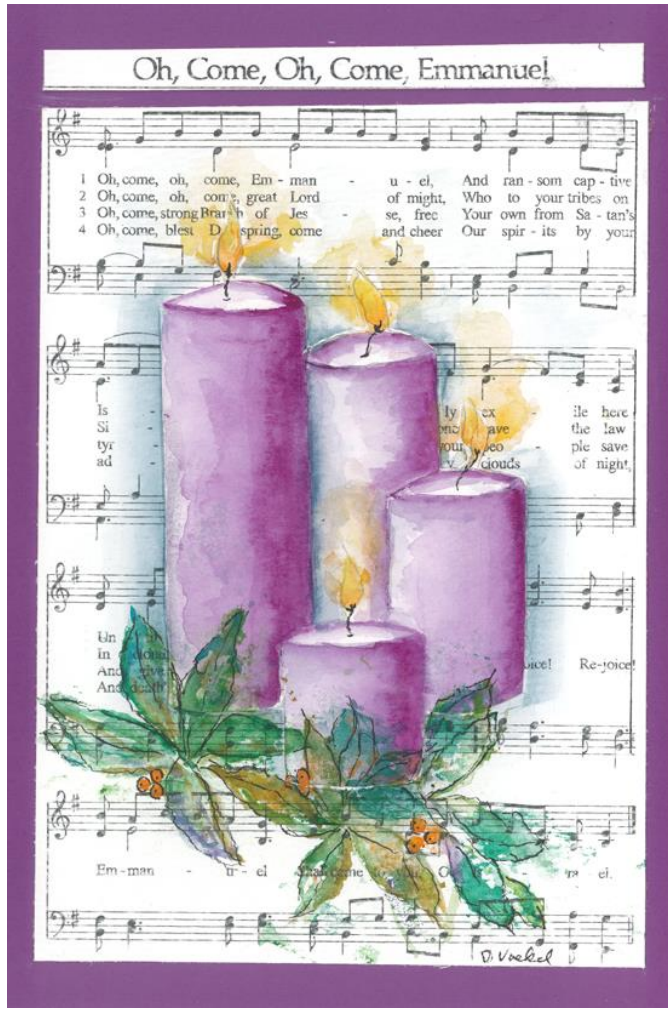
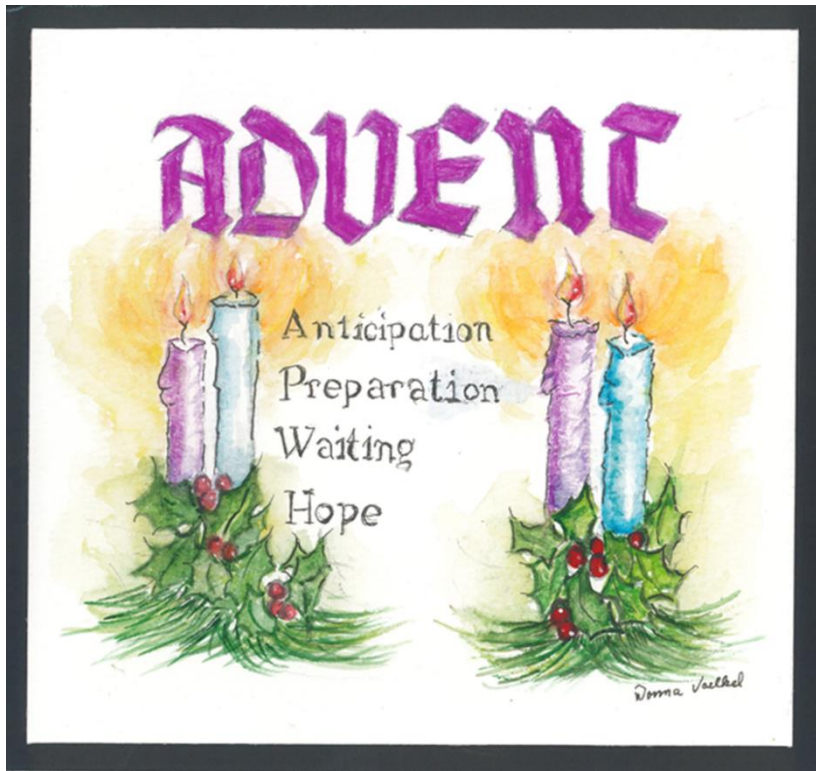


2024 Advent Devotions



Written by members of Redeemer Lutheran Church
Artwork by Donna Voelkel

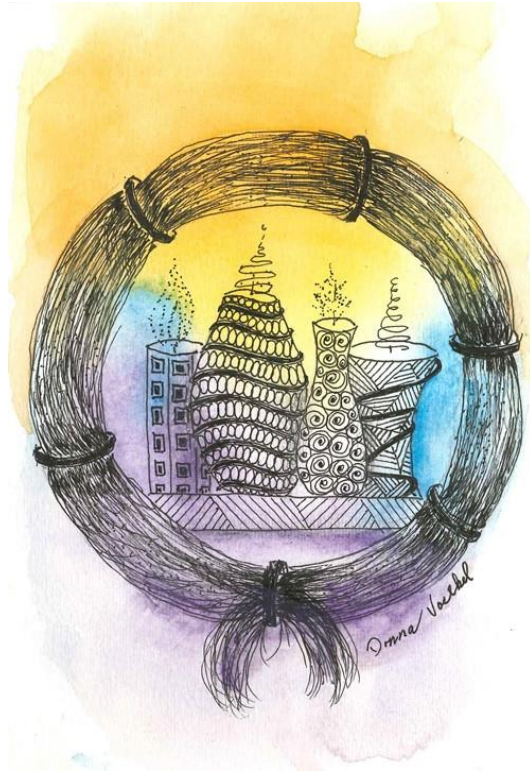


Holden Evening Prayer

7:00 pm

Wednesdays December 4, 11, 18

Dessert at 6:30 pm



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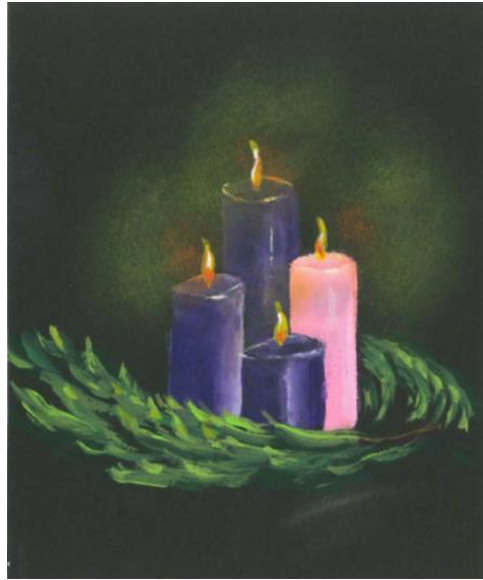
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While the world rushes by outside, bringing into our lives both new and painfully familiar challenges, we hurtle toward Christmas in a blur of red and green. In these unsettled and turbulent times, it is easy to lose our center. That is why Christians choose to pause, and to make time for an Advent spirit to fill us. Making time for these devotions slows our steps, calms our hearts, and wakes us to the presence of the God we often don't realize is holding us in love. Together we wait . . . we reflect . . . we prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child who is coming to us, and the Christ who is already with us.

Sunday, December 1

Kathleen Zwanziger

Hope for the Future

Selecting a passage from Jeremiah was an easy choice for me. Our older son was named Jeremy after this prophet as our sign of hope for the future. Although much of Jeremiah is “doom and gloom,” chapters 30-33 are called the “Little Book of Consolation” or “Book of Comfort,” in which the prophet stresses hope and comfort. He believes God will ultimately redeem his people from exile. On this first day of Advent, we emphasize preparing our hearts to welcome the babe of Bethlehem, hoping again for peace.

At the time of Jeremiah, many of the smaller states of western Asia were pawns of the more powerful countries of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. The people hoped for a Messiah who would deliver them from their struggles. Jeremiah wrote that God had declared he would fulfill his promise in the days to come: “I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line . . . [to be] called The Lord our Righteousness.” The child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is a descendant of David.

However, the words from Luke 21 tell us that not all is well in the Israel of Jesus’ day, for as Jesus foretold, “Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world” (v.26). Such words resonate with us today. Writing this devotion a week before the 2024 election, I question: Am I hopeful about the future? Or am I pessimistic? As deeply divided as Americans are at this point, I fear for our country, regardless of who wins the election.

Jeremiah had been commanded by God to not marry or have children (16:2), so he had to face the struggles of life alone. We are fortunate to have families and friends who support us in our struggles, discuss the politics of the day with us, and gather with us as we await the Prince of Peace.

READ:

*Jeremiah
33:14-16*

*Luke
21:25-26*

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel . . . I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line . . . Judah will be saved.”
*Jeremiah 33:14-16
(NIV)*

PRAYER:

*Creator of the Universe,
be with us as we
navigate the political
landscape of our
country under the
leadership of a new
president. Help us to
remember that even
Jeremiah’s “doom and
gloom” was interspersed
with hope. Remind us to
be hopeful people and
to continue to uplift
those around us.
Amen.*

READ:

Struggling for Peace

*2 Numbers
17:1-11*

*2 Peter
3:1-18*

*So my
friends
. . . strive
to be
found by
Christ,
living at
peace.*

*2 Peter
3:14*

PRAYER:

*"Lord,
make me
an
instrument
of your
peace"
(St. Francis).
Amen.*

Today's scripture writer wasn't satisfied to wait passively for Christ's promised coming. He encouraged Christians to anticipate the Lord's presence now, by striving to live at peace. What? "Struggling" for peace? Whatever could that mean?

There is a painting in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC titled *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks. Hicks grew up in a Quaker home right after the American Revolution, learning values like nonviolence, hard work, and quiet, peaceful living. Apprenticed to a wagon builder, he learned the skill of decorative painting and became quite proficient.

Through his painting, Hicks shared his Quaker love of peace. His favorite scripture was Isaiah 11:6-9, the parable of the "peaceable kingdom": "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion be together, and a little child shall lead them" (v.6).

On the next page we see Isaiah's vision in the foreground, while the background shows a real-life application: William Penn, Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, meeting peaceably with the local Delaware tribe. When Hicks painted this picture a generation later, Penn was dead and an Indian war was raging in Pennsylvania, led by the new state's leaders—many of them German Lutherans by the way! Hicks's painting was aimed at his own state's politicians, suggesting a different way to live.

Hicks made at least 60 versions of this painting, no two the same. One had his cousin's Quaker meeting house in the background, a congregation in the midst of a nasty schism. Another showed local farmers in a land-boundary dispute. Another showed politicians insulting one another. And on his deathbed, he half-finished another with his own two quarreling children in it.

No one appreciated his insight! There is no record that anyone ever listened to Edward Hicks's artistic pleas for peace. This peaceable man took a peaceable stand against conflict but was rejected by his own family and friends. Though nonviolent Quakers themselves, they ignored his prophetic call and preferred to get their way by fighting.

"Strive to live at peace," says Peter, and so says Edward Hicks. But still today, sometimes living peaceably is actually a struggle.



Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, U.S. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Tuesday, December 3

Michelle Clemence

READ:

A/Ω

*Samuel
7:18-29*

*Revelation
22:12-16*

*“I am the
Alpha and the
Omega, the
first and the
last, the
beginning and
the end.”*

*Revelation 22:13
[RSV]*

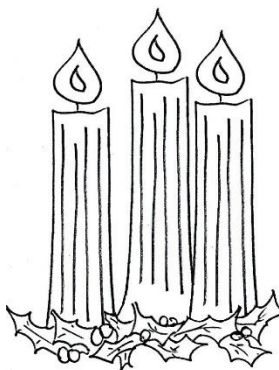
PRAYER:

*Gracious God, we
thank you for
your everlasting
love. We ask for
your help and
guidance in our
in-between times.
Amen.*

When life is topsy-turvy, I take solace in remembering that Christ is the beginning and the end. He has seen it all, created it all, redeemed it all, holds our hands through it all, to our end and beyond.

Can I always access these thoughts in the midst of changes and unknowns in life? No. What helps, though, is my Redeemer family and friends, regular worship, good books, poetry, and music. (Allow me to recommend Anne Lamott, Mary Oliver, and J. S. Bach.)

Do all the people you know also know the solace of the breadth, depth, and length of God’s love, mercy, and care? I dare say some might grasp the beginning or the middle (Jesus) or a far-off end. We cannot change the beginning or the end—thankfully. All we can do is be with people in the middle, which is today—helping, talking, advocating, crying, rejoicing . . . being the face and hands of the body of Christ.



Wednesday, December 4

Emily Kent

No Neon Arrows Here

After Jonah had his attitude adjusted by way of a subaquatic sabbatical, he went to Ninevah and told the people they had better shape up or bad stuff was going to happen to them. Jonah was their sign. This passage is talking about another group of people looking for a sign, and Jesus is like, "Seriously, it's me, I'm the sign." In previous chapters Jesus had been healing people and even once transferred demons from a person to a group of pigs, who then met their demise by cliff diving. Those were spectacular signs, but this time he's not doing that.

Jesus was a teacher. He came to tell as many people as would listen about the love of God. He came to show how God's love can heal broken people and broken relationships. He wanted people to pay attention, but he wasn't going to try to catch their attention with gimmicks or tricks. Sure, healing people is nice, and raising Lazarus from the dead was pretty trippy, but if you're only in this for the miracles, you're in it for the wrong reasons.

As we await his coming in his promised second go-around, I don't think we should expect him to bring a flashy carnival act with him this time either. Instead, I think we should focus on what we already do so well, and that is emulating Jesus' example in our words and actions. We share God's love with all, so we don't have to wait for a physical Jesus to be on this planet. Jesus is present now, in each of us. The Advent prayer "Come, Lord Jesus" reminds us to invite him to be with us everywhere we go and in everything we do.

READ:

*Isaiah
1:24-31*

*Luke
11:29-32*

*"For as
Jonah was a
sign to the
Ninevites, so
also will the
Son of Man
be to this
generation."*

*Luke 11:30
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*Holy Teacher,
please be with
us today and
every day. Help
us bring your
lessons to life.
Amen.*

READ:

Malachi
3:5-12

Luke
1:68-79

*“So, I will
come near to
you for
judgment.”
Malachi 3:5a
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*O Lord, give us
the ability to find
that solid footing
for our lives by
focusing on Jesus
and his example.
Amen.*

Oh Dear

Oh dear, the Malachi passage for the day continues: “I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress widows and the fatherless and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty” (v.5b).

Today, as I write this, it is so tempting to overlay the comments on current events and say, Yes! However, this passage occurs in the context of Malachi’s reporting that the Lord Almighty promises to “send my messenger who will prepare the way before me” (3:1a).

But wait, today’s second passage from Luke 1 also talks about a messenger—this one John who “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” (v. 76-79, NIV).

That is a very different purpose from the one Malachi foretold and reflects the evolution of the understanding of the type of savior Jesus was to be.

In that spirit, as we walk through this season of Advent and through this season of political upheaval, we understand that, as Pastor Steve Bond has written, “The Christian claim that ‘Jesus is Lord,’ emphatically does NOT mean everything that happens on earth is in line with his will or character. Rather it means our allegiance is to Jesus even when his way runs counter to the events or powers of the day”—that is, “to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Friday, December 6

Julianne Johnson

Good Work

Perhaps more than at any other time in my life, this passage resonates with me. It's just days after the results of the U.S. election are known, and my energy for the work ahead is truly tapped out. The desire to "break camp" is real. But I know that there is still "good work" left to do, and there are so many in our community who are committed to that good work.

This season of Advent—preparing, waiting, anticipating the gift of God dwelling with us—is something I need to keep reminding myself of. Not just anticipating, but daily being thankful that God is right here . . . at my side . . . by choice . . . no matter what. So, with renewed spirit we can dedicate ourselves to the good work that our neighborhoods, our country, and our world so need.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.



READ:

Malachi
3:13-18

Philippians
1:18b-26

As long as I'm alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I'd choose. . . . The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful.

. . . But most days, because of what you are going through, I am sure that it's better for me to stick it out here.

Philippians 1:22-24
[MSG]

PRAYER:

Lord, enliven us to do the good work that is ahead. When we are frustrated or forlorn by the challenges that face us, may your Spirit lead us forward in the love with which you hold each and every person.

Amen.

Saturday, December 7

Emily Kent

READ:

Malachi
4:1-6

Luke
9:1-6

He said, "Don't load yourselves up with equipment. Keep it simple; you are the equipment. . . . If you're not welcomed, leave town. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and move on."
Luke 9:3-5
[MSG]

PRAYER:

*Come, Holy Spirit.
Let our authenticity
shine like a beacon
for those who need
to see it.
Amen.*

Keep It Simple

I chose The Message translation for this text because the wording really hit me over the head. YOU ARE ENOUGH, just as you are, no equipment necessary. Jesus then expressly commands his friends that if people aren't receptive to what they have to say, they shouldn't worry about those people, but should just move along.

It's difficult to not let the way people think about us affect the way we think about ourselves. We want to be likable; we want to fit in. But that's not what Jesus asked his disciples to be or do, and it's not what he's asking us to be or do either. The easiest way to share God's love is to be yourself. Be your glorious, quirky, weird, wonderful, flawed self, and trust that the Holy Spirit can use your gifts to glorify God. You don't need to hide aspects of your personality. You don't need more education, or a bigger paycheck, or straighter teeth, or ____ [insert your own insecurity here].

You may be thinking, "But Jesus gave the disciples authority over demons and the ability to heal. We don't have powers like that!" But as it turns out, being your authentic self and being open to having the Spirit use you IS like a superpower. It takes courage to live your truth and shine your light so that your tribe can find you. It also takes practice, and it takes faith. So I encourage you to try it in this season of Advent. Let your guard down a little bit, and see what happens when you let the Spirit use you to connect with others..

Sunday, December 8

Brad Binau

EVERY

Every is an Advent word,
though it seems to us absurd.
All inclusive? Comprehensive?
Peace on earth to all conferred?

All considered? All recast?
All is future? Nothing past?
Every is the word to strengthen
all whose mood is overcast.

Every valley? No exception.
Every mount? No deviation.
Every pathway repositioned.
Every rough spot without friction.

Every means a new creation
comes in Jesus' incarnation.
Nothing but what God intends
shall be ours when Advent ends.



READ:

Malachi
3:1-4

Luke
3:1-6

*“Every
valley . . .
filled, every
mountain . . .
made low.”*

Luke 3:5
[NIV]

PRAYER:

*God of all
possibilities,
grant us faith to
trust that in
Advent we wait
for nothing less
than **everything**
to be redeemed
just as you
intend.
Amen.*

Monday, December 9

Becky Trover

READ:

*Isaiah
40:1-11*

*Romans
8:22-25*

*“ . . . the
uneven
ground shall
become level,
and the rough
places a
plain.”
Isaiah 40:4b*

PRAYER:

*Lord, make the
uneven places in
my soul a plain
for your peace.
Amen.*

De-Construction to Re-Construction

As I write this, the street in front of our house has been blocked off for a couple of weeks. There is construction going on around the corner, and our block is a staging ground for the heavy equipment. At one point earlier, the demolition even caused our house to shake. But the promise is that the sewers will be improved, the uneven ground shall become level, and the glory of the city utilities shall be revealed.

Change does not come without something old being removed to make room for something better. We groan at the inconvenience, the disruption, and even the pain. Everything was just fine before, wasn't it? Maybe not the best, but we got by. It seems like a lot of trouble and travail to go through.

But oh! How wonderful it is when the job is done, when things work so much better than they did before, when we don't have to worry about something failing at the worst possible moment. We gain a perspective that the outcome justified the trouble.

Our spiritual lives sometimes need a little re-construction. Holy Spirit can guide us to tear away the parts of our lives that aren't working well, that are growing weak, that are blocking our path. All this to make room for the Lord to make all things new!

We anticipate with joy the coming of Christ into our lives and into our world.

Tuesday, December 10

Michelle Clemence

Hope

Wow! I do not remember ever hearing or reading this Isaiah passage before. Which means I didn't read the lessons for this day in 2021 or 2018! Or maybe I did, but I wasn't moved by it. I am moved now.

Imagine hearing that you would one day worship God with descendants of the people who enslaved your ancestors and the people who recently captured the Kingdom of Israel. I don't expect a late-8th century Jew would be super-pleased with the idea, but it paints an extraordinarily hopeful vision of God's power to transform people, individually and as a group.

And so, I am led to reflect on who can't I imagine worshipping with? Which "them" would have to be changed by God? What changes would God need to work in my heart? Could we be a "blessing in the midst of the earth"?

Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32, NRSV). "All people" means the powerful and the marginalized, the up-and-comers and the has-beens, the hawks and the doves, the devout and the heretical. What a lovely and strange vision is the ultimate feast of the Lamb!



READ:

*Isaiah
19:18-25*

*2 Peter
1:2-15*

*. . . the
Egyptians
will worship
with the
Assyrians. In
that day
Israel will be
the third with
Egypt and
Assyria, a
blessing in the
midst of the
earth.*

*Isaiah 19:23b-24
[RSV]*

PRAYER:

*God of hope,
grant me the
grace to view
each person as
your child,
beloved by you.
Amen.*

READ:

*Isaiah
35:3-7*

*Luke
7:18-30*

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

*Luke 7:20
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*Dear God, instill in us the boldness to live our lives as our authentic selves and to enable others to do the same.
Amen.*

Who Are You, Really?

John, then in prison, sent his disciples to confirm whether Jesus was "the one who was to come." John had spent his adult life baptizing people and preaching that the Messiah, one more powerful than he, was coming. John may have expected a fiery reformer or a military leader to throw off the Romans, but instead Jesus brought grace and mercy, healing the blind, lame, deaf, and others. Even though it was not what John and many other Jews of the day were expecting, Jesus understood his true mission.

"Who are you, really?" sums up the question John's disciples asked Jesus. Many young people ask themselves that same question on their journey to self-discovery, but unlike Jesus, they may change their answers from year to year. In second grade I read a book about the discovery in 1922 of King Tut's tomb in Egypt, and I decided then and there I would be an archaeologist. But by my junior year in college that self-understanding went out the window, as I was drawn more to chemistry, math, and foreign languages.

Jesus also had the courage to stay true to his self-understanding even though he knew it could and would put him in harm's way. When I was a graduate student at Iowa State University, my advisor was a closeted gay man. When we had a discussion about that 15 years later, he told me that many on the university staff and in the administration were homophobic, and it was safer to keep quiet about his orientation. At his retirement celebration in 2013, he publicly acknowledged his long-time partner, also named John, for the first time. He finally felt safe enough to reveal his authentic self after all those years. Like Jesus, we need to find the courage to be our authentic selves and also allow others that same freedom.

Thursday, December 12

Becky Trover

Giving Beyond Their Means

During the 1830s, people of the Five Civilized Tribes were forcibly removed from their homelands in what is known as the Trail of Tears. This uprooting caused extreme hardship and devastation. After the people were relocated, promises of support and protection were largely broken.

In 1847 the Choctaw and the Cherokee people in their new homes in Indian Territory got news of the severe hardship resulting from the Irish potato famine. At tribal meetings they agreed to send what money they could, a total of about \$800, to the starving people in Ireland. People with inadequate food, medicine, clothing, or warm blankets chose to help others in need rather than use their meager funds for their own survival.

The Irish have not forgotten this extraordinary gift. There is a beautiful sculpture in County Cork memorializing the event. And during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, a huge number of donations were sent from Ireland to Native American people in the U.S. People on either side of the Atlantic maintain a mutual respect and caring spirit for one another.

For all the challenges we face, it is important to acknowledge that the United States of America is still an incredibly rich nation. We moan about inflation but fail to recognize that ours is among the lowest rates of inflation in the world. Our economy, in spite of any perceived weakness, is to be envied. Would that we could learn generosity from the poorest, gratitude from the most afflicted.

Kindred Spirits sculpture, Cork, Ireland



READ:

*Amos
6:1-8*

*2 Corinthians
8:1-15*

*... for
during a
severe ordeal
of affliction,
their
abundant joy
and their
extreme
poverty have
overflowed
in a wealth
of generosity
on their part.
2 Corinthians
8:2*

PRAYER:

*Giving God,
lead me to
share the
abundance of
your gracious
gifts.
Amen.*

READ:

Amos
8:4-12

2 Corinthians
9:1-15

Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor. . . . The time is surely coming . . . when I will send a famine . . . not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

Amos 8:4, 12

. . . for God loves a cheerful giver. 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.

2 Corinthians 9:7b-8

PRAYER:

*God of gracious abundance, remind us to be gifts, generously lighting others' lives this dark season.
Amen.*

Sharing Our Abundant Gifts

Both authors are concerned with caring for and sharing with the poor. Amos warns of future famine, not of physical sustenance but of truth, God's word unable to be heard. Paul advises the Corinthians to be generous, not sparing, with their gifts to the poor. God has given people abundant blessings to enable sharing in the same generous way. Paul further describes how such generosity will enrich the givers' lives in every way.

We hear of "abundant" life at other times from Jesus (aka the Truth, the Word), who came to give us this gift. *Abundance* can mean a plentiful, ample amount. It can also refer to wealth or affluence. Either way, if we're graciously given many gifts, wouldn't that grace encourage us to share the overflowing amount? If we're actually affluent, how could we keep it all for ourselves? It can be a marvelous feeling when gifts are freely given to us. How much better does it feel to share with others? It doesn't even have to cost money. Some of us are poor in spirit, poor in heart. Others share abundantly with their cheerful, kind words and smiles.

I saw an example in action today. A drive-through employee who takes particular care to speak kindly and patiently to customers, so much that they remember her and share that appreciation, multiplied the good-natured mood of the customer, who shared: "I remember you. You're always so nice when I get my order. I appreciate that." The smile that lit up her face multiplied the warmth for both, abundantly.

Saturday, December 14

Connie Criswell

Hope for the Survivors

Amos writes of impending death and destruction for Israel before the people would be subjugated and taken into exile by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians. However, at the end of his book, he conveys God's promises of a new future for the survivors, with rebuilt cities and restored gardens and vineyards.

In Amos's time, 8th century BCE, it was common for conquering powers to take captives back home to work as slaves. These unwilling immigrants increased the population, as they often were forced to intermarry with their captors. For example, the Samaritans were descended from the mixing of Israelites and their Assyrian overlords.

Throughout our country's history our population has been expanded and enriched by various waves of immigrants coming voluntarily, often fleeing wars and persecution or searching for a better life for themselves and their families. In the 19th century many Irish, German, Eastern European, and Scandinavian people came, and later Italians, Mexicans, and others from around the world arrived. However, not everyone received a warm welcome from those who were already established here, as the new arrivals were sometimes viewed as competition for work and land and were disparaged for their different customs, languages, and appearance. Eventually most of these newcomers assimilated, and their children grew up as loyal Americans.

The latest immigrants to be viewed with suspicion are the Haitians, especially those who were recently given asylum after fleeing the gang violence plaguing their homeland. Most of them are hard workers, and some have started their own businesses and restaurants or work in factories that have a great need for employees. Haiti has been held back from prosperity by a long series of corrupt governments, and most recently by vicious outlaw gangs. The result has been a "brain drain," as educated and technically competent people with the means to do so have moved to other countries where they could live without being in constant fear for their lives. Most of these individuals hope to be able to return home when it is safe, but for now they can be productive members of whatever society accepts them in the interim. They can cling to God's promises at the end of the book of Amos, as they yearn for the tropical paradise Haiti can become once security is restored. Let us keep them in prayer.

READ:

*Amos
9:8-15*

*Luke
1:57-66*

*I will bring
back my
exiled people
Israel; they
will rebuild
the ruined
cities and live
in them. They
will plant
vineyards
and drink
their wine;
they will
make gardens
and eat their
fruit.*

*Amos 9:14
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*Dear God, give
us the grace to
welcome the
strangers among
us, as they are
your beloved
children, too.
Amen.*

READ:

Zephaniah
3:14-20

Luke
3:7-18

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more.

Zephaniah 3:15
[RSV]

"Bear fruits that befit repentance. . . . He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

Luke 3:8a, 11
[RSV]

PRAYER:

*Mother/Father of all creation, thank you for your grace and guide us to live lives "that befit repentance."
Amen.*

The Day of the Lord Is at Hand!

After introducing himself, the author of Zephaniah begins his book with "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord" (1:2), calling out the wicked, Judah, Jerusalem, idolatrous priests, and those who do not seek only the Lord. Declaring "the day of the Lord is at hand" (1:7), the Lord goes on to express his anger against officials, the king's sons, the fashionable, violence, fraud, traders, money changers, and the indifferent; to threaten Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Canaan, the Philistines, Moab, the Ammonites, the Ethiopians, Assyria, and Nineveh; and to rail against corrupt judges, faithless prophets, and profane priests.

But then Zephaniah's Lord laments, "I have cut off nations. . . . But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt" (3:6a,7b). He concludes that "on that day" his decision will be to "change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord. . . . On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me. . . ." (3:9, 11a).

In Luke, John the Baptist tells the people, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:16-17).

We are simultaneously saints and sinners, wheat and chaff. Through God's grace our sins are forgiven/burned "with unquenchable fire." All are freed to "call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord."

Monday, December 16

Ruth Murray

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

I am not a musician. However, many hymns stir me. Whenever I hear John Ylvisaker's "*I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry*," I am moved to tears. It's a perfect way of sharing God's love for us throughout our lives.

At our baptism, as our loved ones gather near and with the guidance of parents and loved ones and the strengthening of our beginning spiritual life, we are assured of that love and care.

In our middle years of life, as we seek ways to mature in our faith with the assistance of church, teachers, and family helping to overcome our frailties, we are assured of God's love and caring.

In our later years, as the end of life draws near, we are surrounded by God's love and caring, which we have felt throughout all our years. But then the hymn tells us there is still one last surprise! What will it be??



READ:

*Numbers
16:1-19*

*Hebrews
13:7-17*

*Jesus Christ is
the same
yesterday and
today and
forever.*

Hebrews 13:8

PRAYER:

*Gracious God, we
give thanks for all
of our blessings.
Bless, too, those
musicians in our
midst and all who
hear those
precious words.
Amen.*

READ:

Numbers
16:20-35

Acts
28:23-31

[Paul, to the Jewish community in Rome] "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

Acts 28:28
[RSV]

PRAYER:

Holy Spirit, open our ears, our eyes, our hearts to your love and grace, and enable us to pass it on.
Amen.

Open

Who do you identify with in Bible stories? I read Acts 28:28 and think, "Gentiles! That's me/us; we have the salvation!" But I also read the verses right before it, which are a quote from Isaiah 6:9-10, and wonder, "Is my heart hard or my ears and eyes closed to perceiving?" When I read a passage from the Old Testament, I am inclined to think anything God says to Abraham/Sarah, Isaac/Rebekkah, Jacob or his descendants is directed at Christians.

At the end of the first (and sometimes the second) lesson on Sundays, the reader says, "May we open ourselves to what the Spirit is saying to the Church." And the congregation responds, "Amen." We say this whether the passage is from the Old Testament or the New.

We are asking for guidance. Maybe a passage is just history—a record of what God has done. Maybe a passage is a warning or a promise or an encouragement. Maybe it's different from one year to another. God is faithful and steadfast, but humans need to hear different things at different times. So the Holy Spirit works with us.

When we read the parable of the prodigal son, the question is often asked, "Do you identify with the older son or the younger?" Maybe you're a parent, identifying with the dad and trying to juggle your relationship with two or more very different kids. Maybe the point is that God loves us, gives to us, runs toward us, quietly steps out to speak to us—however and wherever we are.

Wednesday, December 18

God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me

One week out from Christmas, life often gets more hectic and overwhelming. Here is a hymn by Richard Bruxvoort Culligan that soothes my soul. Hopefully, it will soothe yours.

God, be the love to search and keep me;
God, be the prayer to move my voice;
God, be the strength to now uphold me:
O Christ, surround me;
O Christ, surround me.

Bind to myself the Name of Holy,
great cloud of witnesses enfold;
prophets, apostles, angels witness:
O Christ, surround me;
O Christ, surround me.

Brightness of sun and glow of moonlight,
flashing lightning, strength of wind,
depth of the sea to soil of planet:
O Christ, surround me;
O Christ, surround me.

Walking behind to hem my journey,
going ahead to light my way,
and from beneath, above, and all ways:
O Christ, surround me;
O Christ, surround me.

Christ in the eyes of all who see me,
Christ in the ears that hear my voice,
Christ in the hearts of all who know me:
O Christ, surround me;
O Christ, surround me.

Judith Bird

READ:

*Micah
4:8-13*

*Luke
7:31-35*

*. . . and they
shall call his
name*

*Immanuel
(which means,
God with us).
Matthew 1:23b
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*O Christ, may we
feel your
comforting
presence
surrounding us
in this season.
Amen.*

READ:

Jeremiah
31:31-34

Hebrews
10:10-18

*“The time is coming,”
declares the Lord,
“when I will make a
new covenant with the
house of Israel and
with the house of
Judah. . . . I will forgive
their wickedness and
will remember their
sins no more.”*

Jeremiah 31:31,34b
[NIV]

*. . . we have been made
holy through the
sacrifice of the body of
Jesus Christ once for
all.*

Hebrews 10:10
[NIV]

PRAYER:

*Redeemer Lord, thank you
for giving yourself to make
a new covenant with your
people. Help us do our
best to help our brothers
and sisters and strive to
follow your example of
loving all.
Amen.*

God's New Covenant Is Like a New Roof

The Hebrews passage relates how the priests in Jeremiah's day would stand and perform their religious duties over and over, offering the same sacrifices time after time. Based on my experience during the past two weeks, I have begun to see how the new covenant God promised to Jeremiah could be akin to a new roof. Day after day, year after year, I would drive or walk up to my house, note the blue stucco and the grey-black shingles—the appearance still pleasing to me—and think everything was going just fine. Then one day a person came to the door and said it looked to him like I should have my roof checked because it might need to be replaced. Over the course of ten days, I learned an entirely new vocabulary (from “hips” and “ridge vents” to “pipe boots” and “drip edges”). I learned how expensive a new roof could be! I learned that a lifetime warranty does not mean my lifetime and that it can be voided under certain conditions.

Verses 31-34 in Jeremiah 31 tell how God will institute a new covenant with Israel. The old covenant (the law) was written on stone tablets and given to Moses on Sinai. The stone tablets were once broken, literally, by Moses when he saw how the people had sinned, and they were broken repeatedly, figuratively, by the people. The old covenant was the basis of life for the Hebrew people; the priests were needed to atone for infractions committed. The new covenant, relating to God through grace, was given to the world when a new priest (Christ) offered a sacrifice for all time.

Homeowners know that roofs occasionally need to be replaced, particularly after hail and windstorms. The shingles do not last a lifetime. However, at my age a 50-year warranty on materials seems to me to be “for all time.” I will have made a “new covenant” with the roofing company: I will not have to put yet another roof on my house.

Friday, December 20

Heidi Sherer

New Songs, Enduring Faith

Both Isaiah and the writer of Hebrews have messages of transformation. Images of former things changing, birth (during which labor has its own transition), the opening of eyes and ears that had looked and listened but had not heard or seen. All of creation gets involved, invited, to join the song.

Changes are coming. From hard struggles to endurance. From imprisonment to confident faith.

Advent is a time of new songs, our new church year, waiting again for the song of a woman in labor, the birth of a long-anticipated child. Being in the dark takes both endurance and faith that the light will return.

In this season of Advent: With what are you laboring, bringing to birth? From what are you struggling to break free? What new songs are you lifting up? What darkness are you enduring, and what gives you faith?

READ:

*Isaiah
42:10-18*

*Hebrews
10:32-39*

*Sing to the Lord a new song. . . .
Let the sea roar . . . the
coastlands . . . the desert . . . lift
up their voice. . . . I will cry out
like a woman in labor. . . . I will
turn the darkness before them
into light. . . . Listen, you that are
deaf; and you that are blind, look
up and see!
*Isaiah 42:10-18**

*. . . you endured a hard struggle
. . . had compassion. . . Do not . . .
abandon that confidence. . . you
need endurance. . . . "the one who
is coming will come and will not
delay . . . live by faith."
*Hebrews 10:32-38**

PRAYER:

*God of transformations, be with us in
our changing world. Hold our hands as
we labor, set us free in our struggles,
hear our songs, give us faith to endure
the darkness as we anticipate the
returning light!
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
66:7-11

Luke
13:31-35

*“Rejoice with
Jerusalem, and
be glad”
Isaiah 66:10a*

*“Jerusalem,
Jerusalem
. . . How often
have I desired
. . . and you
were not
willing!”
Luke 13:34*

PRAYER:

*Living Lord,
whatever colors
shade this season,
help us trust that all
colors of the
spectrum and the
emotions they
symbolize have their
source in you, our
light and our
salvation.
Amen.*

Red, Green, and Blue

In the spirit of the season “even stop lights blink a bright red and green.” So go the lyrics of the Christmas favorite “Silver Bells.” Somehow red and green partner in proclaiming the joy of Christmas—the kind of unparalleled joy that accompanies a mother giving birth. That is how it will be, says Isaiah, when Jerusalem births a new era of peace for those who have suffered in exile. Had fountain pens been invented, I believe the prophet would have inked the joy and gladness of his final chapter in red and green.

But there is another hue that colors Christmas. If a ballpoint pen had been available to Luke, I believe he would have penned Jesus’ words in blue. Jesus sings his blues song of unrequited love not with the hopeful blue of Advent, but with the darkest blue of heartsick lament. Jesus longed to love the descendants of the exiles for whom Isaiah wrote, but they would have none of it.

Thus is it always at this time of year: some sing joy and gladness while others sing the blues. Some rejoice while others lament. Some have experienced the marvelous birth of hope and new possibilities. Others are living through loss so profound that only blues music has even a chance of articulating its anguish. And sometimes, maybe a lot of the time, many of us are living lives of red, green, and blue all at once.

Whatever color holds sway this season—red, green, or blue—we know this and we trust this: Jesus knows firsthand what it means to be human, from cradle to grave. He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” And he is our comfort and our joy.

Sunday, December 22

Joss Dana

Finding Peace in Chaos

I feel that our society is perpetually marred with fear and uncertainty. Every day, our news feed is filled with the terrible things that are occurring in our country and across the world. Because of this, I think many people are having an incredibly difficult time maintaining hope right now.

How can we have peace when we cannot find it in the world around us? That's a question I've angrily asked myself and God at various points of my life. I've been afraid of change. I've been angry at the things I can't control and the ways I can't fix what is broken. I have agonized silently in my head time and time again about how I can ever feel like I'm doing enough.

The truth is, sometimes the only way we can find peace is by looking for it in ourselves. By focusing on the people and issues that are important to us. By not being afraid to make time for ourselves and lighten our loads. It's OK to say no to people. It's OK to take mental health days. It's OK to not be in 100%, tip-top shape all the time.



READ:

*Micah
4:1-5*

*Luke
1:46b-55*

*Everyone will live
in peace and
prosperity,
enjoying their own
grapevines and fig
trees, for there
will be nothing to
fear.*

*Micah 4: 4a
[NLT]*

PRAYER:

*Lord, give us insight
into how we can find
peace for ourselves.
Show us how we can
take better care of our
mental health when
we're overwhelmed
and set respectful
boundaries when we
need to. Thank you for
providing support
systems for us to lean
on when times are
hard.
Amen.*

Monday, December 23

Emily Kent

READ:

*Micah
4:6-8*

*2 Peter
1:16-21*

*Prophecy
resulted when
the Holy
Spirit
prompted
men and
women to
speak God's
Word.*

*2 Peter 1:21
[MSG]*

PRAYER:

*Jesus, help us to
be present today
and in the days
to come. We
trust the future
to you.
Amen.*

How Much Do Prophecies Matter?

As a person of faith, I believe there are people who have heard divine messages and are relaying them as faithfully as they can. But although the message may not have been created by a human, it is open to interpretation by humans, and that's when things can get messy.

In Advent we recreate the season of expectation surrounding the coming of the Christ Child. We read about how his birth was foretold in many places in the Bible. And every Sunday we affirm the prophecy that Jesus will return some day. But that's the extent of the energy our church dedicates to events yet to come, and I think that's wise. It's been my experience that people who focus on prophecies, though probably well-intentioned, end up misunderstanding them. How many times have people predicted the end of the world, and yet here we are? Either the "chosen ones" were raptured already, and we're all left behind, or someone's calculations/interpretations were off.

I poke fun at people that are hyper-focused on trying to predict when Jesus will return, but honestly, I pity them. First, that's an awful lot of extra reading and math, and I'm not about that life. But more importantly, Jesus said that no one will know the day or the hour (Mark 13:32), and I'm inclined to believe him. Jesus also told us to love our neighbors. Worrying too much about the future gives power to fear, and you can't love well if you're focused on fear.

Prophecies can be interesting to contemplate. And they make good movie plots. But let's leave it to Hollywood to figure them out. The best we can do is choose to make God's love alive in this current moment, and let the future unfold as it will.

Tuesday, December 24

Julianne Johnson

The Greatest Gift

Isaiah's words were written approximately 700 years before the birth of Jesus. And that birth occurred under the occupation and rule of Rome. As Isaiah prophesied in this assigned text, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (v.2).

I'd like to suggest that we think about those who—today—dwell in a land of deep darkness. Many come quickly to mind: the people in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti . . . the hungry, the homeless, those who are held by addiction, those in prison . . . the list goes on and on. The promise of "a child" is likely for them very, very distant.

But it is a truth that we, as followers of that child, know to be true. And we need to be Christ's light for those who walk in darkness. It's not a shiny present, but it is the greatest gift in the world.



READ:

*Isaiah
9:2-7*

*Luke
2:1-14*

*For to us a child is
born, to us a son is
given; and the
government will be
upon his shoulder,
and his name will be
called "Wonderful
Counselor, Mighty
God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of
Peace."*

*Isaiah 9:6-7
[RSV]*

PRAYER:

*God, you sent Jesus to a
time and a place where
many walked in darkness,
vulnerable and
powerless. Help us to
dwell with and give light
to the vulnerable and
powerless of today. And
when we don't see them,
light the way.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
62:6-12

Luke
2:8-20

*You will be
called
Sought
After—A
City That Is
Not
Abandoned.*
Isaiah 62:12b
[CEB]

PRAYER:

*God of
Christmas, may
I recall a
favorite carol
this day, and
let it touch me
in such a way
that the love of
this day might
become truly
real for me.
Amen.*

It's Christmas Day

So why is this reflection based on a reading from Isaiah instead of the Luke story of Jesus' birth, which Linus brought to life in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*? Partly because I've never explored this text before. And mainly because it helps us understand why Jesus needs followers to say *Yes* to his call on this Christmas Day.

The God Isaiah writes about is not the all-powerful God described in any number of sermons and hymns. This God needs humans to say, "Remember all these promises you made? When are you going to make them real?"—and then to be reminded not just once, but over and over again!

It's kind of embarrassing that God needs us in this way. Yet to be told God needs us is exactly what Jesus tells us. Jesus calls disciples to "follow me" because God needs us. God needs people who will join forces with the Spirit in the beautiful work of using our talents to help heal this world and make it whole. One of my favorite carols, "O Holy Night," illustrates this:

*Truly he taught us to love one another;
his law is love, and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for this slave is our brother,
and in his name, all oppression shall cease!*

Jesus can break chains because we who follow him work with the Spirit to make chain-breaking compassion and courage real.

It would be a lot easier if God took care of all the world-mending for us. Yet that's not the message of the Jesus whose birth we sing today. God chooses to need us—not to say, "God, when are you going to make all your promises real?" but to be people who join with the Spirit, and with each other, to lessen the suffering that is right in our midst. United with each other and with the Spirit, we remember and make real God's promise in this morning's reading: "You will be called Sought After—A City That Is Not Abandoned." That is joy for the world!

Merry Christmas!

*A Blessed Christmas to
you and yours.*



Nativity, 2008 Erland Sibuea, Bali

*May the Prince of Peace
enter into our hearts and
into all the earth.*



Christmas Eve Worship

7:00 pm

Tuesday, December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am

Wednesday, December 25



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