

Advent Devotional 2026

We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith, and prepare your heart to celebrate the birth of Christ. This year's devotional is written by members of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary community.

In addition to this printed format, you may also access the devotionals in these ways:

- **Read and listen online.** Visit www.pts.edu/devotional.
- **Receive daily e-mails.** Go to www.pts.edu/email, click "Signup for Seminary News," and "Devotionals (Advent and Lent)."

You may download additional Advent resources by visiting www.pts.edu/devotional.

PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2026

Written by the Rev. Kelsy N. Brown Gunther '10, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3:1-10

This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to
you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention
by reminding you 2 that you should remember the
words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the
commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your
apostles. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the
last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own
lusts 4 and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For
ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were
from the beginning of creation!" 5 They deliberately ignore
this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago
and an earth was formed out of water and by means of
water, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged
with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the present
heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept
until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.
8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord
one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are
like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as
some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting
any to perish but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day
of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens
will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be
destroyed with fire, and the earth and everything that is done
on it will be disclosed.

DEVOTIONAL

Advent is about patience. It is supposed to be a season of waiting and watching for what God is doing in our lives. For four weeks, we pause and patiently wait in anticipation of our Savior, who comes to be God with us. We wait for Jesus—the one who moves into the neighborhood—to arrive. I don't know about your house, but ours feels anything but patient during the Advent season. It is filled with the hustle and bustle of decorating our home, singing Christmas carols, and making Christmas cookies. We make sure the presents have been purchased, wrapped, and stored neatly under the tree. We anticipate the mischief of our elves Rosie and Ralph each night, and, of course, we count down the days until Christmas comes.

When Peter writes this text, he reminds the church to be patient because God is patient, faithfully waiting for us to follow. What seems slow to us is much more deliberate than we might think. Peter is writing about the long wait for Jesus' second coming, but during Advent, we wait for the birth of Jesus in much the same way. We watch and wait to see what God is doing right now. It might not look exactly like we expect, and it might take longer than we think it should, but God is at work. God's plan for Jesus' coming was unfolding long before the earth was formed.

I need this reminder regularly, especially in this busy season, because I am not patient. I want answers right away. I hope for a road map showing me how things are going to go in future. And when I think that God could move a little faster, I often step in with my own plans for how I am going to get the work completed in a timely manner.
Practice patience today. Watch for what God is doing, and remember how patiently our Savior waits for us.

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, help us to be patient. Help us to watch for what You are doing in our lives right now as signs of what You will do in the future. Amen.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell, James A. Kelso Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 1:10-20

10 Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls
or of lambs or of goats.
12 When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more!
13 Bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;
17 learn to do good;
seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.
18 Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
If your sins are like scarlet,
will they become like snow?
If they are red like crimson,
will they become like wool?
19 If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land,
20 but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

DEVOTIONAL

In the Evangelical circles in which I came to faith, Isaiah 1:18 played a crucial role, in preaching and hymnody: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (KJV). Only *believe*, and Jesus will forgive your sins, making your heart clean and your record clear: "as white as snow."

However, if you read this passage in the NRSVue, you will be in for a shock:

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
If your sins are like scarlet,
will they become like snow?
If they are red like crimson,
will they become like wool?

Phrased as questions, these sentences read not as reassurance, but as an accusation: how you think that your blatant transgressions, indelible as scarlet dye, are not apparent to the Lord?

To be fair, most English translations (for example, the NIV, the CEB, and even the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh) render this passage as the KJV does, treating these not as questions, but as simple statements. The Hebrew is no help to us: usually, questions are explicitly marked as such, but not always. Often, we need to rely on the context to tell whether a sentence is intended to be a statement or a question. In the accusatory context of this first chapter of Isaiah (which after all refers to Jerusalem and Judah as Sodom and Gomorrah [Isa 1:10]!), a statement of radical forgiveness does seem jarring—although supporters of that reading might argue, perhaps that is exactly the point.

Still, I must confess that I believe the NRSVue has it right. The problem with the faith of my youth was that it was entirely too *spiritual*—as, indeed, is much American Christianity today! We have made faith an entirely interior, private affair, just between me and Jesus—ignoring the clear demands of Scripture that our lives be holy, responsive, and obedient to the Lord's righteousness (see Isa 1:19-20). But as C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic *Mere Christianity*, new life in Christ "is not merely the spreading of an idea . . . There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God"!

PRAYER

Holy Lord: In this season of Advent, as we anticipate Your incarnation, may we be willing ourselves to become, like Mary, God-bearers. Make us by Your Spirit into faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel by our transformed lives. In Your own holy Name we pray, amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2026

Written by the Rev. Paul James Pfeuffer '12/'18

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 33

1 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
2 Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
3 Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
4 For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
5 He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.
6 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.
8 Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him,
9 for he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
12 Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.
13 The Lord looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
14 From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
15 he who fashions the hearts of them all

and observes all their deeds.
16 A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.
18 Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
19 to deliver their soul from death
and to keep them alive in famine.
20 Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and shield.
21 Our heart is glad in him
because we trust in his holy name.
22 Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

DEVOTIONAL

The unmistakable noise of Styrofoam squeaks beneath your fingertips as you unbox the ceramic nativity set that your aunt and uncle got you when you got married decades ago. Your limbs become entangled in the untidy mess of strings of lights that (somehow) tangled themselves when you put them into sturdy plastic containers 11 months ago, because "honestly, honey, they weren't like that when I put them in there." You carefully unbox the Darth Vader ornament from its original 1997 Hallmark ornament box, reflecting on the lost lightsaber that your oldest child scattered to the wind because he simply didn't understand collectors' value. There is this beautiful and amusing image amid Psalm 33's discussion of the steadfast love of God:

"By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses." (vv. 6-7, ESV)

Imagine the Lord caring enough for creation that God gathers the waters in an orderly fashion and places them into storehouses. If you're anything like me, perhaps you need to outsource the storage of your Christmas decorations to the Almighty! The sharing of such trinkets with our loved ones brings us hope and the reflection on the memories made will last us a good, long while.

And we also realize that unpacking God's love for us is not a one-time deal; when the psalmist talks about our soul waiting for the Lord and placing our trust in God, we have to realize that this is an everyday occurrence. Sure, we may observe Advent as the time of waiting for the birth of Immanuel, but God comes into this world and loves us in the smaller, quieter moments as well as the raucous and joyful celebrations. Even when the last nativity piece is placed in its container, and Darth Vader at last gets put away for the year..

PRAYER

My prayer for today, (and for your Advent, dear reader) is a simple one. It is the last line of Psalm 33:
"Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you."

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2026

Written by the Rev. Kathy Nice '12, Doctor of Ministry Student, Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:1-4

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
2 In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.

DEVOTIONAL

As we wander prayerfully toward the time of Christmas, our minds may be drawn back to our own histories. I remember good times with family and friends: plates of cookies, glasses of milk for the kiddos, and hot cocoa for the grown-ups (sorry, no eggnog in my family). I remember going to a church that was crackling with excitement: decorations reflecting the glinting lights sparkling through tree branches, kids testing out costumes in preparation for the big program, a choir practicing marvelous anthems.

I think that is what Isaiah saw in his mind: the Lord's house, high on the mountains, lights glinting from windows enticing people to come and worship. Everyone focused on the worship of God, not on wars; listening for the word of God, not shouts of anger. Can you see it, too?

We know that Judah and Jerusalem were not living in the dreamy land that Isaiah described, yet that's why this vision was so enticing: it was something to work towards. We aren't living in a time like the "old days" either, but we have something to work towards. We can look for ways to shine lights that others can see, to brighten both their days and our own. We can redirect our anger or discontent into ways of peace with those with whom we disagree.

As we move through Advent, we pause and look forward to the days when the Lord's house is established high on the mountains, when we learn the Lord's instructions and war no more. God could do this all alone, but God wants partners. How will you partner with God in this season to bring light into the world, to shift war to peace, to listen anew for God's instruction? Take a deep breath, and breathe in peace. Allow God to redirect your vision to what *can* be.

PRAYER

Lord, as we pause today to reflect on another season of waiting, we are impatient. We want a time of no war, a time when everyone streams to hear instruction from You. We are in the "not yet," even forgetting the fact that, already, You have shown us Your deep love for all of Your creation. Help us to focus on reminders of where You are and how we can be a part of Your plan for bringing to earth that which already exists in heaven. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Scott Dennis '13

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:5-22

5 O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!
6 You have forsaken your people,
the house of Jacob,
for they are full of diviners from the East
and of soothsayers like the Philistines,
and they clasp hands with foreigners.
7 Their land is filled with silver and gold,
and there is no end to their treasures;
their land is filled with horses,
and there is no end to their chariots.
8 Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.
9 And so people are humbled,
and everyone is brought low—
[[do not forgive them!
10 Enter into the rock,
and hide in the dust
from the terror of the Lord
and from the glory of his majesty.]]
11 The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low,
and the pride of everyone shall be humbled,
and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.
12 For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up and high;
13 against all the cedars of Lebanon,
lofty and lifted up;
and against all the oaks of Bashan;
14 against all the high mountains
and against all the lofty hills;
15 against every high tower
and against every fortified wall;
16 against all the ships of Tarshish
and against all the highly prized vessels.
17 The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,
and the pride of everyone shall be brought low,
and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.
18 The idols shall utterly pass away.
19 Enter the caves of the rocks
and the holes of the ground,
from the terror of the Lord
and from the glory of his majesty,
when he rises to terrify the earth.
20 On that day people will throw away
to the moles and to the bats
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
which they made for themselves to worship,
21 to enter the caverns of the rocks
and the clefts in the crags,
from the terror of the Lord
and from the glory of his majesty,
when he rises to terrify the earth.
22 [[Turn away from mortals,
who have only breath in their nostrils,
for of what account are they?]]

DEVOTIONAL

Isaiah invites us to behold the path that God desires for us as well as the path we choose when we turn away from God, only later seeing its disastrous consequences. Isaiah reflects on the dualism we feel in God's presence: glory and terror. Our reading reminds us that God calls us to walk in his light while simultaneously warning us against the darkness of human pride. This begins when Isaiah looks forward to the time when all nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord to learn his ways, but it ends by drawing our attention to the sin that prevents us from living under God's reign: idolatry and self-exaltation.

In verses 5-22, Isaiah confronts our temptation to trust in human strength by rejecting the world's signs of morality

and knowledge, wisdom and prestige, power and wealth, possessions and achievements. This happens when we turn away from the creator to worship what we have created. Yet, Isaiah foresees the coming of Jesus—that day of the Lord when all human pride shall be humbled, for "the Lord alone will be exalted" (v. 11). This is the coming day against all other days, for it is that day upon which the hinge of history swings and by which all other days are measured, counted, and compared. God stands against the strongest that the world has on offer, brushing aside our best, strongest, and greatest.

Yet, what in the world does this unnatural Advent reading have to do with our journey to Christmas?
Isaiah's message remains deeply relevant for the church: human hearts continually seek substitutes for God, placing our confidence in power, security, knowledge, or success rather than in Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. The church has long confessed that Jesus is the one who both restores communion between God and humankind and reveals that God's wisdom and salvation come not through greatness but through God's self-giving. All earthly idols eventually fail; God alone remains eternal, holy, and worthy of worship. May we hold onto Isaiah's vision of repentance and faith as we proceed to Christmas.

PRAYER

Holy Lord, Your spokesman Isaiah calls us to abandon our idols and walk in Your light. Help us see Your light in Jesus, the coming Christ child, for His kingdom cannot be shaken and His reign never fails. Help us to trust Jesus alone to receive all our fears, our hopes, and our worship from this day forward. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Jessica Anschutz, Director of the Center for Adaptive and Innovative Ministry

SCRIPTURE

Luke 20:41–21:4

41 Then he said to them, "How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? 42 For David himself says in the book of Psalms,
'The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand
43 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." '
44 "David thus calls him Lord, so how can he be his son?"
45 In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples,
46 "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and who love respectful greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

DEVOTIONAL

Each year as I decorate the Christmas tree, I'm instantly transported back to Christmases past as I hang ornaments gifted to me over the years. There are the ornaments given to me by my maternal grandparents—one for each year that they spent Christmas on this side of heaven. The ornaments lovingly handmade by my late paternal grandmother, an avid crafter. The ornaments I've collected in my travels next to ornaments gifted to me by beloved former church members. Perhaps you, too, experience a similar trip down memory lane as you decorate. Which ornaments seem small, ordinary, or insignificant, but with time have become the stewards of cherished memories of days and loved ones gone by? To a stranger, these are just trinkets, but to us, their value is immeasurable.

This contrast between outward appearance and true worth caught Jesus' attention in the temple one afternoon. While proclaiming the good news in the temple and facing scrutiny by the chief priests, scribes, and elders, something caught his eye. In the midst of the rich people giving out of their abundance, Jesus noticed a widow offering two small copper coins. She gave "all she had to live on" (Luke 21:4). Jesus noticed the small gift that, quite possibly, even most of us would have overlooked.

As we prepare our hearts and homes to celebrate the inbreaking of the Christ child into a broken and hurting world, will we follow Christ's example and be attentive to the small gifts? Thanking the person who holds the door open for us as we rush from the car into the grocery store. Sharing homemade cookies with public servants and emergency workers. A handwritten note of encouragement in the midst of the busyness of the season. A neighbor who clears the sidewalk or rakes leaves. A simple smile.

PRAYER

Holy and loving God, we give thanks for the reminder to be attentive to the value in small gifts. Open our eyes, hearts, and spirits to see the immense value in small things so that our hearts, like the widow's offering, may be given fully to You. Amen.

.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2026

Written by the Rev. Annie Parker '13

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 90

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.
1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3 You turn us back to dust
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
4 For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past
or like a watch in the night.
5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
7 For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
10 The days of our life are seventy years
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
11 Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
13 Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us
and as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants
and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

DEVOTIONAL

There is so much pressure to do during the holidays. There are the necessities—the presents to purchase and wrap, the house to clean up before guests arrive, the meals to cook before the celebrations, and the everyday, normal tasks that don't pause during the season. There are also those things we feel that we ought to do, like the traditions we keep, even when we feel like we are going through the motions—the marvelous homemade decorations we see on social media that make our own decorating seem too small and the constant barrage of events and things to do or buy coming at us through our TVs and our phones.

In the book Skipping Christmas, one couple decides to forgo the stress altogether—instead of decorating and buying presents and cooking a grand feast, they will put all of that money towards a cruise, and they will forgo celebrating the holiday season in the meantime. Of course, their story ends humorously as their daughter surprises them at the last minute with a Christmas visit, and they must scurry to make Christmas happen with the help of their community and friends. The stress and overbooking of ourselves has almost become its own part of the season, ready to be pulled out with the stockings and that tangled ball of Christmas lights. We complain about it, we try our best to plan for it, and as the holidays rush by in the blink of an eye, we may wonder if the stress and hubbub is worth it.

Our Psalm today pulls us out of the doing of the season and invites us to rest in God's presence. We are called to count our days and enjoy them, not to fill them with to-do lists and tasks. We can spend quiet time in the word every day to be filled with God's peace. We can put down our to-do list and the stress of the season to see God's goodness and mercy all around us. Maybe our Christmas season needs to be less about what we are doing and more about what God has done and continues to do in our world today. Let us connect with God this holy season and remember his goodness and love every day!

PRAYER

Father God, You created each one of us with a purpose and calling to serve You. Help us to see that calling and to set aside anything that takes us away from following You. In the busyness of this season, quiet our hearts and minds so that we may hear You and see You at work in the world. Lead us today and always. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2026

Written by the Rev. Helen Kester '06

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 25

Of David.

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!
8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
9 He leads the humble in what is right
and teaches the humble his way.
10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
11 For your name's sake, O Lord,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
12 Who are they who fear the Lord?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.
13 They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.
14 The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.
15 My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
19 Consider how many are my foes
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
20 O guard my life and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
22 Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.

DEVOTIONAL

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, in you I trust." (vv. 1-2)

We live with a persistent message: "It is up to you. Be strong enough. Know enough. Work hard enough. Do enough. Make it happen." Even those preparing for ministry can absorb this message: "Study more. Read more. Serve more. Lead more. Meet every expectation." And, somewhere in the margins: "Remember to take care of your soul."

Psalm 25 begins somewhere else: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." The psalmist begins not with what can be accomplished, but with the recognition of need: "Teach me. Lead me. Forgive me. Have mercy on me." The psalmist does not appeal to personal achievement but to God's steadfast love and mercy.

That is a profoundly *Advent* posture. Advent reminds us that salvation does not begin with our reaching toward God; it begins with God's coming toward us. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot manufacture meaning. We cannot become sufficient through effort, knowledge, or accomplishment. We receive.

And yet, Advent arrives in the midst of a season that continually tells us otherwise. Christmas invites us toward more—more gifts, more activity, more celebration, more consumption. But more cannot fill the deepest places of the soul. We know this because it is possible to arrive at Christmas surrounded by abundance and still experience profound emptiness.

The psalmist knows what we so easily forget: the soul's deepest need is not for "more," but for God: "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth." (vv. 4-5)

The request for forgiveness in Psalm 25 is not simply a desire to have guilt removed; it is a desire to be restored to God's way. Mercy makes a new life possible. God's forgiveness and God's guidance belong together.

Perhaps this is a word especially worth hearing in Advent—and especially in the midst of theological education and preparation for ministry. Before we are pastors, students, leaders, teachers, or caregivers, we are people who need God. Our vocation does not begin with what we can do for God. It begins with what God is doing in us and among us. So perhaps Advent asks us to lay down the burden of being sufficient: the need to know enough, accomplish enough, and prove enough. And instead, to lift up our souls.

God is where it starts.
God's mercy is enough.
God's steadfast love is enough.
God's presence is enough.

And because God comes to us, we do not have to save ourselves. "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness." (v. 10) That is the promise on which Advent rests.

PRAYER

Merciful God, teach us Your ways and lead us in Your truth. Forgive us when we try to become sufficient through our

own strength and accomplishment. Remind us that our lives and our vocations begin with You.

As we wait for Christ, teach us again to receive—Your mercy, Your love, Your presence. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2026

Written by the Rev. Charlotte Mace, Doctor of Ministry Student, Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So, then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

DEVOTIONAL

You are people of the light! You are the kind of people who every morning dress yourselves in faith and love. You put on your head the hope of salvation. Paul paints a pretty nice picture of Christ-followers with his encouraging message, but why did he feel the need to remind people that they were so full of goodness? I believe the clue might be in the first few words: "concerning times and seasons." I spend a lot of time considering times and seasons myself: "When will this pass? When will this happen? Is this coming next?" We are created to want to know what to expect. It can wear us down, always trying to anticipate what might happen next.

The time of Advent is an encouragement to learn to wait on the Lord. As my mother always said: "You can't choose what happens to you, but you can always choose how you will respond." Learning to wait with patience and kindness is a spiritual strength. Learning to live with a peace in your heart as you wait through "times and seasons" is a spiritual discipline. Both require that we draw from the strength of the Lord so that we might live in a way where our anxiousness doesn't drive who we are. We are called to develop peace within ourselves, both for our own benefit and to encourage others. We are asked to live in hope and to let our faith and love shine for all the world to see.

We are in a "time and season" when the world needs a lot more of hope, peace, joy, and love. May this time of Advent be the reminder we need to live out peace in this time and season. Amen.

PRAYER

Good and Faithful God,
We have written on our hearts to trust in You,
and yet so quickly the worries of the
times and season catch us unaware.
Let us be students of Your peace.
In our Advent-waiting, let us remember
to encourage one another,
and share Your goodness with the world.
In Christ's name,
amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Steve Shussett '93

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 5:18-25

18 Woe to those who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood,
  who drag sin along as with cart ropes,
19 who say, "Let him make haste;
  let him speed his work
  that we may see it;
let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment,
  that we may know it!"
20 Woe to those who call evil good
  and good evil,
who put darkness for light
  and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
  and sweet for bitter!
21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
  and shrewd in their own sight!
22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine
  and valiant at mixing drink,
23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe
  and deprive the innocent of their rights!
24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble
  and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will become rotten,
  and their blossom go up like dust,

for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.
25 Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them;
the mountains quaked,
and their corpses were like refuse
in the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.

DEVOTIONAL

There are methods of pottery that require the use of a large outdoor kiln and a community of potters to maintain the fire over several days. Despite the long hours, no one can open the kiln's door to check the clay's progress. Any change in temperature or pressure will damage or destroy the pottery within. You just have to wait, and what eventually emerges is rarely as you imagined it would be.

How long had the people of Israel waited for the Holy One's plan to be fulfilled? God had been with humans since Day Six, through sea and desert, good times and bad. But once again, in the midst of turmoil, people just wanted God to get on with it.

Here we are, so many years later. Perhaps, wanting our turmoil to end, we think, "How long, O Lord; how long?" But more likely, we don't even wonder anymore. It's not so much doubting that Jesus will come again, we just don't think about it very much.

But Advent calls on us to think about it, to consider the God who is, was, and is to come. Waiting is hard, and yes, we may want to open the kiln's door, to know. But we can't provoke God into acting more quickly or speed up Jesus' timetable. We can, however, tend to the Spirit's fire, in ourselves and others, and give to the community that has given to us. We can trust that in God's ultimate plan nothing will be damaged or destroyed. We can trust that what God has promised is beyond our imagination.

PRAYER

Holy One, Your Spirit causes our hearts to burn within us, and someday Your grace will consume the world. For now, however, through worship, prayer, and service, feed the fire within us and others, that an ember of trust in You may always burn. In Christ we pray, amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2026

Written by Elizabeth Baisley, Welcome Center and Events Manager

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 50

The mighty one, God the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
3 Our God comes and does not keep silent;
before him is a devouring fire
and a mighty tempest all around him.
4 He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
5 "Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!"
6 The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge. Selah
7 "Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.
8 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
9 I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.
10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
11 I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?
14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.
15 Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."
16 But to the wicked God says,
"What right have you to recite my statutes
or take my covenant on your lips?
17 For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.
18 You make friends with a thief when you see one,
and you keep company with adulterers.
19 You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.
20 You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother's child.
21 These things you have done, and I have been silent;
you thought that I was one just like yourself.
But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

22 Mark this, then, you who forget God,
or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver.
23 Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me;
to those who go the right way,
I will show the salvation of God."

DEVOTIONAL

Today we are a scant two weeks from Christmas, and chances are good that we've launched our frail, forgetful selves at top speed toward a small mountain of holiday-related tasks and checklists. Perspective flees as we chase holiday gifts and plan perfect celebrations and travel.

But surely this is not the only time of year when we lose sight of the presence and activity of the living God in the world. Throughout the years of our lives, as frustrations and disappointments mount, as we stagger under the weight of unmet expectations, missed deadlines, and bad news, we make friends with thieves and deceive ourselves and others with the idea that we're in control.

Psalm 50 reminds us to be mindful of and listen for the invitation of our ever-faithful God (v. 15, "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me") and to bring thanksgiving to lay at his feet, for our God—not our will, not our willingness to throw money or energy at anything we face—is our salvation.

PRAYER

I am thankful before You, living and enduring King, for you have mercifully restored my soul within me. Great is Your faithfulness. Grant that on this day I may recollect and remember that it is You who speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting, You whom I encounter as I meet Your children, and You who sends Your Son, our salvation, among us, in whose name I pray.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Rick Willhite '86

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 147:12-20

12 Extol the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
13 For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
14 He grants peace within your borders;
he fills you with the finest of wheat.
15 He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
16 He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
17 He hurls down hail like crumbs—
who can stand before his cold?
18 He sends out his word and melts them;
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.
19 He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
20 He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

The psalmist raises thanks and praise for God's provision of human necessities. These are the very things we long for: security for one's nation; peace among citizens; the well-being of children; provision of food through the uninterrupted cycles of nature—all expressions of God's eternally creative love. How well God knows our needs!

This swelling hymn of praise reaches its crescendo with the last two verses, which cite God's "statutes and ordinances." Those strike a different note, don't they?

"Statutes and ordinances"—strange objects for thanksgiving, entangled as humans tend to be with attraction to possessions, experiences, power, status, and control. At first glance, the possibility of a life oriented around "statutes and ordinances" might strike one as . . . rather restrictive.

But pause to gaze down from the peak of the final verses. Isn't the implication clear? A life attuned to God's "statutes and ordinances" *is precisely what enables a quality that can be called "blessed."* Justice, peace, provision, compassion toward the vulnerable—these don't just happen. They arise from human intentions—yours and mine—practiced in accordance with God's statutes and ordinances.

Nobody put it better than Jesus (Mark 12:28-31):

> When asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

We have Jesus' word on it. Those are calling and core guidance for those who follow him. To embody them is an endlessly creative, evolving, and challenging practice of a lifetime. There will be errors. We will face the need to forgive and to be forgiven. We will learn to lean hard into God's grace. The psalmist counsels us to take heart and notice. Grace is always.

PRAYER

Gracious God, shape our minds and hearts to cultivate conditions that support what is good and wholesome for ourselves and for others. Help us to remember Your call again and again and again. May we thus become blessing. May it be so by Your strength.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2026

Written by the Rev. Amy Newell '22, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 102

Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry come to you.
2 Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
3 For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
5 Because of my loud groaning,
my bones cling to my skin.
6 I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
7 I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
8 All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
9 Indeed, I eat ashes like bread
and mingle tears with my drink,
10 because of your indignation and anger,
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
11 My days are like a lengthening shadow;
I wither away like grass.
12 But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
14 For your servants hold its stones dear
and have pity on its dust.
15 The nations will fear the name of the Lord
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
16 For the Lord will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute
and will not despise their prayer.
18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:
19 that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the Lord looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die,
21 so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion
and his praise in Jerusalem,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to serve the Lord.
23 He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.
24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away
at the midpoint of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations."
25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
26 They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away,
27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.
28 The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

DEVOTIONAL

Christmas is a difficult time for me. I am grateful for the birth of Jesus, but I succumb to the expectations of everything surrounding Christmas. There's just so much to do—for everyone—at the same time. And so much pressure to "get it right." Exhaustion sets in. The excitement of the season is forgotten, leaving me to feel isolated and alone and hurt as I search for the peace, love, joy, and hope of the season. "I am like a lonely bird on the housetop." (v. 7)

I suspect that I'm not the only one. In fact, I know that I'm not the only one. I see other "Christmas zombies" stumbling around. That's why the words of the Psalmist speak to me. The Psalmist understands how I feel, because they feel the same way. We are broken and hurting people who need to feel close to the God who came to be close to us, and we desire connection with others, too.

When "the appointed time [had] come," (v. 13) Jesus went to great lengths to be born, so that he could immerse himself in the human experience. Not as a distant God, but as a God who came near, right when we needed him most. "So that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord." (v. 18)

And Jesus continues to walk beside us, tenderly plucking every lonely bird off the housetop and inviting us into deep and meaningful relationship—guiding us toward one another as well, into a flock to love and support each other. That is the beauty of Christmas—the presence of Jesus made available to people who are lonely or hurting or struggling so they can know that they aren't alone and that someone cares.

PRAYER

Loving God, we stand in awe of Your willingness to come near to us in our struggles and our loneliness. Raise our awareness up to Your presence, and grant us hope beyond this present moment as we wait for Your birth. Guide us to our flock, and open our hearts to make room for You and for each other, so that we can praise You together and experience the wholeness of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Tennant '12/'25

SCRIPTURE

Luke 22:31–38

31 "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." 33 And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" 34 Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me."
35 He said to them, "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." 36 He said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. 37 For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless,' and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled." 38 They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

DEVOTIONAL

The first part of this passage from Luke consists of a private conversation between Jesus and Peter. Throughout the Gospel, Peter comes across as someone filled with confidence and true to the faith, but in almost every story or conversation with Jesus, Peter talks a big game. In this particular passage, he tells Jesus that he will follow him to prison or even to death.

Imagine the gut-check moment that comes when Jesus tells Peter that even he will deny Christ three times before the rooster crows. Ouch! This conversation shows us exactly who Peter was up to this point: strong faith in word, but not fully committed in action.

This does not make Peter a bad disciple or a bad person but someone who demonstrates the human condition. We are often strong in our faith by the words we say, but when the opportunity comes to put our faith in action, it becomes more difficult, and our actions don't always back up our words. This does not make us bad people, but it shows where we truly are in our faith. Our faith journey is a continual path of growth, and there will be times in our lives when the faith expressed by our words and our actions will be in sync. Over time and through our experiences in life, our faith and our actions will grow, just like Peter's.

This leads to the second part of this passage from Luke, which talks about scripture being fulfilled through Jesus, and that he is enough for everyone. Our faith rests with him, and even in the midst of the chaos of life, Jesus is more than enough for all who truly believe in him. As Peter's faith grew over time and through his experiences with Jesus, he would come to realize that Jesus is enough!

PRAYER

Loving God, as we journey through this Advent season, teach us as Jesus taught His disciples that faith in Him is enough for all of humanity. Teach us to be patient, to be kind, to love, and to have renewed faith in Christ Jesus! In His name we pray, amen!

SUNDAY DECEMBER 13, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Diane Knauf '23

SCRIPTURE

John 3:22–30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the region of Judea, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there, and people kept coming and were being baptized. 24 (John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.)

25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

DEVOTIONAL

Plenty of ink has been spilled (and church marquees have been arranged) to remind us that "Jesus is the reason for the season." And the reminder is no doubt a good one in a

culture so saturated with consumerism and capitalism. We do well to remember that Advent and Christmas are set aside to reflect on the Incarnation, not to fixate on how many gifts we can get our kids or how perfectly we can present our homes to visiting family members.

Today's reading from John 3 may help us extend this reminder beyond just the cultural failures or personal stressors of December. This episode occurs at a critical juncture when Jesus' ministry is taking off, which means John's baptismal ministry is taking a back seat. When John's disciples voice their concern, he doesn't simply reassure them or lecture them on having an abundance mentality. He cuts straight to the theological heart of the matter: "As I already told you, I am not the Messiah."

These may be words for us to repeat, and not just for the narcissists or those with savior complexes. The people-pleasers. The Enneagram twos. Those in helping professions. Those in burnout. Say it with me: *"I am not the Messiah."* For John, this meant his ministry needed to decrease in order for Jesus' to increase. On the one hand, this idea is quite particular to his role as forerunner to the Messiah. On the other hand, it may hold meaning for us. In order for the hope, peace, joy, and love of God to increase in the lives of those around me, perhaps my ego, my anxiety, my insecurity, my jealousy, my striving must decrease.

PRAYER

God, I am not the Messiah. Whatever is currently active in my life that must decrease—whatever strife, discontentment, pride, despair—please help me address it. May I come to project instead the profound hope found in the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2026

Written by the Rev. Jeffrey D. Bergeson '14

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:1–11

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who have received a faith as equally honorable as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. 4 Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with excellence, and excellence with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is blind, suffering from eye disease, forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

DEVOTIONAL

Advent is a time of preparation for celebrating the arrival of Jesus Christ. This often involves taking an inventory of our lives using biblical lists, such as 2 Peter 1:5-7. Am I adequately virtue-stacking my life of faith, like a precariously overfilled Dagwood sandwich? Am I adding to my faith excellence, and, on top of that, knowledge, and self-control, and endurance, and godliness, and mutual affection, topping it all off and trying to hold it all together with a toothpick-pierced olive of love?

When I judge myself against biblical lists like these to try to manage and manufacture my spiritual growth, it is "ineffective and unfruitful." But there's some joyfully good news here.

Verse nine tells us that if we lack growth in these qualities, we've got a vision problem. Perhaps we could say that we're looking at the wrong things. I'd like to suggest that we're not meant to focus on the items on the list, but the source of them. Verse nine concludes that if we're not experiencing this kind of growth, it's because we're "forgetful of the cleansing of past sins." In other words: focus on Jesus and what he has already done for you, not as entitlement, but as a gracious gift.

Similarly, verses three and four emphasize that "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness." God provides this—not us. Jesus' own glory and excellence accomplish this—not ours. God unilaterally (Trini-laterally?) gives and fulfills these "precious and very great promises" to us, empowering us to "escape" the empty, self-centered, self-protective, self-promoting systems of survival and enter the fulfilling life of faith as "participants of the divine nature."

We are instructed to "make every effort to" increase these good spiritual traits, but not by focusing on the Dagwood sandwich of faith. We "make every effort"—note that this

is plural/communal, not singular/individual—by maintaining our focus on the One who is faithful, remembering that Christ cleanses us of our sins, graciously gives us all that we need for godly living, and calls us together into the Trinitarian fellowship of love as participants in the divine nature.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for taking on our human nature that we may participate in Your divine nature. Gracious God, by Your sanctifying Spirit, help us to see, know, love, and reflect Christ more clearly, that others may be drawn into Your eternal kingdom and divine fellowship of love. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2026

Written by the Rev. Thomas John Henion Jr., Doctor of Ministry Student, Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 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.
3 You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
4 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.
5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Great will be his authority,
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 onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

DEVOTIONAL

Growing up, it wasn't unusual for our Sunday afternoon lunches to include a few guests I didn't know. My dad never hesitated to ask people if they had somewhere to go after church. That particular Sunday, our guest was an unhoused gentleman I'll call Ted.

I couldn't have been older than eight or nine, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of Ted or his circumstances. He struggled to walk and explained that severe back pain kept him from pounding the pavement in search of work. In my young mind, it was simple: Ted didn't have a home because his back hurt.

As I peered across the table, I saw my dad give my mom one of those telepathic looks: "We need to do something." Then he looked down. My eyes followed. Ted's sneakers were incredibly worn, with his toes poking through.
After lunch, my mom suddenly raced out the door. Sometime later, she returned with a shopping bag of new sneakers and socks.

Ted was ecstatic. "This is exactly what I needed! Now I can walk better!"

Months, maybe years, later, a well-dressed man came to my dad's office.

"Do I know you?" my dad asked.

"Yes," he grinned. "I'm Ted. Remember the shoes?"

Ted explained that the shoes allowed him to walk with less pain. He found a job and eventually became a vice president at a software company. He returned to thank my dad and to make a donation to our church's homeless ministry.

Advent announces that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light." Christ has entered our darkness and will come again to make all things new. Until then, we are called to bear witness to that Light, sometimes in remarkably ordinary ways—even a pair of shoes.

Who has God placed in our lives who "needs shoes"? We may never know what God will do with our simplest acts of compassion; we are called to be faithful, trusting God with the rest. When God is at work, even our ordinary acts of love can bear witness to Christ's Light in ways more transformative than we could ever imagine.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You have come as Light into our darkness, and You will come again to make all things new. Until that day, open our eyes to those in need of Your love. Make us faithful in ordinary acts of compassion, so that through us, others might glimpse the extraordinary light of Your love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2026

Written by the Rev. Jo Ramsey '99

SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.
2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight,' "
4 so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of
sins. 5 And the whole Judean region and all the people of
Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him
in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was
clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The
one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not
worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8
I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with
the Holy Spirit."

DEVOTIONAL

The year: 1223. The place: Greccio, Italy. The person: St. Francis of Assisi, who created the very first living nativity scene as backdrop for his Christmas Eve mass. The set included just a manger filled with hay and two live animals, an ox and donkey, against the backdrop of a small cave. During the Renaissance, wealthy families began commissioning their own nativity sets. Soon, an assortment of biblical characters appear at the manger, including shepherds, angels, and kings.

Who would you be if you could travel back to that Holy Night? A tired shepherd—busy working, unprepared for angels to interrupt your life with an invitation to meet the Divine? A watchful wise one—searching the skies for a star to follow? The innkeeper— unable to fit anyone or anything else, until something moves you to make space for an unexpected birth? Or maybe you'd be one of the Christmas characters missing from the nativity– aging Elizabeth, silent Zechariah, or their baby John, who will grow up to be 'different.'

For some reason, we never find that family at the manger. But Mark isn't interested in the nativity story anyway. He does feature John front-and-center as his Gospel begins—but not John, the miracle baby. No, Mark's Good News introduces us to adult-John: the misfit loner who wears scratchy clothes and eats bugs. John wants action—radical repentance, prophecies fulfilled, disruptive transformation. This John doesn't exactly give off a cozy Christmas vibe.

If you find your place at the manger this Christmas, wonderful! But if you feel like you don't fit in, are tired of nostalgia, or are longing for change, you aren't alone. John the Baptist is your guy! He stands beside you in the wilderness, waiting for a new beginning, for the Good News that God is coming in real and authentic ways which will reshape our paths and send us in new directions.

PRAYER

Gracious God, You welcome everyone to the manger. May those who feel content this Christmas find deep joy in Your presence. May those who feel impatient find hope that change will come. And may those who feel like they don't fit in find themselves embraced by Your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2026

Written by Dr. Scott J. Hagley, W. Don McClure Professor of World Mission and Evangelism

SCRIPTURES

2 Peter 2:10-16

Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious
ones, 11 whereas angels, though greater in might and power,
do not bring against them a slanderous judgment. 12 These
people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of
instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they
do not understand, and as those creatures are destroyed,
they also will be destroyed, 13 suffering the wages of doing
wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They
are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they
feast with you. 14 They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable
for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained
in greed. Accursed children! 15 They have left the straight
road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son
of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong 16 but was
rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke
with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of
Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven
has come near." 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah
spoke when he said,
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.' "
4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt
around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.
5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the
Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by
him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees
coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of
vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?
8 Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, 9 and do not
presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our
ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to
raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at
the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear
good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.
11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one
who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not
worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy
Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he
will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the
granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

DEVOTIONAL

The first season of the Netflix show *Beef* (2023) tracks a descent of Danny Cho (played by Steven Yeun) and Amy Lau (played by Ali Wong) into a type of hell. What starts as a road rage incident spirals into intensifying waves of devastation. I don't want to spoil things, but businesses are ruined, people are killed, houses are burned. Both characters have multiple opportunities to dial things back, to set things right, to return to the land of the living. But they choose, again and again, to isolate themselves and sow destruction.

And yet, over the course of the season, Danny and Amy appear as sympathetic characters. They are not necessarily evil people intent on harm, but rather individuals caught up in social forces they cannot control or understand. It is not so much a descent into hell as it is a witness to the hellscape created by unbridled greed, racism, and weakened social bonds. They have no one to pull them back from the brink. The social connections they do have only curate an acquisitive desire for more—more money, more property, more victories. Danny and Amy are caught in a lie about who they are and what matters, and they cannot see a way out.

The second chapter of 2 Peter is almost as strange and unsettling as the show Beef. The author begins the chapter warning about false prophets and ends with the text for today, which calls for violence against those "accursed children" whose blasphemy and greed lead others astray. Given histories of religious violence, these texts rightly make us uncomfortable. And yet, it ends with the story of Balaam, a false prophet bent on destruction whose evil intent is thwarted by a donkey and redirected toward God's greater purposes. By "restraining the prophet's madness," God offers grace and a thread of hope in a world that seems destined for self-destruction.

John the Baptist appears in the midst of this kind of world—a world of false prophets and beset by greed and social dysfunction. And he announces not only God's restraint of evil but the healing of what is broken. "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). This is the remarkable thing we remember in Advent: the God who sends John and restrains Balaam is able to meet us, no matter the hellscape.

PRAYER

Pray the opening verses from this morning's Psalm (Psalm 18:1-3):

I love you, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
so I shall be saved from my enemies.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Paul Yanchek '23

SCRIPTURE

John 3:16–21

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so
that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may
have eternal life.

17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to
condemn the world but in order that the world might be
saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not
condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned
already because they have not believed in the name of the
only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light
has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather
than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do
evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their
deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true
come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their
deeds have been done in God."

DEVOTIONAL

During Advent, we often concentrate our thoughts on the coming of Baby Jesus, swaddled in cloths and cooing gently to his mother's murmurs. Advent is also about preparing for the second coming of Christ, when he once again breaks open human consciousness to accept the impossible.

God made flesh. God with us. God loving us unconditionally. The scripture for today is one of the most famous, and yet it is the verses after the best-known one that hold a profound truth. Light has entered the darkness of the world, and everyone has turned away. Those who commit evil will continue to turn away from Jesus because they fear the judgment of what they've done.

But the Light will eradicate the darkness in this world, and as believers, our calling is to keep turning back to Jesus and offering love to everyone. In this time of Advent, of waiting and preparing, let us take a moment to truly reflect on our actions this last year. Where have we allowed the world to dampen our enthusiasm and darken our hearts? What could we have done to prevent it?

God entered the world—not to condemn it, but to save us. This important Scripture provides us with grace and redemption, but it also provides grace to our enemies. Jesus came to save us from our sins, and He came to save our enemies as well.

It's one of the hardest lessons we must learn as followers of Christ—that the people we disdain are also the beloved children of God. The Light is for everyone who treasures goodness and truth, but the darkness would try to prevent us from offering it to all.

PRAYER

Lord of all, during this Advent, help us prepare to accept your Light and offer it to everyone we encounter. In Jesus's name we pray, amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2026

Written by the Rev. Chesna Hinkley, Doctor of Ministry Student, Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 90

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3 You turn us back to dust
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
4 For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past
or like a watch in the night.
5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
7 For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
10 The days of our life are seventy years
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
11 Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
13 Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us
and as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants
and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

DEVOTIONAL

The Lord has been our dwelling place, and we prepare to be the dwelling place of the Lord. The baby is welcomed in his mother's womb, growing from cells and nucleotides of incarnation, mysteriously glorious, but fragile as ours are, tending toward degeneration. He is welcomed, but perhaps only by his mother. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

The psalmist beseeches the Lord to satisfy us with love. In this present age, to be full of love, adoring and adored without remainder, is not comprehensible. Uncontingent safety, home without future exile from home, beauty that will not become nostalgia, radical hospitality of spirit, the almost painful love toward your most beloved, painful because you cannot grasp and hold them as they are forever, unchanged in all their dazzling glory—all of this is love unsatisfied, even in the morning of life. Yet joys with weeping are joys all the same. And they are a true foretaste of the glad days that will so outnumber the days of God's hand of affliction.

We dwell in him because he first determined to dwell in us. Gentle and humble in heart, this consuming fire is uninhibited love. In one Person without confusion of natures, Christ the light comes, the work of God manifest, the glorious power to our children. Because of this we too may be united with Consuming Love, satisfied one coming day in all our good and just loves—in our Lord, and in his Body. Behold, your King cometh unto thee.

PRAYER

O Uncreated Light, shining Beacon of home, Anchor for the soul, as I flourish and fade, with all that I love, teach me

to number my days, so that I may be wise. Receive me as I receive You, with incandescent love and the hope of the age to come.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2026

Written by Keila Lobos-Hernandez, World Mission Initiative Program Coordinator

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:5–25

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest
named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of
Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of
Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were
righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the
commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had
no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were
getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God during
his section's turn of duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according
to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary
of the Lord to offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the
incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was
praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of
the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.
12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear
overwhelmed him. 13 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. 14
You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his
birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must
never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he
will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the
people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and
power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of
parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom
of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the
Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that
this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting
on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in
the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you
and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you
did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time,
you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these
things occur."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and
wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did
come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized
that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning
to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of
service was ended, he returned to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for
five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is
what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked
favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured
among my people."

DEVOTIONAL

There are seasons in our lives when God seems quiet. We pray, but the answer does not come. We wait for healing, restoration, direction, or simply some sort of indication that God has heard us. Days become months. Months turn into years. Eventually, we may begin to wonder if heaven has gone silent.

Luke 1:5-25 introduces us to a couple who knew something about waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth were described as righteous before God. They were faithful people who lived according to His commands. Though righteous, Zechariah and Elizabeth carried the sorrow of not being able to conceive a child. Both advanced in years, what they hoped for seemed impossible.

Their story reminds us of a truth that we often forget: *faithfulness does not exempt us from seasons of disappointment.*

Sometimes we assume that if we are doing what is right, then life should become easier. Yet Scripture tells us that even when Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful, served in the temple, and loved God, their personal prayer remained unanswered for years. Their story is not merely about an elderly couple finally receiving a child. It is about what happens when God appears to be silent. Their story reminds us that God can be working long before we recognize what he is doing.

Even when things feel impossible right now, God may be working quietly. We must learn to sit still and listen for his whisper. Just as God made a way for this couple to have a child, God has prepared us to bear freedom through Jesus Christ.

When God seems silent, let us not assume he is absent. Let us trust that he is working, even when we cannot yet see it. Let us wait with faith, listen with patience, and act according to his commands.

The same God who heard Zechariah and Elizabeth still hears you today.

PRAYER

Gracious and merciful Father, prepare my heart to trust You, like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Help me continue believing when I cannot see the answer. I surrender my doubts, struggles, and fears to You. Holy Spirit, remind me that

nothing is impossible with You. Help me walk with hope, peace, and faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2026

Written by the Rev. Paula Daniel Steinbacher, Doctor of Ministry Student, Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 29:9-24

9 Be astounded and stunned;
blind yourselves and be blind!
Be drunk but not from wine;
stagger but not from strong drink!
10 For the Lord has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep;
he has closed your eyes (the prophets)
and covered your heads (the seers).
11 The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read with the command, "Read this," they say, "We cannot, for it is sealed." 12 And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, "Read this," they say, "We cannot read."
13 The Lord said:
Because these people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me
and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote,
14 so I will again do
amazing things with this people,
shocking and amazing.
The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.
15 Woe to those who hide a plan too deep for the Lord,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"
16 You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?
Shall the thing made say of its maker,
"He did not make me,"
or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?
17 Shall not Lebanon in a very little while
become a fruitful field
and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?
18 On that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a scroll,
and freed from gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.
19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.
20 For the tyrant shall be no more,
and the scoffer shall cease to be;
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—
21 those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit,
who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate
and undermine justice for the one in the right.
22 Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:
"No longer shall Jacob be ashamed;
no longer shall his face grow pale.
23 For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
24 And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who grumble will accept instruction."

DEVOTIONAL

Living high in the Rocky Mountains, I have learned that darkness feels deeper as winter approaches. The peaks surrounding our lush valley hide the sun long before sunset and delay its appearance each morning. By Advent, the days feel even shorter because of the shadows that linger long after dawn.

Just when it seems we cannot endure another hour of darkness, the winter solstice arrives. The longest night of the year marks the point at which darkness reaches its greatest length. Like many congregations, we gather at dusk on the shortest day and lament together, lighting candles and listening to scripture before offering prayers that give voice to our grief, our hopes, and our deepest longings.

Isaiah 29:18 declares, "Out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see." Isaiah promises that even before the light comes, there is hope. This is not to say that the darkness is an illusion; the darkness is real. The gloom, grief, and confusion are real. Yet God declares that darkness will not have the final word. Even when nothing appears to be different, a turning has begun.

Advent is a time when we remember the darkness of the world before the light of Christ began to shine. In Isaiah, that light was only something to be hoped for. As the lyrics to "O Holy Night" remind us, "Long lay the world in sin and error pining / 'til He appeared and the soul felt its worth. / A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices / for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!"

Tonight, though we will endure the longest night of the year, we do so knowing that things are turning. Even though the darkness is pervasive and the cold still seeps into our bones, tomorrow the light will begin to stay a little longer. We are living out the promise that "the eyes of the blind shall see."

PRAYER

God of light, we linger in the darkness today, watching and longing, praying and hoping. As the night reaches its fullest measure, remind us that Your light is drawing near. Open our eyes to see Your presence in the shadows and Your promises shining at the horizon. We thank you that even when the night feels long, we are never alone. Through Christ, the Light of the World, amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2026

Written by Katelyn Fisher '18/'22

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:39–48a

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a
Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the
house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth
heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed
with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed
is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to
me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon
as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb
leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there
would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the
Lord."

46 And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his
servant.

DEVOTIONAL

Women are remarkable creatures. When faced with the most significant, life-altering, truly cosmic, news of her life, Mary's response is to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) I'm grateful, of course, for the witness of Mary's unfaltering faithfulness, but I do wonder about all the internal angst that the writing has overlooked. Mary was fully human, and part of a human's creatureliness is to process and express emotion. I like to imagine that when the text says Mary set out *with haste* to a Judean town, this is a subtle clue that perhaps all is not well in Mary's spirit.

Before she even has an opportunity to share the news with her cousin, Elizabeth already knows. Mary brings the fullness of her humanity to her dear friend—the fear, confusion, and distress—and Elizabeth immediately takes notice, pronouncing blessings over her instead. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, becomes a conduit of God's authority, speaking the truth of Mary's capability to give sanctuary to her beloved Lord within her womb. Elizabeth's ability to speak truth over Mary in a fragile and pivotal moment gives Mary the courage to face the uncertainty with resolve. Knowing she does not go forth into the journey alone, Mary is reminded of the remarkable power she possesses: to declare condemnation against the mighty and extend mercy to the lowly.

May you too be reminded of your own spiritual authority "to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy." (Luke 10:19) Mary and Elizabeth show us that our spiritual authority is not just for defeating enemies, but for sustaining one another. In times of deep distress, may we follow their witness—becoming sanctuaries for each other, speaking truth over the fragile places, and reminding one another of who we belong to.

PRAYER

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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;
indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Taylor-Troutman '24

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:57–66

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she
bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the
Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with
her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.

DEVOTIONAL

"What then will this child become?" (v. 66)
This poignant question is prompted by the miraculous circumstances of John the Baptist's birth: his father, Zechariah, having seen a vision in the temple and struck mute by an angel; and his mother, Elizabeth, advanced in age and previously childless.

But as every child is a miracle, I ponder the same question today in the life of my congregation: when I walk the center aisle with an infant whom I've just baptized; when a kindergartener scribbles a prayer request for her grandmother on the back of her bulletin; and when a youth preaches about our calling to care for our watershed.

"What then will this child become?"

As we are all children of God, we can ask the same question of ourselves at moments in our lives: when we walk down the aisle with our spouse after our wedding ceremony; when we go back to school or start a new calling; or when we retire.

"What then will *I* become?"

Hugh Thomson Kerr, former pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pa., wrote a hymn that's special to me: "God of our life, through all the circling years, we trust in thee." Kerr wrote this hymn at the fiftieth anniversary of the congregation—a poignant moment of reflection on the past and future.

"What then will this *church* become?"

In our time, many ask the same question—some with anxiety, others with hope. Our age brings new threats from climate change, AI, and more. Yet, I trust the grace of "the circling years" and God's steadfast love. People are still called, like John, to prepare the way of the Lord, while God's mysteries will guides us through the dark, occasionally flaring up, causing us to exclaim with wonder and awe.

"What then will this church become?"

PRAYER

Through all the circling years, O God, we trust in You. We believe. Help our unbelief. Guide us to become who we are meant to be, and bring to completion Your kingdom on earth. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2026

Written by the Rev. Amanda Horan '20

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:67–80

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit
and prophesied:
68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed
them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his child David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from
of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the
hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our
enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and
righteousness
in his presence all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most
High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."
80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in
the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

DEVOTIONAL

As the parent of a toddler, I sometimes joke that singing makes up most of my parenting strategy. I have songs to help my daughter go to sleep and to wake up. I have songs to teach her how to be patient and some just to make her laugh. And I have songs that I hope will teach her who she is and whose she is. It seems to me that Zechariah is doing something similar in his song.

His offering of praise comes as an exclamation point after many months of silence. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, an angel visits the priest Zechariah to inform him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a child. Perhaps understandably, Zechariah, who is getting on in years, expresses some hesitation. The consequence for his hesitation is speechlessness until the promised child has arrived.

When the day comes for their son to be named, Elizabeth says that contrary to custom, the boy will not be called Zechariah after his father, but John. Confused, their family and friends seek confirmation from Zechariah, who writes out his agreement. Immediately his mouth opens, and he praises God.

Before his family and neighbors—and most importantly, before his infant son—Zechariah sings of God's faithfulness to God's people and the new hope drawing near. Zechariah's song points to the remarkable good news of the Christmas story: the Christ child will soon be born into a story so deeply human.

Zechariah sings of the dawn soon to break into the lives of those who doubt, those who speak when they should be silent, and those who are silent when they should speak. The dawn breaks on those who rejoice with loved ones and those who struggle to understand one another. God's mercy is made all the more tender as it will soon be swaddled in his mother's arms.

God chooses not to love us from a distance. This is the identity Zechariah sings over his son, and his words echo down the generations for all the children of God.

PRAYER

Blessed be the Lord, for Your faithfulness echoes throughout the generations. May we sing our song of hope with new voices as we await the dawning of Christ's light again in our hearts. Shine on all those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guide our feet in the way of peace. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2026

Written by the Rev. Dr. Allan M. Irizarry-Graves Sr. '17, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

Zechariah 2:10-13

Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord. 11 Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day and shall be my people, and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. 12 The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem.

DEVOTIONAL

Fanny Crosby, a prolific 19th-century American hymnist and mission advocate who penned over 8,000 hymns that spoke of the beauty of God, is most known for her works "Blessed Assurance" and "To God Be the Glory." However, as a child attending church, I remember hearing a lesser-known hymn that always captivated me titled "I Am Thine, O Lord." In the refrain, Crosby writes these words:

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

What a beautiful reminder that we as believers should long to be pulled closer to God. But even more beautiful is the reality in today's Scripture that God draws near to us.

In these four short verses, Zechariah presents what it looks like for God to draw near to us when the Lord declares the promise of nearness (vs.10). What I love most about this promise is that God does not send a representative on behalf of Godself. Instead, God promises to dwell among God's people. Not in a diluted or subpar sense, but in the fullness of who God is. In addition to the promise of nearness, Zechariah shows us that this nearness is extended to all (vv. 11-12). The God who promises to dwell in Zion extends this presence to "many nations" and reveals to us that God's presence isn't only for a select few; it's available to whomever will accept the gift of God's presence.

What a great gift. But a gift this great is not to be taken lightly, because nearness demands reverence (v. 13). After the call to sing and rejoice in v. 10, Zechariah finished this chapter by calling for silence. When we think about the fact that God draws near to us, we should respond in awe and reverence, because some gifts are too great for words.

In the loudness of this Advent season, may we find time to sit silently in awe of the gift of God's nearness to us.

PRAYER

Sit silently for 60 to 90 seconds in awe of the fact that God chose to draw near to us. End the prayer by thanking God for specific moments in your life when you felt God near. Amen.

The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, copyright © 2021, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ABOUT THE SEMINARY

Since 1794, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has been preparing students grounded in faith and formed in community. Participating in God's ongoing mission in the world, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is a community of Christ joining in the Spirit's work of forming and equipping people for ministries familiar and yet to unfold and communities present and yet to be gathered.

DEGREE PROGRAMS

- Master of Divinity
- Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies
- Master of Theological Studies
- Master's Joint Degrees (including law and social work)
- Doctor of Ministry (including Bridging Divides: In Church, Community, and Country; Christian Spirituality; Congregational Ministry; Creative Writing and Public Theology; Intergenerational Black Church Studies; Preaching with Historical Imagination; Reformed; and Trauma-Informed Leadership for Ministry)

GRADUATE CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

- Adaptive and Innovative Ministry
- Faith, Work, and the Common Good
- Ministry
- Missional Leadership
- Theological Studies
- Urban Ministry

PTS NEIGHBORHOOD COLLABORATIVE

Center for Adaptive and Innovative Ministry Forms and supports Christian leaders in creating new Christian communities **www.pts.edu/AIM**

Continuing Education Provides learning opportunities, in person and online, for ministry leaders and the theologically curious public **www.pts.edu/CE**

Faith Forming Families Network Reconnects families and communities as partners in the spiritual formation and moral development of young people **www.pts.edu/F3-Network**

Kelso Museum of Near Eastern Archaeology Offers free tours and open hours to view displays from the more than 7,000-artifact collection, as well as several lectures by world experts annually **www.pts.edu/Museum**

Metro-Urban Institute Combines the theory and practice of collaborative community ministry in a program of urban theological education **www.pts.edu/MetroUrban**

Miller Summer Youth Institute Resources churches in youth ministry and asks participants what God is calling them to do and who God is calling them to be **www.pts.edu/SYI**

World Mission Initiative Equips leaders to engage faithfully and effectively in God's intercultural mission **www.pts.edu/WMI**

RESOURCES

Advent and Lenten Devotionals Get daily e-mails, read online, or print and share **www.pts.edu/Devotional**

Barbour Library Several hundred thousand printed and electronic books and hundreds of periodical subscriptions, plus several online databases **www.pts.edu/Barbour-Library**

Faculty and Program Directors Available to preach and teach on a variety of topics **www.pts.edu/Experts**

Ignite Microcredentials Fully online educational program for bi-vocational and lay ministry **www.pts.edu/Ignite**

Lectures and Events Open to the public on topics of faith **www.pts.edu/Calendar**

Preaching in a Post-Christian Age Initiative Resourcing preachers to engage the challenges of presenting the gospel at a time of growing secularization **www.pts.edu/PPCAI**

Seasonal Resource Kits Advent, Lent, Race and Faith, Prayer, and more for worship and Bible study planning **www.pts.edu/Digital-Downloads**

Videos Recorded lectures by distinguished guests **www.youtube.com/pghseminary**

To learn more about the Seminary and its degree programs, resources, and how to support theological education with your donation, contact:

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
616 N. Highland Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
412-362-5610
412-924-1460 Donations
www.pts.edu

PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY