate to their experience does not seem like a viable option.

So how nice was it that Mary came to visit Elizabeth — not only do their two children immediately relate to one another, but the two expectant mothers finally have an individual who has some understanding of what they are going through? And although their dialogue has not been transcribed, in present day it may have threaded along the lines of, “my feet are as wide as pizza pies — did that happen to you, too?” or “if Gabriel was transformed into an emoji, what do you think it would look like?”

How lucky was it that Mary and Elizabeth had each other to converse with, possibly easing the collective earthly experience of pregnancy. And whether it may be on such a scale as theirs, discussions concerning feelings of isolation during a global pandemic, or a simple discussion of comparing recipes as we prepare for the holidays, we are all blessed if we have friends who can share in our earthly experiences, relate to our pains and joys, and ease the burden of what we are going through in this snapshot of our lives. Let us all be so lucky as to find those who can relate to our human experience, and ease the burdens that we all carry.

Saturday, December 19 **By Joan Swift** **Inspired by Luke 2:8-10**

“There were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. An angel of the Lord appeared before them, and the glory of the Lord shown all about them. But they were filled with fear. But the angel said, “Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people!”

We sing this passage in carols and listen to wonderful music written trying to convey this message. I always think of Handel’s Messiah. The music seems to flutter as though angels are around us. But thinking more deeply of the songs we sing from memory, what is the important message Luke is trying to convey? Written about 85 CE, he was writing - perhaps to a friend - and his intent was to evangelize, to convince his friend of the goodness of God.

In the Christmas Story, there is fear. The shepherds were fearful of the angels, and surely everyone had something to fear: Mary, Joseph, the Wise Men. The shepherds were low on the social ladder and the angels scared them. But the angels said, “Fear not. We are bringing good news, for all people. This baby being born is for all people, young, old, rich and poor.” The angels appeared to the lowly first - the shepherds who spent their nights out in the field protecting sheep - showing us how important even the lowliest can be. Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus was born for us, too. Every person, not just those we choose to associate with, but the lowly and the rich and everyone in between. This is the Baby Jesus, who would grow up and continue to teach that God’s love is for all.

So, FEAR NOT AND HAVE GREAT JOY!

Friday, December 18
By John Sayers
Inspired by 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“With joy in my heart I will pray and be thankful!”

Joy to the world!

Open hearts of joy!

Young and old be joyful!

Praying to talk with God!

Rejoicing always!

Always available for God’s use!

Yearning to be with God!

Thankful for all of God’s gifts!

Holding close our relationships with God!

Alert to the will of God!

Nurturing our prayerful life!

Wednesday, December 16
By Amy & Eleanor Fetterman, Gregory Bohannon
Inspired by Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

SETTING IS A LIVING ROOM – MID-AFTERNOON: A cozy living room that could double as a LEGO store for all the sets and random blocks which cover the coffee table. A soft November afternoon light lights up the room. ELEANOR (an industrious six-year-old who is perfecting the eyeroll for her teenage years) and her cousin GREGORY (an energetic six-year-old who would rather be jumping in a leaf pile than sitting in the living room) listen to MOM read from an open Bible on her lap.

MOM: So. What do you two think about that passage?

ELEANOR: Why are we doing this again?

MOM: Because Pastor Sarah wanted to know what you two thought about Isaiah’s words. About being a messenger sharing God’s words.

GREGORY: Like angels!

ELEANOR: No! Angels are scary!

MOM: Angels are scary?

ELEANOR shows off the eyeroll she’s been working on.

ELEANOR: Yes. They have six eyes! And they tell people to not be afraid so they must be scary.

GREGORY nods while MOM ponders just how much of a pastor’s kid her daughter really is.

MOM: Well, there were no angels in this passage so we don’t have to worry about scary things. But you’re right. There are scary things in the world. And I think maybe why God’s message that we hear from Isaiah is important. One of the ways God offers people comfort is through those who have been anointed.

GREGORY: Annoying?

MOM: No, anointed. Back in Isaiah’s time, being anointed with oil marked you as being claimed by God for an important purpose. You know, you two may not have been anointed with oil like the messenger in Isaiah but you have been claimed by God.

MOM makes signs of the cross on both their heads.

MOM continues: Just like that. At your baptisms your Nana, the one who baptized you, made that sign on your foreheads with water. We celebrated then that you have been given the Spirit of the Lord and you can help make scary things not so scary. For your family and your friends. For the world.

(continued on next page)

ELEANOR: We can make silly faces! Make people laugh!

GREGORY: We can give hugs! Tell people “God bless you.”

MOM: Yes! What else can you do? How can you bind of the brokenhearted or proclaim liberty to the captives?

ELEANOR: When someone is upset, we don’t look away. We can give them hugs or we can, like my cousin Elliott, cry with them. When someone cries, he cries too.

GREGORY: We can help people who are in trouble. We can tell people to stop being mean to others. We can find grown-ups to help!

ELEANOR: We can share!

GREGORY: It’s much better if we share! If we make sure everyone has something!

ELEANOR: Yes! We should all get equal jellybeans!

MOM: Jellybeans? What do jellybeans have to do with . . . Oh! Jubilee! The year of the Lord’s favor! How did you know about that?

MOM stares at her daughter both impressed and a little confused until:

ELEANOR: No. Jellybeans. As in, Gregory and I should get equal jellybeans. Right now.

GREGORY: Jellybeans!

MOM: Is this your not-so-subtle way of telling me you’re done and you want a snack?

ELEANOR and GREGORY enthusiastically nod. MOM smiles and closes the Bible as the children make their way to the kitchen.

Thursday, December 17

By Rebecca Allison

Inspired by Psalm 126

I chose to write this devotional because Psalm 126 ends in the word “sheaves.” For as long as I can remember sheaves have been a symbol of joy for me. It was imprinted on a pewter platter in my grandparents’ house, embroidered on bread cloths, prolific in Van Gogh’s landscapes and a reassuring sight in the valley here amidst the Allegheny and Blue Ridge. This psalm is

(continued on next page)

short and concise. After reading it repeatedly, reading the psalms before and after, I discovered how it started. It began with a seed.

Throughout this pandemic I recommitted to two things: baking bread and gardening. The blend of chemistry and measures of making bread is a wonder. Reviving old recipes from the ancestors and the new gluten-less varieties, it has been a great rediscovery, one that I hope will continue in the days ahead. This seed or reseeded has served well. In years past I have gardened by the acre and saw only but a few challenges to a city garden.

With all the uncertainty this spring, I kept things light and easy. After a consistent harvest of greens and sugar pod peas, I was ready to dig in. Layers of compost and amendments were added to the soil. Seeds that I have saved for years, plants from friends that have been saved and quietly shared were all in glory and growing by June. The garden was singing!

Then, after few days away for respite, disaster struck.

No amount of deterrents, fences, or sprays kept the wildlife at bay. In total 30 lima beans, 25 sweet potatoes, 15 heirloom tomatoes, 3 cucumber, 2 squash, 7 rare varieties of English ornamental sweet peas, all the standing phlox, bee balm, 18 hostas, 2 nine bark shrubs, 2 hydrangea, 2 autumn clematis, 2 DA roses and all the lavender was crushed but one. Between the mangled fencing, the vines stripped bare or little stubs of green poking out of the ground it looked more like a Halloween set than a garden. I wept or lamented off and on for days, to friends and family. I have never had such catastrophic loss in the garden. On top of deep family losses during the pandemic, I was undone. When I regained my focus I realized there was still a harvest. Small blooms and greenery for an upcoming wedding, splendid dinners with friends, who had never gardened until this year. It wasn’t easy, I just had to look beyond myself and my own garden to see the harvest this year. Joy followed.

Look at the image of Mary from December 14. Notice- what is she doing with her eyes? Do you see the seeds? The artist notes she is singing, in joy, for all that is, known and unknown to her. In the seed... there is a promise, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see. Until then bring joy, chose joy, sing joy, allow joy, give joy, share joy, speak joy, dance joy, it is the way of the Holy Spirit.

There are 90 references for seeds in the Bible. There are 90 references for harvest in the Bible. Enjoy!