



“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 2020*

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 alumnae/i of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

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**PITTSBURGH  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY**

## SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Brian Sandell '12*

### SCRIPTURE

#### 2 Peter 3:1-10

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

### DEVOTIONAL

I'm a dad of three amazing kids. My kids live life to the fullest—they play hard and laugh often. They dump Legos on the floor, scatter toy cars across the ground, and get other toys out that they won't even play with. Our basement is often hit hardest by our children's playing. It takes only about 30 minutes to turn a pristine, immaculate basement into a complete mess.

Interestingly enough, sometimes it takes even less time than that to turn our own lives into a complete mess. For Adam and Eve it only took one bite. The great news from our text today is that we can turn our lives away from the mess of sin and into the restorative life that only Christ offers. Our text outlines how we can do so as we begin this Advent's journey.

First, remember the words spoken by the holy prophets (v. 2). The words of Scripture are life giving, transformative, and applicable for all moments of life. The writer of Hebrews describes the Word of God as alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword and able to judge thoughts and the intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). God's word is something

we are called to remember, internalize, and put into practice. Let's take this Advent season and be intentional about remembering the words of God and the prophetic voices of the past and present.

Second, trust that God will fulfill his promises (2 Pet. 3:3). It can be very easy to doubt God's promises when the world we live in seems to get crazier by the minute. Trust God anyway. When brokenness is all you have known for so long, it is easy to see the mess. Trust God anyway. This Advent season let us not be scoffers (as in v. 3). Instead, let us be people who unconditionally trust that the promises of God will come true.

And third, be patient as you await God's timing (v. 8). At the time of writing of this text, it was widely thought that many followers of Jesus believed his return was imminent. Here we are, 2,000 years later, still waiting. We need to be patient. I must confess that I don't do well with patience. I want things to happen now, but that's not how God works. God works patiently, deliberately, in his timing to bring about his glory, and to transform us into the likeness of Christ. In obedient response, we are patiently to await God's timing. If and when we do, we'll be amazed at how we experienced the promised restoration found only in Jesus Christ.

### PRAYER

Lord, we thank you that your promises always come true. Help us during this Advent season to be patient, to be hopeful, and to trust you unconditionally, no matter the circumstances going on in our lives. Fix our eyes and hearts on the Christ Child in the manger this Advent. Amen.

## MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Alyssa Bell '11*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Psalm 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

"Do not delay, O my God" (v. 17). With a sense of urgency and trust, the psalmist petitions the Lord. This same immediacy drives our souls to sing Advent hymns such as "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" and "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." These sweet melodies carry lyrics of longing and desperation, and with them we join all the saints across time and miles in crying out, "Do not delay, O my God."

As we enter this season of waiting, may we be encouraged to cry out to God with this kind of candor. We can be this direct with God, who knows the chaos of our hearts and of our world, for in Psalm 40 we are promised God's listening ear—an ear that does not turn from our cries and frustration. "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (v. 3).

And so we wait, and while we ask God not to tarry, we give God our whole selves in worship! We raise our voices in adoration because God is faithful in raising us up from the pit and giving us stability. The psalms model for us patterns of praise even in times of trouble and uncertainty. May we give honor to the God who beckons us near, whose love knows no bounds.

Our God invites us to postures of both urgent longing and exuberant praise. God welcomes our exhaustion and our gratitude. Let Psalm 40 be our prayer this Advent as it gives voice to the tensions we feel as we approach this season of expectation.

## PRAYER

Lord, do not delay your coming. We need you in our midst to change our hearts and our world. We praise you, our God of strength and tender care, who listens to our longings with love. Draw us near to yourself as we wait. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Jeffrey Conn '00*

## SCRIPTURES

### Psalm 33

1 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. 2 Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. 3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. 4 For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. 7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. 9 For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage. 13 The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. 14 From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth—15 he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. 16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. 17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. 18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, 19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. 21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. 22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

### 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

Psalm 33 celebrates the power of God as our creator and redeemer: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle" (vv. 6-7a). Since God created these vast arrays of matter and energy, surely he can help us with our problems.

"The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing" (v. 10a), yet "the counsel of the LORD stands forever" (v. 11a). There is no end of disagreement about how to handle the affairs of state. How can we align ourselves with God's counsel? "Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD" (v. 12a).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). When we do this, "our heart is glad in him because we trust in his holy name" (Ps. 33:21).

In Psalm 146 the writer says, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help. When their breath departs they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish" (vv. 3-4). On whom can we depend? "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God . . . who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry" (vv. 5, 7a).

Jesus told a parable about a "judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people" yet helped a widow: "'I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' And the Lord said 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant justice to them,'" (Luke 18:2, 5-7). The writer of Psalm 146 reminds us that "The LORD will reign forever"—so we should "Praise the LORD!" (v. 10).

## PRAYER

Thank you, God, that your power to save is not limited by our weakness. Your love for us is not limited by our sinfulness. Hear the cries of our heart and grant us justice. May we find

your presence as close as our breath and the ground beneath our feet. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Carol Divens Roth '85*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 20:19-26

19 When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. 20 So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. 21 So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. 22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 23 But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 24 "Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." 25 He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

## DEVOTIONAL

No matter what he looked like in real life, Tiberius Caesar was probably depicted as a handsome fellow on the denarius, which bore his image. If you were the metalsmith in charge, would you risk insulting the emperor? The people who trade in the coin of the realm bear the imprint of Rome. The government—its laws, its culture, its morality—is in charge, as represented on the money they use.

Jesus knows that fact and offers a different currency—a currency that bears the image of the one true God. This currency comprises the people stamped by the Creator on the sixth day to live in true shalom—to love God and neighbor, to be stewards of the earth, to do justice, and to show lovingkindness.

We are God's spending money, meant to be used to show what is of real value in the commonwealth of heaven on earth. What's in *your* wallet?

## PRAYER

Arriving God, in a season when we focus on giving and receiving, spend us. Let our love and service reflect your beauty to each and all in the world you have made, and let us see you in them too. Amen.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Richard W. Wingfield '02/'13*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Luke 20:27-40

27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 28 and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; 30 then the second 31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." 34 Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 37 And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. 38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." 39 Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." 40 For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

### DEVOTIONAL

Have you ever been drawn into a useless conversation? You saw where the conversation was headed and had no intention to get involved, yet you were put on the spot and forced to reply. And you knew you needed to be clear in responding lest your words be misconstrued and used against you.

Jesus shows the importance of seeing past people's clever but narrow logical and cultural limits. The Sadducees, because of their dogmata, used a fictitious plot within the levirate marriage system of the Law to draw Jesus into a theological debate about the resurrection. Indeed, it was important to them. Their small arguments and literal interpretation of the Law kept their world in order. Nevertheless, their thoughts revealed assumptions that limited God's power and denied God's word.

Ironically, Jesus uses their own argument to debunk their logic. He lifts them from the human web of their theological concepts to a cosmic vision. Don't think of heaven in terms of earthly limits. What's really important is not a specific ideology but a living reality. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living, for to Him all are alive.

How often do we pigeonhole and confine God to a narrow construct? We see every day how God is used to justify certain social, political, and theological positions. We easily develop our private hypotheses regarding the world or the church. We major on minor things, minor on the major things, and miss the important, needful thing.

It's easy to waste time on petty debates that cause needless divisions, whether at a family get together or on a social media platform. Biblical witness warns against this (2 Tim. 2:23). Besides, God is beyond all that. We are invited to imagine God. Imagine God beyond our finite imaginations. Imagine God beyond our often-faulty assumptions. Imagine God who is beyond what even our minds can possibly conceive (Isa. 55:8-9). Imagine the God who will bring life, energy, meaning, and substance to the reality we find ourselves in.

God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.

### PRAYER

God, help us to move beyond our selfish thinking and petty arguments so we can gain a heavenly perspective. Help us to seek those things which are above, not things of the earth. Plant our feet on higher ground. Amen.

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Janet Duggins '90*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Isaiah 3:1-4:1

1 For now the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff—all support of bread, and all support of water—2 warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, 3 captain of fifty and dignitary, counselor and skillful magician and expert enchanter. 4 And I will make boys their princes, and babes shall rule over them. 5 The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honorable. 6 Someone will even seize a relative, a member of the clan, saying, "You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule." 7 But the other will cry out on that day, saying, "I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; you shall not make me leader of the people." 8 For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence. 9 The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim



their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves. 10 Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labors. 11 Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them. 12 My people—children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths. 13 The LORD rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. 14 The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. 15 What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts. 16 The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; 17 the Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will lay bare their secret parts. 18 In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; 19 the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs 20 the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; 21 the signet rings and nose rings; 22 the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; 23 the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. 24 Instead of perfume there will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. 25 Your men shall fall by the sword and your warriors in battle. 26 And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground. 4:1 Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes; just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace."

## DEVOTIONAL

The word of the Lord in this passage is neither comforting nor comfortable. The prophet paints a bleak picture of what the people of God can expect to face in their near future: the loss of supports and structures, resources and luxuries they have come to expect as their due; people oppressing one another; an absence of leadership; men falling victim to violence; women desperate.

Why does God intend to upend the lives of God's people in this way? Because they have stopped even pretending to be just or trying to hide their wrongdoing. They have no interest in God's ways, but they are proud of their greed and conspicuous consumption. They have become a society in which the powerful crush the people and grind the faces of the poor in the dust. Living in this way will bring on consequences, and those consequences will not be pretty.

There is only one tiny, tiny hint of relief, at the very beginning. "For now," the prophet says, God will remove all these things the people have come to count on. For now—suggesting

that perhaps the story will not end with the predicted social disintegration and suffering. But anything more in the way of words of hope will have to wait. Through the next several chapters of Isaiah, promises of restoration will only appear little by little.

This particular text doesn't bring us there yet. Its focus is on the reckoning that has to come. It's not comforting or comfortable, but it might not be a bad thing to sit with it a while. It seems appropriate in a year marked by a global pandemic, hundreds of thousands of deaths, widespread unemployment, the upending of structures and routines, failed leadership, confrontation with the discrimination entrenched in our systems and psyches, deep societal divisions, increased pressure on the most vulnerable, and ostensibly a worsening climate crisis. We can certainly find ourselves in this third chapter of Isaiah. We, too, are a society little concerned with God's priorities; our way of life is unsustainable on many fronts. There has to be a reckoning. Of course, we want to find the Advent hope—skip ahead to it, even. But as always, the prophet offers better wisdom: before new hope can emerge, there has to be a reckoning. For now, we can ponder that truth.

## PRAYER

Sovereign God, when the present is difficult and the future is uncertain, we long to hear a word of hope from you. But for now, give us the grace to be patient, we pray. Give us the willingness to hear, first, your word of truth, your demand for justice, your call to repentance. Give us the courage for the reckoning that can allow renewed hope to blossom. Amen.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Christopher Brown '08*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 90

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and

trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. 11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. 12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. 13 Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. 15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. 16 Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. 17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!

## DEVOTIONAL

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!” (v. 17). I remember sitting in the reference room of the Barbour Library at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and praying this psalm as I began work on the last of my ordination exams. Psalm 90 happened to be the psalm for that morning in the Daily Lectionary, and it felt like a providentially timed word from God. “Yes Lord, please prosper the work of my hands,” I thought, as I began to parse and translate the Greek passage assigned for the exegesis exam. But there’s a deeper longing behind this Psalm than the simple desire to pass a test.

The psalmist’s plea for success arises after a meditation on the relatively brief and inconsequential lives we live. We last only a moment before God turns us back to dust (vv. 3-4). Wisdom, it seems, consists in recognizing that our days are few (v. 12). So the psalmist pleads for the Lord to show compassion by confirming, establishing, and prospering the work we do during these short lives. One could paraphrase this plea by saying, “Lord, I know I won’t last forever, so please let something I’ve done outlive me.”

The good news is that in Jesus Christ, whose advent we both remember and await in this season, God has answered the psalmist’s plea for our lives to be more than grass that fades and withers (v. 6). The Son of God came so we might receive the life that is “from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 2). This is why, after meditating on the mysteries of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul could instruct the Corinthian Christians to “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). In that hope, may we direct all our longing for meaning and success to the One who satisfies us with his steadfast love: Jesus.

## PRAYER

O Lord, “satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. . . . Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon

us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!”

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2020

*Written by the Very Rev. Virginia Mazzarella '90*

## 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

At this time of year, merriment and joy swirl all around us. Busyness is the order of the day. But in anticipation of the One who is to come, this season can be a time of quiet contemplation as well.

Advent can be a time to remember the ways of the Lord. It can be a time to strive to follow the One whose paths are steadfast love and faithfulness. Most importantly, it can be a time to connect with the One who loves us enough to send a Savior into our midst.

When we remember God's paths and seek them out, we quiet the hustle and bustle around us and truly center our hearts on the most important thing: the coming of the Christ Child.

## PRAYER

Loving God, in this season the world seems to move at a frantic pace. Help us in the midst of all the busyness around us to focus on you. May we train our hearts and minds to hear your voice above all else, so that we will be truly ready to welcome our Savior.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2020

*Written by Samuel McCann '19*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 21:20-28

20 "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; 22 for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. 23 Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; 24 they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. 25 There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

## DEVOTIONAL

What a distressing passage. Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. He also promises to return—something we might cheerfully cling to—but even it is dressed in foreboding language. As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ as a baby—a story that often evokes serene images of the holy family—we might ask "Why this text? And why now?"

Despite all the horrific imagery, this passage ends by insisting it is good news. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Jesus is communicating to his disciples that he knows the coming afflictions and trials they will face. He is saying that he knows the suffering

that will be visited upon the people of Jerusalem. His knowledge of this suffering yet to come is intended to assure the disciples that even the sinfulness of this world cannot frustrate his plans to redeem it. The disciples are called to trust the Lord during difficult circumstances.

In turn, we are called to trust Christ as the disciples trusted him. Our faith is not grounded in escapism. We are not drawn into a story that makes us forget the world for a while; rather, the gospel confronts our sinfulness. And integral to the coming judgment is the promise that Christ will shake the very foundations that allow sin and suffering to persist.

This judgment might not always be easy and cheerful, but it is grounded in the hope that the One who judges us is intimately aware of the ways we are plagued by the brokenness of this world. We can trust, then, that the world's shaking constitutes the last gasp of rebellion, the failed attempt of sin and death ultimately to rule our lives. It is in the midst of the shaking that Christ is building the kingdom to come, where we may behold him in all his glory.

## PRAYER

Lord, knowing that you know our struggles, we entrust our lives to you. Knowing that you will redeem us from the pitfalls and snares that trap and entangle us, we entrust our lives to you. Knowing that you shake the foundations of the world to redeem us, we entrust our lives to you. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Lisa J. Lyon '92*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 21:29-38

29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 34 Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." 37 Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. 38 And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.



## DEVOTIONAL

Watch out! Pay attention! Jesus says, “[W]hen you see *these things* taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” What are “these things”? In Luke 21:5-17, Jesus lists them as the destruction of the temple, false prophets, wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents and signs in the heavens, arrests and persecutions, betrayal, hatred, and executions. At this writing, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer. One can’t escape the feeling that Jesus is right here, right now, talking to us.

Christians live in the tension between the already and the not yet: Jesus came and established God’s kingdom on earth, but not until his coming again will that kingdom be fulfilled. Rather than anticipating the end of the world “when [we] see these things taking place,” we should remember that, nevertheless, “the *kingdom of God is near*.” That’s the hope we cling to in the midst of chaos.

Jesus calls us to be on guard and never give in to the fears and worries of our daily life by falling into dissipation and drunkenness. He urges us to be alert and watch for the signs—not merely signs of “the end,” but signs of the kingdom of God. Fred Rogers said, “Look for the helpers”; Jesus says, “Be the helpers.” And we must pray—pray for the strength to escape the pitfalls of self-centeredness, anger, and despair. If we do that, when Jesus returns we will be able to stand before the Son of Man having made the most of every moment, every opportunity, to make the kingdom of God on earth visible—to bring the kingdom of God to fruition by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

## PRAYER

Gracious God, the signs of your kingdom on earth are obscured by sin. Please change our focus. Sharpen our perception of others’ suffering. Remove the blinders of “isms” that divide us. Excise the cataracts that distort the image of God in each person. Clarify our vision of hope. Thank you! Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2020

*Written by Brandon Anthony Shaw ’19*

## SCRIPTURE

### Isaiah 6:1-13

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had

six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” 9 And he said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.” 11 Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the LORD sends every-one far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

## DEVOTIONAL

Holy. God is H-O-L-Y. What does this mean?

A Th.M. graduate of Pittsburgh Seminary and a D.Min. student at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary (Chicago), I also study theology at the University of Notre Dame to learn what the Roman Catholic Church can teach me about our Savior, Jesus Christ. During my first week of class there this summer (2020), Dr. Anthony Pagliarini spoke to us about the holiness of God through an analogy concerning his wife’s goodness. Anthony sees his dear wife as good, like God; but God is not like Katie in his goodness. God is supereminently good. In other words, God is beyond any kind of goodness we can comprehend. He is in a class by himself. When we speak of God as “holy” we must think of him as above anything we may conjure in our minds as we dwell on his righteous attributes. Doing so honors him and causes us to reflect on him in reverential awe.

This Christmas season, we can praise Jesus that his eternal holiness sets him apart from us and is the ground for our salvation. Praise him this Advent for his holy nature!

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

Dear Holy Father, thank you that you are not like us and that your ways are transcendently higher than our ways. Thank you for sending your beloved and holy Son to come dwell among us. Thank you that he lived the perfect life of righteousness on our behalf, died in our place, rose for our justification, now reigns over the cosmos for our good and your everlasting glory, and will return to bring eternal shalom to all things unto your unending praise. Pour out your saving grace in abundance this season for the sake of your global renown. In Jesus' name, amen!

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Mary Catherine (Kay) Day '97*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 18:1-20

1 I love you, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies. 4 The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; 5 the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. 16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support. 19 He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.

20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

## DEVOTIONAL

The paradox of the incarnation never ceases to amaze me. The image we carry at this time of year of "God with us" is of the babe in the manger—tiny, helpless, completely dependent, as any infant is. The image of Jesus as our redeemer is of him meekly hanging on a cross in our place. These are valid images of God with us.

Yet from Psalm 18 we get a totally different image of God. The psalmist labels him a rock and fortress, a deliverer and refuge, a shield and stronghold. When he pictures God as coming to his defense he says, "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked." The psalmist continues to describe how God saved him from his distress and delivered him from his enemies. He affirms the reason for his redemption by saying, "[H]e delivered me, because he delighted in me." God saved him because he loved him. That is the very reason he came to us at Christmas as a baby and died on the cross for our sins.

We know the proclamation in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world . . ." It resolves any paradox we might see. All that God has done and is doing is because God loves us. God is great enough, powerful enough, resourceful enough to come to us in whatever way is needed to reach us and redeem us, because the God of the universe, the one of power and might, loves us.

## PRAYER

All powerful God, we are humbled by the ways you use to express your love for us. Help us to see them with fresh eyes this Advent season. Come to us as you know we need you to. Amen.

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2020

*Written by David Peters '07*

## SCRIPTURE

### 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

13 But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. 16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and

God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. 3:1 Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, 2 and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. 4 And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

## DEVOTIONAL

We seem to have a yearning for the familiar and the simple. In a world where political issues are complex and empathy is sometimes challenging, we seek understanding. In a world of gadgets and gizmos that only seem to make conversations more difficult, we seek familiar voices and words. In many ways, Advent calls us back to the familiar—to someone we know.

Here in Thessalonians Paul seems to be calling believers back to the familiar as well. In the chaos and constant danger surrounding the early church and the Apostle's life, Paul reminds the believers of the "steadfastness of Christ" (3:5) and exhorts them to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions" (2:15). He calls them—and us—back to the familiar. In saying "God chose you as the first fruits of salvation" (2:13), Paul reminds them—and us—of our calling to live out a life that glorifies God. In the midst of all the problems the early church was having with constant adversity and misinterpretation of the message of the gospel, Paul takes believers back to basics – the "proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

During Advent, we are asked to come out of the complexity and chaos of the world around us and get back to basics—our calling to proclaim what God has done for us. Our yearning for the familiar is fulfilled if we focus on what God has done. Our world makes sense when we focus on God's promise, not on other things that only cloud our judgment. This calling is not to ignore the challenges of our world; rather, it's a call to make sense of the world in the light of a promise God made through his Son—a promise God is still fulfilling during each moment of every day.

## PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, it is hard for us to listen to you in the midst of our busy and complex world. We get mixed up and hung up on things that cause us to lose focus. We take our attention away from you. Help us to heed your calling back to the familiar—the love you showed through your Son. Still our hearts to help us focus on what is important: praising

you and telling others about your love. Through Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Jo Ramsey '99*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 22:31-38

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

## DEVOTIONAL

Bethlehem was a long way away from Nazareth. It was an inopportune time to travel for the young couple, and they had no place to stay. Mary was nearly due to deliver her first child. I wonder what they took along.

Several years ago, the children of our church imagined Mary and Joseph's packing list and retraced their steps on the road to Bethlehem. Each child received a saddlebag fashioned from a paper grocery bag. With much excitement, they imaginatively stopped by Joseph's parents' home, where they were given several coins. Next, they visited the house of Mary's parents, where each one received a fleece bedroll. Then they visited the travel agent for a roadmap. On their way out of town, they ducked into the market to buy a granola bar and bottle of water. A quick stop at the synagogue for a blessing, and they were on their way. As the children added each item to their saddlebags, their anticipation grew. They couldn't wait to hit the road! They loved accruing and carrying their gear. Don't we all—especially at Christmastime?!

Today's lectionary text doesn't read like lyrics from a Christmas carol, but it makes a surprising connection to Jesus' birth. When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, there is no room at the inn, the *kataluma* (Luke 2:7). Luke uses this word only one other time . . . to describe the room where Jesus

and the disciples have gathered for the Passover Meal, the Last Supper (22:11). But this time, there is room.

In this *kataluma*, Jesus reminds his disciples that twice before he has instructed them to bring nothing for the journey. No sandals, money belt, no tunic. God will provide all they need through those whom they serve. But times are changing. No longer can they rely on others. They must provide for and protect themselves.

Each one of us takes our own journey. Like Mary and Joseph on the way to the manger (Bethlehem) and the disciples on the way to the cross (Golgotha), we do not know what the future holds. Do we need a money belt or swaddling clothes, a sword or gifts for the newborn king?

What do you need to procure for your journey right now? Peaceful quiet? Inspiring prayer? Meaningful conversation? Engaging service? How can you prepare yourself to trek through the holidays and into the new year ahead? Make a spiritual shopping list today, and commit to acquiring what you need to walk with God.

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we look to you during this Advent journey. We trust that you will provide for and protect us, sometimes in unexpected ways. Help us to recognize, rely on, and appreciate your goodness. May we also take responsibility for ourselves, tending to and safeguarding our faith so that we are ready for all the new year brings. In the name of Jesus, our newborn King. Amen.

## SUNDAY DECEMBER 13, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Dr. James Graham '66*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 3:22-30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24 —John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bride-groom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly

at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

## DEVOTIONAL

Life has its ups and downs—personally, politically, globally. By the time you read this Advent reflection, written much earlier, you may have been called to a new, highly regarded position (or not); we may have elected new political leadership (or not); the coronavirus of 2020 may have been successfully dealt with (or not).

Advent means "coming." Something is always coming, but what comes is not always what we want or are looking for. Israel's anticipated messiah was one who would be a "King of glory," a "Lord of hosts," mighty, powerful, exalted! But what came was a powerless baby, born in a barn of poor parents, who later would enter Jerusalem's gates not riding in a chariot as a conquering king but as a lowly servant "sitting on a donkey's colt!" He came, he said, not to be served, but to serve. That is what true leadership, at any level, looks like.

Advent gives us the opportunity to get our priorities straight: to exalt the one who came with great humility to be our Lord; to humble ourselves to positions of servanthood; and to call on the powerful of this world to do the same.

John the Baptist got it right. When told that people were flocking to someone else, he told them, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

## PRAYER

Humbling God, humble us. Lord of all, continue to serve us and save us from ourselves—from a sense of importance and pride; from failure to recognize who and whose we are; and from too often letting ourselves slip into thinking, "It's all about me." Show us how to get out of the way of your coming among us once more, that we may show forth in the way we serve that it really is all about you.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2020

*Written by Dr. Patricia Sharbaugh '99*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 22:39-53

39 He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. 40 When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." 41 Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." 43 Then an angel from heaven appeared to

him and gave him strength. 44 In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. 45 When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, 46 and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." 47 While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; 48 but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" 49 When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" 50 Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. 51 But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. 52 Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? 53 When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

## DEVOTIONAL

Images of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane evoke feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is an aspect of every person's life. All of us are born alone, all of us die alone, and all of us visit many lonely spaces and places along the way. Loneliness is an ingredient in so many experiences of life. We may be able to repress our feelings of loneliness. We may find ways to run from these feelings for a time, but ultimately, a time will come when we cannot escape our inherent loneliness.

If we are willing to listen closely enough, loneliness offers us many gifts. The most important gift loneliness offers is awareness of the deep emptiness that lies within us—an emptiness we cannot fill, an emptiness that urges us to reach beyond ourselves, to cry out to God, to pray.

In the Christian spiritual tradition, the word solitude recognizes our solitary lives before God. The experience of solitude can be an experience of profound loneliness; yet, paradoxically, in solitude one can also experience deep moments of grace, moments of awakening to the awareness of the gift of God's loving presence. The journey from loneliness to communion with God's loving presence is made through prayer.

Images of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane awaken us to the awareness of the deep communion between our loneliness and the loneliness of Jesus. Jesus is acquainted with loneliness. We do not have to find a way to escape our loneliness in order to find God; rather, God is with us in our moments of loneliness. Deeper and wider than our feelings of loneliness lies the truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God, who came into the world to be with us in all the lonely places of life.

## PRAYER

Gracious and merciful God, give us the courage to remain in the lonely spaces and places of our lives, to turn away from distractions and toward you. Help us find the courage to stand before you in our loneliness so that we discover your gracious presence already present within our hearts, thus drawing us more deeply into love.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2020

*Written by The Rev. Drew Himes '13*

## SCRIPTURE

### Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

## DEVOTIONAL

As the Advent season dawns on us, we in the Northern hemisphere also enter a season of darkness: long nights and short days. For many, life also seems to enter a time of darkness as the year winds down. We look back over the year, when we lost so many and so many others are still without food or healthcare or adequate shelter. We see that so many are still mistreated because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. We think back on opportunities missed and opportunities not taken, and our hearts are plunged into even greater darkness. We wonder about the justice of God and wonder when it will come to fulfillment.

Yet in the midst of this physical and mental darkness, the prophet Isaiah assures us of the coming of a great light: the light of a Savior, the light of a child, the birth of God with us. Our hope, we find out, is not built on human actions or human institutions. Instead, it is grounded in our God, who ventured to earth so many years ago to rescue us from every season of darkness: sin, death, separation, and sadness. Our



God who overcame time and space to live with us as one of us brings great hope and joy even in these dark days of the year.

For the Israelite faithful, who also wondered when justice would be done to all those who had perverted God's reign, the coming of God's light into their midst would be an occasion of great rejoicing. The dark days of idol worship, selling out to foreign kings, and neglecting the voice of the God of Abraham, Miriam, David, and Ruth had to be a depressing state of affairs. But it was directly into the midst of that darkness that God's fullness entered and saved the people. It is right into the messiness of human affairs that God sends a sign of God's providential hope.

And so we cry out to our God: "Save us, save us from ourselves!" And it is directly into this darkness that the Christ child enters.

## PRAYER

God of grace and God of glory, incarnate in the flesh of our Christ, you bring hope to those who walk in great darkness and offer new life to all those who follow the beauty of your radiance. Grant us your presence in this season of dismal dark days, and move us forward with you to allow Christ to be born, once again, into us. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Dorothy Densmore '04*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 147:1-11

1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanks-giving; make melody to our God on the lyre. 8 He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. 9 He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

## DEVOTIONAL

Many, many years ago, my cousin, a photography hobbyist,

introduced me to the wonders of the newly developed macro lens. He focused in on a small spider making its way across a thin, white strand. As I gazed upon the scene, my world exploded with new insight and wonder. This tiny spider had very hairy legs! And that thin, white strand was in fact a strong cord woven from three, fine filaments.

As both microscopes and telescopes improved over the years, new worlds of wonder have emerged for all humanity. God's creation is so much more intricate, more interwoven, and more expansive than we had ever imagined. The creation we could see and touch was just the most obvious of the circles of systems that grow ever larger—and ever smaller. Join one human being with others and you have a family system. Join families together and you have tribes and nations—over continents. Conversely, reduce a human body to its component parts and you have bodily systems, then organs, then cells in a myriad of forms and functions.

Our knowledge of God's creation in this way is limited only by our technological ability—these concentric circles go on and on. What beauty, what wonders are yet to be discovered! "Praise the Lord!" the psalmist cries. Indeed, how can we not desire to spend our lives in fear, awe, and worship of our gracious Lord and his wondrous ability!

## PRAYER

How amazing, O Lord, is your creation! From the smallest of microbes to the grandest of mountains, from the seeking light of a firefly to the brilliance of the night sky, you never cease to proclaim your power and glory to a world in search of your sovereignty. May we be as children, forever excited by new discoveries of your creative power joined by an ever-deepening desire to protect it and share it with the world. Amen.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2020

*Written by Robert Jones '14*

## SCRIPTURE

### 2 Peter 2:10b–16

10b Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones, 11 whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring against them a slanderous judgment from the Lord. 12 These people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they do not understand, and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed, 13 suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you. 14 They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They

entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! 15 They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, 16 but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

## DEVOTIONAL

John the Baptist is one of the central characters in the Advent drama. His proclamation in the wilderness reminds us that preparing ourselves for Christ's coming involves repentance. Today's reading from 2 Peter is troubling. It is directed toward opponents of the church and contains some rather harsh rhetoric. But as I spent time reflecting on its significance, I was struck by a line in verse 12: "They slander what they do not understand." Does this line resonate with you the way it resonates with me?

So much of the conflict in our church, in our country, and in our world appears to be rooted in an impulse to slander what we do not understand. And if I am honest, this impulse exists in my own heart as well. The work of understanding is hard, and it can often unsettle and disturb our comfortable view of reality—even our comfortable view of ourselves.

This Advent, let us take seriously the call of John the Baptist to repent. Let us identify those ways we have slandered what we do not understand. Understanding can be uncomfortable, even painful. Slandering what we do not understand can function as a defense mechanism. It can allow us to preserve our comfortable view of ourselves, of the world, and of our place in it. But Jesus does not call us to self-preservation. Jesus calls us to understanding. And to repentance.

## PRAYER

Gracious God, you have called us to this season of preparation and repentance. Give us the courage to seek understanding, even when doing so is uncomfortable and painful. Help us to be committed more to the truth than to our comfortable view of ourselves. In Jesus' name, amen.

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Norma Prina Murphy '93*

## SCRIPTURE

### Isaiah 11:1-9

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the

LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

## DEVOTIONAL

Out of the multitude of ways to go in considering this text, here in this brief meditation I would focus our attention on verse 1: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." On one side of my in-laws' property there was once a row of Scots pines along the street. There were at least 15 of those trees, possibly as many as 25, closely spaced. The pines were at least 30 feet tall by the time my high school boyfriend (and later husband) and I began seeing each other. But then a blight hit and the pines died. My father-in-law cut them all down, leaving 3-foot stumps.

Imagine that row of stumps! As beautiful as they had been to drive by before, that was how awfully dead and barren they looked now. No shoots ever came forth from them. Over time they rotted and years later were pulled down.

The stump of Jesse that Isaiah speaks of is just as awfully dead and barren as those Scots-pine stumps. In fact, it was worse: the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen, and God's Spirit was AWOL. Only in the voices of the prophets was God's Spirit evident. And they were largely ignored.

But there is a promise here as well—and hope! Hope today for countries laid waste by war or drought or famine. Hope for people laid waste by greed or pandemics or racial bias. Hope for the world that there will be, someday, the fullness of the reign of that shoot, which did indeed come forth as Isaiah prophesied.

Where is your life, or your congregation's life, now barren, laid waste, like a thoroughly dead stump? Can you possibly imagine new life, or at least be willing to see God's image of new life for you? Not the same life ever again, but something transformed and new, coming out of it? That is the promise of God in Christ Jesus, and it is even now in the process of being fulfilled. Can you find hope that it will be fulfilled in you as well?

## PRAYER

"Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!" We pray to you, good and gracious God, to bring forth the Christ in such blooming flowers, both in us and through us. We pray in the name of the Son of Jesse's son David—Jesus—and in the power of Holy Spirit. Amen.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Darryl Lockie '17*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 90

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

## DEVOTIONAL

As a child, I always loved those dollar-store Advent calendars. Indeed, my excitement grew every day we opened another panel, as each window held a piece of chocolate for another successful day of waiting. Looking back, it's curious to think how excited I became about a little chocolate that had the same consistency as candle wax (and though I've never tried candle wax, perhaps the same taste too). Nonetheless, those little Advent calendars helped me to number my days and better understand the importance of time and waiting.

We hear something similar in our morning's Psalm. Psalm 90:12 exhorts us to "count our days that we may gain a wise heart." But the context in this passage is slightly different from my childhood penchant for cheap paraffin chocolate. The verses preceding verse 12 contemplate the brevity of our lives, especially when contrasted with the Lord's eternal nature. The author laments just how many of these days are spent in "toil and trouble" (v. 10). Here, however, in admonishing us to "count our days" the Psalmist begins to pivot. The author asks that the Lord "turn" and "satisfy . . . with your steadfast love" (v. 13). With the Lord's presence, this limited time on earth will indeed be glad—though even here there seems to be a keen interest in time, for verses 14 and 15 make reference to the poet's "days" and "years." One wonders, Why the focus on the calendar?

Perhaps it is because through it we gain a proper perspective on our lives. Our existence on earth might be ephemeral, but hope and purpose are found in seeking the Lord's steadfast love—both as we expect it in our own lives and as we extend it to others. Though many of our days may be spent in "toil," they needn't be meaningless when contemplating God's presence within them.

Hence, this Advent season I am again counting my days, just as I did in childhood, but for different reasons. Instead of expecting poor-quality chocolates, I'm now expecting to find more ways to connect with God's "steadfast love" and then extend it others.

## PRAYER

Dear Lord, teach us to count our days so that we might gain wisdom. May that wisdom be found in contemplating, experiencing, expecting, and even practicing your "steadfast love." We recognize how brief our lives are, so please grant us meaning and purpose as we seek your presence and await your coming. Amen.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Martha Murchison '09*

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 1:5-25

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.  
6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.  
7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.  
8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,  
9 he was chosen by lot, according

to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

## DEVOTIONAL

As Christmas nears, we hope. We hope for family to gather. We hope for limited chaos during our children's Christmas program. We hope for song and joy and a baby to be born. We hope for wonderful things. In that hope, we are not unlike Zechariah. Zechariah hoped in God. Throughout his long life he served faithfully in the temple. Like us, he was ready and prepared.

Yet when the angel appeared to him and told him the amazing news that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, Zechariah's imagination failed him. He was too old. She was too old. Such things simply could not happen, he told the angel. There was no way the news could be true.

If we used the words of divine visions for our greeting cards and prayers— words such as *Death will be no more*, and *Mourning and crying and pain will be no more*—we might respond in the same manner as Zechariah. There is simply no way mourning and crying and pain will end. We have tried and failed to stop violence. We are weary with seeking an

end to suffering. Our imaginations simply fail us. We cannot get them to take us beyond God's beautiful words to our very real and hurting world. We are too old. Such things, we say to the angel, cannot happen.

Yet the angel bends down to us as surely as the angel bent down to Zechariah. He stopped Zechariah's voice from voicing impossibility. The angel whispers to us to stop denying God's vision. The angel urges us to open our eyes and imagine. He asks us to imagine God's vision in our very real world.

The work of Christmas is imagination. The work of Christmas is to make our imagination real.

## PRAYER

Lord God, please open our eyes, our hearts, and our imaginations, we pray, that we might better see an image of God's Kingdom in our mind's eye, and from seeing, begin the hard work of helping to make our vision reality. Amen.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Timothy Goodman '11*

## SCRIPTURE

### Revelation 21:9-21

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each

of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

## DEVOTIONAL

Our passage of Scripture provides a stunning glimpse into the fulfillment of God's Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" during this Advent season. There are many Old and New Testament colors—particularly found in Ezekiel—that can be seen in this vision. We are reminded that God's mission to redeem a people for God's covenant love and joy, to overcome evil in all its sinister forms, and to save the world has happened with Jesus' first coming, happens now through his Spirit's work, and will happen at his final coming.

It is astonishing to allow our whole hearts to consider, feel, and imagine how the Lord, who was laid in a humble manger in what could be a common family's living room, will one day establish the throne of God on earth as the Lamb. That the One who laid aside his glory by emptying himself of all but love will one day bring the ransomed church into the fullness of God's glory. The glory of who we are meant to be will be revealed and the groans of our lives and creation will be satisfied. The Word that became flesh will one day completely fulfill God's covenant word to turn sinners and prodigals into the radiant bride of the Lamb.

What would it take to allow the Holy Spirit to sort out our hearts before the Lord? Is there something that is preventing us from experiencing the comfort of God's kept promise? How will we invite awe into our lives during this season?

## PRAYER

Holy Spirit, awaken our lives to the radiant hope that has found us, claimed us, redeemed us, and keeps us in Jesus. Stir our imaginations to see our lives and world according to God's mission. Pour your love and truth into our hearts so that we become a reflection and representative of Christ, the Lamb of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Mikayla Kovacic '19*

## SCRIPTURE

### Revelation 21:22-22:5

22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of

the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

## DEVOTIONAL

I remember that, as a child, for weeks leading up to Christmas I thought and dreamt of what might await me under the tree on Christmas morning. I also remember the tingle that welled inside me when I thought about the possibility of that big gift—the one I'd "forever" been asking for—being proudly displayed next to the tree. Yes, that big gift would catch my eye as I came down the stairs, and the rest of the day would fade into the background of my joy and excitement.

We always say and hear that Advent is a season of waiting, of anticipation, of hopeful expectation. But what are we really waiting for? What are we really expecting? What are we really hoping for at the culmination of this season?

Throughout the season of Advent, we wait. We wait and prepare to welcome Immanuel, God with us, once again. Yet this passage from Revelation reminds us that, in our time of waiting, we are not merely commemorating the first coming of Jesus—we are waiting, preparing, anticipating, and expecting in hope the second coming of Christ. This passage paints a picture for us of what life will look like when God's throne, once again, moves from heaven to earth. In place of the tender whispers of a mother's lullaby and the delicate breaths of a newborn will be a river of the water of life, trees bearing twelve kinds of fruit, and leaves that heal the nations.

This vision from Revelation reminds us that Jesus, God incarnate, has come to reconcile the whole of creation, restore our life, and renew our hope. So this Advent, may we celebrate and wait with hopeful expectation and anticipation of the hope, joy, love, and peace that both has and is yet to come.

## PRAYER

God of light and love, we thank you for the gift of Immanuel, God with us. Help us to prepare our hearts, our lives, our homes, and our churches for you once again. In all things,



teach us to wait with hopeful expectation of what will be. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Scott Dennis '13*

### 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

Do you like your name? Do you take pleasure in remembering why that name was chosen for you? Do you enjoy the sight of your signature? Do you see your name as a good reflection of who you are? Names are often expected either to carry a message or serve as a memorial beyond their primary task of identification. Whatever Shakespeare would have us believe, there's no denying that names are indeed significant things and that what we call a "rose" would, by no other name, smell quite as sweet.

Three names in our Gospel reading invite us to consider how the entire operation of God's plan of redemption unfolds. First, the name Zechariah is Hebrew for "God remembers His promise." Throughout the Old Testament, God made and reaffirmed the promise that the Messiah would someday come and make everything right. The second name, Elizabeth, is a Greek variation of the Hebrew name Elisheba, which means "God is the absolute faithful one." Time and again throughout Scripture, God is remembered as the absolutely faithful One who keeps his promises. The third name, John, means "God is gracious."

But there is a final, unwritten name that is necessary to give meaning to John's ministry and that guides the coming course of events after our Advent journey comes to completion: that

name is Jesus, which means "God saves." Thus, in these four names, we behold anew and afresh unfolding before our very eyes the whole gracious purpose of our Lord Jesus' birth: God remembers his promises; God is absolutely faithful; God is gracious; and God saves.

As we finish this year's Advent journey, therefore, let us do so not by drawing attention to ourselves and to our names. Rather, let us bear witness to the Holy, Triune One who grounds the meaning of these four names and thus of our own—the One who has brought us to where we are, who journeys with us, and who rejoices with us as we greet joyfully the Christ child on Christmas morning.

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, O Name above all names, with only two more sleeps before Christmas we find ourselves nearing the end of this year's Advent journey. As we prepare to welcome you afresh, sustain us in the peace that is your never-ending love, so that we may share the great joy of your birth with all we meet. This we ask for your name's sake. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Janice Holmes '08*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Isaiah 59:15b-21

15b The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. 16 He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. 17 He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle. 18 According to their deeds, so will he repay; wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. 19 So those in the west shall fear the name of the Lord, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of the Lord drives on. 20 And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord. 21 And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and for ever.

### DEVOTIONAL

There is an old spiritual that was sung by slaves in America. They wept, "O, I couldn't hear nobody pray. O Lord, I couldn't hear nobody pray. O, way down yonder by myself,

and I couldn't hear nobody pray. In de valley . . . On ma knees . . . Wid ma burden . . . An' ma savior, couldn't hear nobody pray. O ma Lord." Here was a people that endured a life full of injustice, oppression, and suffering. Yet they held on to a faith and hope in God for the Deliverer's promise made to humankind in ages past. How could they sustain such a belief and hope while experiencing such dark despair and loneliness? Well, the prophet Isaiah reveals the desire and power of our God to break through and intervene on our behalf. Isaiah describes a God who "sees it." A God who has compassion. A God who reaches out to us. A God of mercy who takes action. A God who is victorious. A God who reconciles and redeems!

Christmas Eve is a time of solemn remembrance along with celebration in praise and worship. It is a time to allow God to break through our hearts! We need remember our transgressions and failure to have a right relationship with God, yet celebrate the covenant made for eternal life and salvation that God fulfilled through the birth, death, and resurrection of the Father's only begotten Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Rejoice! The Light has broken through the darkness. For God's Spirit is upon you and God's Word shall not depart you, from this time forth and for evermore.

## PRAYER

O gracious and merciful God, we give you all glory, honor, and praise from the west to the rising of the sun. With gratitude we worship you in the beauty of your holiness. We are so undeserving of your gifts of redeeming love and eternal salvation from sin and death. Too often we ignore the opportunity to help, intervene, or even pray for others in need of truth and justice. It is easier to feel sorry for ourselves and wallow in the shadows of life's oppressive pressures and demands. Break through our stubborn minds and hardened hearts as You came into a darkened world on that first Christmas Eve. May your Spirit remain upon us and your Living Word dwell within us, now and for evermore. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2020

*Written by the Rev. Nathan Carlson '11*

## SCRIPTURE

### Zechariah 2:10-13

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

choose Jerusalem. 13 Be silent, all people, before the LORD; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

## DEVOTIONAL

Every year, our family pulls out an antique, handcrafted nativity set to put up on Christmas morning. The scene still fills our children's hearts with joy as I tell the story. Just prior to placing the infant Jesus in the manger, we share stories about what it means that Jesus came to earth as a human child. We hear echoes of this meaning found early in the Scriptures, such as this one from Zechariah 2. In verses 10-13 we hear the promise that the Lord "will come and dwell in your midst." Every year, one or another of our children has a personal epiphany that the greatest present received on Christmas morning came long ago in the birth of this Christ child.

During the placement of the pieces of the crèche, one of my favorite moments involves talking about the magi from the East—the ones who show up much later in the biblical story. We discuss how, even at Jesus' birth, people from other nations have already recognized this child's coming as something special. The birth we remember today drew some most unexpected "others" forward to pay homage to the newborn king. These magi embody Zechariah's prophecy in verse 11: "many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people." Their presence reminds us that this first Christmas Day was truly for all people, in every nation and across every land. That Christmas Day is still for everyone should ring out from our celebrations.

As I write today, I find the last verse of Zechariah to be the most striking. As we contemplate the infant Jesus lying in the manger, in whatever form our contemplation takes in this year's Christmas celebrations, let us consider this deep mystery in our hearts: "Be silent . . . for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling." What does it mean for us that the Lord of heaven and earth lay in a manger? What does it mean for each one of us that Jesus "roused himself" from his holy dwelling place to take up residence among us in the form of a sleeping infant? Take a moment to think of the power and wonder of this mystery. Unlike the noisy activities that fill much of Christmas Day, take some time to sit in silence in the presence of such deep and abiding divine love.

## PRAYER

Almighty God and Lord of hosts, we gather in our hearts around your first, humble, earthly throne. Fill us with joy—overwhelm us with the mysterious grace of your dwelling among us. In a day that often overwhelms us, prepare for us a silent time of contemplation that we might kneel by your cradle and meditate on your presence. As we delight in you, remind us that you have come for all people, that you have chosen to reside with us, and that you desire nothing but our unfettered love in response. 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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**Kelso Museum of Near Eastern Archaeology** Offers free tours and open hours to view displays from the more than 7,000-artifact collection, as well as several lectures by world experts annually  
[www.pts.edu/Museum](http://www.pts.edu/Museum)

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

**Miller Summer Youth Institute** Committed to resourcing churches in youth ministry, including bringing the resources of PTS to your youth group  
[www.pts.edu/SYI](http://www.pts.edu/SYI)

**World Mission Initiative** Equips leaders to engage faithfully and effectively in God's intercultural mission  
[www.pts.edu/WMI](http://www.pts.edu/WMI)

### RESOURCES

**Barbour Library** Several hundred thousand printed and electronic books and hundreds of periodical subscriptions, plus several online database  
[www.pts.edu/Barbour-Library](http://www.pts.edu/Barbour-Library)

**Faculty and Program Directors** Available to preach and teach on a variety of topics  
[www.pts.edu/Experts](http://www.pts.edu/Experts)

**Advent and Lenten Devotionals** Get daily e-mails, download the app, follow along on social media, or print and share  
[www.pts.edu/Devotional](http://www.pts.edu/Devotional)

**Topical Resource Kits** Addressing Epiphany, Race and Faith, Prayer, and more for worship and Bible study planning  
[www.pts.edu/Digital-Downloads](http://www.pts.edu/Digital-Downloads)

**Mission Consultations** Available to help congregations plan a mission trip or become more missionally engaged—personally or through downloadable resources  
[www.pts.edu/WMI](http://www.pts.edu/WMI)

**Lectures and Events** Open to the public on topics of faith  
[www.pts.edu/Calendar](http://www.pts.edu/Calendar)

**Videos** Recorded lectures by distinguished guests  
[www.youtube.com/pghseminary](http://www.youtube.com/pghseminary)

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