

Advent 2023



Second Presbyterian Church

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Dear Second Family and Friends,

Advent is a time of anticipation and waiting. During this season, we eagerly await the birth of our Messiah, Jesus Christ. For hundreds of years, God's people anxiously awaited their promised Savior, and we—as Christians today—anxiously await his return. Advent is a Latin word meaning “coming” or “arrival”, and it is marked by a spirit of expectation, anticipation, preparation, and longing.

As we enter into this Advent season, it is our hope that you will use this Advent devotional booklet to guide you through this time of waiting. Carve out a few minutes of each day to sit in silence—perhaps around your Advent wreath—as you read, reflect, and pray along with each daily reflection.

In this booklet, you will find individual reflections on many traditional Advent texts—those that prophesy the birth of the coming Messiah, and those that tell of Jesus' birth—and you will also find several scriptures about waiting. It is our hope that these Advent reflections will meet you where you are in your waiting, and that they will bring you hope as together we wait in joyful expectation for the coming of the Lord.

In hopeful expectation,

Rev. Catherine Hart Monroe



Cover artwork by Alden Monroe

Sunday, December 3

Read: Psalm 27:14

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Reflect:

Courage In Waiting

Courage. We could all use a little more courage right about now, living as we are in what my son calls Clown World. Nothing seems normal; we are beset from all sides with predictions of disaster; impatience and impertinence are the order of the day. Getting through the day sometimes takes more courage than we feel we have.

Courage. We usually associate having courage with taking an action, with confronting an enemy. But in this closing verse from Psalm 27, we are clearly told to take courage and *wait*. And if you read the entire Psalm, this admonition makes complete sense. David expresses his confidence in the protection of the Lord. No matter what he might face on and off the battlefield, David knows the Lord will deliver him. Consequently, if things look bad, take courage and *wait*, for God will surely deliver David—and us—from evil.

As Advent begins, we too can surely take courage and wait for the Lord. We will not be disappointed. The Old Testament prophecies were all fulfilled with the birth of the Christ child. God became human in the person of God's son so that we would never again be separated from God by our own sin. In Advent, we also await the return of the Risen Christ who will gather his people together in a new creation, one where courage is no longer needed.

So let's begin our Advent journey with plenty of courage, and *wait for the Lord*. Amen.

~Marie Finch



Monday, December 4

Read: Lamentations 3:25-26

*The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.*

Reflect:

A Soul Can't Travel That Fast

These verses spoke to me because like the author of Lamentations 3, my youth was filled with hardship and trauma. Verses 19-20 read, “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.”

For years no matter how hard and fast I ran from my past, I, too, carried bitterness in my downcast soul. It was only through listening to a small but persistent voice—the one edging me toward hope and a Higher Power—that I finally let it go and reached a place of acceptance and peace. As the author writes of God later in the chapter, “You came near when I called and said, ‘Do not fear’ . . . you redeemed my life.”

This scripture also brings to mind the lyrics of a recent song, “Pilgrim” by the Wood Brothers.

“When I step off that train / I better sit down and wait / Cause a soul can't travel that fast / The best part of me will surely be late / 'Cause a soul can't travel that fast.”

Even with a life redeemed, I've learned that it's easy to fall back into unhealthy patterns. So a few months ago I started meditating again. And I try to remember these words from “Pilgrim”:

“A soul takes it slow / Like a pilgrim he knows / He's gonna get where he's goin' / If he just stays on the path.”

~Nancy Chapman



Art by Gwen Matheson

Tuesday, December 5

Read: John 1:1-5

Key Verse: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1).

Reflect:

How do the four Gospels start?

Matthew starts with genealogy. Genealogy is the pedigree, giving a reputation to the person under discussion, but to the audience for whom he was writing, this is a wildly radical genealogy, including three *women*: Ruth, Rahab, and “Uriah’s wife”! Lots of weighty folks in Jesus’ lineage, but some problem children as well. Intriguing, not dry and dusty.

Mark we think of as jumping right in with his ministry. But actually, he starts with a quote from Isaiah, anchoring Jesus’ baptism in the teachings of the prophets.

Say “Luke” and I see nativity scenes. But Luke actually starts with a statement of purpose. Luke is carefully sifting through and researching all the eyewitness and oral history accounts of “the things that have been fulfilled among us.” He “has investigated from the beginning,” and starts with the annunciation of John the Baptist’s birth.

John, on the other hand, does two things at once. First he trumps Luke’s “going back to the beginning” by going back to the beginning, Creation. Then he writes with thunderbolts! Shazam! The Word was there in the beginning! He is the Word! The Word is with God, and the Word is of God. Therefore, He was with God in the beginning!

Now before you get picky about understanding this wonderful prose, here is an important thought from Mary Solomon. *Art can communicate ideas in a way that transcends logic*. We are not looking at a scientific treatise, we are looking at a painting. Release logically understanding each phrase, and let the power of these lines touch your heart.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.

Jesus as the Word. Jesus as Light for mankind. He brought life! Jesus as with God and in God and there from the start. Jesus as the Light of the World, yet misunderstood. What else do you need to know? It’s all there! Merry Christmas!

~Peggy Troyer

Wednesday, December 6

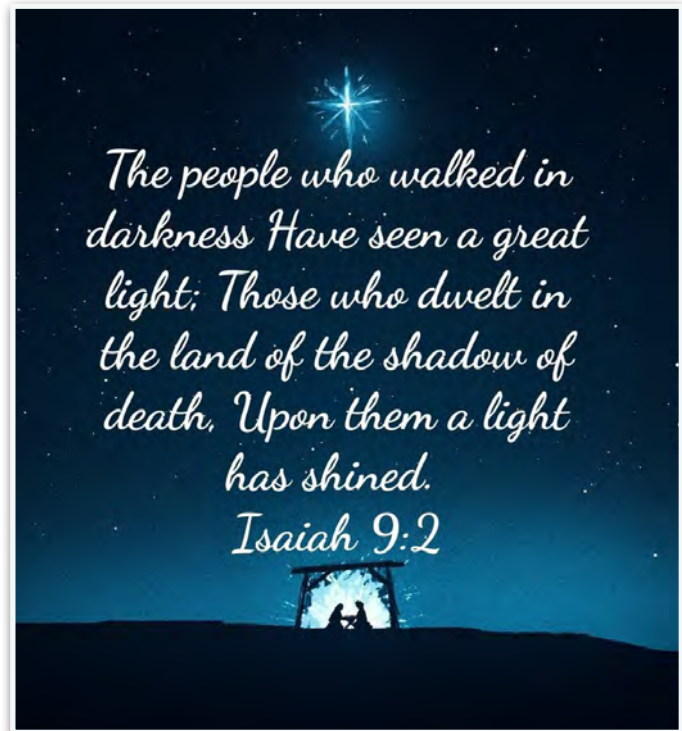
Read: Isaiah 9:2-7

Key Verse: *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* (Isaiah 9:2).

Reflect:

People (individuals, families, congregations, communities, commonwealths, nations) who walk (move, dwell, exist) in darkness (physical, emotional, spiritual, worthless, losing, deprived, chaotic, anarchical, autocratic, oppressive) see light (illumination, discernment, prosperity, hope).

In our well-lit world, we rarely experience pitch blackness. My first recollection of true physical darkness came at the end of a zig zagging tunnel of an abandoned gold mine in New Mexico, when the guide extinguished his lantern. He told us that some claustrophobic miners fatally battered themselves against the walls in an attempt to escape into daylight.



Andrew Lloyd Weber's "Music of the Night" lyrics temp: "Darkness stirs and wakens imagination;...Close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams...And you'll live as you never lived before."

Isaiah foretold the oppressive, brutal conquest of Galilee, from which the Middle East millenniums later is yet to escape. However, he implied redemption by a Prince of Peace, bringing "immeasurable prosperity" (NET) "a peace that has no end" (Jerusalem).

This Advent season, as the northern hemisphere's daylight shrinks and we hope for its growth following the winter solstice, ponder the darkness we encounter individually and communally. Let the holiday lights we illuminate in our homes, enjoy in our sanctuaries and see along our streets, reflect the Light of the World into our apprehensions. "...Till shadows have vanished and darkness is banished..." (Katherine Davis).

~Joe Morgan

Thursday, December 7

Read: Micah 5:2-5a

Key Verse: *But you, Bethlehem...out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel....And he will be their peace* (Mic. 5:2, 5a).

Reflect:

There is turmoil in the land promised to Abraham. Israel and Judah are two separate kingdoms. Ashur, or what we call the Assyrian Empire, is expanding and has subjugated Philistine, Israel, Judah, Moab, Ammon, and Edom; all the peoples of what we call the Levant now. All pay tribute to the Assyrian Empire or expect an invasion. Israel, the northern kingdom, rebelled and their capital, Samaria, was destroyed. Micah points to their idolatry, oppression of the poor, and lust for power. Judah in the south was close to Israel and received their war refugees. Paying tribute to Assyria, preparing for an Assyrian invasion, and taking care of refugees put immense financial pressure on Judah. Power was becoming more important as the poor were multiplying.

Doing the right thing is easy when we have excess, but often our tendency to maintain our position overrides what we can do for those in need. Micah's message was simple: valuing idols, wealth, and power over helping our neighbor and loving our enemy will be Judah's (our) undoing. But don't lose hope! There will be a king, this turmoil will pass, we will be united again in peace, God will feed his flock, and his flock will extend to the end of the Earth. Don't lose hope!

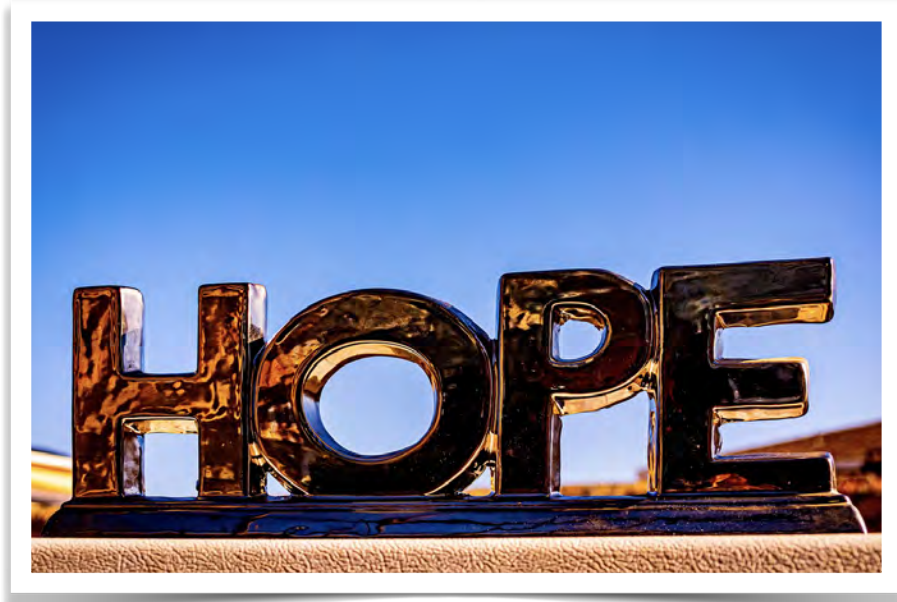
~Philip Byrd



Friday, December 8

Read: Psalm 130:5-8

Key Verse: *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope* (Ps. 130:5).



Reflect:

Waiting and hoping. Not so easy for impatient people, like me. Advent is all about waiting.

But unlike God's people who waited for their King and Saviour, we know he came. So what are we waiting for during Advent? To celebrate Jesus' birthday, of course, but what is it we are hoping for, since we already know that the Saviour came and is with us now. Why do we focus on hopeful waiting at this time of year? Our hope during Advent is more than waiting for December 25th. It is a time to hope in the promise that God is calling us to greater things, knowing that God is patient even if we aren't.

I'm always waiting to hear God calling for me, but during Advent, I can more easily focus on listening for his reply. Despite all the bustle, my life during Advent is somehow quieter. And thank goodness, God is patient with me.

~Alice Allen-Grimes

Saturday, December 9

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10

Key Verse: *The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (Is. 11:6).*

Reflect:

It is Advent – and we are waiting.

It's been two thousand years since a baby born of a virgin was laid in a manger. Two thousand years since God incarnate cried "It is finished." Two thousand years since Death was overthrown and the grave could not contain Him. Two thousand years since the Apostles left Jerusalem for Samaria and the ends of the earth. Two thousand years, and we are still waiting.

Advent is the season of waiting. Some are waiting for Christmas Eve when the family will all be together again, some are excitedly waiting for Christmas morning. Some are waiting to be grown up, to be old enough to drive, to be loved. Waiting for a phone call with news, waiting to be well, to be whole. Some of us are waiting for a gentle word, for an end to our heartaches. Waiting for an end of suffering, both our own and that of those around us. Waiting for peace and goodwill among mankind. Waiting for reconciliation, waiting for that day when the wolf and lion and lamb and calf lie down together. It is nighttime and we are waiting for the sun to rise on that day – that glorious and promised Day of the Lord – when the whole earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That day when every tear is wiped away and sorrow and mourning is no more.

It is Advent – and we are waiting. Teach us, Lord, how to wait.

~Mark Erickson



Sunday, December 10

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5

Key Verse: *Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Is. 40:5).*

Reflect:

Every year our family gets our Advent calendars out on December 1st and spends 24 days getting ready for the birth of Christ with fun activities, hot chocolate, Bible readings and reflections. Sometimes our days are busy or just repetitious so it's important to us to find time to anticipate the coming of our Saviour—Emmanuel, God with us.

But God didn't just take 24 days to get ready for the birth of his son. Ever since sin entered the world, God had his rescue plan ready for us. We would need saving from our sin and Jesus would be our Saviour. Throughout the Old Testament God can't help but leak news of this plan to bring hope and salvation. Here in Isaiah, written about 700 years before the Nativity, we read 'that the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind will see it.'

So, as you get ready and excited for Christmas this year, take some time to think about how excited God is for Christmas. How excited He is for you to see what he has revealed. How excited he is for you to know your Saviour personally.

~Karen Erickson



Art by Gwen Matheson

Monday, December 11

Read: Psalm 39:7; 62:5-7

Key Verse: *For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken* (Psalm 62:5-6).

Reflect:

God is With Us: Miraculous Signs

Probably like you, when the pandemic pushed us into isolation, I started looking for reassuring signs from God.

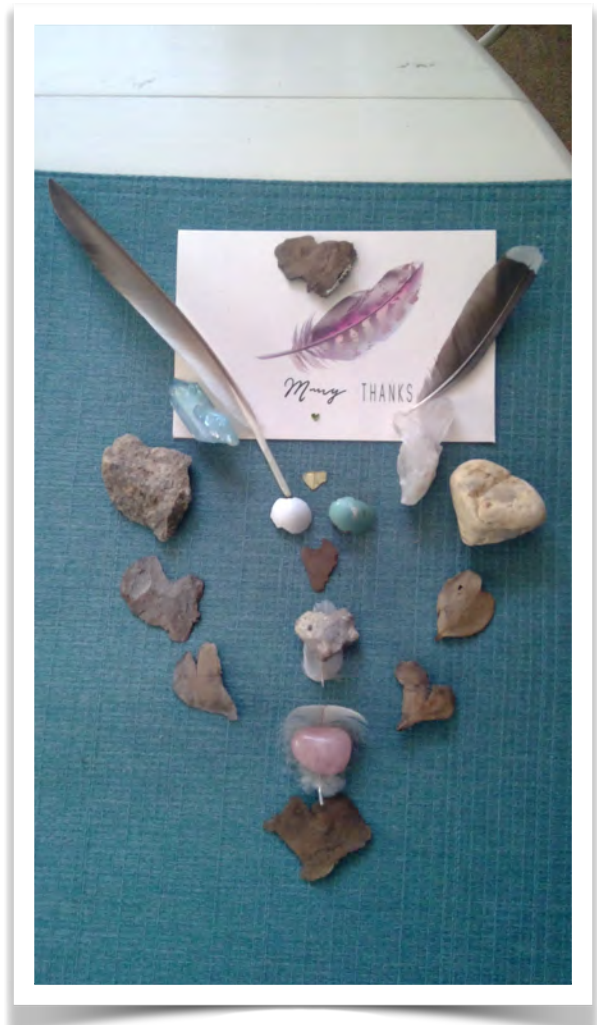
I was drawn to Psalm 91:4, 11-12. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; For He will command all His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." I felt His protection during my morning walk when I tripped on the sidewalk, BUT I didn't fall.

I began seeing lots of eagles soaring above me. And don't get me started on the heart signs! I've found so many hearts that I made an altar of them—mostly stones and bark at first. One message I was getting was "God is by my side. I am not alone."

Hearts have been appearing in less concrete ways: pats of butter at breakfast, two drops of water joined into a heart. The hearts and messages started coinciding with hymns and sermons from church. "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and "There's nothing you can do to separate you from God's love".

All these signs seemed to point to the scripture I chose. "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; I shall not be shaken" (Psalm 62: 5-6).

You too must be seeing or hearing God's messages of comfort and love.



~Sandy Meadow

Tuesday, December 12

Read: Luke 1:5-25

Key Verse: *But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John (Luke 1:13).*

Reflect:

Elizabeth and Zachariah were convinced they would not have children, but then Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, showed up with the news that they were to be gifted with their son, John.

Pondering that verse, it seems to me that the suggestion is, don't stop at the obvious. Families are made in all manner of ways, and each way comes with its own surprises and blessings.

Bill and I had thought we would not have children, but then we sought out an adoption agency, did all their required paperwork and counseling, waited, and waited some more. Then one day when we least expected it, we got The Call. In three days, we would have a son. Talk about a short pregnancy.

Baby Ben was perfect. Five years later, there was another call, and this time with two day's notice, we would have a daughter. Mattie joined our family, and again there was leaping for joy. Family and friends rejoiced with us both times, as we embarked on the adventure of raising our two greatest gifts. This was how our family was created.

~Lynn Ruehlmann



Wednesday, December 13

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Key Verse: *The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God”* (Luke 1:30).

Reflect:

The story of the angel coming to Mary with the incredible announcement she will give birth to Jesus has always brought about wonderful feelings in me. It immediately takes me back to the Christmas pageants from my childhood as well as the ones I have had the pleasure to watch here at our church. There is the excitement of the nativity play beginning. The children are dressed in their costumes. The narrator does the introduction. Then comes the first scene with the angel Gabriel and Mary. The angel appears and, before telling her she will conceive and give birth to a son, the angel reassures and comforts Mary.

It makes me feel warm inside when I hear the Bible verse of the angel telling Mary not to be afraid for she has found favor with God. It reminds me that our God is a loving God. When I am anxious, nervous, or worried, I just have to remember that we always have God’s love and not to be afraid.

~Rich Voter



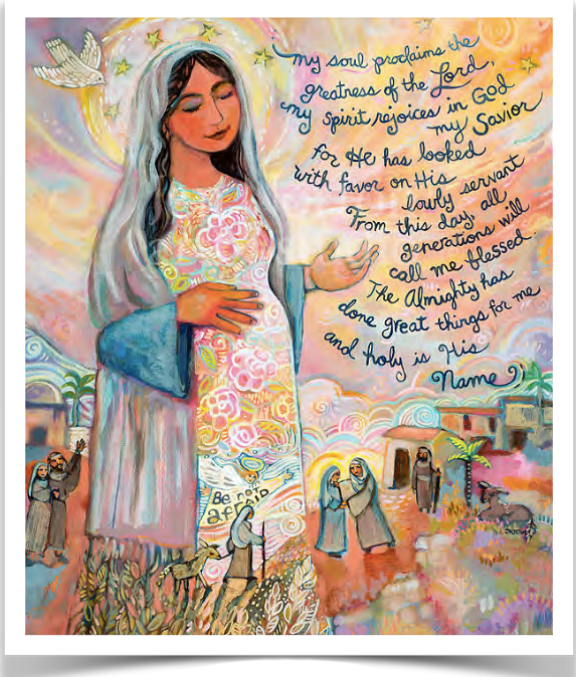
Thursday, December 14

Luke 1:39-56

Key Verse: And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47).

Reflect:

I was 8 years old the first time I ever sang on my own in front of people. It was during a church Christmas pageant just after we’d moved to Silver Spring, MD. I was selected to be the angel Gabriel in the pageant and, for reasons that remain unclear to me today, was told that I would be singing the Song of Mary as a duet with the girl playing Mary. I’d always liked to sing, but was extremely shy and terrified at the thought of singing in front of people. I was very much against this plan. I did not think that saying no to an adult, especially the formidable mother who was organizing the pageant, was an option so I quietly resigned myself to weeks of anxiety and dedicated myself to making sure my part was so ingrained in my memory that it would be impossible to mess up.



At the time, it didn’t occur to me that Mary was also almost certainly terrified when she spoke the words in Luke 1. At age 8, I knew that things were happening for Mary out of what I thought to be the usual order—it was not socially acceptable for her to be expecting a child without a husband—but the terror she must have felt was lost on me. It was impossible for me as an 8 year old and it is still a challenge for me today to trust and rejoice when God’s plan for me seems scary or hard. But I know that God got me through my first (but definitely not my last) terror filled performance and other much darker valleys of my life. I hope, for me and for you, that it continues to get easier to trust and rejoice in what God gives us—just as Mary did.

~Emily Byrd

Friday, December 15

Read: Luke 1:57-80

Key Verse: *“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”* (Luke 1:78-79).

Reflect:

My reflection is on Luke 1:78-79 which occurs in a passage called Zechariah’s Song. Zechariah, soon to be the father of John the Baptist, praises God and prophesies that his son will prepare the way for Jesus, the longed for savior. Zechariah looks ahead with hope.

To me this passage speaks of the natural rising of the sun each day bringing light to all of us in darkness...as God created on the first day. Light is essential for a healthy life.

I also think Zechariah speaks of God’s Son coming to us from Heaven. The risen Son will dispel our darkness and bring us His Peace. The light/teachings that Jesus brings is/are also essential for a healthy life.

As I began to write this, I searched for a pencil and found one and sharpened it. I noticed a message on the pencil: MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE TO THE LORD. Zechariah’s Song was of hope and joy. May we enter this Advent Season with hope and joy, also.

~Sandy Simmermon



Saturday, December 16

Read: Psalm 33:20-22

Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Reflect:

TWO WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Dear Santa
Pleze bring me a pony. I need a pony to ride.
a bron and wite one. Thank yu. I hope I see a
pony tomoro.

Mary

Anxious wife to her husband, "Let's hope the NW Regional leaves and gets to Boston on time. NO track delays."

A Tampa niece texts, "Hoping the weather will be nice so the family Christmas dinner for 40 can be outside."

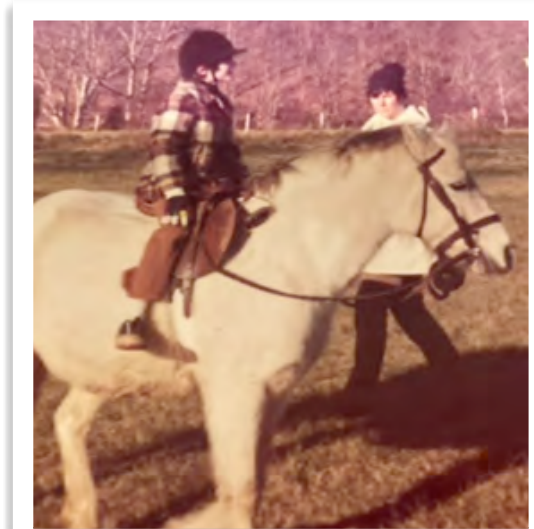
CHRISTMAS DAY

No pony in the living room, only a little black riding hat and a promise of riding lessons.

The train arrives at 1:46 AM, not the scheduled 10:13.

Tampa Weather Report: Rain 100% today.

Still, we are full of gratitude because the Lord is upon us. He is there in the riding lessons, in the son who meets the train at 1:46 AM, and in the family gathered around the Christmas ham and cranberry sauce, two kinds. Christmas love is all around us as we place our hope and trust in the Lord for food, family, shelter, and PEACE.



~Aleene and Bob Rose

Sunday, December 17

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Key Verse: *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife (Matt. 1:24).*

Reflect:

I awoke like Joseph did. However, I found out I had two very small babies. The Lord had blessed me. Things did not go as I thought they would. I lost my daughter. I did not know how the Lord could let this happen. The Lord let Michael live, and what a true blessing Michael is. He has autism, but by the grace of God, he gave Michael the will to learn, and Michael is doing very well.

Now, I truly know how much of a blessing Michael is to me. It has been the Lord, Micheal, and myself for fifty-one years. Michael takes care of me when he is home; minor things, but major to him. It has been hard, but I am really not alone. The Lord gave me the strength and determination to help me help Michael be the best he can be. This story shows what you can do with the Lord's help.

~Linda Norman



Monday, December 18

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Key Verse: *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 (Luke 2:7).*

Reflect:

This passage makes me think of several things. I am glad for the resourcefulness of the innkeeper in thinking of where the animals were kept. Finding Christ in a manger reminds us that his work and his will can sometimes be found in ordinary things. Lastly, and humorously, I cannot help but think of the Christmas lyrics written for Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah". These take things a bit far by saying Jesus was "born in a manger". I don't think so—I don't think Mary climbed into the manger to give birth to Jesus!

~Ken Brock



Tuesday, December 19

Read: Luke 2:8-20

Key Verse: *And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).*

Reflect:

My Christmas Gift

Many of you know I have purchased a house in Chesapeake and will be moving soon. Well, eventually. Currently caught in the Purgatory of sorting, purging and packing, an actual move seems a long way off.

One of the unexpected joys of going through everything I’ve ever collected is rediscovering items from my parents. Today, I’ve read articles about their service to and retirement from Union Seminary in Richmond in 1997, as well as a sermon on 1 Corinthians 15 written by my mother decades ago. What resonates throughout is my parents’ unwavering faith in a God who, as my mother wrote in her sermon, “turned the worst man could do into God’s best act.... God took a death and employed it to give all men [and women] eternal life.”

I believe that is what God did. And the reason I believe it is because every Christmas my parents read to me Luke’s account of the shepherds and the angels. Fear not, they reassured me, for to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. My mother’s favorite part of the story was the shepherds’ response: Let us go over to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. Go and see, and then tell everyone! Tell everyone that God has joined us here on earth.



What a gift, this gift of faith! This Christmas, give that same gift to your children and your friends and everyone you meet. Fear not! God is here. Amen.

~Marie Finch

Art by Gwen Matheson

Wednesday, December 20

Read: Luke 2:21-40

Key Verse: Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and thanked God: “Now, Lord, you can let me, your servant, die in peace as you said. I have seen with my own eyes how you will save your people” (Luke 2:28-30).

Reflect:

The birth of Jesus is pictured as a time of peace, serenity, and joy. And it was those things but it was also a scary and deadly time. King Herod who ruled Judea was an evil, murderous, lecherous, thug. He killed all the babies under the age of two in Bethlehem after he learned another “king,” King Jesus, was born there. The people living in the land of Israel were ruled by Herod and were also a colony of the Roman Empire. The Romans were the ones who used a heinous form of torture called the crucifixion to execute anyone that opposed them. Jesus was murdered by the Romans on a cross or crucifix. I cannot imagine living in a more chaotic, frightening period.

And yet, in the verses from Luke, Simeon says this, “Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and thanked God: ‘Now, Lord, you can let me, your servant, die in peace.’” How could Simeon talk about peace during such a horrific time? The answer is He knew Jesus was there. Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms. He met Jesus. No matter what happened around him, Simeon knew Jesus was there, which meant God was there. The message of Christmas is the Lord Jesus is here and on the move. Problems don’t scare us. Rather, problems are the Lord’s opportunities to bring good out of bad.

Mother Teresa was a nun in the Catholic Church who traveled from Europe to serve the poorest of the poor in India. She specialized in caring for those who had been left to die in the foul open sewers in Calcutta. The world was so impressed with her work she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

During one summer Mother Teresa had a young woman helping her as an administrative assistant. Shortly after taking on her new role, the young woman accompanied Mother Teresa on a tour to several countries. During the tour, she’d run dramatically up to Mother Teresa throughout the day with another new “problem.” After a few days of this, Mother Teresa gently took the young woman aside and explained to her that she was looking at the world from the wrong perspective. The “problems” the young woman described were not problems. Rather, Mother Teresa said problems were God’s opportunities. Mother Teresa knew what Simeon knew. The birth of Jesus meant God is here and on the move. Problems are God’s opportunities. What problems do you have in your life that God wants to use as opportunities to bring good from bad and life from death?

~Larry Toney

Thursday, December 21

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Key Verse: *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh* (Matt. 2:10-11).

Reflect:

We Three Kings

All it takes is the first few notes of that beautiful hymn and I'm right back in Miss Alma and Miss Margaret's first grade Sunday School class at First Presbyterian Church, learning the Nativity story, practicing the parts we would all play in the annual Christmas pageant. Our parts were small – pint-sized angels, lowly stable animals. Even then, we aspired to more: “stage angels” with speaking parts and wings that touched the floor, shepherds and wise men who got to don fake beards. Mary, Joseph.



The Holy Family notwithstanding, the three kings were the really plum parts. Their robes were richly colored velvet, they wore jeweled crowns and carried gifts on silk cushions with flowing tassels. They had *presence* as they strode solemnly down the sanctuary's center aisle on their way to the manger, their heads held high. They had traveled a great distance with only a star, and their faith, to guide them. To my six-year-old mind, there was magic in that star, made all the more magical because the story was all true.

A few decades have come and gone since then. But every year about this time, as we enter the season of Advent, I find myself searching the eastern sky for a star shining more brightly than all the rest, a star that brings a promise of hope to a troubled world, a star that is there to guide me – to guide all of us – even when we cannot see it.

~Peggy McPhillips

Friday, December 22

Read: Matthew 2:13-23

Key Verse: *When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel (Matt. 2:19-21).*

Reflect:

Reading this passage gives me hope. The first evil that Jesus encountered was King Herod. I thought to myself, now he can live and be safe, something a parent wants for their child. But I know that this isn't what will happen, that he came here to die for my sins. This is kind of like going to a scary movie and hoping that the monster isn't in the closet, even though I know it is. I know that Jesus will not have a life free from pain and he will die on the cross. But looking at it this is what gives me hope, that it comes through Jesus and now I have something else he gave me. I wonder what Joseph must have thought for his family and did he understand the gravity of all of this. This verse is conflicted, would I have returned to Israel knowing my child would not be safe but following the directions of God, or would I have run away and done everything in my power to protect my family? Would I have faith in that moment or not? As a parent, I don't know if I could have done this knowing my child's path, and I hope Joseph didn't know that his child would be the lamb of God and sacrificed for all mankind.

~Kevin Kittredge



Saturday, December 23

Read: John 1:14

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.

Reflect:

We go about our lives distracted by busyness, numbed by the news of the world and social media, and overwhelmed by responsibilities. We are satisfied with our snack with the Lord when He offers us a feast. Yet God sent His Son to us on that first Christmas to live with us and offer us more—more grace for our mistakes, more hope and joy for our living, and more adventure to enjoy, and zest for life. What if we accept that gift, truly grasp it? Our lives can be more, so much more than we can ever imagine! Lord, help me to say yes and truly live at the banquet you promise.

~Ann Byrd Porter



Art by Nate Siemering

Sunday, December 24

Read: 1 Samuel 3:9 “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*”

Reflect:

As a young believer, I used to watch the TV program, “The Deaf Hear”, whose hearing pastor, Reverend Stallings, both spoke and signed his messages. I had always been fascinated by the beauty of signing. Also, when I was a teenager, the diving team from the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind in Staunton, Virginia, held their Olympic practices in our city pool. I was fascinated by their athleticism and the powerful, graceful dives they executed. I heard their grunts as they took the dives, and watched, spellbound, not only by the beautiful dives, but by their finger spelling, as they took turns on the high board.

When I heard that one of my classmates in college was going to Cochabamba, Bolivia, to minister to the deaf there, I was astonished at the sacrifice she was making, she having been a music major in college. I couldn’t imagine giving up her love of music to minister to those who couldn’t hear what was “one of her favorite things.”

The “Theater of the Deaf” from Gallaudet University performed at my college, now James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and I was entranced at the beauty of their movement and the sound of voices which could not hear themselves, or perhaps, could barely hear one another.

My fascination with the five senses during Advent began with a realization that the center of all our senses is located in our heads, and I thought of the “senses” of Christmas—“Oh, hear the angels sing!,” or at least “bring good tidings of great joy.” I began my Advent musings last year with taste, “Taste and See,” and am imagining this year, Christmas carolers joyfully singing, hearing the opening of car doors with the arrival of families “home for the holidays”, neighbors knocking on front doors, and even side or back doors, delivering gifts and plates of home-baked cookies and other goodies; the nighttime silence in the town of Bethlehem, the crunch of boots in the snow, the Christmas cantatas sung by church choirs, and the magnificent sounds of Handel’s Messiah!

So many Scriptures refer to hearing the Word of God. Below are some of them for holy-day meditation:

Leviticus 19:14 *You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the LORD.*

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

1 Samuel 3:10 *Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

Job 42:5 *I heard about You from others; now I have seen You with my own eyes.*

Mark 12:37 *And the common people heard Him gladly.*

John 4:42 *They said to the woman {at the well}, "Now we believe, not because of your speaking; for we have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."*

John 5:30 (Jesus speaking) *By Myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please Myself but Him who sent me.*

1 John 1:3 *That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

Romans 10:17 *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*
(The Message paraphrase of Romans 10:17) *But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted?*

Shalom and blessings in this season of waiting. Holy Father, give us ears and hearts to hear Your voice, saying, "Come to Me..."

~Judy Tressel



Art by Eliza Matheson

Monday, December 25

Read: Psalm 95:1-7

Key Verses:

*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for this is our God
and we are the people of God's pasture,
the flock under God's care (Ps 95:1, 6-7 NIV).*



Today we celebrate the God who actually comes to us.

We call out the names by which we know this God:

Head of household, strong rock, the One who made us, the One to whom we belong.

Today we finally acknowledge all the ways God has been around us all along:

in the depths of the earth, upon mountain peaks,
within the unruly sea, upon the safe dry land.

Today we celebrate all the ways we have seen God's face in these recent days of Advent: through the privilege of giving to those who have so little, through joyous moments of presenting gifts and receiving grace, in the delight of every dessert on the table, the warmth of every cup of cheer, amidst every new toy, every treasured nativity, and most of all, within the sweet vulnerability of human love.

For this One who loves us has come to us - in messy human form that we might forever treasure our humanity and know ourselves loved.

O Come, all ye faithful
O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!
Come, and behold Him, born the King of angels!
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!
Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

~Nancy Rowland



By Gwen Matheson