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ADVENT



A Season of Expectation

2022 Advent Devotional of
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Staunton, Virginia

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Notes

Advent is a season of preparation – preparing our homes and our hearts for the coming of the Savior. Just as Scripture offers us a variety of voices with which to prepare – prophets and psalmists, the writers of Gospels and epistles, so this devotional offers a variety of voices from our congregation to aid in your preparation. Ponder with them the wonder of incarnation (God's coming to us in flesh and bone). Hear the calls to repent and embrace faithful paths. Listen for the hope-filled prophecies of the coming of a savior who is Christ the Lord. Celebrate together the birth of the child born in Bethlehem. And look forward to his return in glory. Travel this Advent path with your Covenant brothers and sisters – and do so with great expectation, peace, and joy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JA' with a large, stylized loop at the bottom.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Sunday, November 27
By Janey Terry
Inspired by Isaiah 2:1-5

Life without war. I pray, and I know that you pray too, that one day there will be life without war.

Until then, we can still pick up our plowshares and pruning hooks. At the beginning of COVID, Bill and I did just that. Well, we picked up our shovels, hammers, and hoes and dug up most of our front yard. Bill dug along the road front for months. All the neighbors, walking or driving, would stop and talk to Bill. It became a game to see who Bill would talk to each day (remember - this was during COVID). We planted flowers, shrubs, and trees along the front of our property.

We also decided to build eight raised vegetable beds and plant several rows of berries. I was a bit hesitant to put our edible garden in our front yard, but the sun doesn't make it to our backyard (and I don't always do things the conventional way); however, we wanted to keep peace among our neighbors. Surprisingly, for the past three summers, neighbors – friends and strangers – have stopped and told us that they love our vegetable garden and berries. They enjoy watching the vegetables grow and are curious to see what we are growing. We have been able to share fresh vegetables, lots of tomatoes, berries, zucchini bread, and squash casserole with our neighbors. Picking up our plowshares has allowed us to cultivate new and existing friendships through sharing and listening to stories.

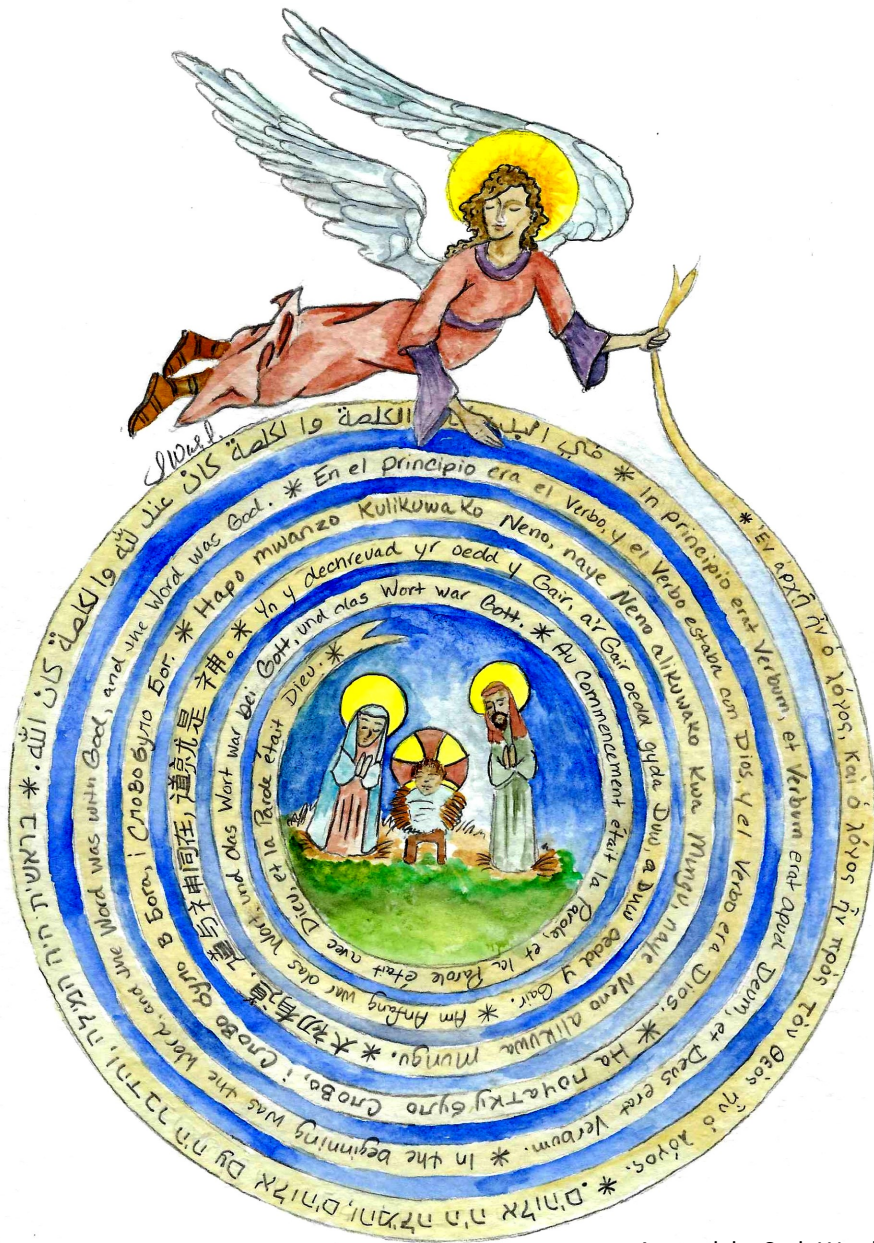
Let there be peace...and plowshares...and pruning hooks on earth.

Prayer: God, be with each of us as we begin this Advent season. Teach us your ways – to love one another and to find peace within and between nations. May we continue to hope for the triumph of your kingdom on earth.

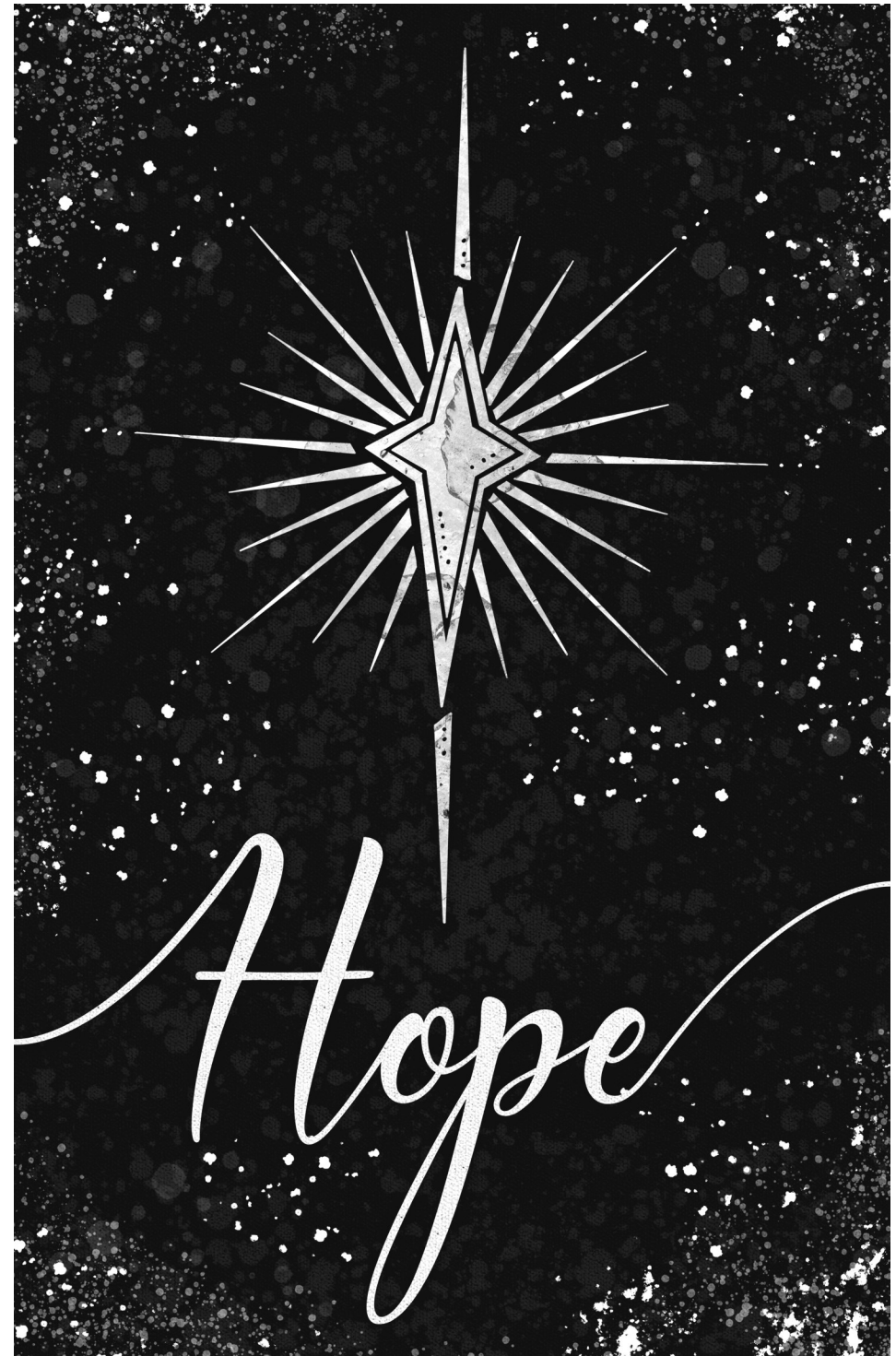
CHRISTMAS DAY
Sunday, December 25
By Seth Ward
Inspired by John 1:1-14

This is my artistic interpretation of John 1:1-14. Here the angel of God is suspended within the white negative space of the paper, for God creates and brings forth all things out of nothingness. The angel holds a swirling ribbon that represents the creation story from Genesis as it tells of the creation of our salvation. Written upon the ribbon is the first verse of John 1 in twelve different languages: Koine Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Latin Vulgate, English, Spanish, Ukrainian, Swahili, Chinese, Welsh, German, and French. These languages communicate God's Love for all the earth! The blue represents the darkness that covered the face of the earth before God spoke, "Let there be light," for "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

PRAYER: Lord, glory to you this Christmas day! Amen



Artwork by Seth Ward



CHRISTMAS EVE, Saturday, December 24
By Sarah Splaun
Inspired by Luke 2:1-20

Every year on Christmas Eve, we hear this telling of the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, and it never grows old. We follow Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, where finding no room in the inn, the tired couple must make do in the stable, and sometime during their stay, Mary delivers a baby, wraps him in swaddling clothes, and lays him in a manger.

Then Luke takes us to the fields outside of Bethlehem, where shepherds, who are watching over their flock at night, are suddenly visited by an angel. The angel tells them not to be afraid and has a message of great joy for all the people. A Savior has been born in Bethlehem, and the child can be found wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. A great heavenly host joins the angel praising God, and then all return to heaven.

The shepherds are curious and hurry to Bethlehem to find this child the angel told them about. They find Mary, Joseph, and the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, just as the angel said. Upon seeing the child, the shepherds tell all who will listen to the incredible events of the evening, and all are amazed. The shepherds return to the fields, praising and glorifying God for all they had heard and seen, and Mary ponders all these things in her heart.

What can we take from this Christmas Story to help us on our faith journey? We know that in other scripture passages, Mary and Joseph were both visited by angels and were told what God had planned for them. We find them here in Luke going to Bethlehem together to be registered. Mary and Joseph trusted God and were obedient even when God's plans seemed contrary to what they had expected in life.

The shepherds heard the good news and went with haste to find the baby and then told all who would listen to the good news. God entrusted them with the good news, and they shared it with others. They didn't just stay in the fields; they wanted to go and see. They wanted to be a part of the story.

The angels offered praise to God and glorified God.

Most importantly, the Baby Jesus in the manger is the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior. His birth brings new hope for all people in that God, in his great love for us, has come to dwell among us.

Be like Mary and take time this Christmas Eve to ponder this story and find other treasures to keep in your heart. Amen



Friday, December 23
By Ruth Arnold
Inspired by Luke 1:67-79

I've always felt kind of sorry for Zechariah. He was a good guy, a priest who had always followed the commandments. He and his wife Elizabeth had grown old together in a happy marriage, except for one thing—they had no children. You can hardly blame him for being a bit skeptical when Gabriel told him that Elizabeth would get pregnant. He hardly thought he would be struck dumb for asking a simple question. Maybe God was a little harsh when the punishment was handed down—no talking until the baby is born! Gabriel was much easier on Mary. After all, her first response to the news that she would conceive without a husband was also doubt.

I feel sorry for Zechariah from a Biblical standpoint too. Luke, Chapter 1, is really his story. He opens and ends the chapter, but he is always upstaged by Elizabeth and Mary. We seem to feel that's the real Christmas as if the babies are the whole story.

Today's reading begins when his and Elizabeth's son is to be circumcised and Zechariah, in writing (because he still can't speak), states that the baby's name is to be John, thus confirming his belief in God's power. At that moment, he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and his tongue is released. The song he sings then is a fitting counterpart to Mary's Magnificat read a few days ago.

Between Santa Claus and 'Round Yon Virgin, we often tend to overlook this postscript to the months before Jesus' birth, but in many ways, it sums up what the season of Advent is all about. With our wreaths and songs and candles and decorations and presents, and yes, prayers, we are all preparing for the coming of the Lord. We are waiting, just like Zechariah, for God's will to be fulfilled.

So let our prayer be from Zechariah's song:

Dear Lord: Thank you for the blessings you have given us, for Mary and Joseph, and Elizabeth and Zechariah, and their sons, who made great sacrifices for us and for our salvation. With all the saints, let us ". . . go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins; through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Amen

Monday, November 28
By Tom Compton
Inspired by Psalm 96

Praise of God's greatness and glory:

I thank The Lord for giving me
The things I love. . .
The sun and the rain and the apple trees
The Lord has been good to me. Amen

My three-year-old granddaughter joyfully sings this prayer. She praises God and His creation through song. Every time she sings this prayer, I beam with joy. That's what music does; it touches us, inspires us, and moves us with emotion.

Psalm 96 calls for us to praise God's greatness and glory. In verses 1-2, the psalmist invites us to "Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the lord, praise His name". Advent is a time of joyful songs, of caroling, and beautiful Christmas hymns. As we enter this Advent season, may we rejoice in singing praise to our Lord. Let the beauty of His creation and the good news of Jesus Christ be proclaimed through song. Sing to celebrate the coming of our Lord; sing to rejoice in God's greatness and glory!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we praise You as we joyfully lift our voices to You in song this Advent season. May our hearts be filled with the love of Jesus Christ as we rejoice and sing our praises to You, our Savior and Redeemer. Amen

Tuesday, November 29
By Elissa McDonald
Inspired by Psalm 145:1-7

When my 15-year-old grandson was around three, he was afraid of the dirt in the flower bed – the worms and little bugs were mean and scary. That summer, he made friends with the ‘nice worms’ and became a big flower gardening fan.

Last summer, we wandered through a bamboo forest together – admiring the textures and the cooling shade they provided. Sharing the beauty of God’s creation is one of the best gifts you can give yourself and the generations following you. Seeing the wonder of creation is the very first step in understanding God’s love for us. Experiencing the eclipse, exploring the ancient and majestic mountains, crunching in the leaves, smelling tomatoes – all proclaiming God’s glory and His love for us. Celebrate God’s love with your family this Season.

PRAYER: Thank you, Lord, for creating our beautiful world. Please help us appreciate and protect all that you’ve given. Amen

- It is a song that rejoices that the Lord has remembered his promise to Abraham and his descendants.

I still have childhood images of the Christmas story, but with the reading of the Magnificat, I experience a mature joy for the birth of Jesus as God’s remembrance of God’s promise to Abraham and to us, to be with us forever.

I encourage you to read this song of Mary out loud and experience the great joy of knowing our God is with us. Listen to a recording of Bach’s Magnificat. This is Mary’s message.

The peace of God be with you.



Thursday, December 22
By Louise Scott
Inspired by Luke 1:46-56 (The Magnificat)

What do you think about Mary, the mother of Jesus? For many of us, we learned her story as children through songs and Christmas pageants. When I think of Mary, she is a beautiful young woman, meek and mild. She is dressed in a beautiful blue. (And for young girls, there is the question; “Will I get to play Mary?”). She is a dutiful servant of God.

As a child, I never understood the reality that Mary was a young Jewish girl, unmarried but betrothed, who was pregnant. She is from a small village and gives birth to the baby Jesus in a stable — not a beautiful or clean spot. “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed” paints an ethereal picture, but our 21st-century eye would see the grimness of the picture.

But I have jumped ahead of the scriptural account found in Luke. The angel Gabriel has told Mary she will bear a child, who will be the Son of God. This is monumental news!

Armed with Gabriel’s message, Mary sets out in a hurry to share the news with her older cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is also pregnant with a son who will be John the Baptist. Elizabeth will understand her story, and indeed she does. Elizabeth knows that Mary will give birth to a son, our Lord Jesus.

The child in me still hears these messages of the angel Gabriel and then of Elizabeth with an easy acceptance. What is stunning news to Mary, and is understood as such by Elizabeth, has become for me “The Christmas Story” and somehow has lost its punch.

And then I hear Mary’s song, known as The Magnificat. It’s a well-known passage, and the hymn of praise is amazing in its message! Mary is praising God in a big way. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.”

Mary’s song is not about how happy she is to be chosen to be the mother of Jesus, but rather is a great hymn of praise to The Mighty One.

- It is a song that recognizes that God has chosen a lowly servant to bear the child who is our Savior.
- It is a song of the great power of the Lord, who takes down the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

Wednesday, November 30
By Jerry Lynn Shipplett
Inspired by Psalm 145:8-13

When I read this passage, I immediately think of our “GOOD NEWS.” Good news that we are loved. Good news that this love is unconditional!

This LOVE comes from our heavenly Father; when we know Him, we know the affirmation that’s written here! We can believe that our Lord is gracious and merciful. We can be comforted that the Lord is slow to anger. We, as children of God, must imitate His mighty works!

Just as an earthly father would rush to his child, ready to listen to the child’s complaint or dilemma, our God stands ready! And like that same earthly father who watches his son topple off a trike, our God watches and waits for our call for deliverance.

Scripture says that our Lord shows compassion over all He has made, and we, as God’s people, shall give grateful thanks and be ready . . . to shout of His greatness and glory to ALL. We deliver this “good news” to all the Earth. We feel this love and feel compelled to share with all nations the mighty greatness of God’s love for all generations.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for loving us so! Amen

Thursday, December 1

By Christy Davis

Inspired by Psalm 29

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings; ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. . . The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. . . The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning. . . And in his temple, all cry, "Glory!"

"I knew I'd find you here," a familiar voice declared. I opened my eyes to see my husband, Wayne, standing over me, and it all came back. During last night's thunderstorm, I grabbed my pillow and a blanket and snuck out to spend the night on our side porch. It's one of my favorite things to do. The fireworks in the sky and the heart-vibrating rumblings just seem to call my name.

Much like the psalmist, perhaps we see power and might in a raging storm and stand in awe and fascination, or we might cower under our pillows and pull our blankets up to our chins. It is this paradox that the psalmist describes. He creates mental images for us of God's might, a force so great that it could cause fires, floods, quakes, and destruction, yet a power ascribed with terms such as glory, majesty, splendor, and holiness.

We probably hear God's voice in a much gentler, more intimate way. Psalm 29 ends with the assurance that the LORD will give us strength and bless us with peace. God is calling us to step out of our comfort zones armed, not with a pillow or our blanket, but with strength and peace. Then we can spread God's grace, love, and kindness, for they are the powerful forces that can truly rock this world.

FUN FACT: Santa's reindeer Donner and Blitzen literally mean "thunder" and "lightning" in German. So, when secular Christmas begins to overpower the birth of our Lord and Savior this season, turn it around and hear the true voice of thunder and lightning calling. Glory to God in the highest!

Wednesday, December 21

By Dan Drumheller

Inspired by Luke 1:39-45

A decade ago, when Mandy was pregnant with Claire, I was able to see the baby move for the first time. We sat quietly on the couch, and I saw movement in Mandys' pregnant stomach, and the world changed in my mind at that very instant. What was once a concept, an idea, something that I was told would be arriving soon, was alive and moving and was very real. That was probably the moment when my love for Claire started to really materialize, and I felt protective, apprehensive, and excited about what was going to change our lives forever.

The impending arrival of a child is a beautiful thing. Patiently you wait, worry, wonder, and hope for the appearance of a baby without knowing exactly how things are going to be different, but they certainly will be.

In these verses, we read about Mary. She must have been worried, concerned, and wondering what her future would hold. In the verses of Luke 1:39, Luke writes about when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who is Mary's cousin, is also pregnant. An unusually late pregnancy at 88 years old, Elizabeth understands what it means to have faith in God's promises. Elizabeth then takes on the role of a prophet as she addresses young Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, as "the mother of my Lord." In addition, the baby inside Elizabeth that "leapt and was filled with the Holy Spirit" was John the Baptist, who would go and prepare the people for the Lord. John was foretold to be "filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born," and this fulfilled that prophecy as well.

This interaction with Elizabeth solidifies a few things for Mary. She's blessed. She has reversed her social status, and despite her expectations that she would be shamed for bearing this child, she would instead be blessed with divine joy. She believed that God was able to do what God promised to do.

Elizabeth's actions, acknowledging Mary and having John "leap with joy" at her arrival, reminds us that we should have open minds about how God works in our lives and how God sometimes chooses the unexpected people to do his work.

Will we believe in God's promises? Will we believe what God has planned for us? Will we listen when the time is right? Have faith and trust in God's plans.

Prayer: Lord, help us to believe in your plans and understand that you are able to do. . . what you promise to do. . . as you have done in the past by sending Jesus Christ for us as our Savior. Amen



As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.

Luke 1:44, NRSV



Friday, December 2
By Thom Jennings
Inspired by Psalm 130

Shortly after we joined Covenant more than forty years ago, I purchased a copy of the Jerusalem Bible at the suggestion of Donn Langfitt. Although no longer the first bible I pick up to read, I still enjoy going back to it occasionally. Psalm 130 is one of those passages that recently led me back there.

Called “an eloquent Old Testament expression of the gospel” by Doug Bratt, Psalm 130 speaks to God’s character and to our waiting or longing for God’s presence in our lives.

Here, then, is Psalm 130:1-6 as it appears in the Jerusalem Bible, with “God” substituted for “Yahweh” and the removal of gender references:

*From the depths, I call to you, God,
Lord, listen to my call for help!
Listen compassionately
To my pleading!*

*If you never overlooked our sins, God,
Lord, who could survive?
But you do forgive us:
And for that, we revere you.
I wait for God; my soul waits for God,
I rely on God’s promise,
My soul relies on the Lord
More than a watchman on the coming of dawn.*

Tuesday, December 20
By Joan Sayers
Inspired by Luke 1:26-38

“Ponder” is one of those ‘church words’ for me that describes serious, God-led thinking. As Mary listens to Gabriel in this passage, she ponders a lot. She is just a young, ordinary person pondering words directly from God!

Mary’s reactions are so human:

FEARING why an angel is speaking to her;
PONDERING about what the angel is saying;
DOUBTING how God can do the impossible;
WORRYING of her own ability;
AWED by God;
HUMBLED to be God’s servant.

Through her pondering and faith, Mary goes from
“How can this be?” to “Let it be according to your word!”

PRAYER: Thank you, God, for the beautiful stories of Jesus, becoming us and teaching us to become your servants. Thank you for the fellowship of your Holy Spirit. Thank you, God, for giving us time and space to ponder your Greatness. Amen

Monday, December 19

By Peggy Roberson

Inspired by Matthew 1:1-17

Many of us are interested in where we came from. I can remember sitting at my Granny McGeachy's knee as she recited her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother's names: Sarah Bannister Peck English, Eliza Jane Robinson Cathcart Peck, Eliza Jane Robinson, who died as she gave birth to her daughter. The names were fascinating to me, although I never got to meet them. They traced part of my own genetic heritage.

Matthew probably didn't know Joseph, who he acknowledged as the earthly father of Jesus the Messiah, but he knew the Old Testament (although he didn't call it that). He manages to arrange the names in an organized way from Abraham to David (14 generations), from David to the deportation to Babylon (14 generations), and from the deportation to the Messiah (14 generations). I think he must have some math genes like my husband!

I'm particularly interested in his inclusion of some women in his extensive list of men. They're all "foreigners" or women of ill repute. From Tamar, who was raped by Judah, to Rahab, the harlot from Jericho who saved the Israelite spies, to Ruth, the widow who slept at the feet of Boaz to gain his favor, to Bathsheba, whose husband was killed by King David's order after she was found to be pregnant after an affair with David, none of them was a good Jewish woman.

Many years ago, my cousin Sandy preached at the church where our grandfather grew up. On certain significant anniversaries, Saint Paul's Presbyterian Church likes having a "son of the church" preach. He startled the Saint Paul congregation by choosing this passage. He used it to show that Jesus came from people who, like us, thought they were special. As this list demonstrates, we are all sinful, unworthy, needy people. The miracle is that God loves us anyhow. As we await the celebration of the birth of the Messiah, let's remember that we, and all God's children, are loved and cherished, and saved by God.

Prayer: Loving, gracious, holy God, help us regard you and your kingdom as gifts to the whole world, not just to our family, our country, our religious heritage—for everyone! Bless your creation with peace and love and joy in Christ Jesus. Amen

Saturday, December 3

By Linda Foster

Inspired by Psalm 24

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of Glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory?

The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

"Come in," two little words that can change my life and yours. When we say "yes" to Jesus' invitation to come into our lives, the LORD Almighty, who created the earth and everyone and everything on it, lives within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. How can you and I, as sinful people, come to the Lord Jesus and ask him to live with us?

Advent is the season of waiting, preparation, and hope for the fulfillment of God's plan to save us from our sinful nature and make our "hands clean and our hearts pure" so that we can climb his holy hill. When we say to Jesus, "come into my heart and my life," we can know that we are forgiven, and our sins are as white as snow.

PRAYER: Thank you, LORD Almighty, for the gift of salvation through the gift of the baby Jesus and the resurrected Jesus. May we all say "come in" during this season of Advent. Amen

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 4

By Tom Bellamy

Inspired by Isaiah 11:1-10

The Way Things Should Be

Reading Isaiah 11:1-10, I found that I was uncomfortable with the term "righteousness." "He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness, he will judge the needy." In our society, the idea of righteousness brings to mind "self-righteous," a decidedly negative term defined as "having or characterized by a certainty, especially an unfounded one, that one is totally correct or morally superior." Politics, in particular, seems to be full of people who are self-righteous, trying to convince us of the "rightness" of their side while demonizing the other side. Looking more deeply at the idea of righteousness, however, I found that it really speaks to the concept of how things are meant to be or what is right. In this passage, we are promised a person who will be granted the ability to see and judge the world based on how it should be and how God wants the world to be. We are being promised a human being, coming from the lineage of Jesse, who will be gifted by God with the ability to judge us and our actions by God's standards, not a flawed human standard. Comparing this promise to the life of Jesus, we can see that this is indeed what happened. Jesus boldly exposed the flaws he witnessed in the way we treat each other and, just as boldly, taught us the "right" way to treat each other. We obviously don't possess the same gift that Jesus had for determining what is right. We see the world through our own faulty human filters, distorted by our own prejudices and weakness. What we do have, though, is faith. We believe that Jesus came to us, taught us how to live, and died for the forgiveness of our sins. Through that lens, we, as covenant people, believe that it is possible to live a life of righteousness the way we are supposed to live. For me, that means seeing the Jesus in everyone I meet, making choices because they are what I think God would have me do, and treating others the way I want to be treated.

PRAYER: God, thank you for showing us righteousness through the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus. Help us to live up to his example and be better disciples for you. Amen

beyond, showing mercy and caring discretion?

We know that raising a child is neither easy nor inexpensive, but we also know that such concerns are -- if not irrelevant -- then "beside the point." We choose to bring this divine child into our lives not because we are guaranteed wealth, success, or happiness but rather to respond to the sacred call to love our neighbors, to give generously to "the least of these," to create a more just and peaceful community.

With God's help, will each of us have the courage to bring Jesus of Nazareth into our daily lives and to nurture and support Him?



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 18

By Roderic Owen

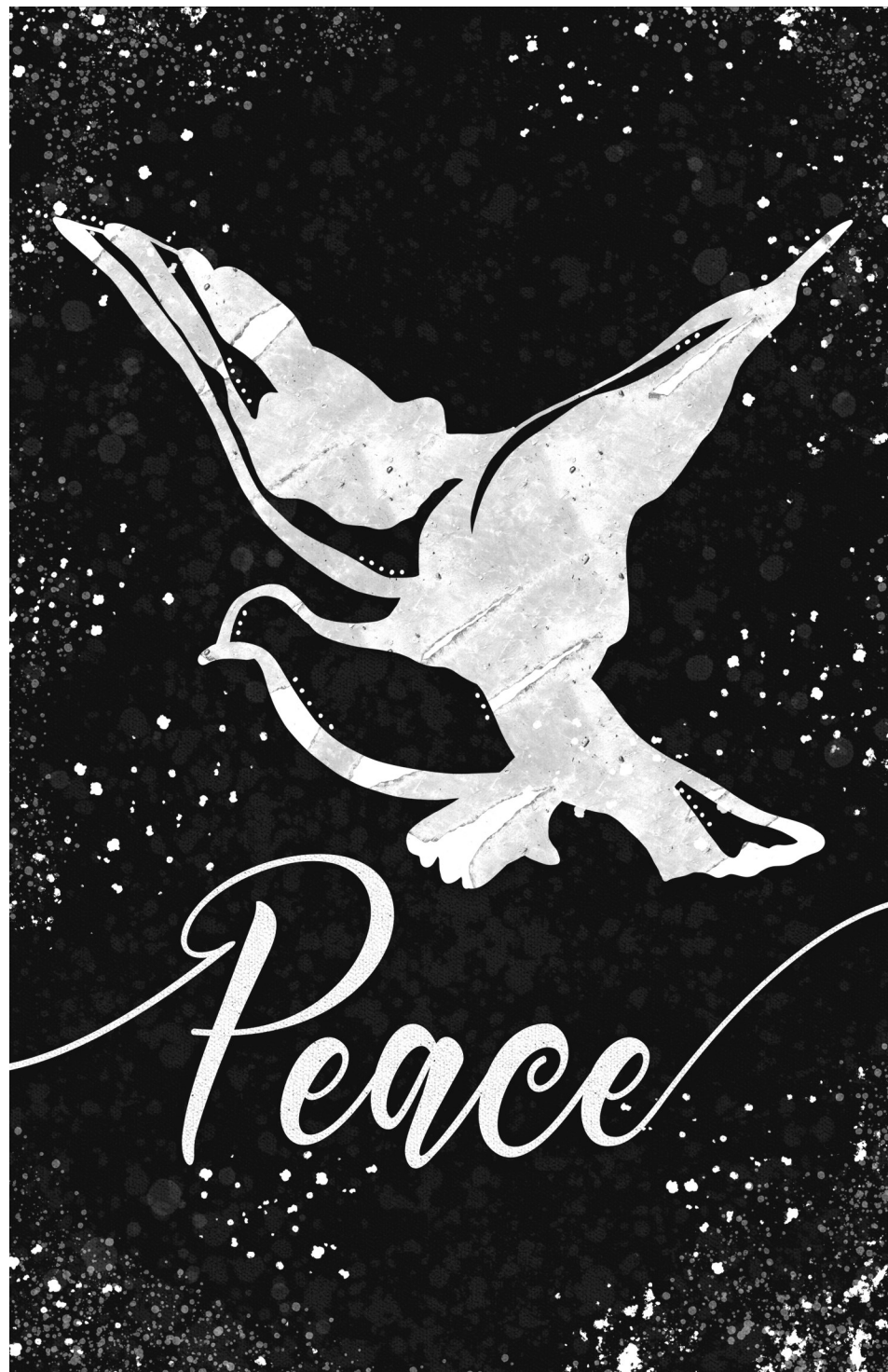
Inspired by Matthew 1:18-25

The Story of When You Were Born

My ninety + year old mother has often told me the story of my birth on my birthday. A day or two after I came into the world in a nursing home in Coventry, England, my father (a Welsh-Presbyterian clergyman), along with six elders (all Welshmen), arrived together to visit Joan and her newborn baby. The nurse-in-charge was clearly flummoxed as she looked over all these men crowded into her patient's room, and she pointedly asked, "Now, which one of you is the father?" Over forty years later, our youngest son, Daniel, enjoys hearing about his day of birth when I was called out of a Mary Baldwin College philosophy class by the faculty secretary on Labor Day, 1992. To this day, I remain unsure whether the amused students were happy because they appreciated the small coincidence of giving birth on Labor Day, or they shared in our family joy and excitement, or they simply were pleased that class ended early that day! I have no doubt that each of you has a story to tell about a special day of birth in your family.

"Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way" is how Matthew begins the story of Jesus' birth. Unlike Luke, Matthew tells the story from the point of view of Joseph, and far more than the other Gospel authors, he places the story within the context of Jewish custom. After all, Matthew begins this Gospel by tracing Jesus' genealogy in depth—all the way back to Abraham. From this account, Joseph is a good and righteous Jewish man. When he learns that Mary is pregnant, rather than divorcing her and publicly condemning her, he initially decides to dismiss her quietly, discreetly. Rather than follow the letter of the law, Joseph tempers strict legality with mercy. But then an angel appears to Joseph in a vivid dream and proclaims" Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid." Joseph responds to this divine challenge, remains married to Mary, and takes on the role of caring father to Jesus throughout his childhood and youth.

Did Joseph or Mary ever tell young Jesus the story of his birth? We can only speculate, but we do know that stories around birth bring renewed hope and joyand that a special Divine message led Joseph to move beyond following the letter of the law as well as expressing individual mercy. Although we may not have an angel appear in a dream or vision, will each of us be asked to move beyond our usual comfort level? Might we be challenged to do more than follow tradition and law and even



The people
who walked in
DARKNESS
have seen
a great

LIGHT...

Isaiah 9:2, NRSV

Saturday, December 17
By John Sayers
Inspired by Colossians 3:12-15

The Apostle Paul wrote letters to the emerging churches to help them understand their journey as followers of Christ. In his letter, Paul reminded the Colossians that God had chosen them and loved them. In response to this gift, they were to live their lives with kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Also, they were to fill their hearts with forgiveness just as God forgave them. To Paul, the defining trait of the followers of Jesus was to love each other as God loved them. Love is what brings everyone together.

Has this idea changed for the followers of Jesus today? Is Paul's message relevant to us? Certainly, it is. We are the recipients of God's love today. In return, we are to live our lives by the same guiding principles-be kind, be humble, be gentle, and be patient. We are expected to be forgiving and loving. As we go about our daily lives, we need to be ever mindful that we need to live lives guided by Christian love.

We live in a world with seemingly endless unsettling news. It can seem overwhelming at times. So during this Advent season, we need to make a commitment to living our lives to show love to one another. Maybe our actions will make the world a better place. It should not be so hard to do. It only requires following this formula:

KINDNESS+HUMBLENESS+GENTLENESS+PATIENCE=LOVE

Paul gave us the formula 2000 years ago!

PRAYER: Lord, inspire us to love one another as you love us.
Amen

Friday, December 16
By Becky Wszalek
Inspired by Ephesians 2:11-22

I let this scripture sit awhile and I find that there is one part I keep coming back to. Christ is the cornerstone. I don't know terribly much about building except that I should probably get a certificate of some sort from HGTV for watching it so often. . . . But I know that the cornerstone is laid first, it's the beginning and foundation of an important structure. So if Christ is the cornerstone then HE. IS. FIRST. Jesus is the beginning of the church and our strong foundation. I feel better when I keep Christ at the center, in ALL things. I just feel as if things are right. Don't you?

PRAYER: Lord, you are the cornerstone of our faith. Help us to build well upon you. Amen

Monday, December 5
By Carrie Chenery
Inspired by Isaiah 9:2-7

"I Saw the Light" by Hank Williams is one of my all-time favorite songs. I find myself getting it stuck in my head often and for no identifiable reason. The lyrics, "No more darkness, no more night; Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight," are always hopeful and uplifting – what a gift it is to feel that way!

I have always been a country music fan, and I remember being so excited about Ken Burns' country music documentary coming out several years ago. My husband Taylor and I watched it with great interest (all 16 hours! Not all at once, of course. . . . But a real feat for young parents to prioritize), and I perked up when they chronicled Hank Williams' short but memorable life. Country musician Marty Stuart is part of the interview series, and he talked about the art of songwriting, saying it's a divine gift you can't explain. He went on to say that when asked about songwriting one time, Hank Williams replied, "I don't write 'em, I just hang on to the pen, and God sends 'em through."

The scripture suggests to us the light is the hope – the cause for joy and a guiding force. The song lyrics tell us the same – "Jesus came like a stranger in the night; Praise the Lord, I saw the light."

We all need hope and light – literally, when we're adjusting to a time change that starts our daily darkness at 5:00 pm; and figuratively, when we're seeking guidance from the Lord in our daily lives. This holiday season reminds us to look for the light always, to find hope and joy in the good news, and to listen always for God's word, whether in scripture or a song that gets stuck in our head.

PRAYER: Lord, let your light shine in and through our lives this Advent season. Amen

Tuesday, December 6
By Jane Wimmer
Inspired by Isaiah 35:1-4

When have you been in a desert? I'm not talking about the Mojave Desert or the Sahara Desert, but a place in your thought processes where life seems bleak and barren. Just like the aforementioned deserts, life can, at times, seem like a barren, windswept plain. Or are you able to see the beauty of your state of mind and roll with it — all the time working to get to the other side? There have been times when all the joy seemed to have left my universe to be replaced with despair and foreboding. Situations in life can often thrust me, and maybe you, into feeling very alone and adrift. Where do you turn in this time of need? Family, friends, pastor?? Of course, these are the people who support you. But in the deep, dark, 3 AM in the morning sleepless times, who is there? For me, God is there. He and I have had many times together, especially this past year when there was no place else to turn but to God.

Now that I've been in the valley, God is helping me to climb out of those dark places. My cries out to God are fewer ones of pleading but filled more with praise and thankfulness. God is leading me to opportunities to serve others and thus bring me back into a more balanced life. I wish I could say it has been easy to climb out of the depths, but it is happening each and every day — one day at a time — with the help of God, family, and friends. In Isaiah 35, verse 4, Isaiah tells the Israelites, "Be strong, do not fear!" "God will come to save you." The Israelites are in a state of despair over their plight of exile in Babylon. In this verse, God's vengeance is on those who will destroy the temple — the temple that meant everything to the Israelites.

God doesn't shut a door without opening a window. May your "shut doors" become "open windows" with your reliance on God's love for you and the strength God gives to you just by you asking for that strength. I know God has strengthened me and continues to work with me and mold me so I can have a joy-filled life.

PRAYER: God, strengthen my resolve to be your servant and see the good in difficult situations. Be by my side as I walk my journey called life, and grant me peace. Amen

I HAVE HEARD OF ... *your love*
TOWARD *all the saints.*

EPHESIANS 1:15, ESV



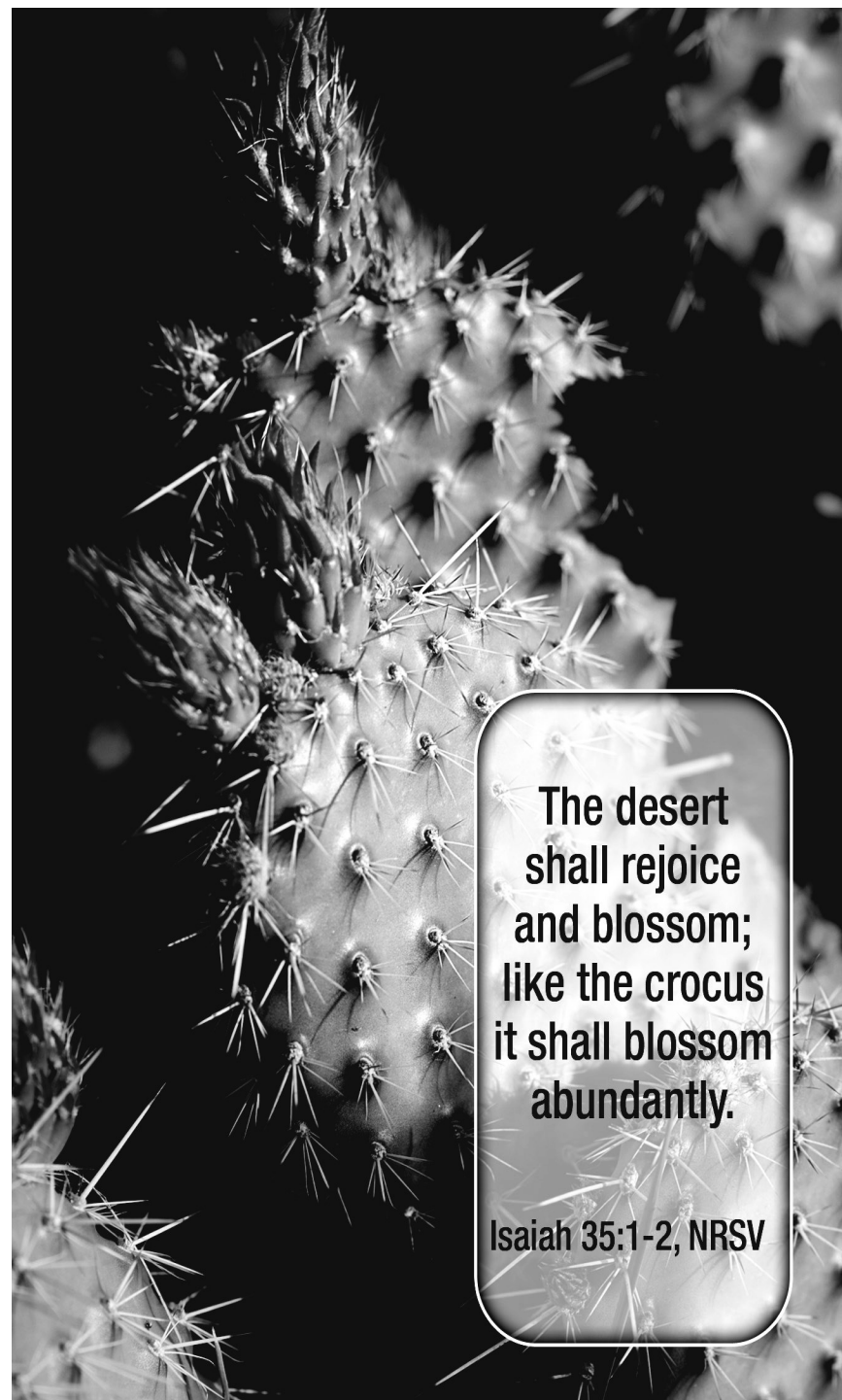
Thursday, December 15
By Jane Maxton
Inspired by Ephesians 1:15-23

I don't know about you, but I confess—I am one of those Christians who sits down at my laptop with honorable intentions to study my Bible, with fresh understanding, hoping for new revelation in an “Ah Hah” moment! But for whatever the reason, it doesn't usually happen! I feel let down and think of Jerry Seinfeld and his friend George. Do you remember them saying, “Yada Yada” when things went wrong, or they felt like there was nothing good in their lives?

I'm sorry to admit that sometimes, I feel that way when I sit down to study the Bible. I read the words, and they sound like a big sad “Yada Yada” in my heart!

But this passage delights me, enlightens me, and energizes me. There is excitement in these words. I can feel it! Can you? Paul has good news for the Ephesians and for us. Even in our inability to understand, they know, and we know that something good is going on. We recognize new hope and dare to embrace it. Let us celebrate God's truth and rejoice! Amen

PRAYER: Lord, inspire, enlighten, and delight us this day and throughout this Advent season. Amen



**The desert
shall rejoice
and blossom;
like the crocus
it shall blossom
abundantly.**

Isaiah 35:1-2, NRSV

Wednesday, December 7
By Tucker Terry
Inspired by Zephaniah 3:14-15

Rejoice and be glad! These are familiar words that we often sing during church services.

It is easy for us to get down on ourselves due to inconveniences and misfortunes. Despite the fact that these inconveniences are often small and have almost no importance, many of us get down on ourselves and are left with apparent negative attitudes. These negative attitudes can often be contagious to those around us and take away the joy that we should live with. They make us forget our many blessings as we take for granted the opportunity to live. While there are always understandable moments of grief, such as the loss of a loved one, don't let such minor situations take over your day. Just like negative attitudes can be contagious, the same goes for positive attitudes.

Rejoice and don't take for granted the blessing of the opportunity to live and enjoy life day after day, and share your joy with others so that they might find joy, no matter what they are going through.

PRAYER: Lord, fill us with joy! Amen

Wednesday, December 14
By Bill Terry
Inspired by Philippians 4:4-7

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

These words from Paul to the early believers in Philippi come at the end of a series of exhortations to remain true to the example of Jesus and to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of earthly temptations. I, too, need this reminder.

As we move through the Advent season, it is far too easy to forget that we are preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus. The commercial side of Christmas hides our actual purpose; the Christmas music, the lights, the sales, and the shopping energize us. We might begin to rush through the season, to feel unfulfilled, to feel anxious.

Perhaps Paul has given us a remedy for the manic tendencies of Christmas:

Slow down.
Allow yourself time to rejoice.
Be gentle to yourself.
Be gentle to others.
Let the love of Christ fill you.

Let your gentleness and love be a blessing -- to yourself and to everyone you meet.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

Tuesday, December 13

By Taylor Chenery

Inspired by Philippians 2:5-11

As we get older, we learn games and sports. Each of these has a set of rules to follow, and it is the common acceptance of these rules that allows the game to happen. Social and business settings have their rules too. I'm thinking of Robert's Rules of Order, as well as guiding principles and rituals of fraternal organizations I've been a part of along the way.

When thinking about how to live our daily lives, it gets a little fuzzier on hard and fast rules to follow. These seem to be more guiding principles than anything else. The easiest example is the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In Paul's letter to the people of Philippi, he encourages them to live as Jesus did. This is a direct call to action. Jesus' life and teachings provide a set of principles for a lifestyle to emulate. He reminds the reader that Jesus exhibited great humility, emptying himself for others. Paul gave his life to Jesus and, in turn, found joy and contentment in Christ's service and encouraged the reader to do the same.

I am a kid of the 90s, and back then, WWJD bracelets were all the rage. Everyone in middle school had these things, and it was not a question of if you had one but which colors you had. Looking back, it was probably part fashion, part fad, but it was grounded in an awesome and simple concept. No different than a string tied around a finger to remember a task, these bracelets served as a reminder to the wearer to take pause. I must imagine if WWJD bracelets existed in the first century AD, Paul would have been a fan as well.

PRAYER: Lord, help us in all situations to do what you would have us do. Amen

Thursday, December 8

By Beverly Riddell

Inspired by Habakkuk 2:1-3

In Chapter Two of Habakkuk, God instructs us to wait because revelations about God's Word will certainly come. Through scripture, we are constantly being encouraged to wait:

- ◆ Psalm 52:9 — I will give Thee thanks forever because Thou hast done it, And I will wait on Thy name, for it is good, in the presence of Thy godly ones.
- ◆ Isaiah 49:23 — And you will know that I am the LORD; Those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame.
- ◆ Lamentations 3:25 — The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him.
- ◆ Hosea 12:6 — Therefore, return to your God, Observe kindness and justice, And wait for your God continually.
- ◆ Micah 7:7 — But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.

We're told that patience is a virtue, but for most of us, waiting is hard. Waiting to be old enough to drive, waiting to go on vacation, waiting for retirement. Waiting can be frustrating, and you feel like joy is delayed.

However, we celebrate the birth of Jesus with this time of waiting called Advent, and the lead-up to Christmas can be a joyful time of anticipation. Waiting in Advent can include caroling, Christmas treats, the gathering of loved ones, and special traditions. This kind of waiting can be a joy of its own!

PRAYER: God bless us as we wait to celebrate the birth of your son Jesus. Bless us as we wait for Jesus to come again in glory. Help us to be patient when waiting is hard and to find the joy in the meantime. Amen

Friday, December 9
By Greg Bohannon with
Dan Summers-Minette
Inspired by Micah 5:2-5a

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah. From you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

5 And he shall be our peace.

In the time of Micah, the northern country of Israel was under siege by the empire of Assyria. The empire was very powerful. They made annual campaigns against the countries in the Mid-East. No one was safe from this big bully.

Today, bullying is a problem in the life of students and adults. It's easy to pick on someone who is weaker or different. What are we to do? If you're a kid, you can and should tell an adult who can help you. But what happens when it's a grown-up bullying another grown-up?

Micah tells us that there will be a time when a rescuer will be born among the Israelites. He will be the leader or shepherd of people all over the world. His power comes from God, and the people of Israel will be safe and sheltered. Everyone will be treated fairly and respectfully, as our Savior teaches us.

But, we are between the first and second coming of our rescuer. We have bullies that don't have respect for anyone beside themselves. They should learn from Jesus that it doesn't matter if you're weak or strong; everyone is a child of God and should be treated justly. Until they do, it is our responsibility as Jesus' followers to act together to oppose bullying. We need to speak up and act together so that bullies can't succeed in attacking people different from themselves.

PRAYER: Lord, help us stand up to the bullies, knowing that you love us one and all! Amen

Monday, December 12
By Eleanor Fetterman
Inspired by James 1:17-22

My first reaction reading this was confusion followed by kind of understanding. Letting go of angry feelings and doing, not just hearing, God's word – that sounds hard!

Not all things are like that. It's easier for me to do math problems than listen to my teacher tell us how to do them. It's easier to put a Lego kit together than to listen to someone tell me how to put it together. It's easier to clean my room than listen to my parents tell me it'll only take a few minutes to clean it (and then go on and on about how I could do it).

But being kind to people who annoy me? Or stopping something fun to do get silverware on the table? Those kinds of things are harder to do!

Yet I can do them. I think it's because of those gifts the scripture talked about. God gives kindness, beauty, life. God can help me regulate my emotions.

When I get a gift from someone I love I'm happy. I'm excited to share it. God has given us gifts. Let's share them! Let's be doers of the word together!

PRAYER: Lord, help us to share our gifts with joy! Amen

Let everyone be
quick to listen,
slow to speak,
slow to anger.



Saturday, December 10
By Bill von Seldeneck
Inspired by Micah 6:6-8

The question posed in this passage is, “...*with what shall I come before the Lord?*” The prophet Micah responds to this query with a two-part answer: a substantial *don’t-do* list and a brief *to-do* list. Like the prophet Isaiah, Micah is crystal clear about what is displeasing to the eyes of God. God does not want rivers of oil or burnt offerings nor our sterling silver service or precious jewels securely locked in a bank vault.

No, just as God was not pleased with the tangible offerings of Micah’s time, God is not pleased with such offerings in our time. If the material offerings are not pleasing to God, then *with what shall I come before the Lord?*” in this twenty-first-century Advent season?

Micah, Isaiah, and hymn writer David Haas, author of the text of the hymn *Come! Live in the Light*, each spell out clearly and in very similar wording what is pleasing in God’s eyes. Succinctly put, as believers, we are called *to do justice, love kindness, to walk humbly with God*. So forget the rivers of oil, forget the burnt offerings, the sterling silver, and the precious gems. Instead, walk in the light of the Lord. Walk not with arrogance or pride, not boastfully but with humility, and in so doing, seek to right injustice, advocate for the weak, the underprivileged, the oppressed, for those on the margins of life. Eschew judgment and where there is hate, bring love, and express that love to all neighbors by serving those in need with no anticipation of thanks or reciprocation.

These intangible acts are what are pleasing to the eyes of our creator God.

PRAYER: Lord, help us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Amen

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Sunday, December 11
By Patti Seaton
Inspired by James 5:7-10

Is patience something we are? A constant state of smiling passivity?

Of course not. It is defined as the capacity to accept or tolerate the delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset. So, what is patience anyway? What is James trying to tell us? To prepare? Get ready? Endure?

Galatians 5:22 tells us patience is listed as one of the “fruits of the spirit.”

It seems to me James is telling us all those years ago that his teaching is as important today as it was in his time and place. Suffering comes to us all. Waiting comes to us all. Patience does not. Consider road rage, anger in a long line for tickets or groceries, or football games. Patience can be identified easily in long lines.

This Advent season, we wait patiently. We prepare. The anticipation of the Christ child to come is a soothing balm for our souls. To know Him causes us to wait patiently for His promises. In our suffering, we wait, prepare and endure. This in our hearts is faith and complete trust that sustains us through our difficult circumstances.

Be patient. Above all, TRUST. “Stay calm and carry on” was my mantra in all the years of watching the long goodbye for my dear husband. I trusted God to lead me, teach me, and help me. And He did.

I guess that was patience in suffering, after all.

Prayer: Most Holy Lord of Light, lead us in your infinite wisdom to prepare, wait and trust as we wait for your return. Lead us to follow you in our suffering. Amen

