

"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 2019*

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 John S. McMillan Planned Giving Society and Board of Directors.

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**PITTSBURGH  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY**

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Darren J. Rogers '17*

### SCRIPTURE

#### 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 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, beloved, 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

It is difficult to be an encourager and look outside our private world when the integrity of society is breaking apart before our very eyes and institutions that seemed rock-solid are crumbling like brittle soil on a hot summer day! We are relentlessly bombarded with reports of mass shootings and divisive and inflammatory rhetoric from elected leaders entrusted to proclaim and protect "liberty and justice for all." The challenge to stay positive when faced with tragedy, illness, and loss is overwhelming—especially during Advent, when peace and goodwill are heralded from the mountaintops while so many are hopelessly struggling though the darkness of the valley.

Our quick fix is to insulate our minds from the distress and to blame others for our condition. We can deep-dive into work, serving, or pleasure-seeking, but the pain is still present when we come up for air. These kinds of solutions only drive us farther away from the One who can reassemble and illuminate this complicated puzzle we call life!

Jesus Christ entered our world of pain and sorrow to give his life for all to become God's *children* through Christ—God's children, "who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13), thus giving us the power and clarity to encourage and strengthen one another.

The birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ enable and entitle us to put on the breastplate of faith and love, along with the helmet of the hope of salvation! By the grace of God we are given new life and light to navigate through the darkness, confusion, and pain that blind humanity! "But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day . . ." (vv. 4-5a). "So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . . since we belong to the day" (vv. 6, 8a).

### PRAYER

Father, thank you for the grace given through Jesus Christ, who through love alone sacrificed his life for all! Lord, help us look away from darkness and focus our eyes on you. We pray that your light will guide our steps and fill our hearts with hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Lisa S. Heckman '98*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Psalms 40

1 I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
2 He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.  
3 He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the LORD.  
4 Happy are those who make  
the LORD their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.  
5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.  
6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering  
you have not required.  
7 Then I said, "Here I am;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.  
8 I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."  
9 I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O LORD.

10 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.

11 Do not, O LORD, withhold  
your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe forever.

12 For evils have encompassed me  
without number;  
my iniquities have overtaken me,  
until I cannot see;  
they are more than the hairs of my head,  
and my heart fails me.

13 Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;  
O LORD, make haste to help me.

14 Let all those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire my hurt.

15 Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"

16 But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, "Great is the LORD!"

17 As for me, I am poor and needy,  
but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
do not delay, O my God.

## DEVOTIONAL

Whenever I read Psalm 40, the song that sings through my head is not an Advent hymn or a Christmas carol, but a spiritual from an old 1970s book of praise songs. As much as I love, love, love Christmas music, the nostalgia of perfect Christmases past or images of a clean, sweet-smelling stable with fluffy sheep and silent nights is contrary to the messy world into which God came.

Real life has us stuck in miry bogs of loneliness, stress, or life-the-way-it's-always-been that are not healthy. We battle evils of apathy, entitlement, and pervading public meanness. And we constantly confront those who want to snatch away our lives with too many holiday responsibilities, expectations of perfection, or all we "should" be, think, and do.

Immanuel, God-with-us, became flesh in Jesus to move into our messy neighborhoods, right where we are—and with us as who we are. Jesus came to lead us out of the bogs, fight evil with the strength of love, and deliver us from the snatchers of life. God is present right now, in this moment of living, whether we're in a muddy pit or standing on solid rock. The Incarnation didn't begin and end 2000+ years ago, nor is it only the means of gaining a seat in heaven someday.

Jesus is with us now, in our neighborhoods, neighbors, family, friends, . . . even enemies.

In thanksgiving we sing songs to tell the world of God's enduring, unconditional love and faithfulness. May we not restrain our lips or hide from proclaiming what we've learned about God. Those are songs the world needs to hear more than the carols that play on endless loop this season. So . . .

"You can tell the world about this! You can tell the nations you're blessed.

Tell them that Jesus makes you whole and he brings the joy, joy to your soul!"

(Traditional spiritual [alt.])

## PRAYER

Yahweh of the low places, high places, and all the places in between, may we seek you in times of trouble. May we declare your marvelous deeds in times of triumph. May we walk with you every ordinary day, knowing that life is better—and we can be better ourselves—when we share our days with you. Put new songs in our mouths to sing praise to you each and every day so the world can know you and the nations hear how greatly you have blessed us. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. A. Gary Angleberger*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 85

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.  
3 You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.  
4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
5 Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
6 Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.  
8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.



12 The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
13 Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.

## DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 85 begins where many hymns and prayers begin: the psalmist lists the many favors God has bestowed on his people. We, in our own prayers, can easily identify with the psalmist's gratitude. The writer speaks of God's favor in the granting of the home-land and the establishment of a people who have been blessed in spite of their shortcomings and failures. This God is a forgiving God, so the psalmist acknowledges the many times in the past when God has forgiven his people—and is still willing to grant forgiveness. In the light of God's many past mercies, the psalmist pleads that the people of his day will hear the story of their failures and turn to their loving, forgiving God.

I wonder whether, in the midst of the political debating of our day, anyone can "lift our eyes" to where we, as a people, have come from—when we have failed and been unfair to the "poor and the stranger in our midst"—yet remind us that the call is greater than our failures. The call is to follow humbly in the path of "the Peace-maker" and trust that serving the needs of our neighbors and striving for justice may be a better path to peace than building walls and greater arsenals. Is this a vain hope? Advent begins with a hope—that if God comes among us, we will see and understand and follow. Today, will we allow the hope of Advent to be a vain hope?

## PRAYER

We wait for your coming, O Lord, when "our salvation is at hand," when "You speak peace to your people," when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet" and "righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Instruct us through your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, how to wait—not passively, not with resignation—but to wait claiming the power of your word of hope in our Lord, and to live abundantly in his Name. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Catherine Mallick Gillis '90*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 50

1 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 silence,  
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.  
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

In Psalm 50 I see the Temple of Zion—God's beacon of light shining for all to see. The Temple is high and therefore receives the light of the sun in the morning, as well as the evening's setting sun. Day and night, God is a welcoming beacon of hope for all who go up to worship God. For God's presence is in his Temple.

Like the ancient Hebrews, today God judges his people, but not like the Gentiles, who do not know God because they are not in a covenantal relationship. God judges his people—judges us—because we hate his discipline. Judgment comes upon God’s people who have ignored his teaching and whose lives do not glorify God. The psalmist specifically mentions that it is our mouths which condemn us; it is our own deceit and slander that diminishes the God who demands single-minded obedience.

Now we are rebuked because we have forsaken the sacrifice of thanksgiving for falsehoods. At this time of preparation, as always, we are to choose the way of thanksgiving. We are to call out to God during these days of trouble. In each one of our own hearts, we are to turn away from disobedience and trust God to deliver us to his goodness. We are to walk God’s pathway so as to give all glory to God—not to humans, not to institutions, but only to God, who alone is worthy of praise.

### PRAYER

O God, as I prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus, remove all falsehood from my heart. Fill me by your mercy with a heart of truth and thankfulness. Then your light will shine, day and night, for all to see, so that all the world will acknowledge your truth and glory by the witness of your eternal truth and light in the lives of your covenantal people. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Heather McLaughlin Sigler ’95*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Matthew 21:33-46

33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The

stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

### DEVOTIONAL

What a difficult reading for the first week of Advent! But stay with this text for a while and some interesting similarities come into focus. Today we, the present caretakers of God’s vineyard, are planning for the annual arrival of the Owner’s most holy Son. While not planning to do him harm, we busy ourselves with baking and shopping and decorating and, yes, even attending extra worship services. In our busyness, do we neglect to provide the proper welcome?

This seemingly terrible parable provides an opportunity to pause during Advent and consider the best ways in which to prepare for the arrival of the Owner’s Son. Perhaps a large dose of repentance should be added to the “to do” list this year.

I wonder . . . do our preparations really provide the best welcome possible? I wonder . . . how prepared are we to be stewards of God’s bounty? I wonder . . . how many times do we subvert God’s plan for the vineyard?

Note well: As we consider this parable, let us not allow the Jewish – Christian conflict of Matthew’s long-ago community shape our understanding of this text. Jesus never condemns the whole Jewish people. Jesus himself was a Jew, albeit one who had some differences with the religious leadership of his day.

### PRAYER

Good and Gracious God, keep us mindful of our responsibilities as caretakers of your earthly vineyard. Guide our preparations during this Advent season that we may truly be prepared to welcome your Son and greet our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Larry P. Homitsky*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!  
2 Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his host!  
3 Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
4 Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!  
5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for he commanded and they were created.  
6 He established them forever and ever;  
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.  
7 Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,  
8 fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!  
9 Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!  
10 Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!  
11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!  
12 Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!  
13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.  
14 He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to him.  
Praise the Lord!

### DEVOTIONAL

I don't feel like getting ready for Christmas at all!!!! Both my mother and my mother-in-law are in the final stages of life with severe memory loss and day-to-day needs that we continue to drop everything to attend to. My workload seems so over extended that every week I am physically worn out and not even able to squeeze in the "together time" my family so richly deserves. And at 6:00 p.m. today—the day I'm writing this Advent devotional—we will put our beloved rescue dog to sleep, because cancer and a stroke have already taken away her spirit. I feel like I should be writing on a text from Job! Have you ever felt like that?

But I'm writing from Psalm 148—one of the lectionary text for today. And it's placed in the midst of a whole section

of writings that specifically celebrates the vast glory of God manifested in the world—all around, in everything we see and are nurtured by, and everything within that can provide meaning and purpose for life itself. I believe these writings exist just for these Job moments—writings to assist us in keeping perspective and faith!

I carry a beach stone in my pocket all the time—a stone found during one of my many beach walks. When I hold it up really close to my eyes, it throws everything else out of focus. But when I pull it away to where it belongs, everything else immediately comes back into proper perspective. I have so much to be thankful for. In fact, the loss I feel so close to right now is only because of the many years of great gain I have been blessed with. Psalm 148, thanks for reminding me. Merry Christmas!!!

### PRAYER

Oh Lord, hear our prayers of gratitude for all the glorious gifts we receive daily. Then help us keep life's many challenges in the appropriate perspective necessary for true health of body, mind, and spirit. And when the burdens of life coming knocking at our door, may the room they enter always be large enough to place them in the corners, where they truly belong, thus enabling our faith-filled celebrations to hold center place among all our experiences now and forever. Amen.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Dahle Sterling '88/'98*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Amos 5:18-27

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!  
Why do you want the day of the LORD?  
It is darkness, not light;  
19 as if someone fled from a lion,  
and was met by a bear;  
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,  
and was bitten by a snake.  
20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it?  
21 I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

25 Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years  
in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 26 You shall take up  
Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images,  
which you made for yourselves; 27 therefore I will take you  
into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is  
the God of hosts.

## DEVOTIONAL

A worn-out old saying is, “The grass is always greener on the  
other side of the fence.” One may still find much truth in it,  
though.

“Looking over the fence” is a form of escapism—the belief  
that we should be able to find a “back door” away from  
our challenges and problems, without doing due diligence  
and “finishing the race.” For some people, this “back door”  
becomes their relationship with God. How many Facebook  
memes have you seen that promise God will miraculously fix  
your problems, answer all your prayers, or bring “deserved”  
wealth your way if you just “re-post this”? There, God is a  
kind of “genie in the lamp”—rub it right and the genie will  
fulfill three wishes.

In this text, the prophet Amos says “No.” Nope. No. When  
we choose a relationship with the living God, we accept  
God’s call along with God’s promises. And that call is not  
to the latest in worship fads (contemporary, traditional,  
“laughing in the Spirit,” contemplative, Pentecostal, or  
throwing clams at the sun) or to hyper-generosity as a way  
to sway God’s favor your direction. The prophet warns that  
this God thing is *real stuff*—and that if you think engaging  
the God of Israel is a cure for everything you don’t like and  
a pass-key to the blessings closet, then you’re in danger of,  
in the words of another old saying, leaping “from the frying  
pan into the fire.”

So where is the good news? First of all, we are called to  
justice-seeking and righteousness. Amos hints that in them  
we will find both God’s presence and God’s enabling power.  
When we work for justice and seek to live “rightly,” we will  
find our sails filled with the divine breeze of God’s Spirit. Jesus  
hit the ground running in these pursuits. Even as a newborn,  
he brought together shepherds and kings, the oppressed and  
the oppressors. He brought them together to the cradle of  
truth and light. In his teachings Jesus gave us the blueprint  
for right living and the essential understanding that we are  
“in this together.” As pastor/author Rick Warren once wrote,  
“It’s not about you.”

In this Advent season, may we shoulder afresh and with  
passion the call of God to the work of bringing in the Realm  
of God—for our neighbor, our world, and even ourselves.  
And may we be healed of the foolish idea that Jesus came  
only to make “me” happy rather than to reconcile the  
world—and me—to God!

## PRAYER

O God of redemption, God of the call, and God of exceeding-  
abundant grace, grant in this hour that the Come, Lord Jesus.  
Amen.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Nancy E. Lowmaster ‘11*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 1:57-68

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. 67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with  
the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 “Blessed be the  
Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people  
and redeemed them.”

## DEVOTIONAL

The Gospel writer reports that when Elizabeth gave birth,  
the villagers—family and neighbors alike—rejoiced. A  
delivery safe for both mother and child was not guaranteed,  
so a celebration was indeed warranted. And Elizabeth and  
Zechariah were each well beyond the time in life when babies  
are usually conceived. This miraculous child was special cause  
for joy.

The people assumed that this baby boy would be named  
“Zechariah,” like his father. Take a moment to be a little  
surprised at that assumption: of course—“Zechariah” was  
the name of the infant’s father. It is a name with deep  
Hebrew roots—it means “the LORD has remembered.”

But “Zechariah” is a name that casts its eyes backward—  
toward what has been. God, however, was looking forward.  
Listen again to Gabriel’s announcement to this baby’s father  
inside the incense-filled Holy of Holies: “You *will* have a son,”  
“he *will* be great,” “he *will* be filled with the Holy Spirit,” “he

will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God," "he will . . . ," "he will . . . ." Would these villagers who gathered to celebrate fully recognize and eagerly embrace the new thing that God was doing (see Isa. 43:18-19)? Do we?

"John" is the name that God has pre-selected for this child. "John" is a name that lives in the present and looks forward into the future—it means, "the LORD is gracious." And it is this John—himself a product of a miracle—who would proclaim the wonder of God's new, loving act of salvation as he points to Christ Jesus, God-with-us.

## PRAYER

God of all-powerful love, grant us the grace both to remember your blessings of the past with thanks and to anticipate eagerly the new ways you are working in us and in creation this day. Grow our trust in you, so that we can confidently, peacefully, and joyfully rest in your care. Through Christ Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray. Amen.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2019

*Written by Jane Alexander Carl*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 122

1 I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the LORD!"  
2 Our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.  
3 Jerusalem—built as a city  
that is bound firmly together.  
4 To it the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the LORD,  
as was decreed for Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.  
5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up,  
the thrones of the house of David.  
6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
"May they prosper who love you."  
7 Peace be within your walls,  
and security within your towers."  
8 For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, "Peace be within you."  
9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your good.

## DEVOTIONAL

Memories of childhood. Opening exercises of Sunday School. Call to worship there or in "big" church. We were reminded by this verse to be "glad" to go to the house of the Lord.

Life centered on church activities if we weren't in school. Someone in our family made it a priority to get us to church.

If such was not the case for you "back then," hopefully you are reminded now that peace in our hearts often starts in the house of the Lord, where we worship in community and remember that all good things come from the Lord, who seeks our good.

Advent calls us to active remembering as we prepare to enter into the presence of God, who was before us, is now with us, and will be with us forever. May we share that remembrance often with others as we gladly go to the house of the Lord.

## PRAYER

We come to you, Lord, in anticipation of receiving you in our hearts and lives so that we may do your will, grateful for your loving care now and forever. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2019

*Written by the Rev. John T. Shaver '98*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 85

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.  
3 You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.  
4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
5 Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
6 Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.  
8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
12 The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
13 Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.



## DEVOTIONAL

The psalmist reminds us that God throughout history continues to provide us with great gifts: “steadfast love,” “peace,” restoration—“The Lord will give what is good.”

Recently, I read a story about a missionary who was serving as a teacher in Africa. During one lesson, he took some time to share about the significance of Christmas. Later in the year, one of the students presented the missionary with an incredibly beautiful seashell before Christmas break. The missionary recognized that this shell could only be found a considerable distance from the school. When he was presented with the gift, he said, “What a beautiful shell. Thank you for traveling so far to get me such a lovely gift.” The student replied, “The long journey was part of the gift.”

As we walk through Advent, I hope you’ll join me by remembering and reflecting on God’s journey to us in Jesus Christ—the One who brings us “what is good.” For God’s journey in Jesus isn’t just an ordinary journey or an ordinary gift. Remember the message of the angels as they journeyed to the shepherds: “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11)—the epitome of “what is good.”

During our individual walks through Advent, may each one of us reflect on the ways in which we can share with others Christ’s gifts of “steadfast love,” “peace,” restoration, and “great joy”—in this season and the seasons to come.

## PRAYER

O God, this journey of Advent stirs great excitement in us. In this season, we see anew all the good gifts you continue to bring to us through your journey to and abiding presence with us—gifts that remind us of your great love for each one of us. Please grant that in all we do and say, we will reflect your great gift of Christ our Lord to everyone we meet as we walk with you each day. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Thomas F. Conboy ‘56*

## SCRIPTURE

### Revelation 1:17-2:7

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. 19 Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery

of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. 2:1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.’”

## DEVOTIONAL

The schedule remains pretty much the same in my assisted-living “home.” The Christmas decorations are pretty much the same each year. Like much of the outside world, we fast forward from Thanksgiving to Christmas and miss completely the wonderful anticipation of Advent.

The ninth verse today’s New Testament text, “I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary” (Rev. 2:3), paints a cross section of facilities such as the one I live in. The folks here who inspire me are those who live each day with joy and a quiet sense of anticipation. Their faith gives them the assurance of the promise “Unto you a child is born, unto you a Son is given.” Each day, with increasing infirmities, they look after each other, give a word of encouragement to those who meet their daily needs, and greet with open arms family and friends who come to visit.

The assured certainty of the Nativity does not relieve us of the need to live each day of Advent 2019 with faithful anticipation. Whether in a facility such as ours or in the crazy, conflicted, strife-filled world beyond these walls, we need to strive to be an example of “faith in action” to others, “enduring patiently, bearing up for the sake of [Jesus’] name.”

As we continue today on our journey to the manger of Bethlehem, recall the words of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century hymn: “O Lord, how shall I meet You, How welcome You aright? Your people long to greet You, My hope, my heart’s delight! O kindle, Lord most holy, A lamp within my breast, To do in spirit lowly All that may please You best.”

## 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 12, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Patrice L. Fowler-Searcy '13*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 62

1 For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.  
2 He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.  
3 How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?  
4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.  
They take pleasure in falsehood;  
they bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse.  
5 For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from him.  
6 He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.  
7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.  
8 Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us.  
9 Those of low estate are but a breath,  
those of high estate are a delusion;  
in the balances they go up;  
they are together lighter than a breath.  
10 Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery;  
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.  
11 Once God has spoken;  
twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,  
12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.  
For you repay to all  
according to their work.

## DEVOTIONAL

I am a fixer by nature. A significant part of the ministry God has entrusted to me is to help others, to make sure they are secure spiritually, emotionally, and financially. Over time I have

come to realize that my desire or need to fix things for others often gets ahead of what God is doing. I've learned that it is better to wait on God than to wish later that I had.

Our ability to wait on God and lean not to our own understanding is difficult, especially when there are so many issues in the world that we are moved to address, try to mitigate, or hope to fix—inequities, injustices, inequalities, maltreatment of people based on a wide range of unjustified factors. Yet the psalmist reminds us to wait in silence and assurance, for God is our rock, salvation, and refuge.

Waiting on God is not a passive act, but a peaceful stillness that manifests when we yield our fears, anxieties, and insecurities to God out of faithful trust and hope-filled living. In the letter to the Philippians Paul writes: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). During this season of Advent, may our minds, hearts, and spirits be at peace as we wait with assurance for Jesus Christ, the ultimate "fixer" of all things, and trust that God has not relinquished control of this world, but is working everything out for our ultimate good. As the psalmist concludes, so shall we: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord."

## PRAYER

Gracious, loving, and all-powerful God, quiet our hearts, increase our faith, and help us always to look to you, the one and only God, who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond anything we might imagine and think. Although the world seems out of control, teach us to wait on you, our hope, and to trust you with every aspect of our individual and corporate lives. For you are our rock, our salvation, and our refuge. Amen.

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Betty Voigt '85*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 16

1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.  
2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;  
I have no good apart from you."  
3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,  
in whom is all my delight.  
4 Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;  
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out  
or take their names upon my lips.  
5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.

6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.  
7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.  
8 I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.  
10 For you do not give me up to Sheol,  
or let your faithful one see the Pit.  
11 You show me the path of life.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

## DEVOTIONAL

The writer of Psalm 16 reminds us of God's desire and longing for creation: *a path of life that leads to fullness of joy. Let us choose this desire for ourselves and our world.*

Turn off your electronic devices for a while. Fast from the continual doomsday, fear-mongering news. This is Advent. Seek the Holy. Hold a baby or the hand of a dying one. Spend time giving thanks for everything! Turn on some beautiful music and let it fill your soul. Offer a small gesture of kindness and support to a stranger. Open your heart to receive the ordinary goodness around you. Be silent. Go within. Touch into the deeper truths that we call God, right here and now. Breathe in this incredible Mystery in us, with us, and all around us.

## PRAYER

O Beloved One, "my chosen portion and my cup," I often wander away from the true path of life you hold before me. My thoughts, heart, and actions get captured by inane distractions and fear. I run away from your presence. Keep wooing me back to yourself, and hold me in your heart of Love.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Nathan W. Carlson '11*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 80

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
3 Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

4 O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
7 Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.  
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches;  
11 it sent out its branches to the sea,  
and its shoots to the River.  
12 Why then have you broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
13 The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.  
14 Turn again, O God of hosts;  
look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,  
15 the stock that your right hand planted.  
16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.  
17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
18 Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.  
19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

## DEVOTIONAL

Within this Psalm we find imagery that provides theological depth for our Christian faith. From the psalm's opening with the image of a shepherd and its calling on God for the restoration of Israel—not only the restoration of a people but also of a "vine" out of Egypt—we clearly see contained herein messianic imagery associated with Jesus. The great Shepherd, Redeemer, and Restorer of life in this passage understands the trials of the day-to-day living we face.

During the season of Advent, each loss, each pain, and each sorrow we experience feels weightier. An unexpected illness, death, betrayal, or bill introduces that much more unease to our souls. The God described in Psalm 80 has seen it all before—on both a personal and a national scale.

When the vine from Egypt was "broken down," "plucked," and "ravaged," the psalmist turned for revival to the God of hope. This passage does not end in defeat, but instead in new life, as the God of hosts restores the people of God. Psalm 80 reassures us that whatever "scorn" we face, "tears" we shed, and rebuke we bear, our God has gone with us through all of it.

## PRAYER

Redeemer and Restorer of life, before we know what we need, you are at work in our lives. During this Advent season, when trials and pains may feel particularly acute, be with us to guide and lead us through these valleys. As you restore us to life, may we remember to praise your name continually. Amen.

## SUNDAY DECEMBER 15, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Donald J. Dawson*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 5:30-47

30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. 31 If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. 33 You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. 39 You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. 40 Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. 41 I do not accept glory from human beings. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. 43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. 44 How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

## DEVOTIONAL

At least in recent history, presidents of the U.S.A., in order to establish their own agendas, claim that they have authority by virtue of their office to take certain actions. The courts are regularly asked to rule whether or not they actually have such authority on the basis of the law of our nation, the Constitution.

This way is so very different from Jesus'. He never argued for authority for himself. In fact, he said that if he had to assert his own authority, he should not be trusted. To those who challenged his authority to judge life and death, he simply pointed to two gauges of authority. First, what do his actions show, as declared in the testimony of those who can be trusted as messengers of truth? Here Jesus was referring to what John the Baptist said about him and to the testimony of people such as the paralytic whom he healed. Second, what is the testimony of the "constitution," in other words for Jesus' audience, the Law of Moses?

We should always be cautious of those who come beating their own drums and claiming power and truth for themselves. Power is given only by the Lord God Almighty, who has entrusted it to the only Son as both Savior and Judge. In Jesus only is eternal life.

## PRAYER

Ruler of the universe, thank you for sending your Son as the Arbitrator of all things. Bring all people to bow before him as the Giver of mercy and the only One in whom salvation can be found. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, amen.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Joan S. Hogge '04 and Dr. W. Allen Hogge '08*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalms 145

1 I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.  
2 Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name forever and ever.  
3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
his greatness is unsearchable.  
4 One generation shall laud your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.  
5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.  
6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,  
and I will declare your greatness.  
7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.  
8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
9 The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.  
10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.  
11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,  
and tell of your power,



12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.  
The Lord is faithful in all his words,  
and gracious in all his deeds.  
14 The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down.  
15 The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.  
16 You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.  
17 The Lord is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings.  
18 The Lord is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.  
20 The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.  
21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

## DEVOTIONAL

“God is good, God is great.” How many times did you pray that prayer as a child? Did you ever ponder what it means to say that God is both good and great? Or, like most of us, did you just repeat it as part of table grace, never really thinking about what the words meant? These simple six words in a childhood prayer tell us a great deal about the nature of the God who came to dwell among us as Jesus of Nazareth.

The writer of Psalm 145 paints a picture of both the greatness and goodness of God. God has done mighty acts and awesome works. God’s mighty deeds are known to all people. But for some of us the image of a mighty and powerful God instills fear—fear of a vengeful and judging God. The psalmist, however, sees a God whose greatness and goodness are completely intertwined. This God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in love. God is good to all God’s creation, and “his compassion is over all he has made.” This powerful God who created the universe manifests that power in gracious and compassionate love toward that creation. The psalmist reminds us that God gives us our food, satisfies our desires, and is just in all his ways. God is near to all who call on him.

God is great and God is good! God’s very nature is love. In that knowledge we can have no greater joy. “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.”

## PRAYER

Holy God, like the psalmist, we too praise your name for your greatness, goodness, and mercy to each one of us. We give you thanks for your abundant blessings, which come to us

each day. Your mercy is there to greet us and to guide our steps throughout the day. Most of all we thank you for your great love given to each one of us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2019

*Written by The Rev. Dr. William J. Carl III*

## SCRIPTURE

### Matthew 24:32-44

32 “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 34 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 36 But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

## DEVOTIONAL

What do fig trees, Noah and the ark, two women grinding meal, and Christmas have in common? In every case, nature and human beings are anticipating something very important and good that is about to happen, but we don’t know when. So we watch and wait the way children wait anxiously for Christmas to come.

The people of God had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, and then he appeared in surprising ways that no one expected. He arrived in a manger instead of a gilded cradle. He rode a donkey instead of a warrior’s steed. He mounted a cross instead of a chariot. He beat the grave in order to save. That’s what we waited for, and it was worth the wait—well worth it! It’s what we wait for every Advent—but we need to stay awake because he keeps appearing every day when we least expect it. Here is Jesus in a person we’ve never listened to before whose story moves us to tears because this time we actually paid attention to what she was

saying. Here is Jesus in an unexpected kindness that came out of the blue. Here is Jesus helping us overcome temptations we've never been able to withstand before. Here is Jesus reminding us that we don't have to try so hard because we really are loved and need to remember this truth.

Unlike like a thief, however, Jesus arrives in the night positively. What Jesus steals away are our fears and our worries, and in so doing he gives us new life. So be alert this Advent for the coming of Jesus into our world and into your life. Be prepared to be surprised yet again by the glorious gift of Christmas!

## PRAYER

Holy God, we lay our lives before you now. We turn off our mobile phones and tablets and give our attention to you totally this Advent season. Surprise us again with unanticipated wonder so we can be awakened to a new and abundant life. We close our eyes to the things that draw us away from you and open them to the joys you share with us each day in small and unassuming ways. We listen with anticipation for your wake-up call, ready to love and serve you with every fiber of our being. All these things we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Susan E. Vande Kappelle '95*

## SCRIPTURE

### Revelation 12:1-10

1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days. 7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God."

## DEVOTIONAL

Birthing a child is a great portent. It is a time of uncertainty. There is potential for rejoicing, but also great anxiety. A woman so strong to carry a child to term is vulnerable at the moment of birth. To her the enemy is the unknown. What will happen? Will she and the child be safe, and what kind of help will be needed for herself and the babe?

On the other hand, dragons are dreadful creatures no matter how Jim Henson portrays them as muppets and friendly stuffed animals. This dragon in Revelation seeks to kill the child to be born, destroys part of creation, and wages war against heaven. Life can be seen as a fight against opposing forces, thus leaving us very little choice but to live in fear and anxiety.

But the Revelation to John offers more than an eschatological vision. It is another perspective about the struggles of life. The broader view of this conflict between the woman and the dragon reveals the saving love of God beyond and in spite of the battles. Not only is the dragon driven out of heaven by the angels, but also the woman and her child remain safe within God's care, and the future is secured for eternity.

We can choose to live in distress and fear in the midst of life's struggles, or we can take on the perspective in John's vision of a present comfort and great expectations. In this season of Advent, be still and seek the God who dwells in and around us, and find your own place of safety and well-being.

## PRAYER

God of grace and God of glory, pour out power on your people. Give your people wings to fly through the conflicts of this world and find saving help from earth and heaven. Encourage us—encourage me—to spend time this Advent seeking the Messiah, who reconciles all things.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. David R. Hosick '76*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalms 126

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;

then it was said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."

3 The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

5 May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

## DEVOTIONAL

The psalmist declares, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy." He refers to the restoration of a "faithful remnant" of Israelites to their homeland from exile in Babylon, around 528 B.C. When first freed and enabled to return home, they were in shock, in a dream world, as is the common human experience when something wonderful or terrible happens to us. When the reality of their freedom sank in, their exuberant joy could not be contained.

For Christians it is interesting to note the phrase used by the psalmist, "restored the fortunes." It means "general restitution or liberation, a passing from the shadow of death into a full and happy life." On numerous occasions Jesus indicated this kind of restoration was a purpose of his ministry. "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live." We Christians understand and believe that Jesus made it possible for us to pass from the power of sin and death into a full and happy life, beginning now and continuing for eternity.

Psalm 126 reflects the message of the Bible from front to back. The psalmist remembers God's grace in the past, ponders God's help in the present, and relies on God's blessing in the future, all resulting in joy. For us the ultimate embodiment of these certainties is Jesus Christ, the celebration of whose birth we anticipate in Advent. Like the psalmist's, therefore, our lives are bordered on one side by the memory of God's faithful acts in the past and on the other side by the assurance of God's promises for the future. So in the present, let our mouths be filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy!

## PRAYER

God of hope and joy, the day draws near when the glory of your Son will brighten the night of the waiting world. Let no sorrow hinder the joy of those who seek him. Let no sin obscure the vision of wisdom by those who find him. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(from the *Book of Common Worship*,  
*Daily Prayer*, p. 104, WJK)

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. J. Gregory Clark '71/'75*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 102

1 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 an 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 For 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 an evening 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 worship 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 mid-point 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

Our firstborn emerged from the womb on Epiphany, five weeks earlier than the gestation calendar predicted. As she grew out of her crib and toddled around the manse, she demonstrated a growing curiosity portraying a contagious, inquisitive mind, seeking to understand this world into which she was born and the Creator who gave her the gift of life.

Now, nearly a half century later, she continues to ask me, "Why, Daddy?" Of course, she no longer crawls up on my lap and looks me straight in the eye as a little child, but the longing to grasp the mysteries of God's provision has not abated. This past Mother's Day, she posted on Facebook a message that gripped my heart. She wrote, "Thank you Lance and my 3 sweet little angels in heaven for providing me the opportunity to be a mom." Our daughter, who surprised us with her early arrival, delivered a healthy baby boy who is now a teenager, bore two fetal forms that were swept away in miscarriages, and carried a still-born baby who could not survive long enough to take even a first breath.

The prayer of the Psalmist cries out, "My heart is stricken and withered like grass." Three times our hearts ached and broke along with the heart of our daughter as fleeting moments of joy almost erupted, but then suddenly vaporized as the dreams vanished from view. We rejoice with our daughter in the life of her son, who continues to bring great joy to his parents and grandparents and to extended family. Like our inquisitive daughter, we also ask our heavenly Father, "Why, Daddy?"

Advent, a season of expectation filled with hopeful signs and joy-filled anticipation, is at the same time a season of Divine Revelation. God, to whom the Psalmist prays most fervently, emerges in the most unexpected way as a baby, born to a virgin by the miracle of the Nativity. God's promise is fulfilled in ways that far surpass our wildest imaginations. Emmanuel, "God with Us!"

God has never forsaken us. God accompanies us through all our darkest nights. God promises eternal blessings, in our generation and for all our offspring—those whom we know and love, and those whom we have yet to meet.

## PRAYER

Abba, Father, thank you for granting me unlimited opportunities to present my needs to You. Help me to be content in receiving whatever paths and provisions You offer. May my frail and feeble faith keep me open to trust that You know the way I must go and be all-sufficient as I continue my journey through life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2019

*Written by Joanne E. Spence '18*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 80

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
3 Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
4 O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
7 Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.  
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches;  
11 it sent out its branches to the sea,  
and its shoots to the River.  
12 Why then have you broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
13 The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.  
14 Turn again, O God of hosts;  
look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,  
15 the stock that your right hand planted.  
16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.



17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
18 Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.  
19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

## DEVOTIONAL

As I ponder this psalm, I hear a wistful and yearning tone. The repeated use of the word “restore” suggests to me that the sought-for restoration involved waiting. I have never known restoration to be a quick process, whether it has involved buildings, paintings, or people. Restoration looks like, and often is, a painfully slow process.

Slowness is not something I am good at, though my vocation involves teaching people how to slow down. Slowness usually involves being thoughtful and paying attention. But paying attention to what? To whom? In my early years of learning to slow down, my mind would go crazy and “chomp at the bit”—not unlike the minds of the Israelites, whom the psalmist reveals as pleading, “come to save us! . . . let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Three times in this psalm they make this cry to the Lord. Waiting and yearning. Waiting and yearning. The struggle is real!

I have a friend who is obviously pregnant. She is waiting and yearning for her baby boy to be born. As she notes, pregnancy is not only the perfect metaphor for Advent but even for our life as a whole. As Christians, we live in the “already-but-not-yet” space till Christ’s return, when all things will be made new.

But like me, most of us are not good at waiting. The slow work of restoration does not come quickly or easily. Just ask any child who has long awaited Christmas morning and tried to stay awake all night on Christmas Eve to watch and wait.

## PRAYER

Dear heavenly Father, may we practice a posture of readiness in our waiting for the time when you will again break into our current reality. As our brother Teilhard de Chardin reminds us to do, help us, “Above all, [to] trust in the slow work of God,” a long time though it may take.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Clinton C. Cottrell '00*

## 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

Not unlike parents naming a baby today, Elizabeth and Zechariah were being pressured to name their eight-day-old son by the convention of the time, preferably by using Zechariah as the child’s name. When Elizabeth used the name “John,” there was immediate resistance—so much so that others were confused and turned to the mute father, who scribbled out the name “John” on a tablet (and who mysteriously regained his speech). No one in the family was named John—this just wasn’t done!

But both Elizabeth and Zechariah knew the reason for naming the child “John”: they were honoring what the angel Gabriel had declared (see Luke 1:13). In fact, Elizabeth and Zechariah honored the will of God, and clearly the aged couple were blessed. It was *others* who were filled with fear at what had happened, while still more were talking about what had occurred that day.

We are but a few days from the day we memorialize and celebrate the birth of Jesus. How much of our preparation for Christmas is about what the world expects? Parties, gifts, and even preparation for Christmas Eve worship can be all-encompassing in our lives. What is God calling us to do that goes against conventional wisdom? What can we learn from the example of Elizabeth and Zechariah? How are *our* actions giving others reasons to talk about the miracles of God this Advent season?

## PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Against all conventional wisdom, you granted them a child and much more. Help us in the final days of Advent to see how you, through us, are breaking conventions in the world today. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Tanta Luckhardt Hendricks '82*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Jeremiah 31:10-14

10 Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."  
11 For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.  
12 They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.  
13 Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.  
14 I will give the priests their fill of fatness,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

### DEVOTIONAL

Exile is dislocation, a yanking out of the socket of home, identity, security, and hope. Exile is despair and desperation, pain and hopelessness.

Restoration puts all back in place. It is a homecoming dance—a medical test that says you're okay, not dying; a song of joy that comes from the heart and tummy; toes in the sand and a sigh of relaxation; a relocation of self in wholeness and hope. Jeremiah offers a vision of what will be when the time of exile is over, and the long journey home is complete.

Jesus of Bethlehem offers himself to share with us our time of exile, of dislocation. But Jesus also offers himself as the restoration of our wholeness and hope. At the same time, that restoration is yet to come. The long journey home is not yet finished. We continue to live in brokenness and despair.

But exile does not have the last word. The Lord who has come to be born in us, with us, and for us will bring us to our ultimate home, where joy breaks out in a dance, and songs cannot be silenced, and tears are no more. Jesus' birth looks beyond dislocation as the Lord brings hope in the midst of exile, the whisper of the song, the shadow of the dance, the whiff of joy. Exile does not have the last word. Ever.

### PRAYER

Holy Child of Bethlehem, you come to us when we hurt with the pain of dislocation, so we are not alone in our despair. You come to us offering hope—the assurance that joy will prevail. As we grasp that hope, you restore our soul. How grateful we are for you. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Harold W. Abram '59*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
2 For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
3 Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

### DEVOTIONAL

After the prophet has reviewed the tale of national wickedness in his time, he proclaims to the people that their light has arrived and the glory of the Lord has risen upon them. It is as though the prophet were speaking to us today, for we are in similar need.

As a society, we are a people in need of something beyond our selfishness, hate, deceptions, duplicities, and other divisions. We need the glory of the Lord to rise upon us. All the "-isms" we declare need cleansing by the "glory of the Lord." On our own we are helpless and hopeless before the evil of our time. We need something new to come into our lives—the "born-to-us" child whose name is Emmanuel, "God with us."

This is the time. The season is ripe for a new way that is older than time itself. God's glory is for now. It is here. Let us receive it by God's grace.

## PRAYER

Oh God, come, be with us in our lives today. Show us, your people, your new way. Imbue us with love, great hope, and peace beyond all comprehension. Hold us up by faith and trust that your promises will be fulfilled throughout Creation. Bring us wholeness, bring peace on earth, and bring goodwill among all humanity we pray. So be it! Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2019

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Judy A. Angleberger '96*

## SCRIPTURE

### 1 John 4:7-16

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

## DEVOTIONAL

For God so loved the world that he sent his only son . . . (John 3:16).

As parents of a newborn, we pour our love and attention into our infant through cuddling, talking to, cooing, and kissing day after day until one day that infant opens his or her mouth and bites Mommy or Daddy on the chin—an attempt at a kiss. Our baby has learned to respond to love. That love continues to grow and find expression in many ways.

John tells us in his first letter that we love because God first loved us. God pours love into us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and in time we learn to respond to that love. "God's

love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him" (v. 9).

Today, we celebrate the expression of God's steadfast love in that God poured God's love into our world and into our lives through the birth of Jesus—God's love personified. How do we respond to such love? John answers, "Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (v. 7).

## PRAYER

God of grace, thank you for loving us and showing us the Way to a personal relationship with you through your son, Jesus. We are thankful for his birth and for his saving grace on the cross. Teach us how to respond to such love by loving one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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*The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*

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