

Prayerful Reflections



**An Advent and Christmas
Devotional for 2021**

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Prayerful Reflections for Advent-An Introduction

Like many of you, I love the Christmas season; it's an excuse to make the winter season extra cozy, with candles and twinkle lights, sipping hot chocolate and baking cookies. It is also a time that seems to get busier by the day, with scheduled parties, activities, shopping and end-of-year to-do lists.

About a decade ago, I went to an advent carol concert at my church. I was ready to sing all my favorite songs: *Joy to the World*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, and *Silent Night*....but I was surprised and disappointed by the somber atmosphere of the evening. There were too many hymns in minor chords and even the sanctuary's lighting was dim. "Christmas is about celebrating not lamenting," I thought.

All the advent activities in which I'd participated in the past had been about increasing the joy of the Christmas season—craft-making, tree-trimming, and Christmas gift-buying. This hymn sing-along wasn't jolly; it was sad. I was so upset by the lack of joy in the songs during the month of Advent at my church, that I even mentioned something to the worship pastor, "Can't this season be happier?" I complained. He understood something, I had yet to appreciate; it's tempting to skip over the darkness of the Advent season, and head straight for celebration, but in doing so we miss the opportunity to tell the truth—that life is full of struggles and disappointments interspersed with moments of joy and peace, and Christ meets us in the midst of it all.

Advent, the period of four weeks before Christmas, is about preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ. In order to prepare ourselves for Christ, (his birth, his presence in our lives, and Jesus' second coming) we must be honest about our lived experience—our despair and our hope, our trials and our victories. Advent is a time to *lament* what is broken in the world and in ourselves. It is also a time to *hope*, believing the promises of God will come to fruition.

Prayerful Reflections is an Advent devotional of daily reflections (from November 28 through Epiphany) written by a diverse group of female Christian leaders from around the world. This devotional is an opportunity to pause daily during the hectic holiday season and take time to *read, reflect, respond* and *rest* with the Word of God. It is an invitation to lament the darkness in our world and seek out the light that breaks through that darkness.

Amongst the major and minor chords of our life's soundtrack, Advent happens, and we have a choice to stop and listen to what God might be singing over us, or be carried along with the busy rhythm of the season. My prayer is that by prayerfully reading through the reflections of these 30 authors, we can prepare ourselves, not just for Christmas, but also for Christ.

- Julia Styles

A Reflection for Sunday, November 28

by Leanette Sunsum

Lectionary reading for 11/28/2021: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

Read

Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

The Coming of the Son of Man

25 “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Exhortation to Watch

34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Reflect

Over the years, we learned that when Advent season arrives, we prepare and get ready for Jesus's coming. We grow up hearing we need to re-create practices that center our minds, hearts, and bodies toward Jesus. We got the sense that we should be excited about the prospect of Jesus coming again just like the people of his time did. However, when reading the text, you do not get the sense there is any excitement. There seems

to be a lot of anxiety, hypervigilance, and restlessness. But why? What was going on in Jesus's time to prompt such intense feelings captured in a language such as: "the earth distress," "people faint from fear," "heavens shaken," or "be on guard"?

This use of apocalyptic language feels urgent, like an impending doom or an expectation of an end. Dr. Barbara Reid¹ shares that the Lukean community is trying to make sense of Jesus's message in light of this delay of Christ's return. She also mentions that some modern Christians take this apocalyptic language literally to mean God is coming now, and they wait at the edge of their seat. According to Dr. Reid, Luke's community uses the images of the fig tree budding as a symbol of summer, growth, birth, newness, and nearness of the "Human One," and there is an immediacy there. The fig tree symbol also demonstrates to us that even as we see death in the leafless state of the fig in the winter, it blossoms once summer reappears.

During this slow end or "delay" to this pandemic, this weird liminal space, this "in between times," we wait, in eager expectation for new life. During this time, it is easy to become frozen in fear or apathetic. But we sense this apocalyptic symbol Luke uses is an opportunity to create a deeper awareness and presence of hope of new life, birth, and a renewed joy that can grow even in the smallest of ways. It is tempting to become passive or hopeless during this time of suffering, but we can look forward to Christ overcoming death, even the smallest of ways.

Respond

How do you connect with this feeling of being "on guard" or feeling like the "earth is in distress?" In what ways can you connect with this feeling of impatience about this delay in "normalcy," especially in light of the pandemic?

What will you do during this "liminal space" or "in between times" that brings you more hope or peace? Name one thing that has made your day or week a little more hopeful or joyful. How will these noticings help ground and center you during this Advent season of preparation, expectation, and reflection?

Rest

As we continue to cultivate deeper awareness, presence, and calm during this uncertain time, take a moment to find a comfortable chair, make sure your feet are planted to the ground, and close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths at your own natural pace. Notice how you are feeling at this moment. Is it sadness, excitement, anxiety, etc?

¹ Reid, Barbara E. *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Luke, Year C*. Liturgical Press, 2000.

Where in your body do you feel this sensation? In your chest, stomach, throat? Accept they exist and hold that sensation and feeling with kindness and compassion as you would for a friend. Then visualize yourself in a place that makes you feel most safe, relaxed, or joyful. It could be sitting by the fire with a cup of coffee, or lying on the beach, etc. Continue to breathe deeply at your own pace and stay present to that image of safety. Notice your feelings and sensations again. Have they changed or stayed the same? Why? To end this practice, take the last breath and offer yourself this blessing: "God of Love, may I experience your peace, calm, and care. May I lay in your safety and rest. Amen.

About the Author



For Leanette Sunsum, Chicago certainly conjures the scent of home, where she has stayed most of her life. Leanette is a Director of Worship for the Inclusive Collective, a radically LGBTQ+ inclusive campus ministry committed to fueling young adults through Jesus-rooted soul work. She is passionate about curating communal, healing safe-spaces through deep intersectional Enneagram work. She is a writer, teacher, coach, and musician who is pursuing her Masters of Divinity and Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She hopes to continue to bridge spirituality, mental health, and the Enneagram within communities of color. To learn more, check her out at www.enneastories.com.

An Advent Reflection for Monday, November 29

By Rev. Sarah Robinson

Lectionary reading for 11/29/2021: Psalm 90; 2 Samuel 7:18-29; 2 Peter 3:1-18

Selected passage for reflection: 2 Samuel 7:18-29 NIV

Read

2 Samuel 7:18-29 NIV

David's Prayer

18 Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and he said:

“Who am I, Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?
19 And as if this were not enough in your sight, Sovereign Lord, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant—and this decree, Sovereign Lord, is for a mere human!

20 “What more can David say to you? For you know your servant, Sovereign Lord. 21 For the sake of your word and according to your will, you have done this great thing and made it known to your servant.

22 “How great you are, Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. 23 And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt?
24 You have established your people Israel as your very own forever, and you, Lord, have become their God.

25 “And now, Lord God, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised, 26 so that your name will be great forever. Then people will say, ‘The Lord Almighty is God over Israel!’ And the house of your servant David will be established in your sight.

27 “Lord Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant, saying, ‘I will build a house for you.’ So your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. 28 Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant. 29 Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight; for you, Sovereign Lord, have spoken, and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed forever.”

Reflect

Promises made; promises delivered. But never quite like we imagine.

Just two verses before our scripture today we have God's promise to David: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:16)

We then get David's response- he is overwhelmed at the promise- a promise of his royal legacy & line being established forever. What more could a king dream for?

God seems to go out of God's way to honor David with this promise. And David is reminded that is the way God works. In Egypt, God pursued Israel and rescued them to set them apart for a special relationship.

David is comforted by this promise, even bold enough to pray "Do as you promised, so that your name will be great forever (verses 25b-26a)."

Except, I'm pretty sure David wasn't thinking that God's promise was going to take hundreds of years, an exile or two, multiple occupations and more, just for one of his offspring to be born in less-than-ideal circumstances in tiny Bethlehem. This descendent who lived only a short while on the earth and did nothing to challenge the earthly kings & occupiers for his throne. This Yeshua, who was crucified...and was raised again 3 days later, only to have his throne established in heaven itself at God's right hand- truly an eternal throne.

How could David have even begun to dream of such a thing?

Promise made; promise delivered. But not quite like David imagined.

This seems to be God's nature, which makes sense, because I have learned we humans have such limited vision and limited understanding. What we take as personal, God wants to be for the good of everyone. God's promises are much grander than we can even imagine.

I have learned over time to hold those promises loosely- to keep checking back in with God.

"Am I imagining & dreaming too small again God?"

"Am I losing touch with your grand design?"

But there is another aspect of David's prayer that is a real encouragement to me as well. David had the audacity to essentially pray: "You said it God, now you better do it."

For YOUR sake as well as mine.” I have not often been bold enough to pray that prayer! That is a boldness born of the deep intimate relationship David had with God. He had so many years of deep reliance on God that stepping out with this kind of boldness in prayer seemed natural to the relationship.

There is a prayer warrior in my church, Constance, who is much like David in this boldness. “And won’t God do it?” she says often. She is not afraid to hold God accountable to God’s promises- to even REMIND God of what God has promised to us. And of course, in the same breath, this in turn is a reminder to us that God is indeed faithful. God keeps all God’s promises.

Promises made, promises delivered. But never quite like we imagine.

Respond & Rest

Today I encourage you to spend a few minutes reflecting on God’s promises to you. They might be very personal promises, or they might be the promises God has made to each of us in scripture. Then pray a prayer of thanks like David, as well as a prayer of accountability- don’t be afraid to hold God to God’s word.



About the Author

Pastor Sarah Robinson loves living & serving in the eclectic eco-district Audubon Park in urban Orlando, FL, where she bikes all over and works in her edible/pollinator garden covering her entire front yard! She considers it a privilege and a calling to work for rights and justice of the most vulnerable.

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, November 30

By Gillie Abdiraxman-Issa

Lectionary reading for 11/30/2021: Psalm 90; Numbers 17:1-11; Revelation 22:12-16

Selected passage for reflection: Revelation 22:12-16

Read

Revelation 22:12-16 (New Life Version)

Jesus Testifies to the Churches

¹² “See! I am coming soon. I am bringing with Me the reward I will give to everyone for what he has done.

¹³ I am the First and the Last. I am the beginning and the end.

¹⁴ Those who wash their clothes clean are happy (who are washed by the blood of the Lamb). They will have the right to go into the city through the gates. They will have the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life.

¹⁵ Outside the city are the dogs. They are people who follow witchcraft and those who do sex sins and those who kill other people and those who worship false gods and those who like lies and tell them.

¹⁶ “I am Jesus. I have sent My angel to you with these words to the churches. I am the beginning of David and of his family. I am the bright Morning Star.”

Reflect

To know God and his spirit is such an honor. I remember waiting in line at church for my turn to hear a special word from the Lord, and would be so disappointed when it was something that didn't draw me closer to his spirit. Now, after years of growing weary of messages, I found a way to hear something specific to me...By listening to worship music, I discovered God's heartbeat for me. I would find myself listening to God all day and enjoying his company. I would dance, cry, lament and rejoice again. I knew that staying close to God and discovering what his instructions were, as written in his Good Book, was the light that I needed in a dark world.

Believe me, I have had my share of dark thoughts and sinful nature, but God has always offered a chance to get it better and eventually, right. Nevertheless, we all know the time is coming when all of our past and our present collide. The sins we have committed and our ability to surrender to the One who saved us will separate us. In

today's selected scripture, God sends one final warning by his angel to let us know to get ready. Analyze your past and get ready. "How?" You may ask. Well, simple. Worship God as he described earlier in this chapter and concern yourself with keeping your "coat" clean. Take heed to his prophetic words and do not put the Good Book away on the shelf, but continually be in his presence and abide in him.

Respond

Spend some time this week in reflection of how you may have put away the words of direction given by the Lord. Perhaps, you may have received a correction, or you have had an opportunity to forgive but didn't follow through. Whatever the case may be, re-evaluate your relationship with God.

Ask God to send an angel to greet you and speak to you about what concerns him about your future. Take a walk but don't listen to music. Breathe in God's goodness, and listen to his whisper in your ear. Repent, and ask that you be washed clean so that when he comes you can be ready.

Bonus: Listen to this as a start--  Shana Wilson Williams & Chris Degen - "My Worship"

Rest

Lord, I honor you, you are so good. I thank you for your wisdom, grace, knowledge, and power. You have given us so much grace, thank you! Thank you for sending warnings and corrections when we are stained. Heal our nation. Teach me how to bear fruit often, and be a tree of life. Forgive me, Lord. I also ask that my family repents for generations to come for any evil doing. May you be exalted and honored forevermore. In Jesus' name, Amen.

About the Author



Gillie is a trained Spiritual Director and a Life and Business Concierge. You can find her leading workshops/retreats, hosting prayer moments with the Divine, sharing her joy of writing inspiring messages, or teaching journal exercises for all ages. She is a fun-loving dance and cooking enthusiast who has been married to the love of her life, T'Chaka for 15 years. Gillie is truly a #Boymom to Xavier, Ethan, Hunter, and Ka'Marion ages 13, 10, 3, and 2. Gillie received her Bachelor of Science from Tuskegee University and has certificates of higher learning from the University of Chicago Graham School of Continuing Education and North Park Theological Seminary. Follow her inspiring messages on Instagram! @gillieissa

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 1

By Melanie Myatt

Lectionary reading for 12/1/2021: Psalm 90; Isaiah 1:24-31; Luke 11:29-32

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 90

Read

Psalm 90.1-17 NLT

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.

2 Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are
God.

3 You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

4 A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.

5 Yet you sweep people away in the
sleep of death—

they are like the new grass of the
morning:

6 In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.

7 We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.

8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your
presence.

9 All our days pass away under your
wrath;

we finish our years with a moan.

10 Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;

yet the best of them are but trouble and
sorrow,

for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

11 If only we knew the power of your
anger!

Your wrath is as great as the fear that
is your due.

12 Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

13 Relent, Lord! How long will it be?

Have compassion on your servants.

14 Satisfy us in the morning with your
unfailing love,

that we may sing for joy and be glad all
our days.

15 Make us glad for as many days as you
have afflicted us,

for as many years as we have seen
trouble.

16 May your deeds be shown to your
servants,

your splendor to their children.

17 May the favor of the Lord our God rest
on us;

establish the work of our hands for
us—

yes, establish the work of our hands.

Reflect

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Why is it that time seems more precious and yet more fleeting when we can hear every second passing by? When I don't pay attention to the seconds of the clock, sometimes I am amazed at how much I can accomplish in even a brief window of time. Ten minutes to clean the bathroom? Zip. Zoop. Done. But ten to twelve minutes for my frozen pizza to cook? Those same minutes last an eternity.

Advent means "coming." During that time we prepare ourselves (sometimes both literally and figuratively) as if we were preparing for company. Advent is an opportunity to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' coming. But as we prepare, we are also aware how long we have been waiting. "How long, O Lord?" How long will injustice seem to rule our land? How long will we wait for the flip flop of power and humbleness that both Hannah and Mary describe in their songs (1 Samuel 2.1-10; Luke 1.46-55)?

Psalms 90 takes us back to the time when Israel was not yet a nation in the Promised Land. A time with no Temple and no King. A time when it was easy for Israel to question their identity. But the Psalm also falls in the Book of Psalms when the community questions the fall of Jerusalem. Psalm 90 gives us a window into three time periods: the time of Moses, the time after the fall of Jerusalem, and our time of waiting for Jesus' arrival.

Even in the midst of uncertainty which can create a sense of instability, the Psalm expresses that God alone provides help and refuge. If we want to find stability in the midst of turmoil or despair, we find it in God alone. God is like our nest: a safe place to shelter when we really need rest.

At the same time, we find perspective when we turn to God. "Teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom." How do we measure the minutes we have been given? How do we make good use of the time while we wait for Jesus' to come? Will the seconds tick by with unbearable slowness? Or will we look back at the end of a day at all we were able to accomplish?

As we prepare for both the celebration of Christmas and for the coming of our Savior, we can ask God to order our days. To see both the value of the day, and the passing of the time that brings us ever closer to the fulfillment of the kingdom here on the earth, and the restoration of God's own creation.

Respond

Set a timer for one minute (or use a breathing app if you have one). Pay attention to each breath for that single minute. What happens in your body when you take that minute to focus on each breath? What happens in your mind and in your heart? Open your hands to God, and ask God to give you an image or a promise of wisdom for today.

Rest

God, along with Mary and Hannah, we long for injustice to be overturned, for the humble to be raised up and honored. Teach us to number our days. Show us how we can fill up each day with the work that you give us and the rest that you grant us. Amen.



About the Author

Melanie Myatt lives in Chicago, Illinois. She is a Writer, Teacher, Mom, Preacher, Spiritual Director, Learner, and Chaplain Resident in no particular order. She is currently journeying through 1 Samuel [if you would like to join her](#). Though she is hunkered down for the winter, she is dreaming, not of a white Christmas, but of sunny days sitting on the beach along Lake Michigan.

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 2

By Dawn Holt Lauber

Lectionary reading for 12/2/2021: Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:5-12; Philippians 1:12-18a

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:68-79

Read

Luke 1:68-79 (NIV)

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Reflect

Zechariah's song is not simply a way to announce the birth of his own child, or even God's faithfulness to him and Elizabeth despite their barrenness. Zechariah's hymn of thanksgiving declares that God's faithfulness, salvation, and peace are for all people and for all time. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah rejoices in the work of God among God's people, using words from the psalms: *Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting* (Psalms 41:13, 72:18, and 106:48).

From everlasting to everlasting, God *has been* faithful and *will be* faithful, and we know that faithfulness most fully in the coming of Jesus Christ. Zechariah's song is the message of Advent: The God of Israel has *come to* His people to redeem them. Immanuel, God with us! This is the powerful witness of who God is and what God does. God, who has been silent for centuries, is coming to His people *as Jesus* to save, redeem, and offer abundant life - from everlasting to everlasting.

Stricken mute because of his unbelief, Zechariah is able to speak again when he confirms that his child will be named John. The babe will grow to be a prophet of the

Most High, announcing the presence of God in our midst and the promise of salvation from our sins. God's long-awaited promise of a Savior is here - proclaimed by John and fulfilled in Jesus.

Zechariah's testimony is an affirmation that God is trustworthy, tender, and merciful. He is the God who *makes* promises and *keeps* promises. Since the days of our ancestors, God has exhibited an abiding mercy that continues today to strengthen and guide each one of us to serve Him.

Our God is not a distant and aloof god, removed from the troubles and sorrows we experience. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reveals how He *personally* experiences the pain of this world. God comes to us, seeks us, reaches out to us, and abides with us through Jesus Christ.

Prepare the way of the Lord! Let the time for silence and darkness be over. Let our voices be freed like Zechariah's to sing praises to our God who has shown us mercy and saved us.

Respond

During this season of Advent, may we be mindful of those to whom we are called to announce with joy the coming of the Lord. May we not remain silent, out of fear or doubt or complacency, but robustly proclaim the love and mercy of Jesus.

Rest

Gracious Lord, we give thanks for Your son, Jesus, who has come to save and redeem us - shining light into the darkness of our world and guiding our feet into the path of peace. May our hearts be open this season to proclaim the good news of Emmanuel, God with us, to all that we meet. In the worthy name of Jesus, we pray.

Amen

About the Author

Dawn Holt Lauber is a Worship Pastor and Chaplain. She and husband, David, have three children. As a professional singer, Dawn first performed Duke Ellington's sacred songs at The Riverside Church of New York City, and often leads worship with a sacred jazz band. She has several jazz recordings and is at work on a new one. www.dawnholtlauber.com



An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 3

By Vanessa Fletcher

Lectionary reading for 12/3/2021: Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:13-18; Philippians 1:18b-26
Selected passage for reflection: Malachi 3:13-18

Read

Malachi 3:13-18, NIV

13 “You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the Lord.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

14 “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? **15** But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.’”

16 Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name.

17 “On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. **18** And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

Reflect

It’s officially December! Whenever December hits, I have to make a conscious effort to keep preparing my heart, mind and spirit to remain in the Advent season and not go into full-fledged Christmas mode. My holiday to-do list grows bigger and bigger, and I find myself chasing all the store deals to find gifts for my loved ones that I hope they will treasure.

In Malachi’s day, there were people who were fed up with giving gifts of service to God. They had abandoned serving God because they felt the payoff was not worth it. They wouldn’t even own up to their harsh statements and God had to quote back to them.

Serving God is not for the faint of heart. I currently serve as a hospital chaplain and there are days when I, too, cry out to God. I have had patients who cry out, thinking they’ve been good people so why has all this suffering happened to them. I have had patients who have abandoned church and religion altogether because it was too tough

and hurtful. I imagine the Israelite people were feeling similarly. They had reached their bitter rockbottom. They did not feel a return on their investment, so serving God became a **buried treasure** thrown away.

Are you weary of serving God? Don't give up. This passage boldly speaks that the priceless gift for those who fear the Lord is that **we are His treasured possession**: "On the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty, **"they will be my treasured possession.** I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him." Amidst the patients in the trenches of the hospital, I have also met deeply faithful people with tough diagnoses who are still seeking to serve God and praise Him with their lives and circumstances.

We are reminded in this passage that there is a difference between going through a tough season of not feeling motivated to serve God and abandoning Him altogether. I am personally encouraged by *Galatians 6:9 (NIV)* "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." All it takes is one foot in front of the other to continue to be faithful in the call God has on your life. If you're resistant or lost in discovering what your call is, having an open heart and asking God to lead you can be your first step. Your presence and service matters. It makes a difference in the Kingdom of God and the harvest awaiting us!

Respond

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Savior, what spoiled treasure can you surrender? What buried treasure can you uncover in your Spirit to serve Him?

Rest

*Father, we praise you that we are your treasured possessions. We thank you that you have compassion on us and sent your son on Earth to be our Savior out of your incredible love for us. We ask forgiveness for complacency, lack of motivation, exhaustion and all the things weighing us down from serving you. Where the Spirit of you is, there is freedom. Let it be so within every fiber of our beings. Strengthen and enlighten us to how you have called us to serve. Reveal yourself and your vision to us in a mighty and unique way. We love you.
In your Son, Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.*

About the Author



Vanessa Fletcher seeks to radiate the light and love of Christ as a hospital chaplain in Georgia. She is married to her adventure partner, Hayden and has a spunky German Shepherd/Husky named Callie. She loves to spend time in nature and enjoys a good cup of espresso. Follow along her chaplain journey at [@chaplainess](#) on Instagram!

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 4

By Jessie Best Chambers

Lectionary reading for 12/4/2021: Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 4:1-6; Luke 9:1-6

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:68-79

Read

Luke 1:68-79 (NIV)

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people
and redeemed them.
He has raised up a horn[a] of salvation
for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of
long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father
Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our
enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without
fear

in holiness and righteousness before
him all our days.
And you, my child, will be called a
prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to
prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of
salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us
from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Reflect

I love Advent. It is a season of waiting, which is usually something I hate, but Advent creates a space in the midst of the holidays that acknowledges life is hard and Christmas doesn't always feel jolly. This year, that acknowledgement hits me a bit more deeply. We're almost two years into a global pandemic. So on top of all the personal baggage we all bring into the holidays every year, we're also carrying the weight of a global tragedy that we haven't been able to fully understand or mourn because we're still in its midst. Did I mention that not a day goes by that doesn't bring with it at least one heartbreaking headline? It is A LOT. We need to acknowledge it and sit with it for a bit before we can move forward. And Advent is perfect for that.

Today's reading is also known as Zechariah's song. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are both well past childbearing age, but one day an angel tells them that they are going to have a son and that he (John the Baptist) will become a prophet who prepares the way for God's arrival (Jesus). Zechariah has a hard time believing this and asks for a sign so he can be sure. The angel tells Zechariah that he won't be able to speak until his son is born (probably not the sign he was hoping for). Zechariah is silent for nine months. Luke 1:68-79 are the first words he speaks on the eighth day after the birth of his son.

I love Zechariah's song for the same reasons that I love advent. It is a song of hope in the midst of hardship. It acknowledges that the world is not as it should be. We are surrounded by very real problems like hate, oppression, fear, pain, and violence. These problems just feel too big and too complicated for us to solve. It's easy to look at all that is broken around us and feel completely overwhelmed by it. It's just too much. And yet.

Zechariah's song reminds us that there is also hope, and hope will win in the end. This hope does not look like blind optimism or toxic positivity. It's more than just the belief that one day we'll get to go to heaven and not have to worry about this world any longer. This hope is real and tangible. It is rooted in the belief that what is broken now will one day be repaired. What is wrong will be made right. It trusts that God is coming into the world to bind up the brokenhearted and to set captives free.

Zechariah's hope does not shy away from the darkness. It sees it and proclaims that our loving and merciful God will "shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." It's a hope that is rooted in honesty and action. This is the kind of hope we need right now.

Respond

My prayer for you this Advent is that you are able to choose hope, joy, and peace in the midst of your hardships. Carve out some time and space today to let yourself feel your hard feelings and mourn what has been hard for you this year. Then find ways to actively choose hope and joy. You might try doing something that brings you joy, making a list of things you're grateful for, or simply taking some deep centering breaths after a good cry.

Rest

God, we are waiting for a brighter future, but we grow weary of waiting for the darkness to subside. Help us to wait in hope. We confess that there are times when we don't want to see the brokenness around us. Help us to hope honestly. We know that we are called to do more than wait. Empower us to turn our hope into action. In the midst of it all, help us to rest in the truth that we are fully known and fully loved by you.
Amen.

About the Author



Jessie Best Chambers lives and works in Richmond, VA. Originally from North Carolina, she did her undergraduate work at Appalachian State University before obtaining a master's in Theological Studies from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. In her free time, you can usually find her taking a walk with her husband or reading a murder mystery. Jessie loves the outdoors, the Old Testament, and photos of dogs in dinosaur costumes.

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 5

By Jodi Mullen Fondell

Lectionary reading for 12/5/2021: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Selected passage for reflection: Philippians 1:3-11

Read

Philippians 1:3-11 NLT

Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer

3 Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. **4** Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, **5** for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. **6** And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

7 So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. **8** God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.

9 I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. **10** For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. **11** May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ^a—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.

Reflect

As we near the end of 2021, fatigue is real. Fatigue is different from being tired. Fatigue points to a weariness that hits deep down in one's bones. Fatigue makes hope a little hard to find. We've been waiting for a long time for this pandemic to be behind us, desperately wanting the future to be more secure than it actually is. And so here we are in the season of advent, a season marked by waiting, but maybe this year leaving a few of us wanting. We are tired of waiting. And yet we are being asked once again to wait with anticipation for the coming Christ child. Maybe the words from a familiar Christmas

carol ring especially true right now: *The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight*. Hopes and fears seem unlikely companions and yet, they are likely the two things that many of us have been carefully holding for the past 22 months. Hope for the sadness and stress of the pandemic to abate. Fears that it actually never will.

I believe a word of hope comes to us through Paul's letter to the Philippians. These words in verse 6: *I am certain*. What have we been certain about over the past two years? Almost nothing. And yet here, Paul is proclaiming something with certainty. And he is certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

Advent hope emerges in the midst of our fatigue, for we not only wait to celebrate Christ's birth, we wait for his second coming as well. The hope in Christ's return is that on that day all will be right in our world. The challenge for us is to stay the course, to trust in the goodness of God, and to have faith that God really is at work even in a world that feels utterly upside down at times.

Paul reminds us that in Christ there is good news. Paul reminds us that we are loved. Paul reminds us that even in the midst of a bone weary fatigue we can still deepen our understanding and knowledge of all that Christ's coming means to us. Maybe it is even our fatigue that allows us to yield the power of Christ in our midst since our own strength is so depleted.

The advent of Christ is good news, both his first coming and his second. Waiting is a way of life and yet we must have faith that the wait is worth it. Christ's love will come to us and sustain us and bring us hope in the midst of all of our fears. May you find rest for your weary soul in the knowledge that you are loved by God and that God is indeed still at work in you, and in our world, to bring about the good work that God has begun.

Respond

Go back to the passage and read it aloud, stating your name where you or your appears. In this way, Paul's prayer will be given with you in mind. May you find encouragement in knowing that someone thanks God for you and that God is at work in you.

Rest

Loving and gracious God, thank you for your love that sees us through every hardship. Thank you for your spirit that fills us with hope. As we journey through advent, tired of waiting, perhaps dubious about what to hope for, may we realize afresh that you are at work, Christ's coming into the world does matter, that your love will indeed conquer all. Until the day it is all realized, be our strength and give us courage to continue loving you and growing in our knowledge and understanding of who Christ is in our midst. Amen.

About the Author



Jodi Mullen Fondell has been an ordained Covenant pastor since 1995. She has served International churches in Stockholm, Sweden; London, England; Luxembourg, Luxembourg; and Paris, France. She is currently the co-associate pastor at The American Church in Paris. She is married to Doug, her co-worker and life partner, loves spending time with her dog Maddie, and is the author of [I Was A Stranger: Encouraging the Church to Welcome and Embrace the Foreigner](#). It is available from wipfandstock.com and amazon.com.

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 6

By Rev. Claudia L. Aguilar R.

Lectionary reading for 12/6/2021: Psalm 126; Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:22-25

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 40:1-11

Read

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's
hand
double for all her sins.
3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the
Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway
for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made
low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be
revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

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

Reflect

During the first months of the pandemic, my husband and I decided, like every other family in the country, to work in our backyard. Our first project was to create a patio so we could install a pergola. But there was a tiny problem: our house is built on a slope, so the first thing we had to do was to level the ground.

Our passage today says that our hope is that "every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. The author is speaking specifically about Jerusalem and Israel, a city and a people that have been through oppression and suffering. God is acknowledging that the people of Israel have been walking uphill for far too long. As someone who constantly hikes in the Rocky Mountains, I can tell you, walking uphill is no joke.

Leveling the ground in our patio was ridiculously hard. It was a freaking 12'x12' square and it took us two weeks of using picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, sweating like pigs. Leveling the ground is not an enjoyable task. But the end result was worth it.

The season of Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God. We are preparing for the reign of justice here on earth.

But we live on a slope, where some live on top of the hill in mansions built by those living at the very bottom, having to walk uphill day by day to make ends meet. The slope looks like Latinas making \$0.57 for every dollar a white guy makes, or 30% of Black families owning a home when 70% of White households own a home. The slope looks like educational opportunities, access to affordable housing and care, and representation in the media. The slope is steep and we are working with those who have been walking uphill for far too long. The work at hand is hard. The tools are heavy, the terrain is rocky, and the laborers are few. But the end result is so worth it.

Respond

What are the slopes you see around you? Is there an area where you can level the ground? How can your everyday choices help level the ground?

Rest

*We give thanks to you, Voice in the Wilderness,
for the ways in which you call us -
sometimes whispering, sometimes yelling -
to level the ground,
to create an equitable world,
where everybody can flourish
and live in authentic peace.
Embolden us, Holy Love,
to speak up when everybody else is silent,
to advocate when everybody else is complacent,
to level the ground when everybody else is building steeper slopes.
We ask this in your name.
Amen.*

About the Author



Claudia Aguilar R. is pastor at First Mennonite Church of Denver, Colorado. Being bilingual, bicultural, and binational is part of her call to build bridges among different groups of people. She is a certified yoga instructor and loves music, dogs, cooking, and baking. She is interested in ecumenical and interfaith efforts to bring justice and peace to every being. In her free time, she likes spending time in her garden with her husband Doug and their dog Bruno.

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 7

By Jenny Hoskins

Lectionary reading for 12/7/2021: Psalm 126; Isaiah 19:18-25; 2 Peter 1:2-15

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 126

Read

Psalms 126 NRSV

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,^[a]

we were like those who dream.

² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Reflect

I've always had a strict rule for myself that Christmas music should not be played until after our Thanksgiving meal is eaten. Once the turkey and stuffing has been devoured, we can “Deck the Halls” and “Joy to the World” 24/7, but not one moment before. And it's never been that difficult for me to hold off on all the favorite seasonal carols. This year, however, the moment the trick-or-treating was done I started to feel a deep longing to fill our home with the familiar choruses that help to frame the Advent season. As I sat with the longing to break my hard and fast Christmas music rule, I began to interrogate this unknown impulse. Ask myself why it was that this year I felt so differently.

It has been a long, strange, hard season for our family – and I know that each and every one of us has faced our own versions of *hard* this past year and a half. Many of our days have felt marked by grief, frustration, anger, anxiety, disappointment, and disbelief. What a good word and reminder of God's faithfulness is spoken to us through Psalms 126. I am ready for a season in which our tears and weeping – both personal and collective – are traded for joy, laughter and dreams.

And in the midst of it all, I am also called to remember all that the Lord has done for me, for us. A call to practice gratitude in each and every season that I am walking through. A call to bear witness to the dark moments of life that have seen restoration and trust that restoration will come again.

I sense that once the Christmas carols fill our home this year, they will sound all the sweeter. In asking myself the question of why I have had the deep longing to get a jump on the Christmas season this year, I have come to realize how deeply I am in need of a season to proclaim and prepare the way for Emmanuel – God with us. God with us in every season. Ready to welcome the one who can turn our tears into shouts of joy, often in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Respond

In what areas of your life are you longing for restoration? Where do you long for restoration in our collective life together? Where do you sense a longing to dream a new dream?

Rest

*Our good God, we long for the day that our weeping will be transformed into shouts of joy. We pray we would know your daily presence as we await your restoration and we are filled with laughter once again.
Amen.*



About the Author

Jenny Hoskins recently moved to Nashville, TN after about a decade of living and serving in Ecuador. She continues to work for Serve Globally, a ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church, and grateful to stay connected to beloved communities in Latin America during this stateside chapter for her family. She loves time spent outdoors with her husband Chris and their two kids and most joyful when their table is surrounded by friends and good food.

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 8

By Heather Watson

Lectionary reading for 12/8/2021: Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:3-7; Luke 7:18-30

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 7:18-30

Read

Luke 7:18-30 New International Readers Version

Jesus and John the Baptist

18 John's disciples told him about all these things. So he chose two of them. **19** He sent them to the Lord. John told them to ask him, "Are you the one who is supposed to come? Or should we look for someone else?"

20 The men came to Jesus. They said, "John the Baptist sent us to ask you, 'Are you the one who is supposed to come? Or should we look for someone else?' "

21 At that time Jesus healed many people. They had illnesses, sicknesses and evil spirits. He also gave sight to many who were blind. **22** So Jesus replied to the messengers, "Go back to John. Tell him what you have seen and heard. Blind people receive sight. Disabled people walk. Those who have skin diseases are made 'clean.' Deaf people hear. Those who are dead are raised to life. And the good news is announced to those who are poor. **23** Blessed is anyone who does not give up their faith because of me."

24 So John's messengers left. Then Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. He said, "What did you go out into the desert to see? Tall grass waving in the wind? **25** If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No. Those who wear fine clothes and have many expensive things are in palaces. **26** Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **27** He is the one written about in Scripture. It says,

" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you.

He will prepare your way for you.' (Malachi 3:1)

28 I tell you, no one more important than John has ever been born. But the least important person in God's kingdom is more important than John is."

29 All the people who heard Jesus' words agreed that God's way was right. Even the tax collectors agreed. These people had all been baptized by John. **30** But the Pharisees

and the authorities on the law did not accept for themselves God's purpose. So they had not been baptized by John.

Reflect

Here we have John the Baptist who is in prison for preaching the news of the coming Messiah. John's disciples were telling him about what this Jesus guy was doing. John sent two of his men to go find Jesus and ask him if he was the one that had come or should they keep looking? Of all people who would have been able to recognize the Messiah, John was questioning if Jesus was the One. But instead of stuffing his doubt, he sent men to the source to ask his questions.

Jesus was not put off by John's questions. He welcomed them and answered them. His answer was:

"Go back to John. Tell him what you have seen and heard. Blind people receive sight. Disabled people walk. Those who have skin diseases are made 'clean.' Deaf people hear. Those who are dead are raised to life. And the good news is announced to those who are poor. Blessed is anyone who does not give up their faith because of me." -Luke 7:22-23 NIRV

This is what the coming Messiah was called to do, and Jesus was doing it. See, Jesus was never afraid of those the world considered "unclean, broken or cast out" because, all that Jesus saw was people he dearly loved. Not only did Jesus welcome the blind, disabled, unclean, deaf, dead, and poor, he sought them out. He welcomed them into his family, just as he does for all people regardless of their "issues". He reached into the broken and dark places and shined his light and healed what was broken.

This is precisely what Jesus is still doing today. He is working in our lives, even when we can't see it. He is giving us a story that he wants us to share with others. He had brought us in and given us a family in Christ Jesus. He is Emmanuel, God with us. Our problems do not scare him. Matter of fact, he can and does for us to give us life in the dark and dying places.

Respond

What parts of your life do you believe are too broken and messed up for Jesus to redeem? What if you knew that no matter, Jesus would welcome you in, would you then decide to come to him then? Is there someone in your life that needs the hope of the Gospel and Jesus meeting us where we are?

Rest

Jesus, you are never shocked or surprised by what I do and how I am treated by others. You see me in my broken and hurting places and you welcome me to bring them to you so you can shine your light and bring hope. You are with me in all situations. You are not scared by anything going on. Thank you for giving me a seat at your table just as I am.

Amen.

About the Author



My name is Heather. I am a chaplain in a local hospital in New Orleans. I have a Masters of Divinity from New Orleans Baptist Theological seminary and I am a deacon at my church. I am also a survivor and advocate for those traumatized by the church.

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 9

By Johnna Hayward Muniz

Lectionary reading for 12/9/2021: Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 12:2-6

Read

2 Corinthians 2:8-15

The Collection for the Lord's People

8 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you^[a]—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

¹⁰ And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."^[b]

Reflect

Fred Rogers' famous quote about his mother has not grown old for me yet. When he was a boy and would see scary things in the news, she said, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

In a society that seems to be increasingly individualistic, we can still look around and see stories of people helping one another and being generous with one another. I've been looking for these stories in the last year or so as the pandemic hit and poverty increased. I read the Good News Network and my daily newsfeed and learned of nurses and doctors that were going above and beyond and heard stories of people working extra hours at food banks and homeless shelters.

The spirit of generosity described by Paul in 2 Corinthians reminds us what it means to live in community. No one is an island here, all are made in the image of God, all deserve to be seen and heard and cared for out of the plenty that we have. This is especially important when we consider those on the margins, people who are vulnerable, those who have been forgotten by the medical community because they live too far away or don't have insurance, or because they are victims of systemic injustice in a society that can hardly talk about these topics without sending alarms and buzz words flying in every direction.

"Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the *desire* to do so," (v. 10). Now finish the work... for it's not about what we don't have, but rather what we DO have! What if we increased our *desire* to be generous? What if we let it stretch to all areas of our lives? Not just financially, but including financially, emotionally, politically, physically as well as generous with our time? What if we looked at what we DO HAVE and gave abundantly and freely from that well?

I currently live in Lyon, France. French society is known for a lot of wonderful traits, but abundant giving is not one of them. The culture is skeptical and fearful of people who are not in your inner circle of friends and family. But the helpers are here, too! My husband's pharmacist goes out of her way to find him everything he needs, even accepting his prescriptions when they're in Portuguese. Our friend, Eve, has given us her girls' used clothes that are in incredible condition and from stores that are more expensive than the ones where I shop. Valerie, our neighbor, gave us all her sons' old legos for the girls to play with when we moved to our new neighborhood, and another neighbor gave us her grandchildren's old books. Our friend, Catherine, goes out of her way to help blind people when she sees them struggling to find their way in the big city. And on and on. The Triune God is a community and has made us for community. Look for the helpers. And try to be one.

Respond

Think of the helpers you've seen lately. Notice the simplicity as they give of what they have. Take a moment to find a place where you can expand your generosity: emotionally, with your time, financially, your physical presence, spiritually, etc. If you feel maxed out in all areas, allow God's abundant love to hold you just as you are.

Rest

*Triune God who dances and shares abundantly within your Three Persons, and allows it to overflow to all of Creation, thank you for what I have at this moment. Lead me to share from what I have and not from what I don't have so I can participate in this mystery called community where no one has too little or too much.
Amen.*



About the Author

Johnna Hayward Muniz grew up in Wisconsin, but resides in France with her Brazilian husband and two young girls where they run Meetup groups as cross-cultural bridge builders as global personnel serving with Serve Globally of the Covenant Church.

An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 10

By Alex Hofmann Macias

Lectionary reading for 12/10/2021: Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 8:4-12; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Selected passage for reflection: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Read

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

The Collection for Christians at Jerusalem

9 Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, ² for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴ otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Reflect

Several years ago, a coworker of mine had a stress-induced health issue that sent her to the hospital. While her children were staying with a relative, another friend and I assumed the role of caring for her home, so that when she returned she would be comfortable and not worry about cleaning. When we entered the home, we found it in complete disorder. The weight of all that she had been carrying was immediately evident to us—a single mother of two young boys working in an emotionally draining ministry and struggling to make ends meet. No wonder her health had faltered. The two of us cried together on the couch before we could begin to pick up the pieces. Other coworkers later joined the efforts. The director set to giving the space a fresh coat of paint. People donated to fill the family's refrigerator. Her colleagues and friends entered into the messiness of her situation and gave of themselves when she was in need.

In this passage, Paul is reaching out to the church of Achaia, reminding them of their commitment to raise money for the needs of the church in Jerusalem. For Paul, giving from their hearts—not because they are coerced or guilted into giving—means participation in God's economy of sharing and interdependence. It not only provides resources to those who need them, the act of giving is also a thank offering to God. It is an opportunity for the church to witness to the resurrection of Christ.

“Give as you have made up your mind,” Paul states. Sometimes our early commitments wane with time. Other times we make our decisions out of fear rather than love. We find ourselves acting in self-preservation or with a scarcity mentality. Remember the panic shopping of March 2020? The fear of not enough remains for many of us, but as Paul saw in the Jerusalem collection, by giving generously we have the opportunity to proclaim a counter narrative—that there *is* enough. God fulfills our needs and makes things right.

When our coworker returned from the hospital, she was overwhelmed by the gift. All who had participated were moved to tears. Together, we thanked God. The Advent season reminds us that God is with us, and that through Christ, God will bring injustice and suffering to an end. May we give as an act of righteousness, a testament to the gospel, a declaration of love and gratitude to God, an act of worship.

Respond

Have you ever been overwhelmed by another's generosity? Take a moment to write out your gratitude to God for those who have helped you along the way. Is God calling you to address a need in your community? Take the first step.

Rest

Holy God, you are our provider. We thank you for your salvation history and for those who have been generous with us personally. Lead us to share with others out of your abundance.

Amen.

About the Author



Alex Hofmann Macias serves as Director of Academic Programming at North Park Theological Seminary. A native of Tucson, AZ, she now lives just outside of Chicago with her husband and two children. Alex is a lover of foreign films, good food, novels, laughing, and singing really loud in the car.

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 11

By Sarah Roquemore

Lectionary reading for 12/11/2021: Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 9:8-15; Luke 1:57-66

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 12:2-6

Read

Isaiah 12:2-6 New International Version

2 “Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my
song,
and he has become my salvation.”

3 With joy you will draw water from the
wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in
that day:

“Give thanks to the Lord,
call upon his name,

make known his deeds among the
peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.

5 “Sing praises to the Lord, for he has
done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.
6 Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of
Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One
of Israel.”

Reflect

The phrase “Do not be afraid.” is one of the most frequently repeated phrases in scripture. And for good reason. Daily life brings with it what can feel like a never-ending list of worries. Just trying to compose a sentence listing examples of anxieties that I have entertained this year has me spiraling. Do I start with my giant cataclysmic fears? Climate disasters. Nuclear attacks. Mass shootings. More Pandemics. What about my personal fears: What if I get sick and can’t work and lose my medical coverage and amass crippling debt just trying to stay alive? What if my fiancé dies or gets into a debilitating accident? What if the housing market never stabilizes and we can never buy a home? What if we suck at marriage? What if we can’t have children? What if we do have children and they become drug addicts or rapists!?

I’m not sure if everyone catastrophizes on this level, but I have a pretty active imagination, so the list of hypothetical fears that regularly slip into my mind is long and sometimes outlandish (don’t even get me started on my bed bug phobia...). Still, in our fallen world, none of my fears are completely irrational. Life is full of pain, full of

possibilities for suffering, full of worst-case scenarios to dread. Bed bugs are real and terrifying, so are the consequences of climate change. Trying to grapple with the broken pieces of our country's housing and healthcare systems is a waking nightmare for millions of people. And even if none of my wild and specific fears come true, life is sure to throw some other unexpected suffering my way. So how do I cope? How do we manage, in a world full of pain, to **trust and not be afraid?**

The key for me is in the final line of Isaiah 12: "For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." There is no promise here that we will not encounter suffering, no promise that things will all work out perfectly. We are simply reminded that God is with us. Emmanuel in our midst.

This awareness is the key to transforming our perspective around fear. With the savior in our midst, our focus shifts: "with joy, [we] draw water from the well of salvation." Like the woman who met Jesus at the well and was transformed by his promise of living water, our spirits are quenched with joy as our hearts are compelled away from fear and towards gratitude, praise, and trust.

Respond

Have you forgotten that God is with you? Take some time today to inventory some of the fears that have taken root in your mind and spirit. How does remembering that God is with you impact those fears? What would it look like for you to find joy as you draw water from the wells of salvation? How might you give thanks to the Lord today? What praises can you sing? Take some time to journal your answers to these prompts and see if you can sense God working in your heart to replace your fears with joy.

Rest

When you start to feel fears creeping in again, practice these breath prayers and return your focus to the truths found in Isaiah 12.

Inhale: God is my salvation;

Exhale: I will trust, and will not be afraid;

Inhale: The Lord God is my strength and my song,

Exhale: He has become my salvation."

Inhale: With joy, I draw water

Exhale: From the wells of salvation

Inhale: I will shout and sing for joy

Exhale: For the Holy One is with me.

About the Author



Sarah Roquemore is a teacher, sometimes a writer, and always a daydreamer. She recently moved from Richmond, Virginia to Atlanta, Georgia, where she is finding her way through the wilderness of a new season and trying to remember to thank God for providing (gluten-free) daily bread along the way. She sporadically writes on her blog a few times a year, but definitely not so infrequently that she had to spend over ten minutes finding the url to share here: <https://sarahoffscript.blogspot.com/>

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 12

By Ruth Jensen Zschoche

Lectionary reading for 12/12/2021: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Selected passage for reflection: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Read

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (New Living Translation)

(14) Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! **(15)** For the Lord will remove his hand of judgment and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will never again fear disaster. **(16)** On that day the announcement of Jerusalem will be, 'Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! **(17)** For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.' **(18)** 'I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals; you will be disgraced no more. **(19)** And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory and fame to my former exiles, wherever they have been mocked and shames. **(20)** On that day I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction, among all the nations of the earth, as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the Lord, have spoken!'

Reflect

The Israelites lived through years of faith and obedience to God as well as times of great disobedience and worship of idols. There were always consequences for their years of disobedience. During one of these periods of disobedience they were captured and taken into exile in Babylon. This is the historical context for the book of Zephaniah, one of the minor prophets.

Most of the 4 chapters are written about the judgment to come for the Jewish people, but in Chapter 3 we come to the verses for today. Zephaniah tells the Israelites to sing aloud because God is going to remove His hand of judgment and "the Lord himself, the

King of Israel, will live among you!" The Israelites were always waiting for the Messiah to appear.

Over 25 years ago, I was in a painful season of waiting. I was experiencing secondary infertility and was waiting, hoping God would work and I would be pregnant again. I remember wondering if God was punishing me or if I was a bad mother. It was during this time, as one day I sat crying out to God, I opened my Bible. I didn't open to any specific passage, just whatever passage it opened to. And there on the page I noticed a verse I had underlined some time previously. No note was next to it. I had no idea when I had underlined it. If someone had asked if I knew the verse, I would have said I had never read it or heard anyone quote it. But there it was for me on that painful, tearful day.

Zephaniah 3:17. "For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs." I remember the tears as they flowed harder. I wrote in my Bible the date and these words. "I feel like I've just gotten a love letter from God." I read that the Lord MY God was LIVING with me. He was a MIGHTY SAVIOR. He was taking DELIGHT in me with GLADNESS. And with His LOVE, He was CALMING my fears. He was REJOICING over me with JOYFUL SONGS. (capitals are my editing).

I wonder if when the Israelites heard these words, they felt much the same way that I did. God was living with them. He was also saying that He would come to save them. They were waiting for the coming Messiah who they believed would be their earthly King. We experience this wait as we look towards the annual celebration of His coming as an infant and wait for His return to take us to be with Him forever.

My wait didn't end as I had prayed it would. More pain than I could imagine was still ahead. But even now, I continue to hold this verse very close to me. It is still a love letter from God to me. And it is still a love letter to anyone who is waiting to experience Him or to see Him work.

Respond

Where in your life might you need this verse now? Close your eyes and imagine that Jesus is sitting right next to you. Feel Him as your mighty Savior. Notice how He is taking delight in you with gladness. Feel His love, calming all of your fears. Hear Him rejoice over you with joyful songs.

Rest

*Lord, waiting is so hard. But You Lord are 'in the waiting' with us. Be our mighty savior today, who delights in us with gladness, loves and calms our fears. Rejoice over us with your joyful songs until our wait is over.
Amen.*



About the Author

Ruth has recently retired from a position in church ministry. She is a Spiritual Director and Certified Enneagram Coach. She is a mom to one son, a daughter-in-love and Omi to two beautiful granddaughters. She loves to run, bike, swim, read and spend time mentoring women.

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 13

By Alicia Vela Anderson

Lectionary reading for 12/13/2021: Isaiah 11:1-9; Numbers 16:1-19; Hebrews 13:7-17

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 13:7-17

Read

Hebrews 13:7-17 CEB

Remember your leaders who spoke God's word to you. Imitate their faith as you consider the way their lives turned out. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

Don't be misled by the many strange teachings out there. It's a good thing for the heart to be strengthened by grace rather than by food. Food doesn't help those who live in this context. We have an altar, and those who serve as priests in the meeting tent don't have the right to eat from it. The blood of the animals is carried into the holy of holies by the high priest as an offering for sin, and their bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy with his own blood.

So now, let's go to him outside the camp, bearing his shame. We don't have a permanent city here, but rather we are looking for the city that is still to come. So let's continually offer up a sacrifice of praise through him, which is the fruit from our lips that confess his name. Don't forget to do good and to share what you have because God is pleased with these kinds of sacrifices.

Rely on your leaders and defer to them, because they watch over your whole being as people who are going to be held responsible for you. They need to be able to do this with pleasure and not with complaints about you, because that wouldn't help you.

Reflect

As I reflect on this passage from Hebrews, it brings to mind the many leaders that have impacted my faith journey. The author of Hebrews knows that there are different types of teachers out there and so he is warning the readers to not be drawn in by "strange teachings," such as religious leaders who are not preaching the message of the Kingdom of God. They are those whose sacrifices are impure because they are paying attention to the wrong things - to the temporary things of this world. The readers of this letter were surrounded by Christ-like leaders as well as false teachers.

We all need people in our lives to spur us on, encouraging our walks and leading by example. In our world today, there is no shortage of people to follow, both in person and online, which begs the question - how do you know who to listen to? That warning from Hebrews is still ringing true now.

Similarly, Jesus closes out his sermon on the mount with this practical application of what the Kingdom lived out can look like, saying that good trees cannot bear bad fruit and bad trees cannot bear good fruit. It's a great way to check on our own spiritual lives but also a reminder to be checking the fruit of those that we follow.

During the pandemic, I found myself turning more and more to various church services, podcasts, books, social media influencers to strengthen my own leadership. I have been able to hear from leaders that can shift my thinking in new ways, and as I do so, I try to pay attention to how close their message sticks to the Kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in. Jesus's message is the same today as it was when he walked the earth, how are those we follow preaching that message of the upside down Kingdom?

Respond

Take a moment, as the author of Hebrews writes, to remember those who have taught you to follow Christ. How have they shaped you in positive ways? How can you express your gratitude for them in this season of advent?

Rest

Holy Spirit, point out the places where we need fresh leadership. Reveal to us the people who can help us to shape our lives like Christ. If there are any voices we need to turn down in our ears, reveal that to us now. Thank you, Almighty God, that you place people in our lives to guide us, to love us and to point us towards your Kingdom.



About the Author

Alicia is a Colorado native who found her heart home in MN. She's passionate about helping young people see God at work in their lives and in the world around them. She spends her days teaching Middle School Bible in the Twin Cities. You can find her at aliciavela.com or on social media as @aliciavelaanderson

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 14

By Ellie VerGowe

Lectionary reading for 12/14/2021: Isaiah 11:1-9; Numbers 16:20-35; Acts 28:23-31

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 11:1-9

Read

Isaiah 11:1-9

“The Peaceful Kingdom”

A shoot shall come out from the stump
of Jesse,

and a branch shall grow out of his
roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and
understanding,

the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of
the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the
Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge
the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of
the earth; he shall strike the earth with
the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall
kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around
his waist,

and faithfulness the belt around his
loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling
together,

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the
ox.

The nursing child shall play over the
hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its
hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge
of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Reflect

Poets and prophets (and often they are one and the same), often tell us the truth of how the world is. They tell us, through photographs, through music, through paint on canvas and words arranged just the right way, that things aren't as they should be. After all,

there is poverty, power being used to abuse, and seasons of pain all around us. Our poets and prophets show us the world as it is, and they show us what hurts and where.

But poets and prophets also tell us that this isn't the way it has to be, nor is it the way it always will be. They don't just show us where we are, but they also point us in the direction of where we should go and what we should do to make things better for all of us. They show us visions that can carry us through the painful seasons and towards seasons of warmth and ease. Poets and prophets use art to bring us hope where hope is not easy to come by.

And this is what the poet and prophet Isaiah is doing in the book named after him. The beginning of chapter 11 is often titled something like "a peaceful kingdom" by various editors long after it was written. And it depicts the possibility of a peaceful, just and beautiful kingdom to the people of Israel who are caught in a violent struggle. Isaiah writes to people who have witnessed atrocities, who are captured, carted off and who are refugees in places other than their homeland. To these people, Isaiah paints a picture with words that is meant to show them what could be and what they can hold on to in a season more painful than words can express. Isaiah paints a word picture that begins with a tree stump nursing a tiny shoot growing up out of devastation. And he uses it to bring his people hope in what could be possible.

When I read this first stanza of Isaiah's poem, I think about a section of land in Western Washington state where I've spent a good amount of time. It is a land drenched in rain most of the year and covered in a green so bright it cannot translate to photographs. It is a place that is devastatingly wild with rock outcroppings that give jaw-dropping views of Mount Rainier/Tahoma, it is the traditional land of the Nisqually and co-Salish people, and...it is in the middle of land now owned and clearcut by the Weyerhaeuser logging company.

I used to hike on this section of land a lot and on one side of the trail, I could see miles of vast forest. On the other side, all I could see were remnants of trees that had once stood, and who now lined up with roots exposed to the air to tell the stories of what had happened. No matter how sustainable a logging company strives to be (and Weyerhaeuser at least claims to be striving towards sustainability), it is hard for me not to see a clear cut field as devastation. Where once a forest stood, now only stumps remain.

But as I get closer and walk among the dead, I find that isn't all there is. Upon closer inspection, stumps I thought were dead now host a veritable forest of mosses and new tiny branches reach up out of the roots towards the sky. Where there once seemed to be only death, the field is sprinkled here and there with evidence of new life that I can bear witness to if I just bend close enough to see it.

While the prophet and poet did not write this poem to us today, we certainly can hold on to the image of stumps and new shoots for our own seasons of clearcutting and death. And this year has been a year of it, has it not? We are weathering the deaths of plans, longings and most heart wrenchingly, the deaths of dear ones we love. Perhaps our lives feel like they've been bought by some cosmic logging company which has laid the axe head to our very souls.

And Isaiah does not forget that the seasons of devastation in our lives are just that...devastating. Isaiah acknowledges the pain and tells the truth about where we are. There are no platitudes (thank goodness). This poet and prophet does not shy away from sitting in the pain. Most of the book of Isaiah describes it after all. Isaiah writes of a God who knows pain and does not demand that God's people "just move on." There are healthy portions of lament and demands for justice that to those of us not suffering can feel like overkill. To those of us in the middle of it, these portions of our sacred text are water to the soul. We aren't alone. And the text is full of these blessings for those suffering.

But at the same time, in a few chapters (including this one), Isaiah also invites readers to drink the healing waters of some hope too. Isaiah offers to his people (and I think we are invited to receive it as well) the reminder that that new shoots of tiny green stems and leaves are in the realm of possibility after clear cutting. Our thriving and the thriving for all in our communities (friends, family, strangers, animals, and the earth!) is not beyond the reach of God. Healing can come. Justice is still at the heart of God. There will be equity for the meek of the earth, the wolf shall live with the lamb, and out of the stump, a tiny sprout appears.

Respond

As you are weary from these months of grief and death, may you know that your feelings and body exhaustion are not written off by poets and prophets, and they are not written off by God. Don't write them off yourself either. May you know that your pain is acknowledged and grieved over. May you have space and all you need to grieve in whatever way feels most right. May you feel held in the loving arms of God as you stand in the middle of the devastation.

And in the devastation, may the Spirit of God also give you courage to get close to your pain, close to the stumps so that you can smell the nourishing dirt and imagine the new life growing in the dark. May your thriving come to pass, springing forth into the air, stretching up from the stumps and up from the roots. And may you, oh beloved of God, have the eyes to witness it.

Rest

*Divine One, Show us that you are the one beside us in seasons of devastation. Let us feel your arms around us and not be pressured into moving past our pain and grief too quickly. And Spirit of new life, give us hearts of hope and eyes to see the new life that you are growing within us and around us. We pray these things in the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer and God the Spirit among us.
Amen.*

About the Author



Ellie VerGowe is a new ACPE chaplain resident at the VA Puget Sound Hospital after serving as a parish minister at a church in Seattle and a chaplain intern at Harborview Medical Center. Ellie feels honored to hear people's stories and meet with them in moments of crisis. She lives in West Seattle on the traditional lands of the Duwamish people with her partner Aaron and their Australian shepherd puppy Fiona. She loves being in the mountains, singing, painting and writing, eating good food with good people and reading a well written book on a rainy day with a cup of tea (Ellie is a grandmother at heart!).

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 15

By Monica Tzeng

Lectionary reading for 12/15/2021: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#); [Micah 4:8-13](#); [Luke 7:31-35](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 7:31-35

Read

Luke 7:31-35 (New Living Translation)

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

Reflect

Before we go into the passage itself, it is good to recognize that the Gospel of Luke presents the timeline of Jesus in his ministry from Galilee, Judea and then Jerusalem. His ministry was continuously met with misunderstanding and hostility by many, which then ended in his crucifixion. The Jesus in the Gospel of Luke is a Jesus that was open to all people and communities. Not only does Jesus uplift the voices of all races and ethnicities and those who lived in poverty, but also confronts the wealthy class in their greed and power.

In the passage Luke 7:31-35, Jesus is speaking to a crowd who has placed judgement on John the Baptist. Judgments such as “He has a demon,” (Demon possession means having inappropriate behavior), “Look, a glutton and drunkard,” and “a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” The judgements do not paint John the Baptist in a good light. Jesus admonishes the crowd that their judgement lacks wisdom. In verse 32, He states “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.”

Jesus here is instructing those passing judgement to take the plank out of their eyes! Their judgements and set ways of understanding ministry are causing them to miss out on life. He ends with saying “wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” While I’m sure Jesus is advocating for the people who suffer under those more powerful, I also believe Jesus stating “all children” includes all those who end up being able to dance and weep

once they trust the wisdom of God. The invitation for wisdom is extended to all, even those who don't understand how to live with open eyes. The difference is that those wielding judgement and power must receive and hear uncomfortable truths in order to live a life of freedom and wisdom.

I reflect on what it means to speak uncomfortable truths to those around me. A lot of times, we shirk from sharing the hard truth because we fear the fall-out or consequences. And there are many, especially when it comes to being in a relationship with those who hold power, leadership, or have the potential to hurt us. Jesus understood this.

Speaking truth can mean telling a friend they are being unkind in their relationship with you, or telling a fellow leader that you have noticed in their 'burn-out' phase has started to lack intentionality and integrity in their work, or being deliberate in speaking to a wealthy congregation and challenging them in their ways of stewarding their money that has only been for themselves.

Speaking truth is a form of care. I remember a couple months ago, a coworker of mine phrased it as "directedness with care" and I have carried that phrase with me in these last couple weeks, discerning how and when to uplift truth well. Care is a "two-sides of a coin" kind of process. You care by empowering the voices of those who lack power and privilege, but also practice caring for those in power, those harder to love with accountability.

I am not saying that we should not be cautious or careful in who we speak truth to, we should! However, sometimes by *not* speaking hard truths into places that need it is actually very unkind. If we believe in caring for others, it also means we continue to challenge those in our community with God in order for them to continue being in community with us with integrity.

Respond

So, who in your life has been hard to speak a 'truth' to? Or are there places in your community you find you need to speak 'truth' to power such as racial justice issues, disability issues, LGBTQIA+ issues? What do you fear will happen when you do speak the truth? How can God help to empower you in speaking truth? How can your own friends, loved ones empower you to carry forth a truth that must be said? Sit with the feeling of what it means to see speaking truth as a sign of care for yourself and others. Speak with God about your fears. Ask to trust the process.

Rest

God, I pray for discernment to know when and how to speak truth into the lives of those around me. (I pray for discernment to know when and how to speak truth into [Name's] life. I want to see beyond my own fear and trust You in the process. I pray you challenge me in this direction towards a deeper sense of care and compassion. Amen.



About the Author

Monica (she/her/hers) identifies as a Taiwanese-American queer faith strategist. Formed by Christian evangelical communities, and experiences across other spiritualities, she thrives in uplifting the sacred during times of tension and chaos. She is also a spiritual director who creates space for others to name God. Monica currently lives in Chicago, Illinois, enjoys locating the best taco spots around the city and working out. (moniczeng.com)

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 16

By Rev. Julie Raffety

Lectionary reading for 12/16/2021: Psalm 80:1-7; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 10:10-18

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 10:10-18

Read

Hebrews 10:10-18 NIV

¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

¹⁶ “This is the covenant I will make with them
after that time, says the Lord.

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.”^[a]

¹⁷ Then he adds:

“Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more.”^[b]

¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

Reflect

American long-distance runner and Olympian, Steve Prefontaine once said, “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift.” Galatians 2:21 (NIV) reads, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

While many Christians lament that American Christmas has become too commercialized and too focused on consumerism, just like a gift appearing under the tree on Christmas morning, Advent awaits a gift.

It used to be (verse 11) that Jews would visit the temple with animal offerings or gifts to be sacrificed for their sins. The gifts were supposed to be domestic animals, animals belonging to the giver. But the gift was sacrificial; the giver would do without that animal for food, offering the animal in substitution for one's self. The giver would be absolved of sin and through the sacrifice, brought closer to God.

During the first Advent, whether they had any idea or not, the people of Israel awaited a gift, a once-and-for-all gift *who* would take away the need for any more sacrificial animal offerings.

With the advent, the coming of Christ, we have already received the greatest gift and "sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary," (verse 18). But, we perhaps have an even greater responsibility with the advent of this new gift. In the in-between-time of Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming, we have a great purpose in response to the gift of grace.

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made," the Psalmist declares (139:14). God created you to carve out a you-shaped-sized-niche for yourself in this world. God blesses each of us with great gifts and God is most visible when we use our gifts for God's glory. Some of us run long distances, some of us cook spectacular meals, some of us hold babies, others sing, some crunch numbers; God's gifts are abundant and amazing. To sacrifice/ to ignore/ to suppress the gifts that God has given you is to nullify the Divine within you.

And when Christ came into the world, we were and are and continue to be the recipients of a literal life-changing gift. With Jesus came God's grace to us. We ruin the gift when we withhold forgiveness, love, and extend Christ's grace to those around us. We are not called to be judges but messengers – pointing to Christ all around us and looking for opportunities to bless others. God promises in the final verse to remember our sins and lawless acts no more. This Advent, offer yourself this gift and then extend it to those who cross your path. Embrace and share the unique gifts God has given you and share the gifts of Jesus – forgiveness, love, and grace – with those around you.

Respond

Open up your left hand and think of one gift that God has blessed you with for as many fingers you have on that hand. Open up your right hand and think of one person you can share God's forgiveness, love, and grace with for as many fingers as you have in the days to come before Christmas.

Rest

Gracious God, we give thanks that we can never out-give you. Help us to rejoice in the pieces of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer within us. Through those gifts, may we share your forgiveness, love, and grace with those we encounter this Advent season. Come Lord Jesus, the greatest gift of all. Amen.

About the Author



Rev. Julie Raffety is the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, NJ and an Associate Mathematics Teacher at Sage Alliance High School, working with kids with social and emotional diagnoses. Julie writes a monthly blog for the Presbyterian Outlook and enjoys running, hiking, cheering for the Green Bay Packers, and eating popcorn. She is the proud aunt to three nieces and one nephew. Reading and praying through Advent devotionals is one of her most favorite pieces of the Advent/Christmas season.

An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 17

By Emily Garces

Lectionary reading for 12/17/2021: Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 42:10-18; Hebrews 10:32-39

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 42:10-18

Read

Isaiah 42

10 Sing a new song to the Lord! Sing his praises from the ends of the earth! Sing, all you who sail the seas, all you who live in distant coastlands. **11** Join in the chorus, you desert towns; let the villages of Kedar rejoice! Let the people of Sela sing for joy; shout praises from the mountaintops! **12** Let the whole world glorify the Lord ; let it sing his praise.

13 The Lord will march forth like a mighty hero; he will come out like a warrior, full of fury. He will shout his battle cry and crush all his enemies. **14** He will say, "I have long been silent; yes, I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman in labor, I will cry and groan and pant. **15** I will level the mountains and hills and blight all their greenery. I will turn the rivers into dry land and will dry up all the pools. **16** I will lead blind Israel down a new path, guiding them along an unfamiliar way. I will brighten the darkness before them and smooth out the road ahead of them. Yes, I will indeed do these things; I will not forsake them. **17** But those who trust in idols, who say, 'You are our gods,' will be turned away in shame.

Reflect

"Sing a *new* song to the Lord!" – How many times have I heard these words? What do they mean? Is it enough to sing one of the same tired old church songs we always sing and change the words and chords around a bit? To whom was the writer directing their command? Sailors? Those travelling to new places? Do we need new songs when we go to new places? Won't an old song do just as well? - even if so much of the world around us has changed beyond recognition.

And why is The Lord relinquishing her restraint like a woman in labor? What would that feel like? - to be silent for so long that you can't contain it anymore and to release your inner being as a guttural scream - as a song so new that the agony of its arrival was as if you had just given birth to it. How loud would this cry have to be to level mountains? It

sounds at first like a cry of destruction, doesn't it? - rivers turning into dry land, the blighting of greenery - but maybe some destruction was necessary to "smooth out the road" – maybe making a "new path" (like making a new song) requires the roar of a little dynamite to help remove a few obstacles for others.

Today a friend told me that it's upsetting that so many people seem to live under the false impression that they are not creative – when creativity is simply the action of letting your inside out – and there are so many ways in which we can do this.

Singing a new song can be a terrifying experience. Giving birth was a terrifying experience – watching something that had only existed inside me becoming part of the world and feeling simultaneously that the world wasn't ready for it, and that it wasn't ready for the world. But I gave birth despite my fear (with no pain relief in a rented room in The Netherlands) because once something is inside you it has its own desire to experience the world. Our inner womb is a safe place for creativity to grow – but a day comes when the daylight will call those creative dreams into being.

At first, I thought that the pain I was feeling was creative frustration, or creative inadequacy - it was when I identified the pain as birth-pangs that I was able to harness it in the creation of my "new song" – a book of 40 poems and 40 paintings, called 'The Quiet Woman'.

Here is the title poem.

*the quiet woman
is quiet because
she's breathing in
inflating her lungs
debating her next move
waiting for her moment
breathing in
breathing in
taking up space
like an airship
when she speaks
you will feel the earth shake
you'll have to lean into her words
one foot in front of the other
bracing yourself
so you don't fall over
when she speaks*

*there will be a landslide
trees will be uprooted
tectonic plates will collide
when she speaks
continents will drift back together
coincidences will reconnect
when she speaks
darkness and deceit
will feel the burning weight of light
running everywhere for cover
- and finding none
when she speaks
all the heavy air that she's been
breathing in
breathing in
breathing in
will belong to all of us.*

Respond

Close your eyes. Place a hand on your body. What are the names of the creative beings you contain? What are the words that you have thought but never spoken? Focus on the tiny, unwrapped parcels of movement that you feel within yourself. Do you feel you have been silent for long enough? Be present with the depths of your silence. Is it the restful silence of healing and growth – or the silence of someone breathing in, ready to speak or to act? Only you know your body. Only you know what needs to be kept in, and what is ready to be released.

I start my book *Hitchhiking with Drunken Nuns* with the words:

“I am writing my own song in the faith that it will inspire you to listen to your own voice in the deep silence – and that you will start to hum the song of yourself – quietly at first, and then with the full capacity of your lungs.”

Rest

In the same way that people do not own the souls of their children, I do not own the forms that my creative expression wishes to take. I release it as I release my own breath. To stay or to go. To bring colour and music and light to the world that holds us close. I trust the same Creative Spirit who chose to plant Their desire for creative expression deep within me. I trust the new songs as I find them within myself, I trust that they are as unique and as original and as needed as the unique and original and very much needed person I have been created to be.
Amen.



About The Author

Emily John Garces gained her middle name when she swapped it with her husband (Matthew Laura). She lives in a cottage in England and is an ex-missionary, an artist, poet, podcaster and all-round creative. She has two children, a dog called Eva, five pairs of doc martens, a Canadian canoe and a large appetite. She is author of *Hitchhiking with Drunken Nuns* and *The Quiet Woman* and can be found on social media.

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 18

By Rev. Denise McKinney

Lectionary reading for 12/18/2021: Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 80:1-7

Read

Psalm 80:1-7 MSG

Listen, Shepherd, Israel's Shepherd—
get all your Joseph sheep together.
Throw beams of light
from your dazzling throne
So Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh
can see where they're going.
Get out of bed—you've slept long
enough!
Come on the run before it's too late.
God, come back!
Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.
God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies,

how long will you smolder like a
sleeping volcano
while your people call for fire and
brimstone?
You put us on a diet of tears,
bucket after bucket of salty tears to
drink.
You make us look ridiculous to our
friends;
our enemies poke fun day after day.
God-of-the-Angel-Armies, come back!
Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.

Reflect

I've been watching a Netflix show called **Maid**. It's a limited series about a young woman named Alex with a preschool daughter, who is trying to escape an abusive relationship. She succeeds for a while. Then when both she and her boyfriend seem to be doing much better, there is a glimmer of hope and she falls back into the relationship. But it's only a matter of time before he reverts to the same alcohol addiction that leads to controlling behavior and verbal abuse complimented with glass objects thrown at her in violent rages. The entire time she is trying to escape this cycle of abuse, she works as a maid cleaning the homes of people who have so much more than her and who regularly treat her with contempt.

Alex's life is a diet of tears, with bucket after bucket of sadness and rejection. Her mom is an unstable, sometimes homeless artist who suffers from bipolar disorder. Her father claims to have found Jesus with his new family, but has never owned up to the abuse

he inflicted on Alex as a child. Each time Alex seems to get a little ahead something else falls apart for her and her daughter.

You might think this is the saddest of stories—and it is a sad story. But I am watching it because it is a redemption story too. It is a story of someone who is still calling out for love and hope and goodness to come back into her life, or maybe to show up for the first time. It is the story of a woman who believes that salvation from this very difficult, very painful life is possible, even though her whole life up until now might have convinced her otherwise. And she is not waiting around for it to happen to her. She is insistent, unrelenting, not taking “no” or “give up” for an answer. She is reaching for any person or opportunity that can help make things right in her broken life.

Her story resonates with me—not because I share any of her struggles—I don’t. But I do know what my diet of tears has been the last 18 to 20 months. I bet we all could line up buckets after bucket of our own struggles, each with our name written in sharpie on the side.

I actually misread this Psalm the first time. My ADHD brain thought it started with God talking to his people about listening to him and getting out of bed to take action. But it is the Psalm writer speaking frankly to God. The writer is calling out for love and hope and goodness to come back into his broken world and he’s rather insistent about it. He doesn’t seem to be asking politely. Here are the imperatives, declarations and questions that jump off the page:

Listen—throw beams of light—get out of bed—come before it’s too late—come back—smile your blessing smile—how long will you smolder?—You make us look ridiculous—come back—smile your blessing smile.

Something about the tone of this Psalm is comforting. In a season of the world as well as in your life and mine, when there is so much uncertainty, challenge and trauma still smoldering, it’s nice to know we can be rather insistent with God that he come and make things right.

Respond

I encourage you to read Psalm 80:1-7 out loud to yourself several times. What phrases jump out at you? Where do you find yourself in this cry for help? If there was a bucket of salty tears with your name on it, what sadness has filled that bucket? And what call to action do you have for God? Ask your question. I daresay make your demand. Don’t be afraid to insist that he make things right.

Rest

Redeemer God, Listen to my sorrow and throw beams of your saving light into the darkness.

Amen



About the Author

Denise McKinney lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she leads The Well, a dinner church planted in 2020. She's also a writer, musician and fairly slow half-marathoner! Denise shares married life and friendship with hubby Gary, a pharmacist and fast marathoner! She is also mom to Lanie and Garrison who have taught her more on the faith journey than anyone or anything. You can find more of Denise's storytelling and music at denisemckinney.com, and learn about The Well's sacred life around shared meals at thewelltulsa.org.

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 19

By Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers Johnson

Lectionary reading for 12/19/2021: Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, 46-55

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:39-45

Read

Luke 1:39-45 NIV

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Reflect

In this scripture we meet Elizabeth, once barren, now carrying a long-awaited child. She is visited by Mary, a very young woman, carrying the long-awaited Messiah but in the form of a baby she had not asked for.

Earlier in Luke the angel reveals to Mary, perhaps for the first time, that Elizabeth is also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy. And I think Mary is thinking: "if this is true, if Elizabeth is pregnant, then if anyone is to believe me—it will be her."

And she does. In fact, upon the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. And she speaks truth. She proclaims that Mary is not just pregnant, she is carrying the Messiah. Elizabeth, the one with power—older, married, carrying a long-awaited child, of a priestly line—humbles herself before young Mary. Elizabeth recognizes the spirit moving in her, humbles herself and speaks prophetic truth

You wonder if John the Baptist's life and call to prepare the way of the Lord actually began here. Began with his mother, Elizabeth, who spoke truth and hope and blessing at the right moment.

However brave and faithful Mary was, pregnancy for her would have been socially terrifying. I've met more than one woman whose pregnancy meant social, emotional and economic crisis. And Mary, angel or no angel, was unmarried and pregnant in a society that permitted stoning as a punishment for adultery.

But Elizabeth spoke truth and affirmation in this in between space. Elizabeth who knew the stigma and shame from barrenness now names Mary's unwed pregnancy as good. When the world considered Mary immoral and sinful, Elizabeth knew different. And when Mary's future looked shame-filled and treacherous, Elizabeth declared Mary a blessing.

The Magnificat, Mary's Song, is amazing and beautiful and prophetic for the world but it does not surprise me that it comes after she is greeted, welcomed, blessed, affirmed, and loved by Elizabeth. Before Mary sings and makes her prophetic proclamation to the world, Elizabeth says to Mary: "I believe you. You are the mother of our Lord. You are blessed." Elizabeth's words prepare the way for Mary's words.

Mary and Elizabeth brought hope and salvation to the world through the children they bore but also through their prophetic words. The Holy Spirit not only brought about miraculous births—the Holy Spirit also transformed ordinary women into prophets.

This is a pivot here in the story of God as recorded in scripture. Elizabeth is the last barren woman story in scripture and Mary's pregnancy is the last recorded pregnancy in scripture. Salvation and hope for the people of God will no longer be through childbirth—it will be through the Word. The Word (meaning Jesus) who dwelled among us, who is God, and was with God in the beginning. The Word proclaimed through the power of the spirit.

The Word has come to us and lives in us. Through the Word we were given the right to be children of God. Children born not of natural descent or human decision but born of God. The Word lives in those who believe. The Word, our savior, makes us all bearers of light, good news, and prophetic words of hope and truth.

Have the words of someone else ever empowered you to take a step of faith, to speak up or speak out, to respond more faithfully to God's call on your life?

Have you ever asked God to make you sensitive to the spirit so that you can speak words of truth that empower others to "sing"?

Respond

Read the scriptures below and ask God to bring to mind someone in need of a prophetic word of encouragement. Call them or write a note and proclaim this truth over their life. Isaiah 40:28-31, Romans 15:13, 1 John 3:1, Isaiah 43:1,4, Romans 8:37-39, Matthew 6:25-26

Rest

*Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, use my words to speak truth and power to others.
Amen*



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers Johnson currently serves as Co-Lead Pastor (with her husband Ryan) at Covenant Congregational Church in North Easton MA. She is the founder of Four More Women in Pulpit, an advocacy movement for women preachers. Devyn is the proud mother of Rosie (9) and Susanna (5). Find out more at revdevyn.com.

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 20

By Amanda Svejda

Lectionary reading for 12/20/2021: Psalm 113; Genesis 25:19-28; Colossians 1:15-20

Selected passage for reflection: Colossians 1:15-20

Read

Colossians 1:15-20

Consider these two versions of Colossians 1:15-20 to experience how word choice broadens our understanding and can spark our imaginations as we meditate on these words. The Message is a modern language paraphrase, and the New Revised Standard Version is a word-for-word translation.

Colossians 1:15-20, The Message translation

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

Colossians 1:15-20, New Revised Standard Version

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Reflect

As a writer, I have often pondered the idea of making “the image of God” the focus of a blog. I even went so far as to purchase a domain name to begin building my website. But, in all transparency, I have often felt unworthy of taking on such a lofty task. I am far from having all the answers to what it means to be made in the image of God. Let alone feeling empowered enough to teach others how to act on it.

Yet this topic keeps pulling me in. For several years, I have been captivated by the richness of *the image of God*. I ruminate on what it means to be made in God’s likeness. I think of the creation in all its complex, stunning diversity--evidence of a masterful Creator at work, crafting astounding and extraordinary masterpieces.

I consider how this phrase, so simple, speaks to what is so profound: grasping what we can of the unfathomable nature of God. How we can more fully recognize ourselves in light of it. How we may journey forward, forming and reforming our steps as we dare to dig deeper into and embody this truth.

And here, in Colossians, I find the pivotal key to understanding God’s image:

Jesus is the image of the invisible God... the exact representation of God’s being... in Jesus all the fullness of the deity was pleased to dwell.

In Jesus, we have *the* breathtaking example of what it means to experience God firsthand. In flesh and blood, we see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears, and touch with our hands the Lord of all creation.

Despite all our past, present, and future distortions of who God is and what God wants for us, we have in Jesus the evidence of God’s true nature. We can look at the biblical record of Jesus’ life and get a long glimpse into the Holy One.

On one of the darkest nights of the year, we can witness the Light of Life as our North Star. We can begin to see that God is not made in our image. God is not the angry, bearded taskmaster we have sometimes thought God to be. God is the One who walked the earth, calling Peter to walk on the water, not hesitating to reach out to grab him when he started to slip. Jesus is the One who healed, fed, and taught crowds. The hands of God, reaching out with healing power and love.

The One who raised the dead.
Who mourned and wept.
Who allowed disciples to recline on his shoulder.
The One who died on the cross for our sake.
And Jesus is the One who will come again, in victory and in power.

Respond

Take a few minutes to be still. Choose one or more ways to engage your senses as you meditate on what it might have been like to encounter Jesus in real life. Use any biblical stories you may be familiar with to imagine what Jesus may have looked like, sounded like, etc. Try to put yourself in the story.

- Listen to/Watch [Pentatonix - Mary, Did You Know? \(Official Video\)](#)
- Create a work of art based on the images and feelings that arise from your meditation
- Journal
- Sip a cup of hot cocoa, tea, cider or coffee. Be still and feel the warmth of the drink as you meditate on today's passage.
- Spend time with a friend or family member this week, and practice being present with them. Listen, make eye contact, and practice being fully engaged to experience who they are, and how they reflect God's image.

Rest

Loving, tender, kind, strong, and merciful God. Thank you for being like no other. You alone are Lord. We look to You for the source of our love, strength, and hope. We celebrate You in this season. As we near Christmas, we ask for the warmth of your love to shine on us, on all of us. We all need You. Empower us and embolden us, Holy Spirit to reflect Your love and grace to all we meet. Speak to us and show us who You are. In Jesus' Name. Amen.



About the Author

Amanda is wife to Joey and proud mama to the world's cutest fur-baby, Kona (the cute puppy who's now five). Amanda graduated from Northern Seminary in 2007 with a Master of Divinity degree. Her interests include writing, social justice, news, coffee, walking by the lake and laughing with friends. Every year she somehow finds new opportunities to engage in lots of existential questions and is always seeking her path, but is starting to understand that trusting God daily is more important than having all the right answers. Feel free to reach out to her at: amanda.svejda@gmail.com

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 21

By Kelly Perez

Lectionary reading for 12/21/2021: Psalm 113; Genesis 30:1-24; Romans 8:18-30

Selected passage for reflection: Romans 8:18-30

Read

Romans 8:18-23 (NRSV)

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Reflect

Advent is one of my favorite seasons of the church calendar. The dual themes of Joyful anticipation and solemn preparation is a tone that allows me to express the full range of my emotions. The often haunting sounds of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, allows me the space to breathe in the promise of God-with-Us, and breathe out the pain, fear, anxieties, emotions that come with the season.

In the midst of offering the full range of human emotion to God, I remember that creation is also calling out and groaning in labor pains for restoration. We join with creation in the journey through Advent. We labor together, through joys, pains, dreams, and failures, the mundane and extraordinary moments of life, and the lens of Advent is one that allows us to glimpse God's presence in it all.

When I did not have the words to express this in my life I found them in the song, "We Labor Unto Glory" (Craig Harris / Isaac Wardell), sung by The Porter's Gate. The slow pace, repeated glories, draws me into a moment of contemplation, expectation, and longing, that is often what I need and do not take the time to engage in. May this song allow you a moment to engage with Advent this season.

My God, my God, where e'er I go -- Glory

*Where I reap and where I sow -- Glory
And my hand it grips the thorn -- Glory
In the still and in the storm -- Glory*

*Oh, we labor unto glory
Till heaven and earth are one
Oh, we labor unto glory
Until God's kingdom comes*

*The sun it shines and then goes down -- Glory
Rain, it pours and beats the ground -- Glory*

Dust, it blows and ends my days -- Glory

Hearts they burn beneath Your gaze -- Glory

*My heart, my hands, they're kingdom bound -- Glory
Where thorns no longer curse the ground -- Glory
Trim the wick, ignite the flame -- Glory
My work, it will not be in vain -- Glory*

Respond

I would encourage you to listen to [“We Labor Unto Glory” by The Porter’s gate](#) and spend some time wondering. I wonder what is your favorite part of the song? I wonder what part of the song was written for you?

Rest

*May the God who hears, hear your cries, even when you don’t have the words.
May the God of creation, show you a glimpse of glory all around you.
May the God of restoration, bring you into glory until God’s kingdom comes.*

About the Author

Kelly Perez is currently living in Vista, CA, trying to not take the sunshine and waves for granted. She loves getting to work with friends, wondering with children, being Tia Kelly, throwing Harry Potter parties, voluntolding family members, creating balloon arches, and laminating everything she can.



An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 22

By Anna Murphy

Lectionary reading for 12/22/2021: Luke 1:46b-55; Micah 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:11-22

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 2:11-22

Read

Ephesians 2:11-22 NRSV

One in Christ

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,[a] called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— **12** remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. **15** He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, **16** and might reconcile both groups to God in one body[b] through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.[c] **17** So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; **18** for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, **20** built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.[d] **21** In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; **22** in whom you also are built together spiritually[e] into a dwelling place for God.

Reflect

Belonging. Every human's deepest desire. From our earliest memories on the playground, to high school cafeteras, from starting new jobs to moving to new places—our brains and bodies are literally wired for connection. We are created to seek belonging.

As I began my Junior year of college, the person I once recognized as myself was falling apart before my very eyes. I was seeking fulfillment and belonging in any reckless way I knew how- and had the legal implications to show for it.

I will never forget the slow simmer of unwavering support and hope in the form of a few humans who changed my trajectory forever. I met Emily and Bryan through an organization we were both a part of, showing potential students around campus. These two knew me in my mess, met me exactly where I was, and invited me into a different life without ever creating distance. My world began to take a pretty different shape- and although I still had to account for the wreckage of my choices, I began to open to the possibility that everything I was looking for was actually already available to me. I began to peel back the layers and realize I didn't have to search for belonging because God had already given me that space before I ever even walked this earth.

The best experiences of healing and belonging - I think - feel a lot like coming home. Through Christ we have been welcomed into family, putting an end to any dividing wall perceived to keep us from the full access his sacrifice grants us. We have been brought near, united in peace, and are members of God's household.

Christ has transformed us from strangers to family. May we learn to live from that place of transformation- knowing we belong. To God, to ourselves, and to each other.

Respond & Rest

As we practice the pause this advent season, may we use that space to remind ourselves of what is already true. Close your eyes, if you're comfortable, and take a few moments to meditate on the feeling of coming home. I wonder, is there anyone in your sphere you can create a space of belonging and home for during this advent season?



About the Author

Anna Murphy is an unschooled, ordinary woman who has been with Jesus. She lives in Richmond, VA and works in the field of addiction and recovery. Anna's passion is to empower and encourage others into freedom and a life lived fully alive through Jesus.

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 23

By Rev. Rebekah Strobel

Lectionary reading for 12/23/2021: Luke 1:46b-55; Micah 4:6-8; 2 Peter 1:16-21

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:46b-55

Read

Luke 1:46b-55, The Voice

My soul lifts up the Lord!
My spirit celebrates God, my Liberator!
For though I'm God's humble servant,
 God has noticed me.
 Now and forever,
 I will be considered blessed by all
generations.
For the Mighty One has done great things
for me;
 holy is God's name!
From generation to generation,
 God's lovingkindness endures
 for those who revere Him.
God's arm has accomplished mighty
deeds.

 The proud in mind and heart,
 God has sent away in disarray.
The rulers from their high positions of
power,
 God has brought down low.
 And those who were humble and lowly,
 God has elevated with dignity.
The hungry—God has filled with fine
food.
 The rich—God has dismissed with
nothing in their hands.
To Israel, God's servant,
 God has given help,
As promised to our ancestors,
 remembering Abraham and his
descendants in mercy forever.

Reflect

Reading through the words of Mary, I keep coming back to that first verse- “My Spirit celebrates God, my liberator”. This is a young woman who recently learned she was miraculously pregnant...a woman who didn't ask to be pregnant, and who knowingly took on shame and ridicule from the society around her, even to the point of risking losing her fiancé. Nothing about that sounds liberating, and yet her words of triumph as she cries out in praise are of liberation...that God has liberated her, that God is in the work of liberating all people. When faced with absolutely overwhelming realities, Mary chooses revolutionary praise... I think Mary has what I so often lack- the ability to step back and take in the fullness of what God is doing.

One of my favorite artists is Monet. I recently went to an exhibit of his works in Boston, and learned that his focus (like all the impressionists) was not on capturing a landscape perfectly, but on capturing the *feeling* the scene produced. If you get close to one of his works of art, you see brushstrokes and color but nothing makes sense....however, as you step further back it all comes into focus and makes you feel. The wonder of a rolling ravine, the stillness of a lily pad on the water... the feeling is the bigger picture.

In a time of uncertainty, when her personal life is in upheaval, living in a society in which she is a part of an oppressed people group crying out for change, when the world around her has achieved “peace” at the expense of those who would step out of line...Mary’s song is an act of rebellion--screaming out to the world that her God is liberator. Hagar once called the Lord, “the God who sees”. God sees Mary, *all of her*, and liberates. God has remembered her, and she is given a glimpse of the whole picture...toppling the mighty, elevating the lowly; a full reversal of the status quo where the oppressed and least heard are valued and given satisfaction. The truth Mary sings out is that those who hurt and toil and strive for what is good and right will be seen and uplifted.

With a world of challenge swirling around her, Mary’s words anchor her in truth. God has seen her. God will continue to see her. God has not left her. God will never leave. God hears it all, knows it all, and is in the work of redeeming and healing it all.

A weary world rejoices...souls, feel your worth.

Respond

What does this season feel like for you?

If the realities of the world are swirling relentlessly around you, take a few moments to breathe deep and anchor yourself in what is true.

What has God done in your life in the past?

How can you experience God’s truth in the present?

What can you declare about God for the future?

If your life feels full of hope and promise, cry out to God on behalf of others and tell God what is so good and true in your life right now. Reach out to your fellow human, provide space for their hurt, and give from your depths of joy.

Rest

Creator and redeemer God, thank you for seeing me. For seeing us. For seeing all of it. When the core of who I am is in agony, remind me what's true. Remind me that you cry out and rage alongside me. You see the wrong and your heart breaks. You have not left me and you will not leave me. When I feel at peace, you are holding the hurt for the rest of the world while you delight alongside me. You are never only one thing, but are all things and so I know you're with me in this thing. Help me today to pause, to anchor myself in what is true, and to rejoice in you, the Liberator of all. Amen.

About the Author



Rebekah Strobel is an ordained reverend who lives in Des Moines, WA with her husband Nate, and her stepson Jack. She received a Communications degree from Azusa Pacific University in 2008, and graduated from North Park Theological Seminary with her Master of Divinity in 2013. After years of Church ministry she has transitioned to non-profit leadership, overseeing a group of people who provide social and spiritual services for low-income and affordable housing communities. Officiating weddings regularly is one of her great joys, as is building up future leaders. She loves Jesus, people, laughing, crying and nature.

A Reflection for Christmas Eve morning

By Rev. Elizabeth McColl

Lectionary reading for 12/24/2021: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, 15-20

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 96

Read

Psalm 96 (NIV UK)

- 1 Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. 2. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.
3. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. 4. For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.
5. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.
6. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.
7. Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
8. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.
9. Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.
10. Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns.' The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.
11. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
12. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
13. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Reflect

Do you ever find yourself reading a passage of scripture only to be taken by surprise by something you may have missed or passed over because those words are so familiar? I read the words, "Sing to the Lord a new song," and stopped right there. I spend much of my professional life singing and making music. At the time of writing, I was experiencing some career setbacks and I was finding myself thinking and speaking resentful and bitter patterns far too often. Then I read these words: "Sing to the Lord a new song." I could hear a voice speaking to me and saying; "it's time to set down those thoughts and sing a new song;" one that's full of praise for a co-worker with whom I usually find

frustrating, one which sees creation for what it is: constantly growing and changing, proclaiming the glory of God, their creative power and beauty.

A voice, the clear lilt and rhythm of which I was certain was the Spirit's, was nudging me to lift my eyes to what was immediately around me and to look up and see what was more than 20 feet ahead of me (metaphorically and literally). Could it be, that by even entertaining the thought of a brand new song, one full of praise and proclamation of God's goodness and majesty, would change my outlook on what was past and give me hope for the future?

It's Christmas Eve, the wonder of the *Word becoming flesh and moving into the neighbourhood*. This is, indeed, a new song; one of tenderness and power wrapped up in vulnerable humanness, holiness and the Lord of all creation.

Respond

What "new song" is the Spirit calling you to sing or hear today? Are there words or a melody to which you have been singing and paying too much attention and you need a change of key and cadence? While there may be snow, ice and cold around you during this time (either metaphorically or actually), what is worth proclaiming day after day and testifies to God's glory and strength? Perhaps you wish to write lyrics to a song which has yet to be composed. Or maybe hear these words, "Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth," and allow the Spirit to gently sing her voice over you.

Rest

Gracious Lord, as we rest in you tonight, may we hear your words singing over us, nudging us to listen to your words, your music, your lilt, your cadences, and may we hear your melody above all the others.

About the Author

Elizabeth McColl is an ordained pastor and currently spends her vocational life working with under-resourced young people using music as their vehicle of social transformation. Based in Edinburgh, Scotland, she is never known to live a day without a good mug of coffee and lemon infused water.



A Reflection for Christmas Eve Night

By Julia Styles

Lectionary reading for 12/24: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-7, 8-20

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 2:1-7, 8-20

Read

Luke 2:1-20 Revised Standard Version

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[b] praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^[c]

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. **19** But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflect

I recently gave birth to my second Child, Zoe. Pregnancy is an advent in and of itself, as a mother prepares for the coming of her child. Being pregnant and giving birth before this year's Advent has made me feel keenly aware of Mary's experience as a soon-to-be mother. It has also made me suspicious of our traditional narratives we have around Jesus's birth,

Most Christians are familiar with Jesus' birth story. We have seen dozens of Christmas pageants and theatrical representations of a young Joseph and Mary traveling far from home, Mary about to give birth, just to be turned away at the inn. We sing songs of baby Jesus asleep in the manger, filled with straw and surrounded by animals. One of those popular songs even has us believe that Jesus doesn't cry². The nativity sets in our homes portray Mary as the sole woman on the scene—no midwives or relatives or peers helping her give birth or care for her postpartum. According to my own experiences of giving birth, and other stories in the Bible, it is highly unlikely that Mary gave birth alone in a barn, but these images of the first Christmas are so ingrained in our cultural subconscious that we rarely question if they are accurate.

In his book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey examines the critical flaws in our western assumptions of Jesus' birth story with the following anthropological insights³:

- 1) Joseph was returning to his village of origin, and would have been accepted and welcomed into the homes of any of his extended family or any neighbors that were friends with that extended family.
- 2) Joseph was a part of a "royal" bloodline since he was a descendent of King David. Being from a famous family would have made Joseph welcome in any home in Bethlehem, which was known locally as the "City of David."
- 3) Every culture gives special attention to a woman giving birth. Rural communities the world over have always assisted their own in childbirth no matter their circumstances. Are we to believe that Bethlehem was different and refused to help one of their own community during a time of need--refusing shelter and medical care to someone from the line of David in the "City of David?"
- 4) Mary had relatives in the hills of Judea, and Bethlehem was in the center of Judea. If Joseph had been unable to find adequate shelter in Bethlehem, surely Mary could have gone to stay with Elizabeth and Zachariah.
- 5) Joseph had time to make adequate arrangements for his family. Luke 2:4 says, "Joseph and Mary went up from Galilee to Judea" and verse 6 states, "while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. Christmas pageants have us believe that Mary was about to burst and therefore Joseph

² Away in the Manger

³ Bailey, Kenneth. Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes. 2008. Pages 25-26

accepted any accommodation, even a stable, when the reality is that they were in town at least days if not weeks beforehand.

So if all these traditional assumptions we have of Jesus' birth are flawed, how did we get such a vivid and erroneous picture in our heads? Bailey asserts that a Christian novel, produced about 200 years after Christ's birth, is partly to blame. The novel, titled *The Protevangelium of James*, written by an author that was not familiar with Jewish culture or Palestinian geography, depicted Mary giving birth alone in a cave on her way to Bethlehem. Although the account was criticized by Latin scholars and popes of the time, it was nevertheless translated into multiple languages and captured the imaginations of much of Europe and the Middle East at that time.⁴

Given the above flawed assumptions, we still need to ask the following questions: Where was the manger and what was the inn? In our western minds, when we hear the word manger, we think stable or barn, but that would not have been true of ancient Middle Eastern cultures. Although the rich may have had separate "storehouses" for grain and possibly animals, the average Palestinian housed their animals in their homes, that often had only two rooms—a room for guests, and a room for the family that often included the family's livestock. The main family room is where the family cooked, ate, slept, and lived. Closest to the door, often a few feet lower than the rest of the family room, the animals would be sheltered at night, protecting the animals from theft and the elements, and providing warmth for the family. Mangers were often dug right into the floor of the family room for cows. While sheep may have used a wooden manger or trough.⁵ Bailey provides scriptural and anthropological evidence supporting this understanding of Jesus' birthplace as a two-room house, with one family room and a second floor, or back "guest room."

Bailey goes on to explain that the Greek word translated into English as "inn" was *katalyma*, which actually has three meanings: house, guest room or inn. Bailey asserts that *katalyma* has been mistranslated into English, and that *pandocheion*, mentioned in the story of the Good Samaritan, translated as a commercial inn, would have been a much better word choice had the author actually been describing a hotel or inn. In this case, *katalyma* more accurately depicts a guest room that is a part of a private house. It is likely that Joseph went to the house of one of his family friends, and that family was already housing guests in their guest room, so they opened their family room for Mary and Joseph to stay with them. Bailey explains that the men would have naturally vacated the space, and a midwife and other women would have come in to assist Mary with the birth. After the birth, Jesus was wrapped in a blanket, and laid in the manger filled with straw, in the family room.⁶

In Luke 2:8-14, the shepherds are the first to hear the message of Jesus' birth. Shepherds were considered near the bottom of the social strata and would have been

⁴ Bailey, Page 27

⁵ Bailey, Pages 28-32

⁶ Bailey, Page 33

intimidated to visit the “King of kings” for fear they would have been shunned as unclean. The fact that Jesus was born and residing in a common two-room house with locals from Bethlehem was a sign that they would be accepted.⁷

Our Western imagination of Mary and Joseph being cast off to give birth alone in a barn distracts us from the greater significance of Jesus’ birth story—that Jesus was born amongst humble people in humble circumstances. Jesus was not set apart and alone at birth, but “took on skin and dwelt amongst us” (John 1:8). Bailey puts it beautifully. “The shepherds left the holy family while praising God for the birth of the Messiah and for the quality of the hospitality in the home in which he was born. This is the capstone of the story of the shepherd. The child was born for the likes of the shepherds—the poor, the lowly, the rejected. He also came for the rich and the wise who later appear with gold, frankincense and myrrh (p. 36).”

Respond

How does understanding this ancient Middle Eastern context change your views of Jesus and his birth? What images now stand out to you that you didn’t see before? Although it might feel painful to re-write the Christmas plays you grew up with, how might this Middle Eastern understanding of Luke 2 enrich your understanding of Christ?

Are there, perhaps, other biblical stories that you have misunderstood due to your own cultural biases? How might you look through the eyes of other cultures to get a fuller understanding of scripture?

Rest

Jesus, born in a peasant home and sheltered by common people. Knowing that you were born in a common home of meager means, helps me discard any shame I may have for what I lack, and helps me refocus on what I have and can give to others. Jesus, knowing that your first guests were poor shepherds, challenges me to remember that your Good News has always been for the poor, vulnerable and rejected first and foremost. During this season of Christmas, I pray that I would be hospitable to those who need a place to rest and that my words and actions would be Good News to the poor. Amen.

⁷ Bailey, Page 35

About the Author



Julia Styles is a mother, wife, spiritual director and intercultural leadership consultant, living in Atlanta, Georgia. She has a Masters in Christian Ministry from North Park Theological Seminary and a Masters in International Public Affairs from the University of Wisconsin. She is passionate about supporting women in ministry, and improving the cultural competency of the North American church.

A Reflection for Christmas Day

By Rev. Mary Peterson

Lectionary reading for 12/25/2021: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, 5-12; John 1:1-14

Selected passage for reflection: John 1:1-14

Read

John 1:1-14, The Message

The Word was first,
the Word present to God,
God present to the Word.
The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.

Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing!—
came into being without him.
What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.

There once was a man, his name John,
sent by God to point out the way to the
Life-Light. He came to show everyone
where to look, who to believe in. John
was not himself the Light; he was there to
show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing:
Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.

He was in the world,
the world was there through him,
and yet the world didn't even notice.
He came to his own people,
but they didn't want him.
But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,
He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.
These are the God-begotten,
not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

Reflect

In the beginning. John begins his version of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, with a reminder of God's intention for humanity at the dawn of creation. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the land and the sea, the plants and trees, the animals that crawl and the birds that fly. God looked at each of the creations and blessed them. It was good. Then God created the first humans in the image of God, and it was very good. God's plan from the beginning was to be with the people.

In the beginning was the Word. John writes out for us how the Word was present at creation and how, at Christmas, we remember that the "Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." Your neighborhood. My neighborhood. The incarnation is in the neighborhood. How often do we walk through our neighborhoods and miss the presence of Christ? John tells us that we often overlook the presence of Christ in our lives. We fail to notice the light.

Ruth Haley Barton says that we are "starved for quiet, to hear the sound of sheer silence that is the presence of God himself." When Jesus moved into the neighborhood, it was a normal night. Most people didn't even notice that anything had changed. They went on with their busy day- folding laundry, reading to children, wrapping up work emails. It took a host of angels appearing to the shepherds for them to notice that the Savior had come. The Magi had to follow a wild star for years just to see Jesus. When the Word came to dwell among us, most people missed his arrival. The activity of daily life obscured the presence of God.

Christmas is often clouded by long lists, never-ending Mariah Carey remixes, and unrealistic expectations. The arrival of Jesus is too easy to overlook. We have to be intentional about making space for us to notice the presence of Christ in our lives, and we have to continue to do this well past the Christmas season. God is longing for us to experience the "very good" plan he had at creation- the plan to be with us. Imagine that Mariah is God singing over us, as if God is saying, "All I want for Christmas is... you."

Respond

In the midst of whatever you have planned for Christmas Day, take some time to give thanks for creation, for the revelation of God through all of the created world. Go for a walk in silence. Listen to the busy silence of the world around you. What do you notice about your neighborhood? Where do you see Christ's presence today? What is the still, small voice of God saying to you?

Rest

God of light, the Word made flesh, may we pause to be still, to breathe and to notice your presence in our midst on this Christmas Day and every day to come.



About the Author

Mary Peterson is an ordained Covenant pastor serving at First Covenant Church of Omaha, Nebraska, where she lives with her husband, Eric and their two kids, Luke and Kate. Mary loves coffee, books, Jesus and the beach.

A Reflection for the first Sunday after Christmas

Sunday December 26

By Rev. Oreon Trickey

Lectionary reading for 12/26/2021: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Selected passage for reflection: Colossians 3:12-17

Read

Colossians 3:12-17 NRSV

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. **13** Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. **14** Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. **15** And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. **16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. **17** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Reflect

December 26, the day after Christmas. The gifts have been given. The feast has been consumed. The mechanics of the holiday have been fulfilled. This is the day that for many includes as much stress as it does joy. Families and friends who are getting on our very last nerve. Awkward scenarios and conflictual conversations. Not at all what Norman Rockwell had in mind. Yet here we are. Jesus has been born, the angels have rejoiced, God has smiled on us and still we feel a little empty, a little lonely, a little lethargic. It is into this very state of being that Christ desires to come and clothe us in His love, His peace, His joy.

I like to think of the "clothing yourself" that Paul speaks of in Colossians like this: putting on my favorite insanely soft fleece hoodie. Letting Christ's presence enfold me in the most gentle nurturing way. Snuggling into His love, letting Jesus surround me, dwell in me, where I am and how I am at this very moment. Receiving all that he wants to give me. Basically calming down, slowing my breathing, and letting Jesus love me.

The texture of Christ's love is indeed snuggly fleece--comforting, so much so that I may find that, in spite of all that is swirling around me on this day after Christmas, I am able to have a little more patience, wisdom, even forgiveness. Which just may result, as the Scripture says, in a song of praise arising in my heart, thanking God for the gift of Jesus.

Respond

Sometime today, put on your snuggly, comfy clothing, light a candle, and sit quietly with Jesus. Breathe out your anxiety, fear, or whatever is intruding upon your soul right now. Breathe in the gentle love of Jesus. Know that He is with you, enveloping you like the best fleece hoodie ever.

Rest

Jesus Christ, God sent from above to live with me and in me, help me to lean into your comforting presence, and to know that you dwell with me and in me, even through these winter holiday seasons. Amen.



About the Author

A long-time resident of Chicago, Oreon is a seasoned urban ministry practitioner, spiritual director, retreat facilitator, and Enneagram consultant. She currently lives and serves with the Jesus People community in the city's Uptown neighborhood. Oreon plays a mean blues guitar, loves to laugh deeply, and appreciates a serious cup of coffee. @oreont

A Reflection for the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

Friday, December 31

By Sarrah Lynne Havens

Lectionary reading for 12/31/2021: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 2:15-21

Read

Luke 2:15-21 New Revised Standard Version

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflect

Mary was in for it. By welcoming Jesus into her body, she had already said "yes" to incredible vulnerability, and the coming heartache of his death would break her. "But Mary treasured... and pondered." Mary heard the shepherds' words and soaked them in. To treasure and ponder--what an exquisite posture for anyone to take at any time, but especially here for Mary, living in such an epic rush of happenings. The Greek word used here for "treasure" is συντηρεῖ (sunetērei) and means *to keep close, i.e. preserve*. I imagine Mary pressing her hand to her chest, kindling the inner knowing of miracle, lest the cold of the night and the fear of what lay ahead snuff it out. She is the consummate contemplative; treasuring is her lifeline.

One of the anti-traffickers I host in spiritual direction, *Kya, lives near a refugee camp where women from all over the Middle East often fall victim to sex trafficking. She offers them stability and a way out. Of course she sees some of the most brutal things human beings do to one another. Last week when we met, she said to me, "You know, there are so many things wrong with the world, but there are so many things that are right."

Wondering if it might be nourishing to reflect on the latter, I asked her to tell me more about those things that are right. Kya goes to the ocean every week and sits in a sanctuary of water and trees and fresh air. She soaks in the "rightness" that the earth offers her there. She is treasuring, keeping close, preserving the beauty and miracle of God in the midst of all she sees wrong in the world everyday. Treasuring is her lifeline.

**I share this story with Kya's permission and have changed her name.*

Respond

Take a few deep breaths. When you feel grounded and present, allow something wrong in your world, something painful in your life to come forward. This may take some time or come right away. As this is the last day of 2021, so many things may rush to the surface for you from this year, or maybe just something from this day is more than enough to try to hold. Whatever presents, when it has come into view, imagine placing it in your non-dominant hand. Consider holding that hand out on your lap or on your altar or table, and imagine the pain sits right there in your palm. You don't have to do anything with the pain, just allow it to be there.

In your dominant hand, imagine placing something beautiful from this day or the past week--something that struck you as Peace, Life, God's Presence. Maybe it was a gust of warm air or the sound of a neighbor laughing. Maybe it was flying down the last big hill on your long bike ride, your hands in the air, free from the handlebars (I have always wanted to be able to do this!). Let something emerge that struck you, that shimmered of Emmanuel, God with you. Hold it in your hand for a few minutes and allow yourself the pleasure of enjoying and savoring that memory or sound or smell. Treasure and keep close this encounter with the Divine. Ponder how it might be a lifeline for you to God's goodness and beauty in the midst of the pain you experience that sits in your other hand.

Perhaps close your time by bringing your non-dominant hand to rest in the hand that holds God's goodness. What do you notice in your body and your spirit as you do this? Or bring both hands together, with fingers interlocking, allowing your treasuring and contemplation of God's presence to inform the pain you hold in your other hand.

Rest

On a slow inhale, pray silently: *Emmanuel, God with me.*

Exhaling slowly, pray silently: *Emmanuel, God with me.*

And on the next slow inhale: *Emmanuel, God with me.*

And the next exhale: *Emmanuel, God with me.*

Repeat as long as you like. *Amen.*

About the Author



Sarrah Lynne Havens lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, Michael, and their children; she is an artist and spiritual director. Sarrah Lynne has a BA in studio art, a certificate in spiritual direction from North Park University, and a certificate in Dream Tending from Dr. Stephen Aizenstat at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She directs the non-profit Furthering (www.furthering.org), where anti-traffickers from the US and abroad are served in spiritual direction, and she hosts people outside of anti-trafficking efforts in spiritual direction in a practice she calls "Spiritual Midwifery." Sarrah Lynne loves the

agenda-less, open hand of spiritual direction and the belief that God is at work in every person, in every story. She never gets tired of making way for anyone to have eyes to see and ears to hear how that is just so. You can find more about her work in spiritual midwifery here: <http://www.slhavens.org>

A Reflection for New Year's Day

Saturday, January 1

By Helen Cepero

Lectionary reading for 1/1/2022: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

Selected passage for reflection:

Read

Psalm 8:1, 3:-6 NRSV

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet...

Matthew 25:40, 44-45 NRSV

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.... Then they will also answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

Reflect

It was a move in 2009 to Anchorage, Alaska that made me consider creation in a way that I never had before. When I looked up at the sky—at the heavens there—I saw the face of God—the Big, Wide, Open. It was not just the Northern Lights, spectacular as they are, but nature was larger and nearer than I ever experienced before. I sometimes felt as if I was waking up to a landscape that stunned me with uncommon, even eerie beauty. It slowed me down; it made me stop; it led me into awe. I found myself led into another way of understanding and seeing that felt like waking up, even though I was already awake. Living in Alaska gave me back that expanding sense of wonder that is both childlike and the wisdom of true experience.

It was this sort of experience that led Dr. Katherine Hayhoe into a career as a scientist. She began as an astronomer, alive with childhood experience of the heavens. She remembers her father carrying her as a three-year-old, long after her bedtime, to point out the constellations in the night sky. Her father, a scientist himself, told her that these wonders are all the work of God's hands.

Even as a child, Katherine wanted to work alongside God, knowing that she had a responsibility in caring for this gift of life. But what led her to become an atmospheric scientist and the Chief Scientist for the Nature Conservancy was not only the inspired awe expressed in Psalm 8. It was the recognition of the responsibilities that were there in her Christian faith to care for the poor and the hungry, the sick and those imprisoned—the very ones who Jesus asks us to see as Christ himself in Matthew 25:31-46.

Dr. Hayhoe realized that climate change is affecting all the poorest and least developed areas of the world most tragically. She saw environmental suffering that ruined crops and starvation and she saw the face of Jesus. For her the church is missing this direct link between the awe expressed in Psalm 8 and the urgency, even judgment, that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 25:31-46. Part of her calling is to help her fellow Christians see the suffering of Jesus in the devastation caused by climate change. This too is a kind of waking up to what was true and real even while we are all fully awake. It is the transcendent awareness.

Will 2021 be the year when we will return to who we are—those who are meant to care for all of life, and to listen to the cries of God's earth and its people? Hope begins with the psalmist's insistence that as human beings we have the world at our feet. Can we as God's people connect the beauty of Psalm 8 to the practical responsibilities of Matthew 25:31-46. If we cannot, God will not intervene, and judgement will be realized by us all.

Respond

Each year we make resolutions to increase our health through exercise or weight loss or better eating habits. This year enjoy the beauty of creation AND see the suffering that is experienced globally. Resolve to increase the health of the planet through your choices.

Rest

Creator God, as we look to the heavens may we see the gift of the world around us and name it as your holy Presence. Amen.



About the Author

Helen Cepero is a wife, mother and grandmother (Oma) to three lively grandsons. And though she's been a spiritual director for nearly twenty-five years, she is still energized by the way the Spirit works through all of life's experiences of the people she companions. She continues to practice spiritual direction and supervision from her home in Berkeley, CA. She is the author of *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing* and *Christ-Shaped Character: Choosing Love, Faith and Hope* both published by InterVarsity Press.

A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Christmas

Sunday, January 2

By Meghan Bruggeman

Lectionary reading for 1/2/2022: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-9, 10-18

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 1:3-14

Read

Ephesians 1:3-14 NIV

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”

Reflect

There are a lot of things about God that are mysterious. I mean just look at all the things we have read over this season of Advent: a baby Messiah born to a teenage girl from the town of Nazareth, Angels appearing to people giving holy and divine messages, A murderous king seeking to end the lineage of anyone who may be a threat to his throne, and Magi following a star that may or may not lead them to the proper and true King (who’s kingdom is not of this world alone, but of the heavenly realms).

There are things we will never be able to fully comprehend on this side of eternity. Even now you may be wondering what lies ahead for this new year: jobs may change, family dynamics will ebb and flow, sickness may occur, challenges may be overcome, life moves on- there is a lot of unknown.

But here, Paul, the writer of Ephesians, makes it known that God wanted his good will and plan to be abundantly clear to us. In v.8-10, he says “with all wisdom and understanding, he [God] made known to us the mystery of his will... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ”. The mystery of God's plan of salvation for humanity, that was once hidden, has been revealed in Jesus. Jesus, fully God and fully man, has been seen, touched, and heard. All creation and humanity has forever been changed.

Notice what words Paul uses to explain how this impacts us. God “chose us”, “predestined us for adoption” as children, gave us “redemption” through Jesus’ blood, and “forgiveness of sins”. Finally, Paul states, “when you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”. As you journey into the unknowns of this new year, what if you held onto the things that can be known? What if we walked into 2022 truly knowing and embodying the fulfillment of God’s plan in our lives?

Respond

Each morning upon waking, before your feet even leave the bed, speak aloud (or think to yourself) in prayer one of these truth statements to remind yourself who you are and whose you are.

*I am chosen by God
I am loved by God
I am a child of God
I am redeemed
I am forgiven
The Holy Spirit is with me*

Rest

Thank you God for your loving and compassionate character. You know us completely, Lord, and we are forever yours. Lead us in the fulfillment of your good plan that we may become more like Christ every day for the purposes of your kingdom. Amen.



About the Author

Meghan Bruggeman serves as the Associate Pastor of Spiritual Formation at Renew Covenant Church in Carroll, IA. Meghan is a mom to Micah and a wife to Danny. She is passionate about connecting people to God through transformative prayer practices and discipleship through her church, Spiritual Direction, and chaplaincy. She loves coffee, sabbath days with her family, watching movies, and laughing!

A Reflection for Epiphany (Three Kings Day)

Thursday, January 6

By Jillian Evans

Lectionary reading for 1/6/2022: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Selected passage for reflection: Matthew 2:1-12

Read

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Reflect

In this passage of scripture, the Magi are ordered by King Herod to find the Christ child. They followed the star to Bethlehem where the baby Jesus was found. Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the descendant of David and Abraham. The prophets told of his birth centuries before it ever happened, so can you imagine how excited the wise men were to finally meet the Savior? The scripture tells us they were overjoyed! The prophecy had been fulfilled.

Christ was born, the wise men arrived and gave their gifts and now what? They have waited their whole lives for this moment so now what? King Herod told them to report back to him, but verse 12 tells us that God warned them not to, so now what?

Have you ever been at a point in your Christian walk where you've been praying about something and your prayers have been answered? *Now what?* Things are great or maybe they aren't. Maybe the very thing you've been longing after, you've received but you don't know what to do next. *Now what?* Possibly you are just at a crossroads and waiting to hear God's voice. You're ready to move but don't know which way to turn- *now what?*

Remain faithful. Continue cultivating your relationship with the Divine. It may not be the season for the next big project. After creating the universe, even God rested. It could be your season for rest. It is often during these respite periods of life that God is calling us closer to Him. There are no more distractions getting in the way of your devotional time or prayer life. The only way that we know for sure what God has for us is to keep that line of communication open. So if you find yourself wondering, "Now what?", turn to your spiritual practices and commune with the Holy Spirit. He will meet you in these times and make everything clear.

Respond

If you have not already, set aside regular time for communing with the Holy Spirit. Some spiritual practices you may try are journaling, lectio divina, doing a daily *examen*, or seeing a spiritual director.

Rest

O Holy One! Thank you God for ordering my steps. Forgive me for getting ahead of Your plans. God I know that You are not the author of confusion so please help me to know when to stop and listen for your direction. Help me to know that waiting is not wasted time. Your ways are perfect Lord. May trusting You be my strength. Thank you for offering gentle grace. Amen

About the Author

Jillian Evans resides in Chicago, Illinois with her husband and three children. She is passionate about ministering to children, youth and their families. Jillian holds degrees from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and North Park Theological Seminary as well as a certificate in Spiritual Direction from C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction at NPTS.



Acknowledgements

Thank you for participating in this year's advent reflections.

Prayerful Reflections: An Advent and Christmas Devotional for 2021 is a publication of www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com. If you have enjoyed this devotional, please sign up for my newsletter at the website listed above in order to hear about future publications and opportunities for spiritual formation and direction.

I am filled with gratitude for every woman who wrote a reflection for this advent devotional. Your wisdom, insights and generosity make this tool for reflection the blessing that it is.

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