

Advent 2016

Ah! Wonderful it is
with no room
on the earth,
the stable is our heart.

Dear Beloveds,

Our 2016 Advent Devotional Book is a true labor of love created for you by the good people of Central Presbyterian Church. I encourage you to take some quiet time each day during the Advent season to read, contemplate, and pray. May you feel and experience the Spirit leading you and guiding you through this season.

For this year's introduction, I sought a poem that speaks to where we are right now as Jesus people, seeking equality and love for all people in a world that does not always feel loving or just.

"Into the Darkness" is Madeleine L'Engle's poem that journeys with us through the darkness, but at the end, we find a surprising light that is deep within each of us.

*It was a time like this,
War & tumult of war,
a horror in the air.
Hungry yawned the abyss—
and yet there came the star
and the child most wonderfully there.*

*It was time like this
of fear & lust for power,
license & greed and blight—
and yet the Prince of bliss
came into the darkest hour
in quiet & silent light.*

*And in a time like this
how celebrate his birth
when all things fall apart?
Ah! Wonderful it is
with no room on the earth
the stable is our heart.*

May you be filled with light and love this Advent season and may you share that light and love with all those you encounter.

Love and blessing to you on the journey,

-Kim

Sunday, November 27, First Sunday in Advent

Romans 13:11-14

Once Paul concludes the theology section of Romans in chapter 11, the rest of the book is ethical material: How should Christians live? He answers the question with this instruction: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” — a strange request, as if Jesus is a jacket you can grab as you run out the door. Lauren Winner, an Episcopal priest, gives meaning to Paul’s instruction in her book “Wearing God,” which explores fresh biblical metaphors for God, images intended to spring God to more vibrant spiritual life in us. Clothing is one of those metaphors.

One of the deepest meanings of our Advent anticipation of the coming of Jesus is the word “incarnation,” God putting on human flesh in Jesus, wearing us, so to speak. Our faith confesses that God walked around wearing Jesus’ skin, loving people, healing them, forgiving, befriending, and enjoying them, teaching and guiding them.

“Them” is us, of course. God wore us and wears us still. God loves, heals, forgives, teaches, and befriends us still. That truth is one part of the Advent salvation story: Jesus became Emmanuel, God with us. The other part is our response: We are to wear him, to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” as Paul said.

What better way to wait during this worrisome, post-election Advent than to live as Jesus did, to wear him as a sign of justice, kindness, tenderness, friendship, and hope to all we encounter — to clothe them, too, with Jesus, God’s own self. To do so, in Lauren Winner’s words, is “to involve yourself in the choreography of divine action. It makes you a mimic of God, and it shapes you more and more into God’s image.” As you put on your jacket this morning, remind yourself of Jesus whom you also wear.

Prayer:

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, [may you] clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another . . . forgive each other. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:12-14)

Mary Swierenga

Monday, November 28

Romans 6:1-11

As I am writing this devotional, Election Day is almost one full week away. By the time most of you read this passage, we will have elected a new president and celebrated Thanksgiving. Regardless of how you felt about the candidates, or how you feel about our new president, you will most likely agree with me that the word “unity” was hardly an accurate one to describe this election season. However, Paul stresses that as we are united in Christ’s death, we will certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like His.

We might be tempted to think that things are different now from what they were with the Christian church of Paul’s time, and Paul wouldn’t understand the political divisions in our country, which we witness even among our fellow believers. Of course, we know better. During Paul’s time, Jews and gentiles fought over how much of the law should be kept (Galatians 2:15), among several other conflicts in the early church.

Paul’s message of our being united with Christ in His resurrection wasn’t a depiction of the early Church in some pristine, pre-conflict state. Nor was it a Pollyanna sort of message. It was clearly a message of good news and great hope for the Christians of Paul’s time and ours — the hope in which we can all participate as those who are baptized into Christ Jesus. The message isn’t about Christ’s death, but about the fulfillment of the promise of the coming Christ child.

This Advent season, we may not reconcile our differences with fellow Christians who have opposing political views. But we can certainly begin to find common ground within these verses. We are all united with Christ in his death, and most importantly, we will be united with Christ in a resurrection like His.

Prayer:

Dear God, we sometimes struggle to see your abounding grace in a world so divided. Help us to remember how we are to be united with you in a resurrection like your Son’s. May we see your grace at work in everyone we meet. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Evan Norman

Tuesday, November 29

Psalm 124

It is no coincidence that Psalm 124 is my Advent assignment.

From “The Message”: “If God hadn’t been for us — all together now, Israel, sing out — If God hadn’t been for us when everyone went against us, we would have been swallowed alive by their violent anger, swept away by the flood of rage, drowned in the torrent; we would have lost our lives in the wild, raging water. Oh, blessed be God! He didn’t go off and leave us. He didn’t abandon us defenseless, helpless as a rabbit in a pack of snarling dogs. We’ve flown free from their fangs, free of their traps, free as a bird. Their grip is broken; we’re free as a bird in flight. God’s strong name is our help, the same God who made heaven and earth.”

It is also no coincidence that Advent falls so closely after the presidential election. There is so much fear and pain in our community, a sense of uncertainty. Please allow me to remind us all what Advent really means and perhaps offer you comfort in how, over the years, Advent has served as a timely reminder that something better is coming, and love does indeed prevail.

From Christianity.com: “Advent symbolizes the present situation of the church in these ‘last days’ (Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:2) as God’s people wait for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God’s past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis they called for God once again to act for them. In the same way, the church, during Advent, looks back upon Christ’s coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when he returns for his people. In this light, the Advent hymn ‘O Come, O Come, Emmanuel’ perfectly represents the church’s cry during the Advent season.”

Prayer:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.” Amen.

Megan Carvajal

Wednesday, November 30

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25:31-46 has always been special for me. Since Jane and I were first married, we have had a special love for working with and supporting international students and friends. These aren't necessarily among the "least of these" as Christ describes in Matthew, but they need care and compassion. We've had 14 International Exchange Students live with us. We've had more than 1,200 internationals in our home. We've been able to keep in touch with many of them. Our three sons have been International Exchange Students: in Spain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Starting in the 1980s we became involved with helping refugees. This started when I met with the Presbyterian Refugee Resettlement office in Atlanta. I came back to our church in Houston and suggested we sponsor a refugee family. Our first was from Vietnam. This was rather easy, so we decided to do it again, this time with a family from Laos. This was more challenging; there were six of them and they had no English. But the Lord really stepped in and introduced me to a woman who had been a missionary in Thailand, where the Thai language is very similar to the Laotian language. She not only spoke Laotian, she was also interested in ministering to them. Together we founded a Lao Christian ministry, which became the First Lao Presbyterian Church of Houston. The Lord certainly works in strange and wonderful ways. We ended up helping to sponsor more than 30 refugees from Laos.

Now the Lord is helping us with refugee resettlement here in Austin, with a wonderful team from Central Presbyterian Church. We are working on our fourth refugee family (one from Cuba, two from Burma, and now one coming from Syria). Thanks to God.

Prayer:

Dear God, Advent seems a perfect time to welcome a new refugee family to Austin. Please be with our CPC Welcome Team as we prepare for this family who has lost so much and needs so much as they settle in and work to build a new life in the U.S.A.

Cleon Dunham

Thursday, December 1

Psalm 72:1-7

Christmas is my favorite holiday because Christmas Eve and Christmas morning always bring me back to my childhood. I loved the excitement of the Christmas Eve service at First Presbyterian Church East Aurora. I loved the candles that we lit in the sanctuary those nights and the smell when the candles were blown out. I loved the way it made me feel to hear the choir sing, "O Holy Night." And, of course, I loved the excitement that loomed in the crisp, cold air the next morning when presents were scattered under our tree.

I'm grateful for these memories and even more grateful that I have been able to continue these church memories with every church I have been part of since my childhood.

Christmas in the church allows us to create traditions with our families and friends and to practice the ritual that brings time together. We sing our Christmas hymns, which are mostly written in the present tense: "Jesus Christ *is* born today." "Silent night, holy night, all *is* calm, all *is* bright." "O little town of Bethlehem how still *we see* thee lie." Church worship is one of the few places where we live into the ritual of time. Bringing the past (as in those hymns) into the present.

My prayer for you this holiday season is that you make memories with your friends and family, savor the traditions of the past, and if you don't have any, then create some. This is the season we celebrate God incarnate, the Word made flesh, then, now, and always. May you remember, feel, and experience the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christmas this season.

Prayer:

Give all leaders your justice, O God. Defend the cause of those who are poor or in need. As the sun endures, and as the moon glows bright, may all experience the miracle of the Word made flesh. May we feel refreshed like the rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. May righteousness flourish and peace abound. Blessed be the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be God's glorious name forever; may God's glory fill the whole earth. Amen and amen.

Kim Rogers

Friday, December 2
Isaiah 30:19-26

We live in very troubled times. That has been true in other eras, but now we have technology that causes us to witness the disasters around the world and here at home. Where is God in all this?

I once heard about a pastor who was listening to the sadness of a man who had lost his wife and daughter. The man was asking how God could let this happen. The pastor was moved to tears and answered, "God would be the first to weep."

Surely God is weeping now as he sees his creation being swallowed by greed, hatred, and fear. Even in the Old Testament where God is often seen as punishing, Isaiah reminds us that "The Lord longs to be gracious to his peoples."

How can we as Christians respond to this troubled world? We must remember that God is with us. God weeps with us and hopes with us, and showers us with love in bad times as well as good. Advent is a season of hope. In every human being there is that divine spark that can give us hope for the abundance God has promised through the birth of the Christ Child.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we are grateful for your comforting love even in these times of adversity. Guide us in doing all we can to heal our troubled world, but also to humbly accept our limitations. Guide our national and world leaders to find that divine spark, enabling them to put aside self-interest and work toward peace on earth.

Jane Markley

Saturday, December 3

John 1:19-28

“Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”

John the Baptist answered, “I am a voice crying out in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord, make the Lord’s way straight.”

What do you say about yourself? Who are you?

Now comes Advent. The first blast of cooler air disrupts our regular routines. We have settled for our current reality, and gotten somewhat comfortable with it. We are close to accepting everything as it is — then something new and different comes.

Surely we don’t think Advent and Christmas are new and different, do we? Oh, yes indeed! A new time is just around the corner. Advent is not simply the beginning of a new church year. Advent signals the hope and possibility of a fresh start, a re-settling of our lives. Questions about the future hang over us. What will happen next year — both in our lives and in the nation’s life?

Advent is about the transformation of our hearts and minds so that we may prepare the way of the Lord. Our words and actions can help transform battlefields into gardens, and instruments of war into tools to feed and clothe those in greatest need. That would be the way to truly make the Lord’s way straight. What will you say about yourself?

Prayer:

O Lord our God, we are grateful that we stand at the beginning of a new season with new possibilities. Open our hearts and minds to opportunities for giving, opportunities to be new people, opportunities to be changed. May each of us make straight the way of the Lord. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Thomas W. Estes

Sunday, December 4, Second Sunday in Advent
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. I ask myself, how can this be? It is only the fourth day of December. It's just three weeks before Christmas Day, the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Does this make us feel we have even less time to do all those things classified as getting ready for Christmas?

The scriptures for today made me stop and think about how often I can lose myself in the doing, rather than the preparation for Jesus' coming. Instead of all the lists and the fast pace needed to accomplish the tasks on the list, can I just stop and absorb the meaning of the scriptures for this second Sunday of Advent. Can I get ready by listening to Paul, who writes: "The purpose of scripture is for our instruction so that as we patiently endure, so we might be encouraged to hold onto our hope and accept one another."

Can I get ready by learning from Psalm 72 that God is righteous — he is good, and we as his children are good. This past year I have worried so, and fretful thoughts have seemed at times to overwhelm me — the election, the fractious nature of our country, crises around the world, stresses in my children's lives. I have tried to be in control rather than letting go and trusting in the goodness of the Lord and his people.

I pray today that I can work through my anxious state, be patient, and prepare for Jesus.

Prayer:

Oh Lord of hope, fill me with joy and peace. Help me stay centered during Advent and through all days, to look inside myself and find the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Carol Arnold

Monday, December 5

Psalm 122

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say,

“Peace be within you.”

This is one of the Morning Psalms for today, and it's a wonderful way to begin any day — thoughts of peace to keep in one's heart, peace for the city, peace for relatives and friends. And, of course, once you've started there, it's easy to wish peace to others, the friends you haven't yet met, and peace to other cities and states and countries, and pretty soon you've broadened your wishes to all, peace to all, peace to everyone.

But then you're driving to work, and someone cuts you off. You get to school, and three teachers in a row give pop quizzes. Your child reports that all his socks are dirty. Your mother declines to drive you to school. The mail carrier leaves the box open, and your letters get rained on. This is not a peaceful day for you, and those last shreds of peace within you are disappearing.

So, take a second to remember two very important things. The first is that peace is always within you. It may be hard to find, it may be buried under a hundred un-peaceful thoughts, it may be covered by an un-peaceful face, but it's still within you. The second is, someone, somewhere in the world, perhaps even someone you know, is saying “Peace be within you,” and extending that wish to the entire world, including you.

Meditation:

I can make peace happen. When it is hidden or covered, I will find peace. As I find peace within me, I can find peace within others. As I face un-peaceful people and un-peaceful times, I will face them with peace. For the sake of all, may peace be within.

Win Bent

Tuesday, December 6
Isaiah 9:6, 11:1-10

Isaiah 9:6 — For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us. And the government will rest on His shoulders. And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Prayer:

Come Prince of Peace, fill our hearts with your peace, and guide us to be messengers of that peace. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7
Matthew 12:33-37

The people of La Habra Heights, California, annually celebrate an Avocado Festival in honor of the Hass Avocado. Almost all commercially sold avocados are of the Hass variety. La Habra Heights is home to the mother-tree of the Haas avocados, which continue to be reproduced through grafting.

Grafting is the horticultural practice of joining the tissue of two plants together. The plants then grow together forming one body. The roots of many different plants have had pieces of the Hass avocado tree grafted onto them, allowing them to produce the bumpy, purple avocado that we see at any local grocer. Sometimes these roots can introduce their own influence to the fruit produced by the grafted stalk from the Hass avocado.

We begin life by taking root. As we grow we learn about life, grafting new worldviews onto our hearts. Some of these worldviews produce life-giving behaviors and practices while others produce behaviors and practices destructive to ourselves and others. Jesus tells us that our intentions shape our speech, and our speech shapes our actions. If we hope to change our words or our actions, we must first investigate the worldview or perspective creating the product.

The words of Jesus Christ are like the branch of a Hass avocado. When grafted to our core, they produce a fruit that is respected as life giving by many. While our roots may influence the fruit, the fruit is still good, offering its own twist on the classic flavor paired with the familiar nutrition.

Prayer:

O life-giving God, graft upon my heart a worldview that may blossom love, joy, and kindness when the world is bitter and sour. Breathe into my roots, and make them strong so that I may weather the storms of life. And help me produce in abundance, so that I may share with all of your children. Amen.

Austin Young

Thursday, December 8

Psalm 146:5-10

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob ... who keeps faith forever.” There is so much stress during this time of year. We are too busy finding the right decorations, we spend too much money on material stuff, we eat too much. We forget the importance of being mindful of what God desires of and for us. But God does not forget us — God keeps faith forever.

“Happy are those ... whose hope is in the Lord their God.” Advent is all about the hope of Jesus and the world his coming will usher in. We want to hope — for a better world, a kinder, gentler world where tomorrow will be better than today.

The Psalmist declares “The Lord sets the prisoner free.” Jesus, too, told us that he had come to set the prisoner free. We long for that freedom — from stress, from fear, from the uncertainty that surrounds our daily lives.

But the Psalmist doesn’t say “you will be happy when” or “the Lord will set the prisoners free.” The words the Psalmist uses say right now — “happy are” and “the Lord sets them free” — right now! God is working in the world right now. God is being faithful to us right now.

How will we use this time of Advent, this period of waiting? Will we wait to be happy, depending on material goods to satisfy us? Will we wait to be free, longing for better times in the past, worried about an unknown future? Or will we remember that God is faithful and helpful and hopeful, and we can be happy and free right now?

Prayer:

Creator of all that is good, thank you for being faithful to us, your creation. Forgive us for forgetting you in the midst of the season’s busyness. Help us to let go of our fear, and fill us instead with hope and the knowledge that you are in charge and faithful to us forever. Amen.

Robin Manning

Friday, December 9
Psalm 146:5-10

Psalm 146 is one of five psalms known as the Hallelujah psalms because it begins and ends with Hallelujah. Hallelujah is a Hebrew compound word consisting of “Halelu” which means “Praise Ye” and “Jah” which is a shortened form of “YHWH,” one of God’s names. It is an invocation to all of us to praise God. Today’s reading tells us that those who seek God’s help will receive it.

I had always known that I wanted to be a mother but I also wanted to take time to establish myself in my career. Before I knew it, many years had passed, and when I finally decided I was ready, I found that it might not be possible for me to have a child. I was placed on a waiting list to see a specialist.

And I also turned to prayer. I was taught that when you pray, you should pray as if you have already received that which you seek. Every morning before dawn, I sat at my kitchen table and I lit a candle. I read my Bible and I prayed this prayer, “Dear Lord, I praise you and I thank you for the blessing of a child.” I prayed through many ups and downs, through hopes and disappointments, and even through a miscarriage. But God heard my prayers and those of others who prayed with me and for me. In time, my prayers were answered.

A few days from now, I will be celebrating the 11th birthday of my little miracle. Hallelujah!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, in you all things are possible. We praise you, and we thank you for unknown blessings already on their way. Amen.

Gloria Walls

Saturday, December 10

Psalm 146:5-10

As Advent approaches, our country finds itself in a time of change. For many this season of change involves grief and fear. For some, it involves relief in the hope that the changes they long for will materialize under new governance. For all of us, there is reason to pause, as we have endured a season of public rhetoric so vitriolic, so full of blame, that we have lost sight of the difference between positioning and dialogue, and the fact that no power or principality can determine our own potential for human transformation. The question now becomes not whether but how we move toward transformation, regardless of governing power, for we do this work not for them, but for and with each other.

The Psalmist reminds us our power resides in the Lord, and the Lord remains faithful forever. The Lord upholds the cause of the oppressed, feeds the hungry, sets the prisoners free, watches over the foreigner, sustains the fatherless, cares for the widow, and frustrates the way of the wicked. Help us, God, to lean into your work. Show us what there is to do and diminish our faintness of heart. Give us wisdom and courage to stand up, to work toward your kingdom, regardless of the cost. Provide us light and hope in times of darkness.

The powerful search for light in darkness is key to the celebration of Advent, and instructive in this time of confusion and, for many, disbelief. We anticipate the birth of Christ, the most impossible of impossibilities in the most unlikely time and place. It was a radical beginning, the birth of joys and challenges, and a narrative that invites our participation still today — an opportunity to believe.

From “The Glorious Impossible” by Madeline L’Engle:

“And so the life of Jesus began as it would end, with the impossible. When he was a grown man he would say to his disciples, ‘For human beings it is impossible. For God nothing is impossible.’ Possible things are easy to believe. The glorious impossibles are what bring joy to our hearts, hope to our lives, songs to our lips.”

Martha Lynn Coon

Sunday, December 11, Third Sunday in Advent
Psalm 146:5-10, Matthew 11:2-11

These scriptures illustrate God's glory, power, and compassion. God cares for those in need like the widows and the fatherless. He lifts up those who are bowed down. Jesus came to do God's work — he restores sight to the blind.

We don't have the power to physically restore someone's sight. However, we do possess the power to help people heal. Our power comes from our compassion, defined as "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering." To be compassionate is to do more than feel distressed by another's suffering. Being compassionate requires taking action to alleviate the suffering.

Psychologists are studying the power of compassion to improve our health, our general well-being, and even our careers. One of the ways compassion generates those benefits is by creating strong and meaningful social connections.

We are focused on accomplishing our list of tasks or the latest challenge or problem at work, at home or with one of our good causes. We admire the person who is the busiest. We feel we have failed if we aren't busy. But this focus on being busy all the time causes us to miss opportunities to be compassionate and connect with others.

Let's focus, instead, on the people we encounter. A compassionate act can be something as simple as engaging the person in a conversation. We all know how healing a caring talk can be. Any positive interaction helps, even a smile. Compassion is contagious. If we act compassionately in everything we do and with everyone we meet, we will enhance our own health and well-being and the health and well-being of others. Everyone benefits when we live compassionately. God will be pleased.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we are all so busy. We have many competing demands for our time and attention. We feel constantly harried and hurried. Help us to slow down and remember that our relationships with You and other people are most important. Remind us and help us to live compassionately.

Virginia Sampson

Monday, December 12

Psalm 42

What do you long for? What is your heart's deepest desire? As this Psalm of David so eloquently expresses, God alone can quench our spiritual thirst and restore us to joy and peace, even in the midst of crushing disappointment, threats, and torment. Despite these challenges, there is something deeper that washes over us and calls us to praise God and to choose hope. This is not the theology of "don't worry, be happy." Instead, we are invited to embrace the fullness of our pain, sorrow, and hopelessness so that a deeper knowing can come through us.

As a child, and for many years thereafter, I saw Advent as merely a prelude to Christmas, a time to count down the days on Advent calendars until the exciting morning of presents and treats. It was the happy ending that I knew was coming and a welcome respite from the feeling that things were not quite the way they should be. Now that I'm gaining some spiritual maturity, I realize that our Advent journey does, indeed, lead to the birth of a Savior, but one who will endure pain and loss so that we might know hope and joy.

Prayer:

Lord, we long for your presence in our hearts and in our lives.

Revive our souls with your spirit that we may praise your name despite our hardships and live in the hope of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. Amen.

John Spence

Tuesday, December 13

Psalm 42

Psalm 42 depicts the depression Christians may feel during the Advent season and day to day. Our faith is tested by nonbelievers all around us. The birth of Christ should be a joyous celebration.

Commercialization of Christmas has diminished our joy causing many to suffer from depression and doubt during the Advent season. The joyful exchange of “Merry Christmas” is not always an acceptable greeting. During this Advent season what is a believer to do but feel sad, discouraged, hopeless, and isolated.

God assures us through the writings of the New Testament that he is loving, forgiving, and merciful. These assurances are gifts from God that will renew our energy and restore our happiness and lift the veil of depression.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, during this Advent season let us be mindful of why we celebrate Christmas. Despite our feelings of despair and hopelessness we know through your grace, mercy, and love that this is a time of joy. Help us take the gifts you have graciously given us to share with all, especially those who feel hopeless, sad, discouraged, and isolated. We ask your mercy to lift us up to feel the joy of your love.

Ann Eichelberger and Barbara Farmer

Wednesday, December 14

Psalm 42

The past few months have been somewhat stressful for our family, and the recent elections added icing to that cake. For me it was a shock to realize how deep and broad is the divide in our nation. The level of open anger and hatred stunned me; my friends and family are in disbelief and despair.

Psalm 42 conveys similar despair. The Psalmist's soul thirsts for God as the deer pants for water. Overwhelmed by sorrow, he has eaten nothing but his own tears day and night. Taunted and oppressed by his enemies, he feels that his afflictions might drown him: "My soul is downcast within me ... all your waves and breakers have swept over me."

Like perhaps every other person on earth, I feel at times forgotten by God. How can He allow such bad things to happen to me and the people I care about, surrounding us with enemies and tribulation? But I realize that — particularly in terms of elections — many people who made choices different from mine also felt surrounded by enemies and abandoned by God and made their choices hoping the results would improve their lives and those of the people they love.

In this time of Advent, we would do well to remember the message of love that Jesus brought: love for all of God's creation, not just those people and things we choose. Perhaps this moment of turbulence and vast division is intended to teach us that it is finally time to go deep and heal the schisms at their source, finding common ground and truly caring for one another.

"Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." God is with us, and things will get better.

Prayer:

Eternal God, you are always with us, even when we are suffering and wonder at your absence. You love all of us, even when we fight among ourselves. Grant us the faith to recognize your presence in the hardest of times, and the love and courage to take care of one another with kindness. Amen.

Karin Ascot

Thursday, December 15
Galatians 3:23-29

Throughout our journeys as Christians we come in contact with strict interpretations and statements regarding the text transcribed in our Bibles. However, our abilities to construct, deconstruct, and share interpretations of such writings and beliefs and practices are what make us unique in the eyes of God, instead of the distinguishing features we seem to hold near and dear to our hearts. In fact, when it comes to God seeing us living out our lives, he sees neither Greek nor Syrian, neither Muslim nor Jew, neither man nor woman, neither sick nor healthy, and neither hateful nor charming. Such factors, which we highly regard in terms of distinguishing ourselves from others, are of no consequence to the mother of us all.

To me it is amazing how children do not seem to see these little things adults notice, meaning that during our lives we have allowed ourselves to be influenced in the sense of picking out differences between ourselves and other people. As a child I never saw my friends in a different light or a different way based on what they believed or practiced, or what they looked like. I always saw them as the people they truly were. Even today, experiencing different values, thoughts, and ideas from peers and people in general I make an effort to visualize them as the kind and loving people they truly are.

This Advent season I encourage you to take a step back and realize that we are all children of God with the same faith and passion for what we believe in, and that no matter our races, our religions, or our beliefs, we are all in our own ways faithfully unique and loving.

Prayer:

Giver and Redeemer, allow us to break free of disciplinarian laws, and the need to be justified by our faith in you. We ask you to help us see the world through your eyes, without divisions and distinctions. For we are all in your image and heirs to your grace. Amen.

Luis E. Ortiz-Colón

Friday, December 16
Galatians 4:1–7

In these times of political turmoil, these verses provide a salve to my soul. They assure me that I am a child of God and, through God, an heir. Although the world may see terrible violence, hate, disastrous wars of our making, and destruction of the earth as a result of seeking greater power and greed, we are assured that as heirs of God, we are blessed with hope to conquer evil.

In Matthew 19:13-15, children were taken to Jesus and the disciples tried to stop them, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” Jesus loves not only the little children but us as well, for as children of God, we have God’s protection and can pray to God for guidance in dealing with our earthly challenges.

When those challenges seem to be overwhelming, we must remember our faith and act in good faith and hope to improve unjust conditions in whatever ways we are able to do so.

Prayer:

Dear God, remember us as your children who need guidance, strength, courage, faith, and wisdom to do your work. Light our way in the storms of time and protect us from evildoers. Help us to help others. Thank you for the many blessings you give us.
Amen.

Gloria Lenoir

Saturday, December 17
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Pretty much everything in life reminds me of a song. This Psalm calls to mind excerpts from “Fallen” by Sarah McLachlan:

*Heaven bend to take my hand
And lead me through the fire
Be the long awaited answer
To a long and painful fight
...Though I've tried, I've fallen,
I have sunk so low
I messed up
Better I should know
So don't come round here
And tell me I told you so.*

The God of Psalm 80 has a lot on His hands. The people have repeatedly turned against God, and though the commentators do not particularly agree on what the issues were, the result is that they are once again in the midst of calamity. The people feel — or perceive — God’s anger, recognizing they’ve messed up, and the psalmist implores God repeatedly to “restore us, shine your face upon us, and we will be saved.”

Advent is a time of great anticipation. We tend to anticipate the coming of the Christ child with hope, filled with wonder and goodness. Perhaps the Psalmist here is also compelling us to make room for reflection on the calamities we have created in our lives. As we wait for a silent and holy night, let us reflect on the darkness we create and the darkness around us. As we ask for God to shine upon us, let us also radiate our light outward, without discrimination or judgment.

God reaches out, forgives, and restores us into everlasting goodness. There’s no “I told you so,” only the promise of salvation and the light of a new day. When we fall or wander, when we distance ourselves, all we have to do is ask, and we are returned to the welcoming radiance of a loving God.

Prayer:

Oh God, during Advent we wait for you. Let that waiting be active. Let it be filled with the blessing of your forgiveness. Just as we ask for your face to shine on us when we’ve messed up, let us radiate your saving and forgiving presence to all. Amen.

Nancy Lesch

Sunday, December 18, Fourth Sunday in Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

Don't be afraid. "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife" is what the angel said to Joseph in a dream. "Don't be afraid" is also what the angel said to the shepherds watching their flocks by night.

"Don't be afraid," is what Jesus said to Peter when He was walking on the water, what He said to Jairus when his daughter was dying, and what He said to the disciples when He was about to get killed. Don't be afraid.

But I am afraid, sometimes. I am afraid of my momma dying. I am afraid of the direction our country is leaning. I am afraid that the children in my charge will not learn the faith. I'm afraid that I've grown too fat to be thought beautiful, that I'm a bad mother, that I'm contributing to global warming, that I won't make my rent this month, that I'm too old to learn new things, that racism will never be undone, and on and on and on — ugh. The fear is paralyzing and exhausting.

So "Don't be afraid," is what the angels say to me this season. "Don't be afraid," the Spirit whispers, "God won't let you fall." As scary as this world is sometimes, God is still in charge of it. And She's about to give you the most precious gift the world has ever known — the Child of Peace. (*Deep breath.*) The Child of Hope. (*Deep breath.*) The Child of Love (*deep breath*) is coming. Don't be afraid.

Prayer:

Emmanuel, God with us, your very name brings comfort and strength. Your light illuminates the darkest corners of the world. In this moment, I open my heart to You, that You might fill it with trust and courage. In You, we are fearless. Amen.

Carolina Treviño

Monday, December 19

Psalm 33

From The New English Bible, verses 1–21:

Shout for joy before the Lord, you who are righteous; praise comes well from the upright. Give thanks to the Lord on the harp; sing him psalms to the ten-stringed lute. Sing to him a new song; strike up with all your art and shout in triumph.

The word of the Lord holds true, and all his work endures. The Lord loves righteousness and justice, his love unending fills the earth. The Lord's word made the heavens, all the host of heaven was made at his command. He gathered the sea like water in a goatskin; he laid up the deep in his store-chambers. Let the whole world fear the Lord, and all on earth stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it was; he commanded, and it stood for firm.

The Lord brings the plans of nations to nothing; he frustrates the counsel of the peoples. But the Lord's own plans shall stand forever, and his counsel endure for all generations. Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he has chosen for his own possession. The Lord looks out from heaven, he sees the whole race of men; he surveys from his dwelling-place all the inhabitants of earth. It is he who fashions the hearts of all alike; who discerns all that they do.

A king is not saved by a great army, nor a warrior delivered by great strength. A man cannot trust his horse to save him, nor can it deliver him for all its strength. The Lord's eyes are turned toward those who fear him, toward those who hope for his unending love to deliver them from death, to keep them alive in famine.

We have waited eagerly for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. For in him our hearts are glad, because we have trusted in his holy name.

Prayer:

Verse 22: Let thy unending love, O Lord, rest upon us, as we have put our hope in thee. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

As I reflect on the 2016 Advent season, it evokes feelings similar to those I experience during the celebration of a new year, except with a different focus. The focus is not on myself so much as on Jesus past and Jesus present. And in that examination, Advent is a wonderful opportunity to examine my relationship with Jesus past and present.

In Hannah's prayer, she talks about ways she surrendered to God her innermost desires. God took away her ability to give birth. In that taking away, God created an even greater desire, "The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up."

Advent not only reminds me of the power of our Lord from the past, the dying and resurrection of Jesus, but the importance of claiming that power in my day-to-day life. We have desires that sometimes only God knows. And our job is to trust a little bit more each day that nothing can be too great to be overcome, or if not overcome, then used for good.

In Hannah's prayer, there is one example after another of what our Lord will do. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. "For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's, on them he has set the world." Every Advent I get the opportunity to examine my life, and I can better know that no matter what is happening in my life, whether I am feeling barren or full, it is time to focus on the immense power and love of Jesus our Lord.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us during Advent to surrender the innermost desires of our hearts to you. Help us to reflect on our connection with Jesus past and present. Help us to feel your love and power, especially during Advent, and to take the memory of Advent with us in the coming year. Amen.

J'Lane Spence

Wednesday, December 21

1 Samuel 2:1-10

At some of our darkest times, many of us have asked “Why?” Others may have recited the Lord’s Prayer as a way to cope. Yet, how many of us have — in our sadness — acknowledged all that God has done and continues to do for us?

The back story for today’s devotional is that Hannah bargained with God. If God gave Hannah a son, she would dedicate the child to God. When Samuel is old enough to leave her, Hannah takes him to the tabernacle in Shiloh. There the High Priest Eli takes over the raising of Samuel. In this darkest of times, Hannah gives thanks to God for his work — strengthening the feeble, giving children to barren women, protecting his faithful servants, silencing the wicked, and dealing with those who oppose him. The song ends with the prophecy of Jesus.

At this writing there is much angst at the change in leadership of this country. Friends from outside the U.S. have written to ask if we have lost our minds. The holiday season should be a joyful time, but that may not be the case. As the new leadership assembles its team, our uneasiness grows. For some, this is a new atmosphere — not being enthusiastic about the change in leadership. For others, like me, we know what it is like “to be the uninvited guest at the party.” We shall persevere.

Although we are sad, we can still rejoice in the birth of our Savior. We can celebrate not only God’s greatest gift to us, but all that He has done. Ultimately, we know that although we are entering a dark period, there is another election (and a court system) and that we will be better for the experience.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for all that you have done. Your power has enriched the lives of the downtrodden, brought children to the barren, led to a better time. Your power will continue to see us forward to that next land. Amen.

Peggy Terry

Thursday, December 22

Luke 1:39-56

Our text reading in Luke is Mary's poetic response to the news that she will bear a child as from God who will do great things. Mary goes to her cousin Elizabeth and poetically expresses her joy and wonder at this gift she bears for the world. "The Gift Child" is my poem reflecting the meaning of Mary's gift to all of us. How can each of us express the meaning of the Gift Child in our lives, in our words, in our response to God?

Black baby?
Brown baby?
White baby?
Jew.

Males under,
Sons under,
Kings under
Two.

Crowds hailing
Him hailing
Lord hailing
Jew.

Whose baby?
Mary's baby,
Our baby
Too.

Egypt passing.
Time passing.
Jesus passing,
Grew.

King carrying
Cross carrying
Jesus carrying
You.

World broken,
Water broken
Silence broken—
Hue!

River flowing
Overflowing—
God flowing
Through.

Cross lifting
Jesus lifting
Soldiers lifting
View.

Shepherds searching,
Herold searching
Magi, searching
Clue.

Jesus choosing
Some choosing
Men choosing
Few.

Stone raising
Body raising
Life raising
New.

Spirit warned
Magi, warned
Mary, warned,
Flew.

Came preaching
Love preaching
Faith preaching
True.

Black baby?
Brown baby?
White baby?
Jew.

Herod plotting
Death, plotting
killers, plotting,
Slew.

Life, healing
Men, healing
Women, healing
Drew.

Whose baby?
Mary's baby.
Our baby
Too.

Prayer:

Ever present God, how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So You impart to human hearts the blessings of Your heaven. No ear may hear Your coming, but in this world of sin where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in. O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.

Kent C. Miller

Friday, December 23
Luke 1:46b-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

So begins this text, which we know commonly as Mary's song, the Magnificat. Mary sings of all that God has done, and she proclaims her role in this work because of who God is. Feminist critics point out the importance of the context of Mary's song within her visit with Elizabeth, who has just welcomed Mary into her home and cries out in joy, recognizing Mary as the mother of God. It is within this relationship and welcome that Mary teaches us of her faith in the God we will soon come to know through Jesus Christ, the God who is saving, merciful, and allied with those considered lowly by the world. A feminist lens draws us to the possibility that this *when* of Mary's song is nearly as important as the *what*. It is in relationship, within the solidarity of the sacred community these women share, that the details of God's nature are proclaimed.

In my time as the social worker intern here at Central, I have gotten to spend time with some of CPC's neighbors who are experiencing homelessness in Austin. I have been welcomed into sacred community with many individuals. It is in these relationships that I am hearing people's songs and learning of God's work, of God's beauty revealed in Her people. Many days I get to be the Elizabeth who listens to the song, and occasionally I even feel like the Mary who ponders and proclaims my own role in the work of God's kingdom.

Mary's song reminds us, as we await Christ's birth, to consider joyfully our role in God's work, to welcome and be welcomed into sacred solidarity, to remember that, as Kim often says, where there is no way, God will make a way.

Prayer:

God of many names, as the hope of Advent builds, remind us of who we are in your world. Help us to grow closer in solidarity and relationship with your people. Open our ears to your truth. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Katherine Atkins

Saturday, December 24
Luke 1:46-55, 67-80
Isaiah 9:2-7, Isaiah 60:1-6

These verses reflect and repeat and resound with images of darkness over all the world. We walk in darkness; it covers the earth, and is thick over the peoples. We sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death; and we live in a land of deep darkness. So many of us at certain times or so much of the time dwell in and find ourselves within this world of darkness. The darkness seems to be everywhere. But these passages also show us the light. They shine with the promise that God delivers.

When we are in times of darkness, political or personal, or unable to find the difference – there is God. God is with us, shining that light upon us and showing us what we need to see: the light. The light of hope. The light of life. The light of a baby given for us, a baby given so that our lives might be saved.

On you light has shined; the dawn from on high has broken upon you, giving you light. Take heed to these words, and look to the light. Look to the light tonight of a babe born so long ago, whose light still shines for all of us. For you. It is your light reflected back through the ages.

“Lift up your eyes and look around.” “Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

As Mary said of herself, let it be so of you: Let your soul magnify the Lord, and let your spirit rejoice in God your Savior.

Prayer:

Loving God, show us your light. Right now. Open us to your light, freely given to us. Given to us in your child, Jesus. Let us see and feel and taste and touch your light that is our light. Help us to magnify you with our very souls. Help us tonight as we feel the darkness, and be with us tomorrow as we welcome your child, our light. Amen.

Kevin Estes

Sunday, December 25

Isaiah 62:6-12

The hustle and bustle of the holidays can make us forget what we are truly celebrating. The joy of Christmas is so much more than the presents, the decorations, or even the wonderful food we share. We, the people of God, have been set as watchmen to proclaim the glory of the birth of Christ. Once the gifts are unwrapped, the mess has been cleaned up, and the Christmas feast has been enjoyed, I always take time to refresh my soul, heart, and mind with the knowledge that God shared His wondrous love by sending His Son to earth to be a beacon of love and hope for all people. It is our privilege to share this moment of hope and love in our lives with all those around us.

I was lucky enough to have found my way to Central Presbyterian. And during the Christmas Season in 2008, I remember crying during every service as I found my way back to my belief in the promise of love and joy that is personified in the birth of Christ. In a version of the song "Mary Had a Baby/Go Tell It On the Mountain," there is the following verse:

*"When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day
And I asked the Lord to help me
And He showed me the way."*

When the hustle and bustle of Christmas is done, I remember the greatest gift of all is the loving grace given to us all. I rejoice knowing that the love of God is renewed in my heart and soul.

Prayer:

Dear Lord may we accept the joy and love of the greatest gift the world has ever known. May the knowledge that God loves us so much that he sent His Son as a beacon of light for the world refresh our souls and hearts as we continue our journey.

Steve Whichard



Central Presbyterian Church

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