



## **Advent Reflections 2020**

***Daily Readings for the season of Advent,  
written by members and friends of Hope Church***

*Cover Art by Kyle Vohlken*

Advent 2020

Friends in Christ,

We have become more accustomed to life on hold than we would ever have thought possible and have learned more about ourselves and our faith in the process.

As Advent approaches, we offer a revised Hope Church daily devotional from 2017. Some entries are new; others from congregants whose voices linger after they have died; all are worth reading.

May the peace of Christ encourage you through these reflections.

*~The Hope Church Worship Ministry*

**Daily Bible Readings  
From Year B  
Revised Common Lectionary**

The First Week in Advent

November 30	Isaiah 64:1-9
December 1	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
December 2	Mark 13:24-37
December 3	Isaiah 40:1-11
December 4	Psalm 85:1-2
December 5	Psalm 85:8-13

The Second Week in Advent

December 7	2 Peter 3:8-13
December 8	2 Peter 3:14-15
December 9	Mark 1:1-8
December 10	Isaiah 61:1-4
December 11	Isaiah 61:8-11
December 12	Psalm 126

The Third Week in Advent

December 14	Luke 1:46-55
December 15	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
December 16	John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 17	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
December 18	Psalm 89:1-4
December 19	Psalm 89:19-26

The Fourth Week in Advent

December 21	Romans 16:25-27
December 22	Luke 1:26-35
December 23	Luke 1:36-38
Christmas Eve	Psalm 96
Christmas Day	

**Monday, November 30, 2020**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9**

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!* (Isaiah 64:1-2)

As I write this at the end of October 2020, I'm stunned by how timely this passage feels. I can remember hearing this in my 20's and being a bit baffled by the feelings that must have been behind the plea. Today, I am shocked by how relevant this despair sounds to my ears, and how it speaks so clearly to the voices I hear all around me, from friends, family, my community, and the world.

When we think about the upcoming (as I write this) election -- *O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*

Looking at the effects thus far of the pandemic and imagining what is yet to come -- *Now consider, we are your people.*

Considering the racial injustice, disparity, unrest in our country right now, the wrongs not yet righted, the vast differences in perception of what is at stake -- *That the nations might tremble at your presence!*

The present crisis of climate change, a problem so vast as to feel overwhelming, and yet already in tangible ways affecting the most vulnerable of our global community -- *So that the mountains would quake at your presence...*

And what about so many of us, whose already shaky mental health has been pushed even further by the many strains and stressors of COVID-19 on physical and emotional well-being -- *You have hidden your face from us.*

What I am struck even more by, as I ponder these verses in light of the world we find ourselves in today - is how I can picture just about anyone with the audacity to still call on God in times like ours, reaching out with this same cry. From those full of more doubt than faith, more questions than answers, to those who feel quite certain that God is listening and responding - and from every side of the political and religious spectrum, aren't we all crying out right now - *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!* You have hidden your face from us. Why are these things happening? How can we change others/ change ourselves/ change our world?

I've been learning more about compassion the last year – how I need to have compassion on myself, to be able to have it on others, and how it's all related. The more I realize that we are all suffering, the more I can understand and have grace on my own suffering. And the less I run from my own suffering, the more I can be present with others' suffering. I don't have many answers for the questions of if or when God will tear open the heavens and come straighten us all out, or if that would even be a good thing. What I do hear in this plea is a recognition of every single person's suffering, and our realization of powerlessness to change so many parts of the world around us, and sometimes even those parts inside of us. But at the end of this passage of despair, we're left with this thought – “we are the work of your hand – we are all your people.”

What if each time we read a letter to the editor in the Sentinel that made our blood boil, we repeated- We are the work of your hand. We are all your people. What if each time we saw a lawn sign or heard a news report that made us CRAZY, we took a deep breath and repeated, We are the work of your hand. We are all your people. I am, and you are, and we are, and they are. What could change?

*-Rhonda Edgington*

**Tuesday, December 1, 2020**  
**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

We have a new level of understanding--and feelings about-- concepts like “remote” and “in-person.” After a number of weeks of working remotely, I returned to the hospital to work in person. I encountered many nurses, physicians, technicians spontaneously offering welcome statements of “glad to have you back in person!”

Seeing the faces of those whom we love, work with, and share life with is vital to our social constitution and to our identities. One of the themes this past year has been a desire for normal gatherings. “Normal” means sharing food and space, hugs and high-fives, facial expressions and laughter. Wearing masks, being careful about going outside, and being physically distant stifles our sense of community and care. This is so painful and awful, especially for those who are doubly isolated because of technology or ability. It is as if our masks and distancing have changed our behaviors and changed us.

The pain of the self-induced estrangement for the people of God in Psalm 80 compels them to cry out for help. The reality that they can and do cry out to God is itself a sign of hope, in spite of their pathetic state (“tears to drink in full measure; the scorn of their enemies.”) The indicators of hope are that they realize their estrangement, their contrition, and their need for help. Psalm 80 expresses an ardent desire for restoration with God when it says three times, “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Yearning for God’s face, and for God’s face to shine (representing blessing), describe every person of faith’s desire for the divine. Our spirituality is not about what we can do for ourselves, but connecting with the Creator, the Spirit, the Holy One. We seek God’s face, we want restoration with God, and long to be involved in the work of God with God. We also know there’s a distance between us, such that seeking God’s face may be the best way to describe our ability to bridge that gap in the mean time.

When someone offers the Aaronic benediction, “May God bless you, and keep you; may God’s face shine on you and be gracious to you, and give you peace,” we look at the one offering the blessing because their face, their message, serves as the conduit for God’s blessing. The blessing one “stands in the gap,” to bridge the divide.

We feel the heartbreak of that divide every day, but particularly in Advent. The hymn, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” touches the wound by attesting to the “already, not yet” nature of Christ’s presence with us. We long for normal, which we know has changed forever. We long for restoration of our social fabric and for our souls. We long to see each others’ faces for the pure enjoyment of shared contact. We long for God’s face to bless us, and to engage in love and glory, because seeing God’s face reveals God’s very self as the source of love and life and peace.

With the psalmist, we ask God to restore our souls. What does restoration look like for your spirit? Remember Psalm 23 which also says, “God restores my soul.” When people know us, and affirm our presence—virtual or not—we restore our connections. Perhaps our smiling upon each other bestows a blessed recognition of God’s shining face in the spaces between us.

*~Cindi Veldheer DeYoung*

**Wednesday, December 2, 2020**

**Mark 13:24-37**

*“Watch”*

Little did I know that what Mom modeled for me—taught me—would find its echo in Jesus’ urgent, loving appeal to every one of his disciples. Including each one of us.

I was six, maybe seven. And I was feeling quaking remorse, bordering on fear. I had been playing solo in our living room, making small paper airplanes and giving them flight. One of them, however, banked right rather than left. In doing so it veered straight towards the mantle over the fireplace, striking dead-on the dainty, handcrafted wooden angel placed there by my beloved mother. The little angel, not more than four or five inches tall, was doubly winged—until being knocked off the mantle by my errant airplane. To my horror, when the figurine struck the fireplace brickwork below, both wings snapped off of their angelic host, sadly leaving three wooden pieces where a moment earlier there was only one.

Mom must have heard the small crash from the next room over. She called out, “Bobby, are you okay?” Shattered even more than the angel, I ran to the stairs and straight up to my bedroom, shutting the door and hoping somehow that my role in the disaster might be missed.

That’s when what *really* mattered unfolded.

Hearing Mom walk up the stairs, I retreated to my twin bed, sitting with my legs dangling, my head downcast, and my spirit broken. My mother knocked gently on the door. “Bobby, may I come in?” I must have mumbled—or whimpered—“I guess.”

In she walked. I could see only her shoes, given my head’s bowed condition. The shame I felt was beyond measure. The anxiety about what was now likely to befall me was immobilizing. I glanced just a bit upward, enough only to see the three angel pieces in Mom’s left hand.

And then I saw it, and then felt it: her right hand. It—she—lifted my chin gently, slowly. To the point where I could look her in the eye. My vision in doing so was blurry, given the tears welling up in my eyes. But in spite of that blur, I saw it. Or more to the point, I saw her. Mom’s eyes were tearing up, but her expression was one of compassion, not anger. She held my chin up, firmly but warmly, so that she could look me in the eye, and I in hers. And she said, “It’s okay, Bobby. It’s okay.” And then she smiled, ever so slightly. “We can fix her.”

I remember, as if it were yesterday, that when she pulled her hand back from my chin, my chin remained up. As did my gaze, into her loving, forgiving, gracious eyes.

That’s when I knew. That’s *how* I knew. That’s the moment when maternal love transformed me, as it did countless times over the years—erasing shame and anxiety, and replacing them with grace and peace.

Mom enabled me to see. To watch. She modeled for me—taught me—the reality of Jesus’ urgent, loving appeal to every one of his disciples, including you and me. In Mark 13:32ff, our Advent Lord urgently calls all of his disciples to be “on the watch,” to “keep awake.” In doing so, he is taking us by our chins, gently lifting our gazes upward, and enabling us to behold his restorative, redeeming, even maternal love.

“Watch,” he says. “Awaken to my divine love. Open your eyes, and your hearts, and behold the reality of that love’s Coming again.”

*-Bob Luidens*

**Thursday, December 3, 2020**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11**

“We have you. You’re going to be alright.” Words, calmly spoken as I was tucked into the ambulance.

“Comfort, O comfort my people” says your God. Words spoken after suffering war and now exile.

Broken, discouraged, depressed, afraid. God, our parent, opened his heart to hold close to him those who loved him.

“I have you.”

I hear you, Lord.

“I am coming. Prepare the way for me.”

How?

“Do you believe in me? Trust me? What’s standing between you and me?”

I don’t know. I don’t have time to think about it.

“Make time. You need to get ready for me.”

“I will lead you like a Shepherd. Trust me. I have you. You’ll be alright.”

***Prayer:***

Lord, I’m alone. I have feelings that aren’t good for me or others.

Let me hear you.

Draw me near.

Comfort me.

Are you coming? Help me get ready for your coming.

Be my Shepherd.

*-Moira Poppen Gargano*



**Friday, December 4, 2020**  
**Psalm 85:1-2**

Do you feel as I do watching the nightly news? That the world is coming apart at the seams? From the top down, people engage in name-calling. Those in authority spend more time arguing about who's right instead of compromising to achieve shared goals. Stories of police brutality share space with those of sexual harassment.

Will there ever be progress? Will people ever treat each other with respect? Where is God in all this?

Does that tiny voice in the back of your mind find fault with everything you do or do not do? You shouldn't have eaten those cookies or cake or that candy bar? You should have helped your child with homework or read a bedtime story? You wish you could take back those harsh words you had for your spouse before you left for work? You shouldn't have bought that or spent that? You didn't... You should have... You could have...

Those nagging feelings can motivate or paralyze.

If we ever needed a reminder of God's restorative powers, it's now. It's in these times of chaos and uncertainty we need today's scripture with its song of God's steadfastness and forgiveness. From the time that this Psalm was written to today, the people of God have cried out and God has heard and answered. God bestows this renewal and forgiveness not once, but continually. God's faithfulness lasts forever.

This snippet from the Psalms reminds us that God returns to us that which was ours but is gone or missing. That feeling that the equilibrium of the world is off, God sets right. Before we were, God is. God has forgiven us. To use a colloquialism, God has us covered. Not just us as people of Hope or of Holland. Not us who are white or protestant or who are Americans or who speak English or are Christians. But **US**, everyone—people of every race and color, every size and of every faith or belief, from every corner of the world. God restores our fortunes and covers our sins.

***Prayer:***

Dear God, thank you for your steadfast care of me, for showing me your unfailing love and granting me salvation. I rejoice in knowing that you offer hope and forgiveness in the midst of this tumultuous world. God the LORD promises peace to God's people and God's glory will dwell in our land. (Ps 85:7). Replace my inner mantra of could have and should have with words of praise for you—words like glory, rejoice, peace. Amen.

*-Kristine Bradfield*

**Saturday, December 5, 2020**  
**Psalm 85:8-13**

As I took up my computer to write this devotional, NPR was broadcasting a story concerning the damaging effects of pornography on marriages and relationships. The Apostle Paul gives an antidote for the negative and destructive poison coming from culture. He instructs, “Whatsoever is true, honest, just, pure, lovely . . . think on these things.”

All fine and dandy, but where does one go to find such things. Today’s scriptural Advent passage is a great place to start. Just as John Lennon challenged us to Imagine a better world, so also the psalmist of this passage coaxes our thinking away from the world that is, and towards the world that could be.

Read the passage if you haven’t yet; then let’s look together at just one provocative phrase: “righteousness and love will kiss each other.”

Have you noticed that one can determine a person’s political leaning and world view by the bumper stickers on their car? While we all support our troops, a “Support our Troops” sticker likely shows a conservative bent. Similarly, who is against peace, but a “Peace” bumper sticker identifies a liberal. Somehow we have isolated ourselves into camps where we appreciate and embrace only certain virtues and ignore others.

The psalmist had no such hang-up. “Righteousness”, a tough and favorite word of conservatives, and “love”, a soft and fuzzy notion of liberals not only can coexist, they “kiss each other.” How cool is that.

Not only will a lion lie down with a lamb in the world we hope for, so also the world we are waiting for – longing for – is one in which those on both ends of political and philosophical persuasions will acknowledge and appreciate each other’s values. Righteousness and love will not be at odds – each demanding exclusive devotion. Instead of “either-or” we will recognize the possibility of “both-and.”

Advent opens us to the possibility of a new world involving a revolution in our thinking. Let’s follow the lead of the psalmist in imagining a world in which we do not – indeed, cannot - choose between righteousness and love, because these two virtues cannot be separated. They are locked in a tight embrace with no distance between them – they are kissing each other.

***Prayer:***

Thank you for reminding us through the psalmist that love and righteousness are not adversaries but allies in creating the world we long and hope for. Break down the thought-barriers that we have constructed so that, like the psalmist, we can imagine a world where love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace spring up from the ground and look down from the sky – totally wrapping us in their full embrace.

*- Tim Pennings*

**Monday, December 7, 2020**  
**II Peter 3:8-13**

Isn't it remarkable? God does not want one person to be destroyed. He is patient even when I ignore Him, put all manner of things before Him and behave as though I have all the answers. My Heavenly Father may shake His head and sigh but He still doesn't want to destroy me. Instead, He longs for my repentance, my meagre attempts at holiness and godliness. He is patient and willing to wait for each and every person to repent, just as He waited for Saul and Peter to turn around. When they did, He blessed them, fed them and loved them so that they would do the same for others like Aeneas, Dorcas, Sergius Paulus, Lydia and the unnamed jailer. One person at a time. As Courtney Martin has said, "Our charge is not to save the world after all. It is to live in it flawed and fierce; loving and humble." We must never give up on anyone, including ourselves. Patience. As we wait in the Advent season for the joyous celebration of Jesus Christ's birth, let's also look forward to a world filled with God's righteousness. And then let's roll up our sleeves and do our part in service to hurry it along. With patience. One righteous act at a time.

***Prayer:***

Patient God, help me not to let my life slip away from me. In this season of short days and long nights, of gray and white and cold, teach me the lesson of waiting. Waiting in silence now, Lord, and expectant. That I may receive the gift I need, so I may become the gift others need.

*-Lori VanDoornik*

**Tuesday, December 8, 2020**  
**2 Peter 3:14-15**

I meditated on these verses on October 11, having read that day's leading story in the *New York Times*, "Wildfires Burn Out of Control Across Northern California," while remembering recent earthquakes in Mexico and devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean, Texas, and Florida. These earthly turbulences were accompanied by political loose cannons destabilizing our ship of state. I was reminded of some lines from William B. Yeats's "The Second Coming:"

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Yeats ends his poem with a haunting question:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

I eagerly returned to Scripture to read today's passage, which follows immediately after "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." (2 Peter 3:13) Yes, we wait because God's day is like a thousand years to us. But while we wait for our ultimate salvation when we will be at home in the Lord, we have time to work for peace and purity in our temporary shelters.

***Prayer:***

Almighty Creator, Destroyer, and Restorer, as we wait for the promised new heavens and a new earth, "grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the living of these days." (Quotation from Harry Emerson Fosdick's hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory")

*-Judy Parr*

**Wednesday, December 9, 2020**  
**Mark 1:1-8**

“It is the month of December, and yet the city is at this very moment in a sweat. License is given to the general merrymaking. Everything resounds with nightly preparations - as if the Saturnalia differed at all from a usual business day. So true it is that the difference is nil, that I regard the remark of the man who said: ‘Once December was a month, now it is a year.’” Seneca around 65 AD.

I laughed out loud when I read this. Not much has changed in 1,952 years. I wonder if Seneca wrote this after visiting a Hobby Lobby in September?

The Christmas season usually has me involved in expending tremendous amounts of energy, time and resources in the task of preparation. I also in the past have taken, as an Advent warning, Donkey’s lament from TV’s Shrek’s Christmas, “Momma always says it ain’t Christmas until somebody cries. Usually that somebody is me.”

Mark’s gospel starts with a simple, “The good news about Jesus...”. This is proclaimed by John the Baptist, a man living simply in dress, food and location. His simplicity becomes a path for me to straighten the roads of my heart.

How will my life be in this Advent/Christmas season? Will the thoughts about all I have to get done fill me with dread or joyous anticipation?

***Prayer:***

My Dearest One, Help me remember that sometimes all I can control is how I think about things. Let me think simple. All I need is the Good News about Jesus. Please and amen.

*-Jackie Knoll*

**Thursday, December 10, 2020**

**Isaiah 61:1-4**

*Call to Action*

Could this passage, Isaiah 61 verses 1 to 4  
Be speaking to us today?  
Is it asking us to seek out the poor  
And share what the Bible has to say?

Is it challenging us to care for the brokenhearted  
And visit prisoners in our jails  
To seek justice for the innocent  
And find opportunities for those who fail?

Should we proclaim the Year of Jubilee  
And forgive those who owe us debts  
Or shed a tear for Native Americans  
Whose homeland is still ours yet?

Can we replace so much sadness  
With a hope that shines so bright  
Or hear someone's daily crying  
And try to heal them from their blight?

Would we be willing to plant a seed  
And water and care for it each day?  
Could that seed become a giant oak  
If we sought God's nourishment when we pray?

Is this passage a call to care for the earth  
To protect its air, water and life  
To make us understand what we and what God can do  
To lessen all the strife?

So much can be gleaned as we read these verses  
Of Isaiah 61:1 to 4  
But I think what they are saying to us  
Is a call to action, to say "Yes, Lord! Yes Lord."

*-Vicki Rumpsa*

**Friday, December 11, 2020**  
**Isaiah 61:8-11**

As a young mother, I spent hours preparing unique birthday cakes for my three children. Every year a few weeks before the big day, I would sit down privately with the birthday child and ask what idea they might have for the cake's shape. With wide eyes and eager voice, I would hear their version of "the perfect cake". Their responses often involved favorite toys or activities, and I remember fondly cakes shaped like rockets, dachshunds, Barbie princesses, and tractors. Never have I forgotten the look of delight on each face when the lit up cake came out.

When I read this passage from Isaiah, I hear that my God, a just and loving God, is promising a long - lasting commitment to his people. In response, the prophet speaks of delight and rejoicing; he describes the gifts that come to him - salvation and righteousness - as resting on him much like a robe or jewels on the bridegroom and bride at a wedding. The overall mood of this scripture reflects a living gift wrapped in trust and unified vision.

In this time of waiting before the birthday of our Savior, I reflect on this passage compared to the fleeting delight that comes in planning for a child's birthday cake. When we plan for a celebration, we think about the elements of the party that will make it memorable. We add festive decorations, tasty dishes, and special cakes. We offer moments to delight and rejoice in community. What similarities can be made in our preparation for a life lived in relationship with a God who delights in us? How much more is the delight in living out a relationship that reflects the truth that our God has formed with us an "everlasting covenant" for all time? It never burns out or is thrown away; the delight can remain forever.

Our lives with God are much more than any birthday party or a wedding ceremony. As the scripture says in verse 9, "we are the people the Lord has blessed." Gifted with a relationship that can propel us into a dark world which needs water and light, we are protected with the love of a God who rejects evil and nurtures goodness. Our festivities never need end; instead, we can look with wide eyes on a relationship that offers delight and joy each and every day.

***Prayer:***

Thank you God, for your desire to live in relationship with us. We rejoice in your commitment to walk alongside us each and every day, and relish the gift of your Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*- Joy Zomer*

**Saturday, December 12, 2020**  
**Psalm 126**

I am so glad that this was the Psalm assigned to me because it is a joyful Psalm.

You, dear reader, may be in the prime of your life. I don't know where you are physically, emotionally, or spiritually, but I have just celebrated my ninety-third birthday, and it would be easy for me to agree with the saying, "Old age is not for sissies." At my age it is tempting to start counting one's losses (loved ones, eyesight, balance, and my singing voice), but regardless of who we are or what age we are, none of us can tell what a day will bring.

Psalm 126 is a song of rejoicing by the Israelites upon their return from being captives in Babylonia. Picturesquely, Psalm 137 tells us that they hung up their harps in the willow trees because they had no song in their hearts. To them their freedom was like a dream. But then their mouths were "filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy." Why? Because, the Psalmist goes on to say, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoice."

Do you have a song in your heart and on your tongue? My voice therapist suggested that I go up and down the musical scale singing "oh, oh, oh" or "ah, ah, ah." I changed the letter to "Ha, ha, ha." Try it. I guarantee that you will end up laughing.

For each of us there is somewhere that creates in us a place of silence. For me that happens most readily in the enjoyment of nature. I love water. Our Psalmist speaks of water being restored in Negeb, bringing joy.

The following is just one verse of Psalm that I was inspired to write one day while living on the West Coast:

"Oh, Lord, How I love this place – the ocean with its many moods; the bluffs rising high above the water, and on these bluffs, the gnarled shapes of pine trees made sturdy by countless sea breezes. And all around, fantastic outcroppings of rock sculpted by an imaginative Hand. Places made for climbing and for viewing the world from a new perspective. I'd like to stay here forever, Lord, but help me see beauty wherever I am."

Each morning at the end of my devotional time, I sing a favorite song, "This is the Day that the Lord has Made, I will rejoice and be glad in it."

***Prayer:***

Our loving father, we have no control over what you have allowed to come our way. Help us in whatever the day brings to lean on your love and understanding, and to bless you for all our benefits. In this Advent season we are reminded that this is possible because you gave your Son to for us. Thank you, thank you, thank you! Amen.

*-Trudy Van Der Haar*



**Monday, December 14, 2020**

**Luke 1:46-55**

*Mary's Song – Our Song*

The song of Mary's heart fountains up with awesomeness at her part in the history of God's Revelation and flows out as the River of Grace and Truth.

We all live downstream of God's Fountainhead in the current and eddies of that River; we are witnesses of the Christ "who tented among us, full of Grace and Truth."

Decades ago in Great Falls, Montana, I had the privileged opportunity of forming an inter-church high school folkhymn group, "The Instruments of Peace." We loved performing "Agape Singers" compositions because of their fresh expression. I share with you one that springs up in me every Christmas since:

Emmanuel

Our God's love has sent you here;  
O Christ, you have come to stay;  
Living through our newborn selves,  
You live and work with us today.  
You came for the world's new dawning  
To a darkened selfish world;  
You brought us the light-  
A bright new ray of being here to stay.  
You came to a starving world,  
You came as the Bread of Life;  
You gave us your flesh  
As a life-giving sign of your presence here to stay.  
You're here in our human world,  
You share your life with all;  
We find in our brotherhood  
The truth that you have come to stay.

What song springs forth for you this advent?

*-Earl Laman*

**Tuesday, December 15, 2020**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

What a happy and joyous passage. In this holiday season, it is easy to get caught in the hoopla of the wrong spirit. Instead of thinking about how you need to get that Barbie dream house for my child or she will never believe in Christmas again, thank God for Christmas and the reason it is here. He gave us His son! That was the ultimate gift! This season try and find a peaceful place, a peaceful moment to sit, relax, and breath. Breath in the love of our Lord God and pray:

***Prayer:***

Lord, today I thank you for all things. My health, my family, my job. I thank you that you had your son come to earth and walk among us. I pray that all will see, hear, and feel the true meaning of Christmas.

*-Juliann Hoekstra*

**Wednesday, December 16, 2020**  
**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

“There was a man sent from God,” but he was making the Jewish religious leaders uncomfortable. Despite being under Roman occupation, the Pharisees continued to wield power and influence in Judea with their elaborate system of religious rules, centered on worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Now here comes this man preaching repentance and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Who is he? And why is he usurping the role of the Pharisees with these new practices?

They send representatives to ask John if he is the deliverer, but he says, “I am not the Messiah.” Elijah, then? “I am not.” The prophet that Moses predicted would come? “No.” Each answer is more abrupt, and they grow exasperated. Who is he then? If he is not a person of religious importance and authority, what right has he to practice his own form of purification rites? Is this “fake news?” John answers:

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
make straight the path of the Lord.”

These words are from Isaiah 40, where the prophet calls on Israel to make ready to receive God—the mighty God, who has created the world from the tiniest insects to the most distant star, who determines the course of kings and kingdoms, who gives strength like an eagle to those who wait for him, who feeds his flock, gathers his lambs, and gently leads the mother sheep.

John is the first to say, “I am nobody, but I’m pointing you to the one who is everything.” He came to bear witness to the coming of the Light into a darkened world, so that “all might believe through him.” He is preparing the hearts of the people through repentance and baptism to receive their God.

During this time of Advent, we are called to do the same: to prepare our hearts anew to receive God, to be washed clean of our failures, and to witness to the Light that has come into our lives.

***Prayer:***

Wash my heart clean, O God, and then fill that clean space full of your love, so I can bear witness to the light you bring into our dark and damaged world, through Christ my Lord, Amen.

*-Judith Boogaart*

**Thursday, December 17, 2020**  
**2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16**

It's difficult to know how to connect to this passage. Since King David is a darling of Sunday school curricula, years of stories jumble together in my mind— David the great king, David the shepherd boy who killed the giant, David who was beautiful and chosen, David and Bathsheba, David and something faintly racy about dancing, David who wasn't allowed to build the temple—that one seems to stem in part from these verses in 2 Samuel. Unlike my mental mash-up, though, this story doesn't seem to be much about David at all. It seems to be about God.

Even though, along with stories about biblical heroes, I was also taught that the church was “God's house,” I'm not in the habit of thinking about (or much caring) whether God resides in a house or a tent. But in this passage, it's clearly a big deal—big enough for God to send a special message correcting the advice of the prophet Nathan and sounding more than a bit exasperated. Since bringing David's ancestors out of Egypt, through all the days of wandering and fighting and establishing a people, the LORD has traveled in a tent without complaint and now... “*Really, David?*” is the tone I hear. “Who asked for a house? Don't you know me better than that?”

David's mistake seems to have been his assumption that the LORD could be assigned a permanent address by him or any king. Nathan's admonishment makes clear that, instead, the LORD would be the one doing the building, the housing, the care of the people--even the king and all his descendants.

This gives me a place to connect and some questions to mull. It leads me to think about who might be attempting to “build a house for” - or set boundaries around - God today. It reminds me that even after all these centuries, God no doubt still has cause to say, “*Really people? Don't you know me better than that?*” And it leaves me with the lingering, grace-filled image of a God who understands the goodness of houses, but who chooses to remain free to move among people who are not yet home.

***Prayer:***

Lord, when we try to secure your presence with our plans and constructions, help us let go, resting in your gracious, uncontrollable presence. Thank you for staking your tent with migrants and wanderers.

*-Laurie Baron*

**Friday, December 18, 2020**  
**Psalm 89:1-4**  
*A God of Steadfast Love*

This passage from Psalm 89 asks us to meditate on the "steadfast love" by means of which God keeps the promises made in the Covenant. It thus tells us about the nature of God who, even when the people failed to keep their promises, would not let them be lost. What is this "steadfast love"? The term appears seven times in Ps. 89. The adjective "steadfast" alerts us to its uniqueness.

The word "love" itself in our current speech has been misused for so many unsavory purposes that much of the meaning has been drained from it. We use it now to express our passionate pleasure in something--"I *love* ice cream!" Advertisers, driven by the need to get sales by overhyping a product, have seized the word to sell products like automobiles --"It's *love* that makes a Subaru a Subaru!"-- and hamburgers--"I'm *lovin'* it!" The rest of us have followed the trend, and instead of saying "I *like* it" (which means "*it pleases me*") we now say "I *love* it." *Liking* something was not strong enough in advertisers' eyes to do the job, so they stole the depth and intensity of "love" to improve sales. We should not follow that example in our usage, but rather think hard of how we use the term "love," and reserve it for more serious purposes.

The word in Hebrew translated as "steadfast love" is  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*). It is a word used to describe the special quality of caring devotion that God had shown to Covenant people. Its appearance in the Psalms reveals that it not only means devoted special attention and care, but other dimensions of God's character as well: kindness and goodness, aimed at the wellbeing of God's people (Ps. 59:16); meeting the people's needs (Ps. 59:6); providing deliverance from troubles, enemies and death (Ps. 6:5). Steadfast love is abundant and everlasting (Ps. 86:5), the basis of God's trustworthiness in keeping the Covenant. It renews our spirit when we are downcast or become weary in well-doing (Ps. 109:26.) It involves mercy and forgiveness, even to those who break the covenant, and is offered to all generations to come (Ps. 103:17).

These qualities of God's *hesed* are fulfilled with the coming of Christ Jesus. The Greek word that St. Paul uses for love in I Cor. 13 includes the meanings in the Hebrew word, but adds new dimensions made clear by Christ's life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection. From the many Greek words for different kinds of love, Paul chose  $\alpha\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\eta$  (*ah-gah-pay*): a love that transcends human capacity. It is a love capable of self-sacrifice for the good of others, that can accept and support the unlovely, the needy, the helpless, the outcast, that can forgive those who sin against us. It is a kind of love that defines God's nature, and is made possible in us through God's grace.

***Prayer:***

Help us, O Lord, to see and accept the gift of your steadfast love in the coming of Christ Jesus, to which in Advent we look forward with gratitude and joy. Amen.

*-Francis Fike*

**Saturday, December 19, 2020**  
**Psalm 89:19-26**  
*Where We Live*

*“I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people ... My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted ... He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’” (vv. 19, 24, 26)*

Psalm 89 is ideal for Advent. It reminds us what God’s desire looks like for his anointed ruler; more importantly, it shows us that God is the one who initiates this rule. God is the one who crowns, who exalts, who chooses, who strengthens, who overcomes. David’s kingship in this royal psalm is depicted as a reflection of the Lord’s kingship. The ultimate power is enthroned in heaven.

But the seven verses selected as today’s Advent reading do not tell the whole story. The last section of Psalm 89 (verses 38-51) is a lament pleading for God to do some ruling: “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? ... Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?”

The psalmist does not resolve this dilemma, and neither can we. It’s where we live in Advent, this season of expectant waiting when we are painfully and numbingly aware that all is not well.

We work for justice and reconciliation out of a longing for a world ruled by righteousness and peace. This motivation grows out of our faith in God and understanding of God’s desire for this world. But all is not well. The darkness of terror and brutality inflicted on others is repeated over and over—from London to Las Vegas, from San Bernardino to Barcelona, from Sandy Hook to Sutherland Springs.

How do we live hopefully—as people whose lives are saturated with hope—when so much is wrong in our own lives and in the world?

We confess that the ultimate power and hope for this world is enthroned in heaven, but that also strikes us as part of the problem; it’s there, not here.

“Come, Lord Jesus” may sound like a plea to be rescued. In fact, it’s a hopeful, expectant call for the Light of the World to shine in the dark places that seek to overwhelm us.

***Prayer:***

God of hope, in our working and in our praying, fill us with anticipation—not only for the return and complete reign of Jesus as Lord, but for his rule to break into our world in these days. Give us hope, endurance, and resolve in bearing witness to your reign, even as we live in a world whose powers seek to deny it. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

—Terry DeYoung

**Monday, December 21, 2020**  
**Romans 16:25-27**  
*Inexplicable Mystery*

At first glance, this passage seems to have little in common with Advent, but given a deeper look it has much to teach us, here in Holland Michigan, this Advent 2017.

These verses, which are part of the lectionary readings for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent come from Paul's letter to the Romans.

The Epistle to the Romans is fundamental to Paul's theology and teaches that the gospel has come to both the Jewish and Gentile people. It illustrates God's faithfulness to Israel and the singularity of salvation through Jesus Christ for all. These particular verses are a doxology from Paul to the people Rome. They speak of the fulfillment of prophecy, of mysteries now revealed, of the providence in the plan of God made known in the gospel.

The word used here for mystery is *mysterion*, something God has kept hidden, at least for some period of time. A mystery that was promised long ago but not fulfilled until the New Testament times. These verses tell of God's plan, once foretold by the prophets and now revealed in the Gospels, and for *us* this Advent revealed by the inexplicable mystery of a virgin conception and birth. God held us in suspense, waiting for the revelation that was prophesied...which is the hidden secret of God's plan for our salvation. This mystery is opened like a box of treasure in the story of the Virgin Mary, engaged to Joseph, who has never lain with a man. This same Mary the angel Gabriel visited with unbelievable news: "Behold young one, God has chosen you to bear his precious son, Who *will* be a light to the nations, *the promised one of God*...who will be God with Us. **Emmanuel!**" To whom Mary replied "Let it be unto me according to your word, for I am the handmaiden of the Lord." What unexpected news indeed.

What might the invitation be for you this Advent season? Can you listen with your heart wide open for the Spirit's whisper? Perhaps it is simply an invitation to trust in the mystery of God's deep love and desire for oneness with us---a love that went to such great lengths to give the gift of God's son, Christ our Redeemer. Will we reply with such tender obedience to the invitation of God, whispered in our souls this Advent season? Will we acknowledge the secret held for each of us, that meets our hearts in the place of deepest longing---the baby Christ, Emmanuel, God made flesh, for us and for our salvation?

As with Mary, may it be unto us according to God's word—that we receive with joy the mystery that our loving Creator has held for us in secret since the beginning of time. Amen.

*-Celaine Bouma-Prediger*

**Tuesday, December 22, 2020**  
**Luke 1:26-35**

Last December I had a glimmering. You might have had one yourself on a snowy mountaintop, while hiking or at a glorious sunset. It's an encounter of the sacred. It's one of those moments of wonder that leaves you speechless, yet can have you chasing after its meaning for years afterward. It's a thin place, the Celtic's say, a place wherein God's own touch is so very nearly felt that it can only leave one longing afterward for more. It can feel like a kiss from heaven... and then you'd rather not say much more about it.

Anyway, amidst advent busyness, a painful reacquainting with winters aches and pains and a gnarly encounter with post-election blues, I found myself longing for as much down time as possible.

Show me a quiet room. Light a candle there for me, please. I'm fine, really. Just a half-hour.

In a poem entitled, Prayer, Jack Ridl reminds "There are those who know the world without words, not even a murmur or a breath." He continues "Within the modesty of presence, a prayer could be green, tattered, cold, alone as a possum crossing a back road." Yes, please, far away and never mind me. Please put me there. Put me in prayer... and go ahead and put on that movie in the background, The Nativity.

The world, then as now, was offkilter. The news, far and near, horrific. As the film played in the background I tilted back in the wheelchair, simply letting things be for a while, and there she was. Not glamorized or glamorous, not sexy or unsexy, not heroic because or unheroic because. I simply remember a young woman shown plainly and radiantly.

Was their music swelling? Did I just need a hug? Whatever it was, it was not an "it." It was love in the form of God, the presence of woman, the mother of my Lord, the Tender Witness Herself. The moments warmed me straight through to the toe-tips of my soul. It was a heart to heart encounter, holding open a way to return as often as I liked in prayer, to ponder its meaning, to be as perplexed and drawn into its mystery as Mary must have been herself. It was an invitation to be with God in a way that would bring God to life both within and without.

I wept without fear. I gazed back at her. I later asked my attendant to bring a tissue, I had a tickle in my throat.

Gabriel's announcement continues to mystify us all: You have found favor with God and you will give birth to God in the real world and God will do this with you through your own body. Don't be afraid. God sees you and gazes through tears of joy and fullness. It is a Divine Love happening with you that cannot possibly be conceived of, that can only be placed in you, that can only be born "unto you" and held and witnessed as more than you could ever hold.

Friends, when I am out of descriptors for what's happening in my life or those I love, when inside the very inside of me the unimaginable turns and torrents leave me speechless; right then I need God inside lighting a candle and coming close as one with plans for just the two of us, plans for the kindling of presence, compassion and hope. This season, may you find yourself overshadowed by God with glimmerings and new kisses from heaven, birthing the inconceivable and all that of which "there shall be no end." May your down time in prayer leave you rich with plans and longing.

*-Randy Smit*



**Wednesday, December 23, 2020**  
**Luke 1:36-38**

Thinking herself to be alone, Mary now shook with fear. And who else wouldn't have done likewise? The angel Gabriel had suddenly intruded into her space, into her life, into her future.

Speaking to her understandable terror, Gabriel calmed her, as only the Divine can. "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Gabriel then detailed to the trembling teen how she would now be impregnated with a child destined to be called God's own Son. Confounded, she asked of Gabriel how such a conception could be possible absent any husband. To which God's messenger answered in even more mysterious manner, revealing that the Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High, would see to it.

The young girl's veiled face betrayed a yearning to trust, coupled with a need for proof. Gabriel obliged her, announcing, "Your beloved elderly relative Elizabeth has already conceived. Your blood kin, known by all to be barren, is already six months pregnant, just as you will find yourself only half a year from today." Mary stared at Gabriel, and maybe even beyond. The messenger continued. "For with God nothing will be impossible."

The twosome looked into each other's eyes. And in that moment Mary stepped into her new future. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Each time we revisit this astonishing event, so powerfully described by Luke, we're invited to veil ourselves along with Mary. We're urged to put on her sandals and to pause with her, listening for Yahweh's intrusion into our space, our lives, our future. We're informed that we, too, have found favor with God, and that we, too, are meant to bear the Redeemer in our flesh, in our service, in our community.

Confounded, just as the young Jewess was, we likely ask again and again how we, of all people, could be marked with such a mission. To which the God of all creation whispers to us, "I will do what I will do. I will choose whom I will choose. I will send whom I will send."

When we follow in Mary's footsteps, the opportunity to echo her words presents itself again and again. We too can confess, "We are the Lord's; let it be to us according to the Lord's word."

And then we discover, time after time after time, that God indeed does what God does. We discover, as people of Advent promise, that God will do what God promises to do. That the Christ will come as the Christ has vowed. For with God nothing will be impossible. For with God everything – even the redeeming of our broken, shattered world – will be.

***Prayer:***

Promise-keeping God, reveal to us in this season of Advent,  
and throughout every season of our lives, your Coming again.  
Give to us a spirit willing to trust Your Spirit.  
Help us to welcome Your intrusion, Your call, Your love.  
We ask it, as always, in the name of Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

*-Bob Luidens*

**Christmas Eve**  
**Psalm 96**

Say among the nations, “The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.  
—Psalm 96:10-13

One of the things that has scared me most in the strange political landscape of the past year or two has been how much harder it has become for people of different ideological factions to agree on what the truth is. Politicians play fast and loose with the facts—or even tell outright lies—to serve their own ends, journalists frame events according to the established spin of their billionaire-owned media conglomerates, and more and more I find that conversations I have with people I disagree with can’t seem to get off the ground because we can’t agree on what the facts of the matter are. It scares me, that feeling of the ground shifting beneath our feet, because I don’t know how to fix it—how do we find a way back to a common shared experience?

Throughout scripture, the power of words is central. God creates by speaking creation into being. The author of the gospel of John calls Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, who was present at creation with God. Because we are made in God’s image, our words matter: they have power, they can create worlds. No wonder the psalmist in Psalm 96 exhorts all of creation to speak, sing, roar, and exult God’s sovereignty over nations, peoples, all of creation. What other truth is worth singing on this messed up, wandering earth? Say it, the psalmist exhorts, so you will remember it. Say it, so it will be true for you even when everything else feels slippery and unreliable. Say it, so you can live into that truth and trust that even when we feel lost in a forest of lies, God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

He is coming, he is coming to judge the earth. During this Advent, I pray that he will hurry up—and that heaven and earth will sing the truth of his sovereignty over every mess of a government that pretends to power on this globe.

***Prayer:***

Lord, to your name alone, and not to the broken systems of human power, do we give glory. Even when the ground shifts beneath our feet, we say that the world is firmly established, and trust in your judgment and mercy. Come soon, O God, and usher us back to the truth that will heal our hearts, our families, our nations. Amen.

*-Rachel Brownson*

**Christmas Day**  
*Entertaining Our Great Expectation*

They were tired. They were unwelcomed.  
They carried the light.

They were watching. They were searching.  
They hoped for some light.

They were neighing. They were braying.  
They were witnesses to the birth of the light.

It is cold. It is dark.  
And this little light has come.

We are sad. We are fearful.  
And this bright light has come.

Within this great expectation came gifts  
– Hope, Grace, Salvation.

*- Audrienne Hill*

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