

2020 Advent Devotional

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church



INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends,

This has been a year unlike any other we have experienced. Months ago we realized that life, and especially our life as a congregation, would not return to anything that looks or feels normal by the time Advent and Christmas were upon us.

And so for an unusual year, we decided to do yet another thing we have never done before — create a daily devotional written by members and staff of our congregation so that we might be connected with one another during the dark and the light of the Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seasons.

The season of Advent is one of anticipation — anticipating the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and anticipating the coming to earth again of our Savior Jesus Christ. These reflections were written this spring and early summer as we all sat patiently — and not so patiently — waiting to know what life in our families, our community and our world would be like.

Each week you will find three things: a scripture reading to highlight the themes of the season — hope, peace, love, joy and light; a simple candle-lighting liturgy for you to use at home with your families so that you might mark the weeks of Advent around your own Advent wreath together; and reflections on these themes from members of our church community.

In these devotions I can hear voices asking questions about how we will emerge from these strange days changed in some way. How will we be better? How will we, as Christians, create a better world? This is our Advent work — to look for signs of God's Kingdom to come, just as we ourselves lay the foundation for the building of that Kingdom in this place.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to this devotional.

May these personal reflections and the reflection of the light from your candles this season show us the way to dwell in the light of Christ and do all that we can to shine that same light in the dark places of our world.

Peace and Grace to you this Advent Season,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'R' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'a'.

The Rev. Rebecca Kirkpatrick,
Associate Pastor for Adult Education and Mission

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF HOPE

This week we light the candle of hope. The Advent wreath is made of evergreens that remain green all year long to remind us of the never-ending hope we have in God to make all things new.

Voice One: Because Jesus is with us when we gather in his name, our home has become the house of the Lord.

Voice Two: Let us call on the name of the Lord our God, who does awesome deeds we do not expect.

Voice One: Let your face shine upon us, O God.

Voice Two: So that we may hope that you come to us.

Voice One: We light this candle, a sign of hope in a world full of shadows.

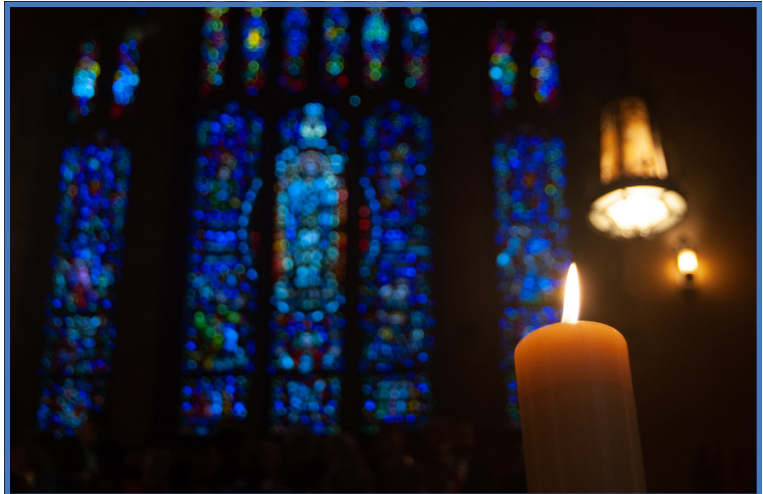
Voice Two: We are ready to welcome the Light of the World into our lives.

Voice One: Jesus said, "While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of Light." (John 12:36)

Voice Two: May this candlelight bless our home with hope.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, fill this house
and fill our hearts with
hope in you so that we
may show forth your love
to the world. Amen.*



1ST SUNDAY IN ADVENT - NOVEMBER 29

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

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

Have you ever read a passage that seems to contradict itself and makes you wonder what you are supposed to learn from it? One minute I am as forgettable and temporary as a withering flower and the next I am as precious as a lamb? As I began to read this scripture passage, that great old song by the rock band Kansas, *Dust in the Wind*, came into my head. It's so easy to see your life as fleeting and meaningless. Or you can see it for the precious gift, with a purpose, that it is. Genesis speaks of coming from and returning to dust. But I believe; from God's heart we came, and to God's heart we will return, and in the meantime, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

People often ask, "Why do you bother decorating for Christmas? It is so much work! Why do you waste time creating a runway of garland and candles for small children in homemade costumes to saunter down? Why do you spend so much time rushing around, all for just one day?" For me, it is simple. It is our responsibility to bring hope and joy into this world. We can do it with glittering paper stars, food for those in need, or with a thoughtful gift. When we create hope and joy for others, Thy will be done....

I recently came across a song from my teen years, *Hammer & Nail*, by the Indigo Girls. As I listened I realized it might be an anthem for my life. One of the great lines is:

*Now I know a refuge never grows
From a chin in a hand in a thoughtful pose
Gotta tend the earth if you want a rose.*

It's easy to feel like the "dust in the wind" of God's Breath and say, "It's all so hopeless; nothing will ever change; what's the point...?" But if we want to live in a world where everyone feels as safe and loved as that precious lamb, it's time we get out of a "thoughtful pose" and get to work! By *my hand* Thy will be done.

Meggin R. Capers

Prayer: *Oh mighty Shepherd, teach us how to show your endless and lavish love to the world. Give us the strength to endure the hard days as we toil in your garden. Give us the courage to stand as upright as the fir tree, for all your children, as we work to create your kingdom on earth for all to enjoy! Watch over us, keep us safe, and open our eyes to the joys and trials of all your people and the beauty that lies within each of them, until we are in your arms again.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

The promise of our passage is part of the overarching story of Isaiah, a narrative about a people's liberation from oppression. It speaks to the entire Advent message, the coming of the Messiah. The liberation that God provides is not merely personal well-being and redemption. It is that but more. It addresses the comfort of my people. And to God, my people are the entire human family: no one is in or out. To prepare the way of the Lord is more than to passively anticipate the coming of something great and good. Preparation is not mere anticipation; it entails work. Preparing for the way of the Lord that Advent represents is more than Christmas shopping, laying out our manger scenes, baking cookies, decorating our homes, listening to the beloved music of the season, and family gatherings, as treasured as these traditions are. To prepare the way of the Lord is to actively do the Lord's work. God will not magically "feed his flock," but we as God's instruments can do that work, which is the true task of Advent. If valleys of our society are lifted up, if there are heralds of good tidings, if "Here is your God!", if "He will feed his flock like a shepherd," it is not because these things simply happen. It is because of our actions. We as individuals, as a church, and as a society, do the serious work of comfort, feeding and preparing the way of the Lord. That work, however, does not begin and end with us. It stretches across generations: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." Our Advent endeavor is to strive to be the enduring word of our God in our time and place.

Rich Allman

Prayer: *Gracious God, make us instruments of your comfort, the feeding of your flock, your lifting up of valleys, of preparing your way, and of your enduring word. Help us do the work of Advent, in the name of the coming Christ. Amen.*

“The way of righteousness is level.”

- Isaiah 26:7

“How still it is! I hear no more the busy beat of time.”

- Cardinal John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius*

In the past 10 months it seems like our lives have been filled with waiting, with stasis, inhalation and held breath. This time period also has encompassed the usual peaks and dips that none of us can avoid: pain and relief, activity and rest, peace and jabs of violence. These are the conflicts of life for which Isaiah offers comfort, while also warning us to do our best to “level the playing field” with righteousness as a way to be worthy of God’s coming.

It is human nature to seek a balance. As a Libra librarian, perhaps this longing is especially strong for me. I have always loved Newman’s description of heaven as encountered by the soul of Gerontius – a vacuum that is yet full, freed from time and yet holding earthbound humanity. This is the redeemed peace that Jesus brings and asks us to strive for. We wait with hope, as Mary waited through pregnancy’s suspended flux, for the light that meets darkness and is not overcome by it. Good tidings, indeed!

Anne Chamberlin

Prayer: Lord, grant us hope and strength to work for your truth in the world, resisting the temptation to mistake tidiness for truth, through your loving spirit. Amen.

There are moments when I feel as if I am drowning in the darkness. The world sometimes seems to be filled with so much hatred, violence, political polarization and chaos. It is on those gloomy days that I have allowed myself to forget God's promise.

When I read Isaiah 40:1-11, I am called back to God, and I feel a great sense of hope and comfort. I remember God's message and regain the courage to move forward.

I recently found myself reminiscing about an image evoked from my childhood. This memory was related to one of my church school lesson books that had beautiful artwork on the front cover. I often stared at the artist's soft pastel brush strokes, ran my fingers over the texture of the paper, and inhaled that wonderful book smell that many avid readers would recognize. I do not know what the artist intended, but this seven-year-old loved that painting and imagined it to represent the beautiful universe that God created. Just as in this scripture passage from Isaiah, it embodied that promise of hope and reward bestowed by God.

The Greek word for hope is *elpis*. The precise English translation is "expectation, anticipation, hope." *Elpis* specifically refers to the future and to the hope which we do not yet see. We must never doubt God's presence or plan.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass." This passage does not deny the brokenness of the human condition, nor does it promise that all suffering will cease in this world. But it reminds us, however, that God will send comfort and guidance, as He did in the gift of his Son, and we can be assured that His word and kingdom will stand forever.

Marian Chitester

Prayer: *Dear God, as we look to this Advent season with watchful anticipation and open hearts, please bestow upon us Your comfort and guidance. Amen.*

Hope is a gift from God that supports us every day. The season of Advent is a time when we expectantly await the birth of our Savior. Such waiting is sustained by hope: hope that Christ's birth will happen; hope that Christ's birth makes a difference; hope that we are not alone and that God is with us.

Hope can keep us going when we are ready to quit, and often there are many reasons to quit. Earlier this year I found myself despairing during the pandemic, lamenting the loss of community, connection and comradery. "What does the future hold?" I passively pondered to God. "What is the meaning of all this?"

Thankfully, such musings placed me in the collective company of fellow faithful followers from far back, including Isaiah. When it seemed that all hope was lost, I was reminded of the persistent promises spoken by the prophet: "[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom." God will not let us go; and such a promise causes us to hope.

If God will not let us go, then pain and loss are not the end. If God will not let us go, then we are never alone or abandoned. If God will not let us go, then we are always loved and valued. We can place our hope in God for these promises and more. Even during the most difficult seasons, may we be a people of hope, daring to believe the supernatural promises of God.

The Rev. Brian Ballard

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for gathering us in and holding us close. Sustain us in our waiting by the hope we have through the birth of your son, our Savior amongst us. Amen.*

Many of us have been around BMPC long enough time to remember Dr. David Watermulder, who served as our church pastor from 1962 to 1986. Isaiah 40 was one of his favorite texts, and I can remember him reciting it in a sermon many times. He was a man of strong faith and found a key to life in this passage: “Those who wait for the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Thanks, David, for your enduring witness.

As the text reads, apparently the Israelites were in somewhat of a bad situation and thought that God had ignored them; maybe he didn’t even know their plight. Sometimes we feel this way and ask, “Where is God?” Isaiah poses the timeless relevant question which comes down to us as well. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” We might ask ourselves, “Have you not heard the good news about Almighty God?” That question is the wake-up call we sometimes need to hear that can lead us in the right direction. Isaiah answers this question with a bold declaration: “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

God is the Almighty God who has made heaven and earth, and who also stands with us and loves us. He is the answer, the strength, the salvation and the companion we always need. Those who wait upon Him, that is, trust in Him, who let God be God in their lives, shall find hope and strength for the times.

David Heaton

Prayer: *I remember Dr. Watermulder saying something like this in his pastoral prayers: The Lord God is from everlasting to everlasting and underneath are His almighty arms. Amen! to that.*

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF PEACE

This week we light the candle of peace. As we light another candle on the Advent wreath, we are reminded that the peace of God shines brighter with the gift of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

Voice One: Lift up your hearts.

Voice Two: We lift them up to the Lord.

Voice One: Praise the Lord who comes to us with the promise of peace.

Voice Two: And to Jesus Christ who is our Prince of Peace.

Voice One: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing,

Voice Two: So that we may abound in hope by the power of God's Spirit.
(Romans 15:13)

Voice One: We light this candle, praying for God's peace everywhere.

Voice Two: May this candlelight bless our home with peace.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, fill this house
and fill our hearts with
your peace so that we
may be peacemakers
among our family and
friends and in the world.
Amen.*



2ND SUNDAY IN ADVENT - DECEMBER 6

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

As I listen to the first part of Handel's *Messiah*, I hear a proclamation of God's promise. The Prince of Peace will come to establish a kingdom upheld by justice and righteousness. It is for this promised incarnation of love that we celebrate Christmas with joy and exultation; that message could not come at a better time!

My translation of Isaiah 9:6 uses "government" rather than "authority" and for me brings to mind inhumane actions of past and present leaders. The text was written in the 7th century B.C. during Babylonian captivity. Seven hundred years later, Jesus was born during the reign of ruthless King Herod. Even today, our government does not ensure justice for all citizens and reinforces a long-standing burden of oppression.

While political leaders and policies are ever changing, God's love is constant and unchanging. In spite of my faith, sometimes I am emotionally consumed by the injustice and deception. The political climate, however, may be very different in 2021, modified by results of the presidential election and the discovery of a coronavirus vaccine.

When I feel angst about the state of our nation, verses from Isaiah bring comfort and hope. These and other verses in the New Testament encourage me not to be buffeted about by external events and to nourish my inner core. In John 18:36, Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." I can be a positive force in the world while not being deluded by the world.

The Christmas season especially is a time to experience, both individually and in community, the joy found in God's message. He promised us his Son, which was fulfilled in Bethlehem. Jesus encourages us in John 14:1, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." Amen.

Anna May Charrington

Prayer: *Thank you, Holy Spirit, for the gift of love and comfort modeled by Jesus. Guide us that we may live as He did. Amen.*

How deeply this prophetic promise of peace, justice and righteousness resonates with the longings of our hearts today, as it has across the ages! As this year, marked by pandemic threat, economic loss and racial injustice, draws to a close, more than ever we feel like a people who walk in deep darkness. We long for a great light that will shine upon us, a leader we can call Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace. But we also know from experience that we are unlikely to see the fulfilment of this prophecy in any human leader or in the imminent return of Jesus.

Yet these moving words continue to bring me hope as a promise and invitation to apply in my own small corner of the world. How might I bring this promised light to shine on both my inner experience and my interactions with others? Can I let my life be ruled by the Wonderful Counselor, with a view to living in greater peace, justice and righteousness? The notion of “being the change you seek” is a cliché but a simple way to express the invitation of this prophetic promise, to allow the Prince of Peace to take authority in my own life, to guide my intentions, prayers and actions to make a difference. As each of us does our part in our individual domains, we can trust that “His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.”

Patricia Danzon

Prayer: Prayer of St. Francis

O Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

It was Sunday, December 31, 2017, the last day of the year. Having worked extra hard through the Advent season, our church school teachers were afforded a much-deserved day of rest. Jack, our three year old at the time, being “much too old” for the BMPC nursery, joined his mom, older brother and me for the worship service in the Sanctuary. While we brought lots of things to keep Jack occupied, it was clear that he wanted to participate with us. So we followed along in the bulletin.

Jack, looking at the words for the Call to Worship, leans over to me and says, “Daddy, is this where it says, ‘Don’t be afraid?’” I smiled, and whispered back, “Not yet.”

So we stood and sang the first hymn. Then we sat down to get ready for the Call to Confession. Again Jack leans in and says, “Daddy, is this where it says, ‘Don’t be afraid?’” I whispered, “Not yet, buddy.”

We listened to the Assurance of Pardon, sang the Gloria Patri, listened to Scripture and the sermon, and sang another hymn. But my mind was distracted by my son’s question: ***Is this where it says, “Don’t be afraid?”***

I realize now I gave him the wrong answer.

Every time we participate in the call to worship the Almighty God of Creation, we are saying that we needn’t be afraid. God is calling each of us, and we are calling one another to come before God. ***Don’t be afraid!***

Every time we confess our sin, we are saying that we needn’t be afraid. Boldly and confidently we come before the throne of the Sovereign God of the Universe acknowledging the many ways we are separated from God and knowing that the mercy of God through Jesus Christ awaits us. ***Don’t be afraid!***

The Assurance of Pardon says, ***“Don’t be afraid!”*** The Gloria Patri says, ***“Don’t be afraid!”*** Scripture and sermons and hymns say, ***“Don’t be afraid!”***

We have walked and lived in darkness for too long. The Light of the World has come and shines on us. Don’t be afraid!

Tim Bickhart

Prayer: Loving God, the shadows of this world frighten us. Give us voice to loudly proclaim, ***“Don’t be afraid!”*** Amen.

It is mid-June, and I cannot help but feel that we are in the midst of dark times that are trying our faith and souls. Yet, as we bear witness to oppression, protest and violence all against the backdrop of an ongoing global pandemic, we see hints of light that bring us hope.

Shocked into action by the police brutality that led to the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, many across the country were moved to raise their voices against racism and for immediate reform. Our protests gained momentum as other countries joined in the march. The message was clear. Enough was enough. We are long overdue confronting the sins of the past and the omissions of the present. Thus, there is promise of a righteous future for all.

In the face of personal risk, uncertainty and limited resources, healthcare workers have fought to save lives from COVID-19. Essential workers have risen to the challenge of keeping us safe and fed. We have devised brilliant, creative new ways to accommodate the multitude of unexpected needs that have emerged during this crisis. Most telling, our isolation has taught us how beautifully interdependent we are and how much we need one another. Together, in Christ, we gain the strength to accomplish our commission to bring the love of Christ to the world.

This text from Isaiah reflects a message of hope via this new birth. This Child embodies the great promise that oppression will lead to justice, violence and fighting to peace, and ultimately in our hearts and souls, darkness will give way to light. It is through Christ and following where he leads that we will be vessels of change. But we cannot do these things alone. We need one another, and it is together that our voices will be heard as people of Christ.

Carolyn Gerrish

Prayer: *Dear Lord, with the coming of Advent, fill our hearts with the hope and joy of the birth of Light of the World. Let this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace guide us and give us strength to follow the path toward peace, justice and righteousness. Amen.*

The picture is powerful. A pile of abandoned automatic weapons stretch across the foreground, blurry in comparison to the true subject of the picture: 25 child soldiers dressed in a mix of oversized fatigues. They are walking away from the weapons that had defined them and toward an unknown future. Despite the intervening millennia, Isaiah would have understood that moment. When the prophet spoke about God's promised child, he described not only a new kingdom, but a new way of being. Their lives had been defined by war and a constant fear of the next invading army. Always on guard for the next attack, they stayed in their blood-stained garments and heavy boots. When Isaiah describes throwing those garments and boots into the fire, he shows a people capable of abandoning the fear and violence that had defined generations. Here the people put on a new identity, no longer marked by war, leaving behind the old in order to embrace a new kingdom defined by peace.

Putting down a weapon or changing clothes is only one step in a long journey toward peace, but it is a starting point. Advent invites us to look at ourselves and see what we are wearing, what weapons we are carrying, and to ask if we are willing to leave these things behind so that we can follow the Prince of Peace. Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann explained it well: "People notice peacemakers because they dress funny. We know how the people who make war dress — in uniforms and medals, or in computers and clipboards, or in absoluteness, severity, greed and cynicism. But the peacemakers are dressed in righteousness, justice and faithfulness — dressed for the work that is to be done."

The Rev. Rachel Pedersen

Prayer: *God, guide our feet in the ways of peace. Help us put aside the tools of violence and destruction, and turn our hearts, minds and hands to serve the Prince of Peace. Amen.*

This summer, my family decided to install a series of small railing lights around a renovated deck. The lights are partly concealed and hardly noticeable during the day. Yet, when the sun goes down, the little lights increase in potency. Even when general darkness surrounds us, the lit deck beckons us to sit outside for a chat in its friendly embrace. When daylight returns, my deck lights seemingly recede into oblivion unless I intentionally look for them. Whenever darkness descends, however, the power of the lights returns to guide my footsteps with a reminder of their constant presence.

This summer, I struggled to understand the contrast between the light and darkness in the context of Isaiah, Chapter 9. The birth of Christ representing the light was promised to bring peace, joy, love and hope to the world of darkness. He has come, but darkness persists! I still see people suffering from illnesses, wars, poverty, and various forms of injustices and losses. We still engage in lies and slanders to increase our personal gain, exclude others to protect our own establishment, and more. At the same time, I know the world is not only about darkness. The light of optimism, enthusiasm, goodness and self-sacrifice exists at every corner of the world. Obviously, lightness and darkness commingle. In this confusing world, what does Christ's birth mean?

My little deck lights teach me a lesson about the constant presence of goodness as days and nights come and go. Although I often ignore their existence, I surely notice the presence of the little lights at night. In the same way, I feel that Christ comes closer to me and becomes more visible against today's darkness. I seek Christ's presence more when I hear stories of brokenness. Is Christ's ever-present light of joy, hope, peace and love meant to overcome darkness in this way?

Heewon Chang

Prayer: *Lord, it feels so dark around us! Help us to not be paralyzed by general darkness enveloping us. Instead, remind us of your ever-present light of hope so that we can take courageous steps toward your transformative light, even in darkness. Amen.*

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF LOVE

This week we light the candle of love. Like a wedding ring, the Advent wreath is a circle that has no beginning and no end, reminding us that there is no end to God's love for us and for our world.

Voice One: The coming of the Lord is near.

Voice Two: Praise God's holy name.

Voice One: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for us.

Voice Two: Whoever believes in him will have eternal life. (John 3)

Voice One: We rejoice greatly in God's love for the world.

Voice Two: We will praise God with our whole being.

Voice One: We light this candle celebrating God's love for us and for the world.

Voice Two: May this candlelight bless our home with God's love.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, fill this house
and fill our hearts with
your love so that we
may share that love with
everyone we meet.
Amen.*



3RD SUNDAY IN ADVENT - DECEMBER 13

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

“How can this be...?” In prayer, I’m drawn to Mary’s question again and again. Yes, she was bewildered about her pregnancy. But I wonder, like me, if she was also confused about a much larger question: “How can this be that You chose to live with us humans?” Reflecting on God’s choice to be Emmanuel (God-is-with-us) leaves me feeling profoundly confused. I think that’s a good thing.

Until a few years ago, I didn’t want to accept confusion as a helpful part of my spiritual life. But as I shepherded my father through his progressing dementia and eventual death, I grew to understand that my confusion was useful and perhaps necessary, helping me grasp that our decades-old father-adult son relationship was vanishing with his memories, leaving us in uncharted territory. Since then, I’ve come to see confusion as a powerful and God-gifted sign of conversion, the way in which God turns our life to another direction.

In his poem “*The Real Work*,” the poet/farmer Wendell Berry argues for the inevitability and giftedness of confusion:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,*

*and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.*

*The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

Maybe the real work, the start of new life, is signaled by our bafflement, confusion, bewilderment. Maybe confusion is our cue that something important is about to begin, like the new world God broke open to us in the Annunciation.

Paul Burgmayer

Prayer: God, help us accept the gift of confusion. Help us see beyond it to the possibility of new life, something that we cannot yet imagine. Amen.

My response to the angel's announcement to Mary, that she will bear Jesus, is to remember beautiful paintings. The earliest memory is of the cover of my father's Handel's Messiah recording. That cover had a picture of da Vinci's "Annunciation." The image fascinated me in childhood and still does. More recent memories include the Annunciation paintings in various museums. Favorites include Tanner's, which hangs in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and in the office of my life-giving spiritual director. Almost daily during Advent, I look at paintings in a book called "Annunciation." Coincidentally, the preface to that book is Luke 1:26-38.

My ambivalent automatic reaction to Luke 1:26-38 was highlighted as I tried to follow the instructions for writing this page. The directive was to share the connection of the verses with my faith experience, as related to the theme of love. The positive associations with artwork aside, my hope and wonder around the text are mingled with fear and resistance. I quickly recognized Mary's example of faith through her words: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Due to my fear and resistance, it took me longer to see the message of love.

As I read Luke's text repeatedly, my attention became increasingly drawn to the angel's words: "Do not be afraid," "the Son of the Most High," and "of his kingdom there will be no end." These words brought thoughts of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, and - finally - the memory of a poem, "Love Came Down at Christmas" (Rossetti). Through Advent and beyond, I hope to remember the message of love and to act faithfully on it.

Anita Iyengar

Prayer: *Open my eyes this day, dear Lord, to see your light in the world so that I may walk faithfully and share the light of love with others. Amen.*

- From Daily Prayer for All Seasons

How would you feel if an unknown person came up to you and began a conversation, “Greetings, favored one...!?”

Twenty centuries have unfolded between today and the announcement of the birth of the King. The shock of this stunning revelation is jolting and disconcerting at any time!

Luke describes Mary’s unexpected encounter with Gabriel as “perplexing.” Nowhere does his story say anything else about the meeting. How was the messenger dressed? Was he a poor beggar or an affluent citizen headed for the temple? Would such news have evoked a different response from Mary if Gabriel had appeared with blaring trumpets from a cloud?

This meeting was special. No fanfare. No clouds. No trumpets! One cannot question the magnitude of the information the angel was to impart. So why the understated, almost secret encounter?

Was it to keep Mary from being upset and questioning or to forewarn her what to expect with her child? Was it to give her courage? It was all of the above and more.

Mary was the key to God’s plan for his people. The message Gabriel delivered was one of love and hope for the future. She had been chosen to bear and raise this special child who would be King forever.

God’s decision had been deliberate: Gabriel without fanfare would give gentle Mary the endlessly anticipated news: The King is coming!

It was an earth-shaking, simple message, quietly given. THE KING IS COMING!

Linda Madara

Prayer: *Loving and Deliberate God, help us pay attention to the quiet ways we encounter you and your message of grace each day of our lives. In days of trial and waiting, startle us with your mercy that we might bring greetings of love to those around us. Amen.*

My brother faced a very difficult diagnosis with great anxiety last year. There was no one else who could take him to his medical treatments, so I spent October through January with him to give him support. Through all kinds of emotional weather, I wanted to maintain love between us.

It might have been impossible had I not had a favorite author close by. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* brings the reader close to his faith and relationship with God. As I sat beside my brother and others during his treatments, I was often asked questions about the book I was reading. Sometimes I could answer with a favorite quote from one of Bonhoeffer's fellow prisoners: "Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.... He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near..." Every day as I read more of the book and was questioned about it, I noticed that Bonhoeffer's faith provided encouragement to my brother, myself and to others around us. Patients greeted and spoke with one another.

In November, my brother had his first surgery, followed by the second in December. "No small boy operation," the surgeon warned. "The worry is failure to thrive." We became a community of shared experiences, each learning from the other. My brother gained weight again.

My brother was discharged on Christmas Eve with no rehab, but housebound with nursing support during his six-week recovery. Together we got through it. In our darkest moments we could laugh together. We need not be afraid when alone, if we have faith. God's promise to us through baptism is that He is with us forever.

Colby Madden

Prayer: *Help us to deeply and honestly treat others with respect and the love they were promised as children of God. Be not afraid. Amen.*

In Luke 1:28, the angel greets Mary, saying “Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη!” Our NRSV Bible translates this as “Greetings, favored one!” In the King James version, this phrase is translated as “Rejoice, highly favored one!”

While both translations make sense in English, they obscure the relationship between the two words that make up the sentence. Both words come from the cognate word *χάρις*, meaning grace or kindness (Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη). A more literal version of the sentence might be, “Delight in God’s grace, you who receive great grace!”

At this moment in history, it is not easy for me to delight in God’s grace and view myself as one who receives incredible grace, though I **know** it to be true. God has been extravagantly graceful to me. I am alive, with a roof over my head, a partner I love, who loves me, and a dog who brings me joy. I have meaningful work for which I get paid a fair wage and co-workers with whom I can laugh, learn and collaborate. Despite the many times I have missed the mark, been complicit in systems of injustice, and broken the trust of people who put their faith in me, God has never left me, and has never let my mistakes block me from God’s love in Christ Jesus.

Followed by that greeting, the angel declares the truth that is the drumbeat of humanity’s relationship with God: “The Lord is with you!”

God is with me. God is with you. Emmanuel, God with us.

In this time of Advent, particularly in this complicated, messy year, God is with us. Like a parent at our soccer game, like a teacher in our classroom, like a sibling at a family event, like a friend at our side, like a therapist who listens, greater than the water in the sea, more present than the very air we breathe — God is with us. God is with us because of love.

Jesus’ coming birth serves as our most profound reminder of God’s great love for us: God’s coming to earth in human form, proving God’s never-ending love for us irrevocably.

So in the coming weeks, when you mourn the traditions no longer possible this year because of our circumstances, I challenge you to also remember your belovedness. Remember always that you are loved. And you are not alone.

The Rev. Leigh DeVries

Prayer: *God, you will never leave us in our solitude or in our complications. You are Emmanuel each day of our lives, not just these days of Advent and Christmas. Help us be present to those in our lives so that they too may know that they are deeply loved. Amen.*

I write these words that you will read in December on Juneteenth: four weeks after George Floyd was murdered, three weeks after Black Lives Matter protests began in earnest, one week after Loving Day, and right in the middle of Gay Pride month. As I reflect on love, surrounded by harsh news reports, hateful memes and hurtful words, I am aware that love is not always the happy-happy we typically ascribe to that emotion. Rather, love often hurts; love has painful consequences; and loving others is hard work.

Our ruling culture — white, heteronormative, Judeo-Christian and moneyed — regularly reviles, oppresses, discriminates against, segregates, even murders the “Other”: the Black, Brown or Red Other because their skin is the “wrong” color; the LGBT Other because they love the “wrong” person; the poor or homeless Other because they have landed in the “wrong” circumstance. By denying the rights of the Other, the ruling culture feeds its greed at the expense of and props itself up on the suffering of the Other.

Yet, for 2,000 years, Jesus has called us to love our neighbor, whom he literally defined as the Other: our homeless neighbor, our Muslim neighbor, our Black neighbor, our poor neighbor, our gay or lesbian neighbor, our immigrant neighbor, our unemployed neighbor, our Asian neighbor, our addicted neighbor, our Hindu neighbor, our Latinx neighbor, our transgender neighbor, our First Nations neighbor.... We Christians have a long, hard, painful road ahead if we truly want to evince and engender the love of God. Our sacrifices will be many and great. The first step toward making the road easier is for all of us to walk together.

This benediction, spoken by retired Methodist Bishop Woodie White in 1996, resonated profoundly with me when I stumbled across it this week.

And now, May the Lord torment you. May the Lord keep before you the faces of the hungry, the lonely, the rejected and the despised. May the Lord afflict you with pain for the hurt, the wounded, the oppressed, the abused, the victims of violence. May God grace you with agony, a burning thirst for justice and righteousness. May the Lord give you courage and strength and compassion to make ours a better world, to make your community a better community, to make your church a better church. And may you do your best to make it so, and after you have done your best, May the Lord grant you peace!

Brian Middleton

Prayer: Lord, strengthen me to confront and prevail over my own prejudices, to be an impetus for others to recognize and surmount their prejudices. Teach me to listen to understand, instead of to reply. Embolden me to speak out and take action against discrimination and oppression. Inspire me to become a supporter and ally. Provoke me to do what you require — to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you, my God. Amen.

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

THE CANDLE OF JOY

This week we light the candle of joy. Now the wreath is filled with a circle of light that proclaims Joy to the World in the coming of Jesus Christ, God's gift to us and to this home of hope, peace, love and joy.

Voice One: Come, Lord Jesus. Shine on us, and the night will be bright as the day.

Voice Two: Today we light all four Advent candles.

Voice One: Their brightness recalls God's glory that shone around the shepherds.

Voice Two: Their brightness recalls the angels who lit up the night sky with their singing of peace.

Voice One: "Do not be afraid," the angels said. (Luke 2)

Voice Two: We pray that our joy in Jesus coming to us will bring light to others.

Voice One: We light this candle with excitement for Christmas is coming soon.

Voice Two: May this candlelight bless our home with songs of rejoicing.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, fill this house
and fill our hearts with
joy so that we may be
glad every day and give
thanks for the gift of
Jesus Christ. Amen.*



4TH SUNDAY IN ADVENT - DECEMBER 20

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise is a passage I have read and reread throughout my life. As I submerge myself into Mary's Song, what speaks to me is her complete faith and trust. She is joyful and confident in her relationship with God. God chose her, and she accepts what God offers with grace, humility and joy. She exclaims that God has shown mercy, strength and compassion. There is no doubt or questioning present. Mary's spirit rejoices!

One summer day when our children were younger, we hiked up a mountain in Bar Harbor, Maine. As we wound our way up the mountainside, we reached a point where we needed to navigate a narrow ledge to continue on the trail. My husband and one son maneuvered along, but my other son froze. Fear consumed him and he wanted to turn back. I began to talk him, not off the ledge, but onto the ledge. This was a moment when he needed to have pure trust and confidence in God and his own abilities. As the Spirit moves, another boy about the same age came along and affirmed this ledge was not a barrier, but a bridge. He offered reassurance and confidence. Together my son and I trusted and believed. We rejoiced on the other side as well as on the mountaintop! God provides.

When challenges become overwhelming and struggles too great, I remember, "God's got this!" I trust this and believe with all my heart, mind and soul. God is always guiding, providing and vigilant. The Holy Spirit is constantly moving within and around each of us. Know this deep abiding joy and rejoice!

Anne Montgomery Schmid

Prayer: *Oh dear Lord, be gracious and merciful to us during waiting days and questioning moments. Restore us, Lord, and renew us as we wait with patience, trust and joy. Amen.*

This scripture passage represents the joy associated with this Advent season. Known as “The Magnificat,” we see the depth of Mary’s faith as she reminds us how truly wonderful God is, and that God will bring great joy to each of us if we listen to God’s words. She recalls the great things God has done for us, but more important, the great things God still can do for us. She reminds us that the benevolence of our Lord is imparted to those who follow God’s Word.

We are reminded that to love God is to love all God’s people and that each and every one of us is deserving of dignity, respect and inclusion, regardless of our gender, race or creed. Our voices are equal and always will be heard by a loving God. Mary reminds us to be humble and to do good for others, lest our human fortunes be reversed. I see this passage as a powerful call to action, where we are reminded that to share Christ’s love, we must act as Christians, not simply speak as Christians, and that we must do so each day of our lives. Our actions must include the giving of ourselves, our time, talents and resources in God’s name. In particular, I see this as a call to service for the benefit of others, with a promise that God will see this as good and will not forget at our time of judgment. I have learned firsthand the power of service and how it can bring peace and joy from a simple act of kindness, a charitable offering, or from time spent listening to another’s story. I hope and pray that this year’s Advent season will bring great peace and joy to your heart and to your home.

Tod Guernsey

Prayer: *Together, let us pray. Loving God, grant us peace and direction during this Advent season, as we await the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Ensure that the bounties of spirit, time and abundance always are directed in service to others, as we build your larger community of fellowship from the seeds of your Christian family here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. We ask this in your name Almighty Father. Amen.*

The Magnificat is much like a psalm, praising God for his love, mercy, salvation and deliverance. Mary is a very young girl, but her understanding and wisdom are great. She has learned that she will bear a son, Jesus, Son of the Most High. How terrifying! But Mary is not overwhelmed by fear or the uncertainty of what is to come. Instead, she waits in faithfulness with the assurance of God's presence. Mary praises God, and her fear gives way to great joy!

In our own fear and uncertainty these days, where do we find joy? Can we find joy and not feel guilty amongst so much grief and sadness? Joy is much more than plain, old happiness. It just bursts forth, usually when we least expect it and need it the most. Joy surprises us, and we are filled with the sudden realization of God's presence and his great love for us. Joy isn't necessarily huge, like Mary's joy, but can come upon us by taking note of the small things. To me, joy is necessary for our very well being.

As the pandemic and shutdown began in the spring, my mother was in hospice. I wasn't allowed to visit. It was a time of sadness, yet joy would surprise me. I found it in the encouraging word of a friend, the smile of my grandchild, the sight of a bright red cardinal. My mother died in early June. I did not see her before she passed. I was filled with anguish and grief. But in this season, joy has been popping up all around me! God's gift of the love of so many friends equals great joy. Praise be to God.

Susan Thorkelson

Prayer: *Dear God, in this Advent Season, may we faithfully, expectantly wait for the birth of your son. We praise you for your ultimate gift of joy! Amen.*



CHRISTMAS EVE

THE CHRIST CANDLE

Our time to wait is over. Christmas is here. Our days of preparation are completed. What has not been done will now have to be left undone. Our homes have become the birthplace of our God and we welcome the light to this place.

Voice One: We have witnessed to this very hour, this very night,

Voice Two: And we hope that the world has heard the good news that has been spoken.

Voice One: Our circle of candles is lit and tonight we light the central candle, reminding us that Christ is the center of our lives,

Voice Two: The shining beacon of hope for all the universe.

Voice One: Christ is born.

Voice Two: Praise God!

Voice One: Emmanuel, God with us, dwells among us this night and forevermore.

Voice Two: May this candlelight bless our home with the incarnate presence of God.

Let us pray:

Dear God, thank you that the time of waiting and preparing is over and that the light of Christ shines so very clearly tonight. Even though this Christmas feels different from any other, we give thanks that your love and grace will always be the same. Thank you, God, for this holy night of nights. Amen.



CHRISTMAS EVE - DECEMBER 24

Luke 2:1-20

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

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

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

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

“And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.” These words are so familiar and yet each year they resonate in our hearts with such joyous wonder. All of us can imagine a lovely Christmas card kind of image of this scene with an open stable, stars twinkling in the sky above, and shepherds kneeling in adoration.

However, when you think about it, the plight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus is very gritty and all too real. This year the United Nations estimates that there are currently 80 million people who are displaced from their homelands across the world, uprooted by foreign occupiers, civil unrest and famine. The Holy Family’s predicament of being forced to travel due to a foreign government’s census requirement, with no place to stay upon their arrival, places the God of heaven and earth in the midst of any contemporary overcrowded refugee camp. There we find God’s hope, peace, love and joy for the world.

The gift of the Christmas gospel is that Luke is not recounting the grim evening news with a statistical headcount of a world in crisis. Rather, Luke proclaims good news that, amid the most dire and unsettling of human experiences, God comes in person to offer a vision of the earth healed and redeemed. The baby grows up and places a call upon our lives to join God in transforming the world into a new creation.

The Rev. Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet

Prayer: *On this Christmas Day of rejoicing, O God of love and light, we worship and adore you for you come to us as one of us, vulnerable and weak, and yet with the power to save. We bow before your awesome wonder in thanksgiving and in praise, in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Ah, the day after Christmas... it surely was different for Mary and Joseph than for us.

We might have stray wrapping paper to pick up, leftover dishes from Christmas dinner, gift boxes to recycle, thank-you notes to write. We might even feel some emotional letdown. But with the 26th falling on Saturday this year, we have all of today and tomorrow to regain our sense of “routine.” Today can be a somewhat slow-paced day of transition.

What of Mary and Joseph the day after?

Whatever December 26 was for them, it was surely not slow-paced. The Baby had to be fed. Could Mary nurse successfully? Or must a wet nurse be found – in a strange town, no less? Did they bring enough blankets to keep the Child warm during the nine or so cold nights that their journey back to Nazareth would entail? What was necessary to complete this “registration” that Augustus had ordered? (After all, that’s why they went to Bethlehem, and Joseph certainly didn’t register before Mary delivered.)

Surely, there also was some aura of happiness – a resonance of joy. The shepherds had witnessed the angels glorifying and praising God, and shared their excitement about the angels’ visit and what they had heard – with Mary and Joseph, and clearly with others, too. Townspeople were abuzz with the shepherds’ news. Mary was treasuring wonderful things in her heart.

Joseph? *He* was worrying about the trip home, the dangerous forest they had to pass through and the always-possible encounter with bandits. How would he cope with the inevitable gossip about Mary’s unmarried status? How would she?

But they made it through all these uncertainties, didn’t they? Each of us can learn from that, can’t we?

Steve Mygatt

Prayer: *Great God, in uncertain times, grace us with Your comforting presence, grant us courage to face our situation, and give us faith to proceed on our way. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

THE CHRIST CANDLE

The season of Christmas continues beyond the magic and mystery of our evening watch. The light of Christ has become the light of day that shines in all of the dark places of the world to offer grace and hope.

Voice One: The reality of Christ's birth shocks us, just as any parent experiences the joy and the challenge of caring for a baby.

Voice Two: We are called to follow this baby Christ as he grows in wisdom and grace.

Voice One: Like Joseph and Mary, we seek to be faithful as we are entrusted with this great responsibility.

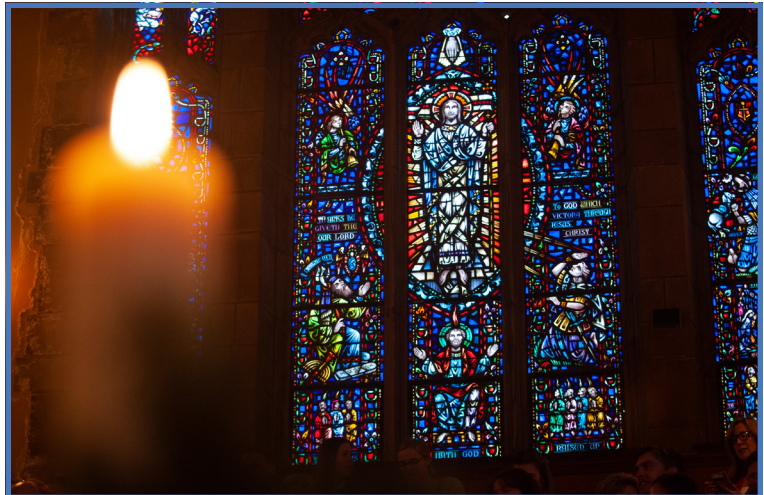
Voice Two: We look to our community to be our guide and our comfort in our discipleship.

Voice One: Praise God, that the light and life of Christ continues to grow among us.

Voice Two: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, fill our world
with your light and
continue to shine your
grace in our lives. May
our homes be beacons
of the light of Christ to
our neighbors and the
community around us.
Amen.*



1ST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS - DECEMBER 27

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

When our son Henry was little, he loved playing with a Fisher-Price® Christmas set. If someone said “Merry Christmas” to him while he was playing, however, he quickly corrected: “NO, Mary JOSEPH,” making us laugh and think for a minute about Joseph as the oft-forgotten character in the nativity scene. If we take just a minute, we can learn a lot from Joseph.

While the other gospels focus on Mary’s learning of her pregnancy, Matthew tells of Joseph’s quandary: His fiancé is pregnant, not by him; what should he do?

In those times, engagement was a formal contract that could not be ended without a trial. Joseph could go forward with a trial, humiliate Mary in the court of public opinion, have her stoned per Old Testament law, or divorce Mary quietly. He struggled with the decision, recognizing the implications of his actions. Joseph could have used the Bible as justification for harming Mary, to make himself feel better about her apparent betrayal.

Then an angel appeared.... as they seemed to do back then. The angel abruptly awakened Joseph to say that Mary’s child was from the Holy Spirit and would save the people.

Thankfully, Joseph put aside his pride, listened to the angel, and read the Bible with a vision of love and grace, choosing compassion over strict adherence to the law. Joseph’s decision to marry Mary and act as Jesus’ father was a response filled with love, not pride. So, while we may think of Joseph as a bit player in the story of Jesus, as the quiet and calm carpenter, we can learn a lot from Joseph as the first person to practice what Jesus later taught: Love is primary, and forgiveness can change conventions and customs. That’s the meaning of Christmas: irrational love in the midst of the harsh realities of the world.

Jeannie Bickhart

Prayer: *Dear God, this Christmas, teach us to be like your servant Joseph. Help us to wake up and listen to you. Help us let go of fear, anger and ego, and choose your teachings of compassion and love. Amen.*

Although one of the foundational words of the Christian faith, *incarnation* was not a word I thought about very much. It was a word my mind slipped over in the hearing of the Christmas story. However, in recent years, I have listened more carefully. *Incarnation* points to one of the mysteries of our faith: God becoming human in the person of Jesus, and thus Jesus being both fully human and fully divine.

My understanding of *incarnation* has grown and my faith deepened in the reading and studying of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Without using the word *incarnation*, Paul seems to be working out what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God. In Col. 1:19, Paul wrote, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." And in Col. 2:9, Paul emphasized his message, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." God's very essence, God's love, was who Jesus was.

Paul went on to say, Christ, this fullness of God, was not only in Jesus, but "Christ is in you!"

(Col 1:27). The essence of God's love is in each of us. It is hard to live out this truth, but it is the challenge and the grace of growing in Christ.

Finally, Paul says, "Christ is all, and in all." (Col: 3:11) Jesus is fully the Christ, but there is something of the Divine in all of creation. All the earth is inherently sacred.

No wonder Jesus was to be called "Emmanuel," for truly, "God is with us!"

Karen Dunkman

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for the mystery and blessing of incarnation. Help us to grow in understanding of your presence in Jesus, in each human being and in all of creation. Amen.*

There are two very different birth narratives in the four Gospels. Luke tells the story from a Greek feminine point of view. Matthew tells it in a Jewish masculine way.

So, Joseph has a dream. Some people pay no attention to their dreams. Some a little. And others see dreams as very meaningful to them. Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung taught that dreams are a reflection of the deep unconscious and therefore important to understand in order for a person to grow in knowing the self and the higher dimensions of life.

Our Joseph, whose name means “whom God will increase,” is not a major character in the New Testament. But he reminds us of the Old Testament Joseph who is betrayed by his jealous brothers and then becomes Pharaoh’s second in command by interpreting, with God’s help, the dream. This Joseph, one of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament, is most like Jesus in that he forgives his brothers as Jesus forgave those who persecuted him.

Our Joseph did exactly what the dream guided him to do. He married Mary and named her son Joshua. Yes, “Jesus” is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name that goes all the way back to Joshua, the great Prince of War who conquered the Promised Land.

Our Joshua however, whose name means God is my salvation, our Jesus is to be the Prince of Peace and love. Our Jesus sees God as a parent who loves and cares for each child. God is no longer a controlling king who expects only obedience from his servants.

As children of God we seek guidance from our loving parent who has only our best interests at heart. We are taught to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

Paul MacMurray

Prayer: *Our Father, guide me today in the paths of truth and love. Help me to ask and then listen for your voice in whatever form it may come. Help me have the courage to bring your message to a world in need. Amen.*

In the blink of an eye the COVID-19 pandemic has altered my life. My day's rhythm and what I expect in family, work, relationships, faith, and my vision of what is to be, is upended. I can only believe this is a bit how Joseph feels when he learns Mary is pregnant with the son of God. Imagine that upending; this news would throw anyone for a loop!

Perhaps I am in a “distilling” phase, considering the essential meaning or most important aspect of life — what is fundamental. It seems there are two ways I could go. One is to hide and be fearful; the other is to respond to this new opportunity to risk, to acknowledge “things have never been this way before,” and to trust that God is there in the darkness, to walk with me as I step out into the hoped-for but not seen. In the midst of the mess, this time of COVID-19 offers opportunities to walk into God's “Yes” for my life.

This is what Joseph did. He was surprised by God; Joseph listened, was faithful, and became a part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. Matthew tells us Joseph is a righteous man, but more than that, he is so exquisitely faithful.

Maybe if God came to me in a dream, I could be righteous and faithful, too. But, in fact, God *does* show up, and I am often unable or unwilling to hear or listen or pay attention. We can be grateful that both Mary and Joseph shook themselves awake to the remarkable moving of God in their lives, took time to hear, and responded faithfully. Today, not in spite of the pandemic but because of it, how can we listen for God's call and take the risky steps into the unknown, welcoming darkness?

M. Courtenay Willcox

Prayer: *God, surprise us as you surprised Joseph, and walk with us when we step out into your holy ‘Yes’ for our lives. You are with us in this life-altering pandemic, and you also are with us in decisions and opportunities that exist for us in our lives. Help us be faithful as Joseph was faithful and to bear witness to Emanuel, who is God with us. Amen.*

The incarnation is risky. Incarnational theology is hazardous. The whole notion of the Creator of Universe coming to us in vulnerable human flesh is a nearly laughable cosmic gamble. We humans are a horribly messy lot of creatures.

I suspect that's why I'm so drawn to the scriptural witness of Jesus' birth: The risks abound. God isn't the only one who is making a wager. Mary takes enormous chances by trusting the divine messenger. And here it's Joseph of Nazareth, who also must be willing to suspend his sense of the coherent in order to breathe in such holy imagination.

I love Christmas, less for the glitz and glamour of the consumer culture that has surrounded it, and more for the scandalous hope it promises. Shirley Guthrie, a Presbyterian theologian, notes, "Whatever else they may mean, the birth stories of Jesus emphasize that the Christian belief that 'God is with us' is not just a beautiful idea or an abstract theological truth. It *happened!*"

The particularity of that truth is wrapped up in the geography, politics, economics and history of a certain time and place. While Jesus' birth has cosmic significance, it is situated smack dab in the middle of real-world tensions and drama. As much as we sing of *angels from the realms of glory*, this story is really about the earthy nature of human birth; the wailing of an infant; the exhaustion of a teenage mother; and the bewilderment of a carpenter.

Choosing to send Jesus among us in such a way points to the gamble God takes to know us, to save us, and to share in the mess of our human stories while redeeming us through them. What risky, hazardous love.

The Rev. Franklyn C. Pottorff

Prayer: Redeeming God, you come to us in the midst of such earthy circumstances. In this new year, help us to trust your deep love for us that descended down into our messy world, in the name of the One who shows us your way. Amen.

As I am reading Matthew 1:18-25, the coronavirus pandemic continues around us. This section of Matthew speaks of miracles. The story is put forth simply, almost as though this was not miraculous, but it was. The Holy Spirit, Immaculate Conception, and angels, all together in eight short verses. So much love from God, bringing God's gift to the whole world. What would have happened if Joseph and Mary hadn't believed in dreams and miracles?

At times during these days, I am uncertain of miracles, even as I pray for them. I feel the pain of others. I find hope in this scripture passage. Miracles still happen. I heard of a woman who was pregnant and dying of cancer; she had a healthy baby and her cancer is in remission. What a blessing!

I pray for the many people who struggle to survive from day to day. In a country that discounts and undervalues them, what can I do to support and help? What is God asking of me in this situation? I have no answer.

Matthew reminds me that just as God was with Mary and Joseph, God is with us now. I do not think COVID-19 will magically disappear. I believe that God has created many brilliant people such as scientists, pharmacists, doctors, nurses, technicians, and other professionals who eventually will find ways to stop this pandemic. Until then, I do my best to keep my husband and me safe.

God is with us. God is with us, indeed. Thanks be to God!

Susan Joseph

Prayer: *Dear Creator, help us as we struggle through what seem to us to be difficult times. Guide and protect us. May we come to understand and appreciate the miracles in the world around us. Grant us your peace. Amen.*

SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

THE LIGHT OF EPIPHANY

The Light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. We shift from a season of hope into a season of light, of recognition of God's goodness and an awareness of our responsibility to carry that light into the world.

Voice One: The world has shifted, and the light of Christ calls those who are near and those who are far away to walk in the light of God.

Voice Two: We walk as Children of the Light in the footsteps of Christ.

Voice One: In Christ there is no darkness.

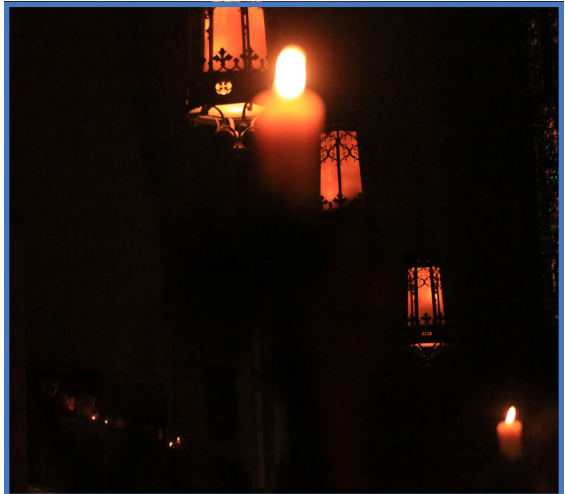
Voice Two: The night and the day both shine brightly with the light of Christ.

Voice One: Praise God for the light and the love of Christ.

Voice Two: May our homes be filled with light. May the dark corners of our lives be places where the light of Christ may break in.

Let us pray:

*Dear God, In the beginning, your light
and your spirit moved over all of creation.
As your creatures we seek to reflect that
light in a world with too much darkness.
May we enter this season of Epiphany
with eyes wide open to your movement
among us, in our homes, in our church,
and in our community. Amen.*



2ND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS - JANUARY 3

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The birth of Jesus in the bleak midwinter was a miracle, but it wasn't an accident. Our ancestors were even more sensitive to the length of days than we are. In those ancient Decembers, when the sun dipped so low, they wondered if it would ever come back. They lit bonfires, Yule logs, and candles on fir trees to encourage the sun to return. The more sophisticated Romans established the Feast of the Invincible Sun on December 25 to celebrate the slow emergence of the sun from its winter nadir.

The Bible says nothing about the date of Jesus' birth, and so, to the delight of those of us in the northern hemisphere, the Christians of the fourth century decided to co-opt the midwinter Roman festival and to make it, in a sense, the Feast of the Invincible Son, the birth of the tiny candle amidst the chilly gloom. St. John the Evangelist had no idea when he wrote the famous prologue to his gospel that, three centuries later, the Christian Church would adopt the darkest time of year to celebrate the birth of the Savior. When John wrote, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," the message of Jesus was indeed a delicate, sputtering spark in the cold and enveloping Roman Empire. Three centuries later, the spark had engulfed that empire. The tiny candle had expanded to warm the world, and it warms our hearts still, 2,000 years later, in our Merry Christmases, and even in our darkest days.

Bill McKee

Prayer: *O God, who gladdens our hearts by the yearly festival of the birth of your son, let our Christmas gladness cheer all those we meet, and let our hearts expand to encompass in Christian love all those we can never meet. Amen.*

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Two thousand years later, the words of this inspirational passage (John 1:5) are more meaningful than ever.

The words are about Perseverance. We are holders of dual citizenships — occupants of the time in which we live and in the eternity that follows. Throughout that span, God seeks people willing to be ambassadors of the message and the moment. Helen Keller, who knew more than most about “inner light,” reminded us that the Bible challenges us “to live in harmony with God’s laws.”

The words are about Vision. We need light to see, and as children of God, we will see the sun even when it’s not shining. We will see the stars even when the storm clouds gather. We will see God even during the darkest of nights. During the darkness of uncertain times, when anxiety and fear of the unknown overwhelm us with a sense of powerlessness, the light of God’s presence in our lives illuminates our path forward.

The words are about Faith. An epiphany is a moment of sudden intuition, and when it happens, that inner light glows with such glory, it invites us to act. It is then we must not only see the light, but we must be the light — a light so bright it can help others to see their souls.

The world is God’s workshop. At this renewal time of year, let us accept that we who are the beneficiaries of God’s mercy, must now become the instruments of its delivery to others.

Lynn Yeakel

Prayer: *God of Vision, you created us to be citizens of this earth and of your kingdom. May your light shine in our lives so much that we may never lose sight of the good news that we have been created in your image and created to bring your light of love to all of the world. Amen.*

It seems fitting that this devotional will end with the phrase, “In the beginning...” The season of Advent and Christmas is ending, but now the season of Epiphany has begun. Epiphany is a day to remember the Magi who knelt before the Christ Child, as told to us in the Gospel of Matthew, bringing gifts to symbolize both the hope and the pain that would color the life of Jesus of Nazareth; honoring a King like the world had never known; and looking ahead to his suffering and death for our sake.

Epiphany brings us story after story like the visit of the Magi - the Baptism of Jesus, the Calling of the Disciples, the Transfiguration - all of which teach us who Jesus Christ is, not just for us but for the world. And too the prologue from the Gospel of John reminds us of the identity of the Cosmic Christ - the beginning and the end, the Word, the Light, the Good News.

Interestingly, in some traditions we actually claim these coming weeks of January and February leading up to Lent as Ordinary Time and not Epiphany, which runs the risk of taking away the brightness of the season. Theologian Lawrence Hull Stookey shares a counter argument:

*Because of what has been made known in Christ, no time can be regarded as ordinary in the sense of dull or commonplace. The liturgical calendar as a whole exists in part to remind us that Christ has sanctified all of time... what we deem ordinary, God has transformed into the extraordinary by the power of divine grace.... The extraordinariness of God's work is seen amid our anxiety, fear, and perplexity. God works in the midst of adversity and in spite of it, not in its absence.*¹

So here at the end of this holiday season, may we step into the extraordinariness of God's time. May we cling to the message of hope given to us in the season of Advent and rest in the presence of God made known to us in the season of Christmas. May we carry with us the un-dimmable light of Christ into a world in need - every day of our lives.

The Rev. Rebecca Kirkpatrick

Prayer: *God of all time and all days, God of the ordinary and the extraordinary, may we take your light and love with us into this new year. May we never stop hanging on to the Hope of Advent and the Light of Christmas. As we walk in this world just as your Son did, may we walk in faith, may we live with grace, and may we love with courage. Amen.*

¹ Stookey, Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church. 1996.



Photo by: Andy Sagcal

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