



“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Luke 2:10-11

Advent Devotional 2018

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 the Metro-Urban Institute staff and Advisory Council and leaders in our other auxiliary programs.

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**PITTSBURGH
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2018

Written by the Rev. Kimberly Gonxhe '07, Director, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 25

- 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 your goodness' sake, 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 that 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

Put one foot in front of the other. Follow God's voice. Trust God's voice. Although fear may creep up as self-doubt, naysayers and circumstances show themselves, remember the last thing God told you, and do that.

This life is full of doubters, dream stealers, people who mean you harm, but God is immensely greater than the culmination of them all. No matter where you are and whatever the circumstance, the Lord is there with you. You can soar in a prison cell. You can have peace while possessing no possessions. You can thrive in spite of tremendous opposition.

As we surrender our lives to Christ, Christ leads us out of dire places which seem to have no exit door. As we yield and let go, rough places become smooth and crooked places are made straight. As we obey God's instruction, people who mean us harm will be silenced and dealt with. As we do those things which are possible, God then does the impossible. So wait on the Lord. The excellency is of God and not of you. You'll make it to the other side successfully; just keep your hand in God's hand and put one foot in front of the other.

PRAYER

Lord, I know there are people who mean me no good and situations that seem so insurmountable, but I put my trust in you. Help me to walk in righteousness and not succumb to the temptations of doubt or fear. I put my hope in you and rest knowing that you always take good care of me and will continue to do so. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2018

Written by the Rev. Paula V. Cooper '10/'13, Regional Liaison for East Central Africa, Presbyterian Church (USA), Louisville, Ky. / Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

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 the evil of your doings
 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:
 though your sins are like scarlet,
 they shall be like snow;
 though they are red like crimson,
 they shall 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

Okay, God is piqued! In this passage of Isaiah, God sounds pretty annoyed with the leaders and people of Judah for their vain offerings and lack of obedience in the assemblies. God unequivocally says, “[T]hey have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.” But to me, it is liberating to know that even though God is piqued or weary at their (our) “fake” obedience and worship or liturgy styles, God ALWAYS provides opportunities—as often as necessary—for our behaviors and bad habits to be transformed into obedient actions that are pleasing to God. In verses 16-18, God provides step-by-step instructions.

In addition, God invites us in to an argument (One scholar says, “God deigns to argue the case with us, that all may see the just, nay, loving principle of His dealings with men”); and God still offers an option, a choice, between redemption and destruction. What gracefulness—because no matter what decision we make, God will be God! I, myself, choose the

opportunity of redemption! Will you? Jesus came so that we “may have life and have life more abundantly.”

PRAYER

Dear Lord, during this Advent season we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming of Jesus, the Christ. May we open our minds and hearts to follow the instructions that lead to the opportunity of redemption so that we may be transformed into obedient, faithful, and truthful worshipers who present ourselves as “living sacrifices pleasing unto God” now and forever. Amen!

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2018

Written by the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush, Senior Pastor, East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa. / Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

Luke 20:9-18

9 He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. 10 When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 11 Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. 12 And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. 13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ 14 But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.’ 15 So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Heaven forbid!” 17 But he looked at them and said, “What then does this text mean: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? 18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

DEVOTIONAL

When confronted by one of Jesus’ parables, a common tendency is to jump to explaining the metaphors contained in the text. But what happens if you let the unsettling reality described in the parable simply unfold as described? The parable of the vineyard appears in all three Synoptic gospels, usually after the cleansing of the temple scene. But before leaping to a deeper message about the Passion of Christ, take a moment to consider this parable as a lesson in faith and morality.

It opens with a description of a contract between an owner and tenants—a contract that is unjustly broken when the rightful compensation is refused to be paid. When a second attempt is made, this servant is insulted, thus breaking not only the business arrangement but also a fundamental trust between the workers and the owner. When a third servant is sent, this person is literally wounded and thrown out—a clear affront against common standards of human decency. Finally, when the owner's son is sent, the ungrateful vineyard leaseholders literally plot to kill and then act on their violent plans. Far beyond seeing a broken contract, broken trust, and broken social values, now we are told about broken humanity itself through the willingness to kill an innocent man for no just cause.

Bad thoughts and actions can escalate into terrible deeds of violence and pain. The slippery slope of unjust behavior is sadly a pathway human beings choose out of fear, out of pride, and out of sin. If we truly seek to live into God's righteousness and Christ's justice, we honor our contracts; we don't betray trusts; we respect common standards of human decency; we work to repair the world, not add to its brokenness and pain. Christ's "cornerstone" perspective truly is something upon which a beloved community (or a righteously operated vineyard) can be established to the glory of God.

PRAYER

Open our eyes, living God, to the ways we distance ourselves from you and denigrate your understanding of covenant, trust, and righteousness. Shine with your Advent light into our places of darkness so that owners and workers alike may dwell in mutual peace and lasting justice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2018

Written by the Rev. Dr. R. Drew Smith, Professor of Urban Ministry / Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:1-4

1 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

Isaiah's prophecy outlines a time "in the last days" that will be characterized by widespread conflict, but also by a systematic seeking of *higher ground*. According to the passage, many people in their seeking will look specifically to expressions of religious life for that higher ground. "God's temple," says Isaiah, will be "the highest of the mountains . . . exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."

An expanded appeal to faith realms that transcend socially-bounded identities and worldviews seems almost counter-intuitive within a contemporary context characterized by cultural captivity and political cooptation of religious life. Yet Isaiah's prophecy anticipates God's temple as a primary source and site of leadership within just such a world.

But what is also clear in the text is that this breakthrough of spiritual awakening will come to pass through God's doing, and not ours. Isaiah says that God will teach us the pathways to walk, and God's word and judgment will transform swords and spears into instruments of peace and livelihood.

Rising above our inherent social antagonisms and hostilities will require God-sized solutions. Isaiah assures us of God's leading—and that in seeking God's face we will find promised deliverance (cf. Ps 27:8; Matt 7:7).

PRAYER

(Derived from a hymn by Johnson Oatman Jr.)

Lord, by your grace,
May we press on the upward way
New heights to gain with every day,
And praying as we onward bound,
Lord plant our feet on higher ground.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2018

Written by Lori Liller Arnold, Coordinator, Office of Continuing Education

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, 3 so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain. 6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. 11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

DEVOTIONAL

Imagine a day when the sky is gray (easy to do in a Pittsburgh winter), it's chilly, and you are feeling downhearted about things happening in your life. Everyone has a day like this occasionally—a day when it seems that nothing is going well. Then . . . you get a text message, an email, or perhaps even a letter with wonderful news! Immediately your heart is lightened, your face is smiling, and you may do a little dance because of the happiness flooding your body. Paul describes such a feeling after Timothy's return with news that the church in Thessalonica was remaining faithful. Paul writes about being encouraged in the midst of his persecutions and, furthermore, states that he "now live(s)" because of the Thessalonians' steadfastness. This happiness is the same kind of joy we can carry in our hearts today because we already know the Good News and we don't need to wait for the arrival of a text, e-mail, or letter. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER

Dear Creator, thank you for the abundant joy we can feel in the midst of our daily trials. Help us to remember that standing firm in the Lord is a source of life now and forevermore. In your name we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2019

Written by the Rev. Dr. Richard W. Wingfield '02/'13, Senior Pastor, Unity Baptist Church, Braddock, Pa. / Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

1 Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; 4 that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. 9 Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; 10 and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, 11 to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, 12 so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

DEVOTIONAL

Encouraging words can go a long way. Well-chosen words can inspire even the most challenging person to do even more to accomplish any goal. For sure, there were times when you needed that kind word to motivate you to do more than what you're doing. You knew your assignment, yet you wondered whether it was worth all the trouble. You were facing so many obstacles and so much opposition. Frustration had set in and you were ready to resign from everything. But someone came along side you at the right moment, placed a hand on your shoulder, and encouraged you to 'keep on keepin' on' despite the difficulties.

Today's passage challenges us to continue to do more and more in pleasing God. Paul encourages these young believers in Thessalonica, "You've come a long way. Great job! You're doing well. But there is always room for improvement. I need you to abound more and more in those areas."

Life in Christ is never static. It's a continual process of growth. There are areas where you have flourished—great job! But there are also areas, personally and communally, where you can improve. Be careful never to allow complacency in your walk with Christ, for that's your biggest enemy. Spiritual complacency denies a believer's verbal confession. Though you've made progress, there are still areas where your life can be strengthened.

Everyone lives to please someone, whether your spouse, your parents, your children, your boss, even your friends. To do that, you work harder. You do the extra things, the little things, to please that someone.

Our task is ultimately to please God. You're doing good things. You've made great strides. Keep doing more and more. Stay the course. "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).

PRAYER

Dear God, help us to please you in every aspect of our lives. Help us to speak an encouraging word to someone, even as we recognize our own need of that same word at times. Help us never to become so complacent or inwardly focused that we lose sight of our ultimate purpose, to please you.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2018

*Written by the Rev. Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13,
Director, Worship Program*

SCRIPTURE

Luke 21:5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." 7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" 8 And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." 10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls."

DEVOTIONAL

If we read this passage as a prediction of final judgment, we'd be hard pressed not to think that we're currently facing the end times. Fighting between and within nations, refugee crises, ecological crises, natural disasters that strip people of their homes and loved ones, stories of abuse and of corrupt leadership, and ongoing persecution, oppression, and injustice all prompt panic and fear. And these words of warning from Luke's Gospel might tempt us to interpret all these realities accordingly. Yet Jesus says, "do not be terrified." Jesus invites us to trust that he remains present in our lives and faithful to his promises, even when we face the most challenging of circumstances.

Rather than offering a prediction of future judgment, Jesus is describing the truth of the world in the present. It is a lamentable truth in that the world is not yet as God desires it to be. But it is also a hopeful and comforting truth in that God's desires for the world are coming to be through Jesus' present work. And we are invited to participate in this work as, in the midst of all the brokenness, Jesus gives us "words and a wisdom that none of [our] opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (verse 15).

And so it is that we discover that Jesus' words here are not words of warning, but words of assurance. In the midst of a broken, divided, quarreling, uncertain world, Christ is at work—gathering, baptizing, communing, healing—and thereby making visible God's inbreaking Kingdom. It is a message of comfort and hope in Jesus' abiding presence and active reign even in the midst of the inevitable calamities and injustices we face.

In this time of Advent expectation, we are again reminded that we live betwixt and between. We cannot deny that we experience a world of destruction and pain. Yet God has chosen to bend down into that experience; therefore, let us fix our gaze on our coming Lord's present work, and let us trust that he is giving us the words and a wisdom to testify to that work in a hurting world that God so loves.

PRAYER

Gracious God, there is so much in this world that causes us to cry out in fear and sorrow. Help us to trust in your promise to wipe away every tear in the time when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. In the meantime, train our eyes to see Christ's loving and transforming presence in our midst. And give us boldness to testify to that presence. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2018

Written by the Rev. Karen Rohrer, Director, Church Planting Initiative

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3:11-18

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

" . . . we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. . . ."

When I think about the Christmas story, the story where God made God's home in our midst, where for a moment righteousness was at home in this troubled world, and new heavens and a new earth peeked in at us, for just 33 years, I am filled with longing. What would it be like if this world were not the kind of place that sent righteousness to a cross? Can we imagine a world where parents in war-torn countries weren't clutching their children and running for their lives,

only to find borders closed in their faces? Can we imagine a world without the Herods who murder children as pawns in their grabbing for power? A world where the innocent rest safely and the righteous are safe in homes, not under threat of tyranny, violence, or cruelty? To whatever degree we can imagine that, how can we ever be patient with the patience of our Lord? The more I learn about trauma, the more it seems to me that human suffering can be so deep and destructive that it cannot be quantified—yet we are to accept the patience of a God that tarries to come to the aid of children. How?

I can't pretend to answer that question—but I am struck by the command to "regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." What is being saved by this patience in a world that seems bent on growing destruction? That command is a hard word as we wait for Christmas, as we wait starving for the in-breaking of the kind of Messiah who will rule over powers and principalities, overthrow the ugliness of unjust governing powers, and rule the nations with an iron fist. But, friends, that Messiah isn't coming. Whatever it does or doesn't mean, if the text is to be trusted our Messiah doesn't save with an iron fist—our Messiah saves with patience. We do not get to choose our salvation. No doubt we, like the disciples and the crowds of Palm Sunday, would choose differently. Instead, as we wait for righteousness to make its home in our midst, we must be patient. We must be patient and love patience, because our slow and patient God is coming to us again as a baby, saving us again, over the course of 33 years and the course of human history, with the slow vulnerability of the very children we would defend. We may rail against the pace, but salvation is the slow patient work of God over our whole lives. This Christmas, may we find a way to be content to watch again over the baby Jesus—and over all the children of the human family—and to wait with hope, knowing that the salvation of our God always comes and stays with those who wait.

PRAYER

Patient God, in the midst of the world's grief and pain, give us the strength to stand with the vulnerable as we await the slow work of all our salvation together. In our watching and waiting, teach us to trust your ways, so that we might not lose heart. And, loving God, please don't delay coming again to us. We and those we love are frightened, broken, and hard pressed on every side. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2018

*Written by the Rev. Derek R. Davenport '05/'17, Director,
Miller Summer Youth Institute*

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 5:8-17

8 Ah, you who join house to house,
 who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
 and you are left to live alone
 in the midst of the land!
9 The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Surely many houses shall be desolate,
 large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.
10 For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
 and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.
11 Ah, you who rise early in the morning
 in pursuit of strong drink,
who linger in the evening
 to be inflamed by wine,
12 whose feasts consist of lyre and harp,
 tambourine and flute and wine,
but who do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
 or see the work of his hands!
13 Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge;
 their nobles are dying of hunger,
 and their multitude is parched with thirst.
14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
 and opened its mouth beyond measure;
the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down,
 her throng and all who exult in her.
15 People are bowed down, everyone is brought low,
 and the eyes of the haughty are humbled.
16 But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice,
 and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.
17 Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture,
fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.

DEVOTIONAL

This passage is not particularly Christmas-y. At least, not at first glance.

So often, when we get ready for Christmas, we want tender moments and sweet babies. We want Jesus to be happy, gentle, and peaceful. We want *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger* along with hot chocolate and warm blankets.

Those aspects of Christmas are appropriate, but they're just one side of our celebrations. We sometimes forget how radical and revolutionary Christmas really is. This passage from Isaiah reminds us of how shocking God can be. The haughty are humbled and lambs feed among ruins. As strange as these images are, their very strangeness makes

them appropriate for Christmas—for the celebration of the infinite born an infant, reality redeemed through resurrection.

As you prepare for Christmas this year, as you hear your favorite songs and see those nativity sets, remember the words of Isaiah. Remember how revolutionary Christmas truly is.

PRAYER

God of reversal and resurrection, we thank you for this season. We thank you for the ways you surprise us. We ask you to open our eyes to your work around us where we least expect it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2018

*Written by Dr. Helen Blier, Director, Office of Continuing
Education*

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. 25 Beloved, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. 27 I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

DEVOTIONAL

When my children were little, we had two rules in our house: Be Kind and Do Your Job. (Later on, when the eldest became a teenager, Tell the Truth was added, but that's another story.) The challenge was to identify what simple rules would best name the behaviors that let us live as a family by lifting up some of the practices required of love without burden or distraction? These two rules worked for us, and they grew as the kids grew. When they were little, being kind and doing their job meant fair play on the playground and brushing

teeth before bed. As they got older, it got more complex—time management, making good choices about friends, leveraging their privilege in behalf of the common good. Over and over again, the simple rules became an invitation to have important conversations about what we are called to do as family members, community dwellers, Christians, children of God. (And if you ask me, I think the two of them are turning out pretty well!)

Paul's exhortation to his friends in Thessalonica isn't so much a laundry list of behaviors or rules to follow—it's naming some of the things that happen when the Spirit is present and people live in the joy of the Good News. And what's obvious to me is how much Paul really loves these people! The delight he takes in them is infectious. He wants them to do the right thing because he wants them to participate in the promises of Christ—and in his enthusiasm he's reminding them of what makes that possible. Seek good for all. Give thanks always. Greet others with delight. Rejoice! In other words, be kind and do your job. These are the hallmarks of love practiced, the conditions that create welcome, as he says, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in addition to commanding his friends to do, Paul participates in this joyful expression himself.

As we head toward the third and joyful Sunday of Advent, what can you do to make sure that this love, practiced in delight, marks your own preparation for the coming of the Christ child?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, on behalf of my beloved community,
May we pray without ceasing
Give thanks without reason
Do good to all because it is good to do—
And in doing so welcome the Christ child with joy and love
into this, our human family..

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2018

Written by the Rev. S. Balajiedlang (Bala) Khyllap, Associate Director, World Mission Initiative

SCRIPTURE

John 7:53-8:11

7:53 Then each of them went home, 8:11 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such

women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

DEVOTIONAL

We live in a very polarized world where we can't seem to have an open conversation with one another without being in conflict. An open conversation with mutual respect for one another's opinions even when we disagree seems to have lost favor in our society today. We are automatically programmed to point fingers, blame, disagree, and even condemn others. This is exactly what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing in the Scripture reading today. Just because they disliked what Jesus was teaching and doing for the least of these in the society, they sought ways to get rid of him. They dragged and shamed a woman who was caught in adultery not necessarily to settle the matter, but mainly to test Jesus and to see whether they could find ways to condemn him and have him arrested and then be killed.

Yet what Jesus did changed hearts. Jesus simply asked the religious leaders and then, in turn, asks every one of us to take a deep look within ourselves first, before we jump into negative conclusions about others. Doing so is difficult for us. And to be honest, one problem in our world today is the fact that most of us generally see ourselves as heroes, as good and righteous persons, whereas when evaluating others we tend to villainize or criminalize their behaviors we see as wrong. I think the world would be a better place if we could recognize that within ourselves there is a mixture of both evil and good and that through God's grace and strength we are able to choose good for ourselves and for others.

I've been pondering lately the state of our country and our world—the hate, the prejudice, and the heartless attitude we as humans have toward one another. I can't help but ask myself, "Is it possible for us to listen and understand one another ever again amid our current differences?" My hope and prayer is that as we are waiting for the coming of our Lord this Advent, may we have the courage to deal with one another and with ourselves as Jesus would have us do—to love in the face of hate, to forgive in the face of condemnation, to be kind in the face of bigotry, and to walk in humility in the face of superiority.

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for loving and accepting us even when we don't deserve it. Forgive our inability to listen and our desire to condemn others within our hearts. Help us to see our daily need of your forgiveness so that we can, in turn, offer grace and mercy toward others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2018

Written by the Rev. Rebecca DePoe '16, Pastor, Mt. Nebo United Presbyterian Church and Glenshaw Valley Presbyterian Church, Sewickley and Glenshaw, Pa. / Alumnaeli Council

SCRIPTURE

Luke 22:1-13

1 Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. 2 The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. 3 Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; 4 he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. 5 They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. 6 So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. 7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." 9 They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" 10 "Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters 11 and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" 12 He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." 13 So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

DEVOTIONAL

For Jesus, meals have a sacramental quality. How we eat together matters, regardless of Judas's pending betrayal of Jesus. Jesus instructs the disciples to prepare the Passover meal in a stranger's guest house. The disciples are to rely on the hospitality of others even as they prepare for one of the most important meals of the year.

I believe Jesus' insistence on relying on a stranger's hospitality is what allows him, a few verses later, to feed his betrayer. Part of the disciples' preparation for Passover is to learn from Jesus how to receive and give hospitality. Part of

our preparation for Advent is learning how to rely on the hospitality of others. We prepare to be with others as we prepare for the birth of Jesus—our Savior, who chose to be with us. When we talk about preparing our hearts for Christmas, we're talking about preparing ourselves to receive the hospitality of Jesus so that we can share that hospitality with the world.

PRAYER

Loving God we thank you for creating us so that we have to depend on you, and each other, for our daily sustenance. We pray that that in giving of our time, our talents, and our resources you would strengthen our faith in you and our bonds to our communities. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2018

Written by Fr. Eric McIntosh '12, Priest-in-Charge, St. James' Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pa. / Alumnaeli Council

SCRIPTURE

Luke 22:14-30

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. 21 But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. 22 For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" 23 Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. 24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

DEVOTIONAL

Given our current political climate, the racial divide, the increase of the non-religious in the U.S. and the Me Too movement, I cannot help but think the church is headed for greater persecution in America. Reflecting on the aforementioned realities, I am ever focused on these words of Christ: "Take this and divide it among yourselves . . ." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said this!

Given our current state, I cannot look at this cup and ignore the cup Christ mentions in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked that this cup be taken away but succumbed to the will of God the Father. Neither can I ignore what Christ said on the cross: "I thirst!" I imagine that in those words, "I thirst," he was saying to God and the world, "Give me the cup!" So how might that statement relate to the words here at the Passover table when Jesus refers to the cup: "divide it among yourselves"? I believe Jesus was inviting all of us to take, intentionally, the mantle of sacrifice he was offering—to share in his cup! Jesus said to the disciples at his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Perhaps he was suggesting that we, too, have to face our cup of persecution and to follow his lead for how to do so.

During Advent we reflect on Jesus' coming. Is the cross why he came? Is that why we have come and been sent? I hope that persecution is not coming to the church in America, but if it is, such reflection is worth considering.

PRAYER

Lord God Almighty, prepare us for tomorrow even though it is not promised. Equip the saints for what comes as we prepare once again for the coming of Christ. This Advent, make us fully aware of your call and sending of us into the world. Make us aware of your desire for our imitating Christ. Remind us that we all have a cup and we all have a cross to bear. Give us the courage and strength to pick it up and to say, intentionally and boldly, "Give it to me!" May we be your witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth! For the sake of Jesus Christ your son our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2018

Written by the Rev. Erin Davenport LSW '05, Parish Associate, Parkwood Presbyterian Church, Allison Park, Pa. / Director, Miller Summer Youth Institute

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 8:1-15

1 Then the LORD said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, "Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-

baz," 2 and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah. 3 And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; 4 for before the child knows how to call 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria." 5 The LORD spoke to me again: 6 "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; 7 therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; 8 it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

9 Band together, you peoples, and be dismayed; listen, all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed!

10 Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us."

11 For the LORD spoke thus to me while his hand was strong upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: 12 "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. 13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. 14 He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."

DEVOTIONAL

Isaiah is warning the people of the two Kingdoms of Israel that the Southern Kingdom will fall to the Assyrians in less than a year (less time than it takes for a child to learn to speak). Isaiah and the Israelites are living in a time of political chaos that feels like it has dramatic and lasting historical significance. He is living and speaking in a time of split kingdoms, split narratives, split alliances—and everyone is full of dread. The Lord speaks to Isaiah and says in verses 12 and 13, "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears or be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread."

Like Isaiah, our hope is not in the kingdoms and powers of this world, but in Immanuel, God with us. Our hope, security, and future are found in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, give me the voice of a prophet today. Help me to speak hope into the midst of chaos, love into the midst of hate, and joy into the midst of sorrow. Thank you for reminding me again and again that you are God, and even when it seems that everything is splitting apart, you remain steadfast and holy. Amen.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 16, 2018

Written by Jacob G. Wilson, Student Staff, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 110

- 1 The LORD says to my lord,
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool."
- 2 The LORD sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.
- 3 Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning,
like dew, your youth will come to you.
- 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest forever according to the order of
Melchizedek."
- 5 The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
- 6 He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads
over the wide earth.
- 7 He will drink from the stream by the path;
therefore he will lift up his head.

DEVOTIONAL

Melchizedek calls You priest; You sit at God's right hand; You judge people and nation;
To You I come.
You are Messiah; Christ; Savior and Lord.

Seven verses call You by name:
You are one with the Godhead; both unity and division;
completion and resurrection; sabbath of creation; grace upon grace; human and slave, our weakness set free.

You are Perfection.
Enthroned in Psalm:
In honor; in victory; in judgment.

From Holy Mount to lowly stream,
You are there.
From where You sit to where You send:
Your children come.

Lift Your head:
Adventus; parousia; maranatha.

By the path:
Purple and blue; candle and wreath; carol and calendar.
Between memory and hope; between past and present, we
wait for Thee already come.

"O Antiphons: *ero cras,*" and "O come, O come Emmanuel."
From Zion to footstool heads shatter:
You have come; You are risen; and You will come again!
Advent to Christmastide; four Sundays to five;
One season begets another: one hope begets all joy.

Jesus: You are Priest forever.
I have sworn this and will not change my mind.

PRAYER

Lord, Teach me to remember You as You have remembered me. Let me anticipate my neighbor with love and expect my enemy with kindness. Make me to work in praise and rest in humility. Bring me into light and deliver me from darkness. Lead me to Your kingdom and save me from my own. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2018

Written by Dr. Stephanie Boddie, Assistant Professor of Church and Community Ministries, Baylor University, Waco, Texas / Chairperson, Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious 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 goodness. 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 goodness, and goodness 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 nearsighted and blind, and is 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

A few years ago, I was worshipping at Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia and heard the song *Heaven's Christmas Tree*. I later learned the pastor that penned the song also wrote a sermon with the same title. In the sermon, the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) asked, is "Christ really a tree? . . . And if so, are there packages in this tree?" He answered, "Yes, a package with your name on it is hanging on the limb of Heaven's great Christmas Tree." Tindley suggested that Christ bears a package of rare blessings for every human being throughout the world.

According to these verses from 2 Peter, through Christ we have been given a precious faith and the precious promises of God. Our needs have already been anticipated and met. We have been given all we need for life and godliness. The gift of faith help us to claim these other gifts—moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and above all, love. Having received these gifts, we will live into our new life and our new identity. We will become partakers in the very nature of God.

Like the expectant child on Christmas morning, we must come and receive these gifts. We must not toss them aside after the excitement of Christmas is over.

Keep reaching up with all your heart, soul, and strength to receive from Heaven's Christmas Tree!

PRAYER

Loving God through your goodness and glory you have given us rare blessings in your son, Jesus Christ, and everything we need for life and godliness. Fill our hearts with peace as we share in your divine nature and grow in faith, adding courage, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, kindness, and above all, love.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2018

Cecile Springer, Founder and President, Springer Associates, Pittsburgh, Pa. / Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 146

- 1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
- 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
- 3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
- 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
- 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
- 6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
- 7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
- 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
- 9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
- 10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

This advent comes in the midst of division around us. We go forth in pursuit of joy and gladness as we await the coming holy season. Glad tidings surround our thoughts, for we forecast Christ's coming in glory. Thanks be to the Lord for lifting us up daily. By rejoicing loudly, we fill our souls with gladness as we pray for peace and happiness in the knowledge that Jesus' love conquers us all for God.

PRAYER

Lord, let me be patient,
Let me listen intently;
Let me not judge,
But rather extend my love to others.

Lord, let me be wise,
Keep me faithful forever.
Lord, keep me from foolishness,
Open to love you forever.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2018

Written by Sonya-Marie Morley, Fellow, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 11:10-16

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. 11 On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

12 He will raise a signal for the nations,
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.

13 The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart,
the hostility of Judah shall be cut off;
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.

14 But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines
in the west,
together they shall plunder the people of the east.
They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites shall obey them.

15 And the LORD will utterly destroy
the tongue of the sea of Egypt;
and will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching wind;
and will split it into seven channels,
and make a way to cross on foot;

16 so there shall be a highway from Assyria
for the remnant that is left of his people,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from the land of Egypt.

DEVOTIONAL

The title of Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* became a household phrase after its posthumous publication in 1940. Indeed, that concept seems like an apostasy during the season of Advent, when, for better or for worse, we often find ourselves immersed in complicated family systems that can, in fact, evoke a sense of home. But the notion of home for the original audience of today's devotional text was a luxury that was as foreign to some of them as their own surroundings were. After all, the United Monarchy of Israel had split into two kingdoms, and the ravages of war had left hundreds of thousands of Israelites displaced, much like Joseph and Mary at the time of Jesus' birth.

As hearers of today's text, we are invited to imagine a future when the Lord will "acquire," "gather," and "collect" those who have been dispersed. We are encouraged to envision a

destiny in which a babe born in a lowly manger is "lift[ed] as a signal flag for the nations" and, in the process, "draws all people to" himself (John 12:32). We are inspired to hope for a "road" that is "the way, and the truth and the life" for all of us (John 14:6). This road leads us out of the exile of sin and death and assembles us together, here, at the foot of the manger, where we wait for the coming Messiah. Waiting reminds us that Christ in our world changes our reality: those who were dispersed are reassembled, reunited, restored, and adopted into the family of God through Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank you for loving us so much that you created a forever home for us in the Christ babe. As we gather with family and friends to wait, fill our hearts with the hope, peace, joy, and love that are the hallmarks of the Advent season. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2018

Written by Felix Rivera-Merced, Fellow, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 28:9-22

9 "Whom will he teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?
Those who are weaned from milk,
those taken from the breast?

10 For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little."

11 Truly, with stammering lip
and with alien tongue
he will speak to this people,

12 to whom he has said,

"This is rest;

give rest to the weary;

and this is repose";

yet they would not hear.

13 Therefore the word of the LORD will be to them,

"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,

line upon line, line upon line,

here a little, there a little,"

in order that they may go, and fall backward,

and be broken, and snared, and taken.

14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers
who rule this people in Jerusalem.

15 Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death,

and with Sheol we have an agreement;

when the overwhelming scourge passes through

it will not come to us;

for we have made lies our refuge,

and in falsehood we have taken shelter";

16 therefore thus says the Lord GOD,
 See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
 a tested stone,
 a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
 "One who trusts will not panic."
 17 And I will make justice the line,
 and righteousness the plummet;
 hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
 and waters will overwhelm the shelter.
 18 Then your covenant with death will be annulled,
 and your agreement with Sheol will not stand;
 when the overwhelming scourge passes through
 you will be beaten down by it.
 19 As often as it passes through, it will take you;
 for morning by morning it will pass through,
 by day and by night;
 and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.
 20 For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it,
 and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it.
 21 For the LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim,
 he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon;
 to do his deed—strange is his deed!
 and to work his work—alien is his work!
 22 Now therefore do not scoff,
 or your bonds will be made stronger;
 for I have heard a decree of destruction
 from the Lord GOD of hosts upon the whole land.

DEVOTIONAL

Think of a time when an enormous burden was lifted from It's a bit hackneyed to say we live in confusing and complicated times. Yet what I find striking in this passage is that it is exactly this sentiment that the people of God are using as an excuse: "Whom will he teach knowledge . . . Those who are weaned from milk?" That is, is the prophet speaking to babies? Does Isaiah not realize the problems we're facing—and all he says is, "One who trusts will not panic"? If there is to be a tomorrow, let alone a good one, we must act and make difficult choices.

Yet Isaiah here lays out for Judah God's "alien" plan: God will go against God's people—against those who "have made a covenant with death." God is going against them so that a new foundation stone, trust in God, can be laid and justice and righteousness made the standards of this new building.

Advent reminds us of God's alien work that breaks us: In the midst of oppression, God came down as a babe. God lived life as a babe, a toddler, a teenager, then as an adult for a bit. God's alien work took some time—for even through the story of Acts we see that the church lived in the midst of an oppressive empire, in an oppressive world.

The cornerstone upon which justice and righteousness are laid? Trust in a little peasant boy.

PRAYER

Lord, as we wait for Christmas, bring us to Holy Saturday, bring us to today. Teach us to wait for your coming. Let it break us, that whether we sit or act, eat or fast, we might hope for it to be in the holiness of your love and justice, of your kingdom. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2018

Written by Kelcey Bailey, Fellow, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 29:9-24

9 Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor,
 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, you prophets,
 and covered your heads, you 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 Ha! You 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"?

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2018

Written by the Rev. Dr. Catherine Brall, Director, Field Education

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:39-56

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 lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

DEVOTIONAL

As the oldest child in a family of seven children, I have memories of family vacations that always include a good dose of long rides in a packed car, buoyed along by our family's singing one of the many simple songs we still sing when we gather these days, yet frequently punctuated with the plaintive question by one of my siblings, "Are we there yet?" Here we find ourselves today, with nearly 90 percent of the season of Advent behind us and with only three days remaining until Christmas. Are we so ready for Christmas

- 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 out of their 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 without grounds deny justice to 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

The prophets and seers are stumped. The human visions and plans constructed for our future are lost. And time and time again, the people of Israel come to worship God in rote rhythms dictated by human dogma. How often do we so easily seize the opportunities to make good! To prosper! To be victorious in our lives! But as the prophet cries to us, we're doing it all wrong when we believe ourselves to be the makers and creators in charge. We can at times so easily forget to turn to God as the potter and remember ourselves as the clay. Though our human power and arrogant wisdom can so easily turn things upside-down and in the wrong direction, there is grace in to be found, brothers and sisters: No matter how many times we try to root ourselves in our own plans rather than God's, God promises to do amazing things with God's people—AGAIN.

PRAYER

Dear God, in this season of preparation, prepare our hearts and minds to be open to your amazing reversal of the world's darkness. Help us loosen our tight grip on our plans and understandings and instead rest in your promise of fresh joy and light. Amen.

that we wish it were already here, or even over, or would we prefer a few more days to get everything on our to-do lists checked off?

This account in Luke's Gospel relates the wondrous meeting of Elizabeth and Mary—each both joyfully (miraculously!) pregnant and yet likely also aware of the very real complexities that accompanied the bearing of their sons. Elizabeth was old and had been barren—certainly a shameful condition made worse by her husband's profession of being a priest. At her advanced age it would be more difficult for her to care for her child, and she probably was not likely to live to see him reach adulthood. On the other hand, Mary was too young a woman—by today's standards a mere child who was called to bear the son of God. The older man to whom she was betrothed had every right to leave her in the lurch (or worse), as he knew the child she carried was not his. The circumstances of both Elizabeth's and Mary's lives were "complicated," as we like to say—perhaps much more so than most of our lives are, even with the difficult dynamics of blended families, political differences around the dinner table, and rushing around to get everything ready three days before the big holiday.

What Mary and Elizabeth model for us is the joy of knowing that, in the midst of their difficult predicaments, they are exactly where God would have them to be. They are both blessed for believing that God would fulfill what God had brought into their lives. They have learned that life with God is a continuous journey, rather than a stable place at which to arrive. They encourage us to hope and believe that God will be with us in the difficult predicaments of our lives—even those right around the corner that are coming with this year's celebration of the Christmas holidays.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child inside her leaps for joy and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Do we each have an "inner child"—a part of ourselves at the core of our being that is open, receptive, and perhaps even longing to be filled again with the Holy Spirit? Are we there yet?

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Come remind us of all the promises that God has spoken to us through the years, even as we await the coming of the Christ child once again. Help us to be with God, here, now, and always—with joy in the midst of our many predicaments. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2018

Written by Jennifer Christmas '11, Associate Curator, Kelso Museum of Near Eastern Archaeology

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 33:17-22

- 17 Your eyes will see the king in his beauty;
they will behold a land that stretches far away.
- 18 Your mind will muse on the terror:
"Where is the one who counted?
Where is the one who weighed the tribute?
Where is the one who counted the towers?"
- 19 No longer will you see the insolent people,
the people of an obscure speech that you cannot
comprehend,
stammering in a language that you cannot understand.
- 20 Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals!
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,
a quiet habitation, an immovable tent,
whose stakes will never be pulled up,
and none of whose ropes will be broken.
- 21 But there the LORD in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams,
where no galley with oars can go,
nor stately ship can pass.
- 22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler,
the LORD is our king; he will save us.

DEVOTIONAL

Are you feeling besieged!? Are you overwhelmed by To-Do lists, activities and commitments to family, friends, or at church? Are you feeling under attack spiritually or being threatened physically? Are you facing discrimination, exploitation, or oppression? Are you engulfed by grief? Is your heart especially burdened for others experiencing any of the above?

As we near the end of Advent, a season that for many of us is a flurry of activity, and approach that day when we celebrate the first coming of our Lord, you are invited to pause Pause. Breathe. Look up and behold the King in his beauty, the majesty of our Lord!

Many scholars place today's Scripture reading in the context of the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians in 701 BC, during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. Jerusalem was able to withstand the threat, in part due to the foresight of Hezekiah to make sure the city was provided with a reliable source of water. This detail is actually supported by both Scripture and archaeology, with the find of the Siloam Tunnel Inscription.

In this passage of Scripture, however, we see more than a single spring as the source of water. Instead, "there the Lord

in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams," where no other powers that might threaten or harm us can come near. In fact, those previously under siege are invited to "muse" over the terror that is now gone: those who sought to extort, demand, oppress, and attack—insolent people, voices bragging or speaking nonsense. Further, we are invited to "Look on Zion," a place of gathering and celebration, to "see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation." It is a place of refuge, "an immovable tent," a strong covering, indestructible, a place of tranquility, with our Lord at its center. "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; He will save us"!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank you for being with us when we are worn, weary, and besieged. As we prepare to celebrate your first coming, may we also be reminded of the peace, joy, and healing in fullness ahead, in your presence, when you come again. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2018

Written by Rebecca Dix '15/'17, Miller Summer Youth Institute Advisory Council

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 35:1-10

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

DEVOTIONAL

There have been days
I've gone down to the river to pray
But the river bed has been empty for days
A lingering, barren ravine
Where I'd expected a mercy filled stream
Canyon carved stretch marks of a belly
Once with such life within
Leaving only sand to be baptized in
And a parchment tongue
Desiccated from praises it's forgotten how to sing
Yet tomorrow, I will return again
Eyes piercing the sky in anticipation
For flood waters anointing,
Poured out, pores soaked
Washed in the words of the greatest Love story
Whose torrents push and move and remake what has been
Saturate my sin filled body
With grace like rain

PRAYER

Healer and Sustainer, pour out your flood waters to saturate our dryness and break through our dams and roadblocks that keep us from holy communion with you and with our brothers and sisters. Strengthen us with the hope of Emmanuel as we await his arrival. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2018

Written by the Rev. Kimberly Gonxhe '07, Director, Metro-Urban Institute

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 96

- 1 O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
- 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- 6 Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.

- 9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.
- 10 Say among the nations, "The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- 12 let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- 13 before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

DEVOTIONAL

Our God reigns!!! On this day we celebrate the divine one who became flesh out of sheer love, even for a fallen humanity. On the day of Christ's human birth, hope arrived. Hope. It rings in our hearts. Hope. For this fragile baby would go on to change the course of history forever. The world would be "firmly established" and the peoples would be judged "with equity." Through Christ all people would become valued and the marginalized would be seen through the lens of dignity. The first would become last and the last first. The design of God's reign in heaven would be the blueprint for earth. Through Christ's birth we all have hope. So take courage on this day from knowing that God loves justice and God loves you. No situation is too dark for the light of God's love to enter. No circumstance is too far gone for the hand of God to permeate. Come behold the one who is our Savior! Come experience the love of God! Come embrace hope!

PRAYER

Lord, we pause to remember that you are God: mighty, holy, supreme, and just. Thank you for always taking care of us. Thank you for being concerned with what concerns us. Thank you for loving us. Help us on this day and always to be ever grateful for all that we have. Help us to follow your example to leverage our privilege in behalf of those without it. Help us to recognize the disparities in this world and be agents of change for your glory. Amen.

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