

Advent Devotional 2023



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

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2023

Written by the Rev. Dr. Angela Dienhart Hancock, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty and Howard C. Scharfe Associate Professor of Homiletics

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

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

DEVOTIONAL

Why do people say things that don't need to be said? It's a good question to ask when reading this passage from one of Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica. Paul claims his readers don't need to hear what he has to say, but he says it anyway.

On the surface, Paul's message is simple: there are good alert day people (his readers) and bad clueless night people (others). But that binary disintegrates if you read the text closely. Why does Paul need to tell us to be sober and alert if we already are? Why tell us to put on the equipment of faith, hope, and love if we are already wearing it? We are children of light, sure, sometimes, but not all the time, it seems. It's not just the day of the Lord that will come like a thief in the night, perhaps. Maybe doubt and fear sneak up on all of us some of the time. Paul doesn't come right out and say it, but he knows. It slips out in verse 10: Christ died for us, even when we are among the sleepers. Because we are both awake and asleep, in brightness and in shadow, we need encouragement, building up, and reminding from time to time.

We are going to hear and say and sing many things at Advent that we already know. "God is on the way," we sing,

"bringing this world to a good end." We know this. But the night pulls on all of us, in spite of what we know.

I don't know whether you are brimming with faith, hope, and love today or lulled into shadow, but either way, God has got you. It doesn't need to be said, except when it does.

PRAYER

God of the alert and the drowsy, we thank you for the ways you remind us that you are bringing the world to a good end. When we are alert and brimming with hope, empower us to build up the weary. On days when hopelessness blurs our memory, may we be carried by the encouragement of others. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2023

Written by Mark Russell, Research and Instruction Librarian

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: 2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

DEVOTIONAL

In this passage, the author of Second Peter encourages the letter's audience to stay on the path towards the kingdom of God and resist the corruption of worldly lust. To accomplish

this, the author extols the letter's audience to have faith, and to support that faith with other virtues, like goodness, knowledge, and self-control. This effort is portrayed as a chain in which each virtue supports the previous one listed, like goodness with knowledge and knowledge with self-control.

Reading about this chain of virtues in Second Peter reminds me of a commercial that I saw a few years ago. The protagonist in the commercial has a choice between a healthy snack and a snack with no nutritional value. The decision to eat the healthy snack inspires a series of other decisions throughout the day, including going for a walk over watching television, and passing on fast food in favor of a healthy meal. As the author of Second Peter would say, a healthy diet supports exercise, and exercise supports wellness.

Both the commercial and the passage from Second Peter show how an individual can harness the inspiration and momentum from one good choice to make another, but there is an additional, essential element that neither makes explicit. We need teachers, ministers, and parents to illuminate the path to a virtuous life, and friends, family, and co-workers to encourage us in our journey to well-being. The current tag line on the PTS web page is "Grounded in faith, formed in community," and one cannot underestimate the importance of the latter half of that statement. On the other side, our personal choices effect our communities and our growth as individuals can only benefit those around us. As we begin this season of hope and anticipation, it seems right to acknowledge our interdependence, for we can only arrive at a better world together.

PRAYER

God of hope, we give thanks for the many blessings that aid us on our path to the kingdom. As each step in the right direction supports the next, guide our hearts to help our neighbors as they take steps of their own. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2023

Written by Michelle Spomer, Donald G. Miller Librarian and Director of the Clifford E. Barbour Library

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 85

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin. Selah
3 You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

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

DEVOTIONAL

Psalms can often be poetic and rich in imagery, and this psalm is no different. I was immediately drawn to "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" and the other phrases in verses 10 and 11. However, as I reread the psalm, it was one solitary word that captured my attention: again. By asking that God "restore us *again*" and "revive us *again*," there is acknowledgement that the current relationship with God is not the same as it once was. There is also acknowledgement that God's love isn't a one-off, and that God can extend that love over and over.

As with many of you, my relationship with God ebbs and flows. At my lowest points, I've felt as though I have failed God, or worse, that God has failed me. During these times, I'm thankful to have memories of being more connected to God, of feeling God's grace and love for me. And eventually, I ask for restoration and revival. Again.

If you're at a low point in your life, or maybe just a little too cynical and jaded, it may be time to ask God for restoration and revival. Advent, a hopeful anticipation of God's love and grace for us, might just be the perfect time to do it.

PRAYER

God of love and hope, draw us near to you. Help us to remember how much you desire to be in our lives, and how you have given us your grace over and over. May our faithfulness "spring up from the ground." Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2023

Written by the Rev. Charles L. Fischer III, Vice President for Seminary Advancement

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 50

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

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

DEVOTIONAL

"The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." (Ps 50:1-2)

As a child, I knew when I heard my mother or father calling out to me in the yard to come back home. Depending on what they were calling for, I could tell by their cadence and the octave as to what I should be expecting when I reached the door of the house. It was a comforting sound which assured me that awaiting my return home, even in the worst of times, a loved one was calling out to me.

This was a blessing that others may not have experienced—the voice of a loved one that brings comfort at all times. I long to hear the voice of the mighty one. I have imagined what the voice of God the Lord might sound like, only to accept that it would be a voice that I desired and would bring comfort and assurance to me alone. Yet, I understand that to hear the voice of the Lord and to comprehend that it is good, it must be a voice that resonates with all, a soothing sound versus a clanging cymbal.

In the season of Advent, we await for the birth of the Christ child and his second coming. When Jesus was first born and laid in the feeding trough, the cry of the Lord sounded like the wails of a baby who was able to gain the attention of the angels. And who might hear his voice when he comes again? We will surely know when all the earth responds.

PRAYER

(Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *Book of Common Prayer*, 211)

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2023

Written by the Rev. Balajiedlang (Bala) Khylllep, Associate Director of the World Mission Initiative

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 21:33-46

33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’ 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

DEVOTIONAL

As a person who comes from a family in India, I remember how our tenant for our rice fields would not only till the soil and inform my family about any issues with the land and harvest but also would share part of the harvest with us. There is so much trust needed between landowner and tenants, and both benefit from the process.

Instead, the landowner in our scripture did everything and leased the vineyard to the tenants to only to care for what was already planted. There is so much trust from the landowner here. The tenants seem to tend to the vineyard properly as they were supposed to do. But we are not quite sure about their reaction—beating up and killing the slaves and even the landowner’s son. Were they scared that the landowner would find out about their failure to produce anything and lease the vineyard to someone else? Or, had they become corrupt, not wanting to share the plenteous harvest, and even deciding to take control and steal what didn’t belong to them? Both of these questions point to the reality we witness today—the power of control.

In a power-driven world sometimes it is so difficult for us to trust one another because we are afraid of losing control of the things we love or own. So as humans, we do the best we possibly can—holding on tightly to the things we possess, afraid that if we loosen our grip we would somehow lose our power to control and influence others. Yet the landowner, who is God, willingly entrusts us with God’s plentiful vineyard so we may fully enjoy God’s abundance and be able to share with others. May you find joy in sharing God’s hope, peace, and love with the world this season of Advent.

PRAYER

Generous and self-sacrificing God, thank you for entrusting us with the many gifts and resources. Help us to be good stewards of these gifts so that we may not only enjoy the fruits for our gain but to willingly share with our brothers and sisters what belongs to you. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2023

Written by the Rev. Dr. Kimberly D. Russaw, Associate Professor of Old Testament

SCRIPTURE

Amos 5:1-17

1 Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:
2 Fallen, no more to rise,
is maiden Israel;
forsaken on her land,
with no one to raise her up.
3 For thus says the Lord GOD:
The city that marched out a thousand
shall have a hundred left,
and that which marched out a hundred
shall have ten left.
4 For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live;
5 but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beer-sheba;
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nothing.
6 Seek the LORD and live,
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.
7 Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!
8 The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,

and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
the LORD is his name,
9 who makes destruction flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.
10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.
11 Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
12 For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.
13 Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.
14 Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
15 Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.
16 Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord:
In all the squares there shall be wailing;
and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas! alas!"
They shall call the farmers to mourning,
and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing;
17 in all the vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through the midst of you,
says the LORD.

DEVOTIONAL

Years ago, Throw Back Thursday (#TBT) went viral on social media. On Thursdays people used to post their awkward grammar school photos, pictures of their laughable high school hair styles, and reminisce about their youthful sports accomplishments. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter timelines were full of these self-deprecating images, as #TBT became a light-hearted way for people to put their imperfections on display for their virtual community. But people never posted images of them breaking laws, engaging in morally questionable behavior, or committing acts of violence on #TBT. Nobody shared their miserable failures, embarrassing mistakes, or poor life decisions on #TBT.

Have you ever made such a colossal mess of things that you wanted to make yourself invisible? Have you ever been entrusted with an assignment that you botched so badly that all you could do is hope time would make others forget about your transgression? It is one thing to mess up, but it is another thing to mess up publicly.

As Christians, we try, but we do not always get it right. Often we lament our own thoughts and actions. And when we fail to live into the life of faith, grace, and mercy, the words of the prophet Amos offer us hope during Advent season. Even when we have committed grievous acts, have mistreated others, or have been disparaged and punished for acting unjustly, there is hope in the midst of the lament. In the same way biblical Israel should seek the Lord and "seek good and not evil" (v. 14), so should we. We can seek to establish justice. We can change. We can do better. And the Lord will be gracious to us. There is hope in the idea that our Creator is gracious.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we have not always gotten it right. Our thoughts, our words, and our deeds have not always aligned with your vision for our life. We are saddened by how our acts and the very remembrance of them grieves us. We seek good and not evil. We seek justice and not wrong. Have mercy on us. Forgive us. Be gracious unto us. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2023

Written by the Rev. Dr. Leanna Fuller, Joan Marshall Associate Professor of Pastoral Care

SCRIPTURE

Amos 5:18-27

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, not light;
19 as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.
20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?
21 I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
25 Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years
in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 26 You shall take up
Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images,
which you made for yourselves; 27 therefore I will take you

into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

DEVOTIONAL

Today's reading begins with a warning: "Be careful what you wish for!" In the first three verses of this passage, Amos strongly cautions the Israelites—who are longing for the day of the Lord—because they are making assumptions about what that day will bring.

Most scholars agree that "the day of the Lord" was traditionally a time for the people to remember God's past mighty acts and to look toward God's intervention on their behalf in the future. But instead of a day of deliverance, Amos describes the day of the Lord as a day of judgment. It's as if the people of Israel have assumed that because God was faithful to them in the past, their choices in the present have no bearing on that relationship. They have assumed that they could offer empty worship and still expect God to be pleased with them. Instead, God closes God's eyes and ears to the people's praises (vv. 21-23), and powerfully points to justice and righteousness as the true goals of religious devotion. I wonder what kinds of assumptions we make today about the relationship between God's faithfulness and our choices. Do we assume that because we are "good Christians" who seek to honor God, our opinions are naturally correct? Do we assume that because God has been true to us in the past, it doesn't matter what decisions we make now—even when our decisions lead us to ignore demands for justice from those experiencing poverty or oppression?

Today's text suggests that when we make such assumptions, we are bound to be bitterly disappointed. Instead, we are called to examine the way we live our lives—both individually and communally—and do all we can to pursue faithfulness and justice on behalf of the world that God so loves.

PRAYER

Gracious God, in this season of anticipation remind us that we await the birth of one who offered care and compassion to all people. Help us to show our faithfulness to you in ways that embody the justice and righteousness that you desire for this world you have lovingly created. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2023

Written by Dr. Franklin Tanner Capps, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

Many scientists are saying that a sixth mass extinction event is upon us. This conclusion has provoked skepticism and outright denial—reactions that are quite understandable, given how tough it is to face the fact that our lifestyles and collective behaviors are likely responsible for the decline of vast webs of life that may take us down with them when they finally collapse. It's also unsettling news, because it asks us to come to terms with the fact that we're creatures whose lives depend on the lives of others. And in a fundamental way, we're reminded that we humans are neither the point nor the final goal of God's creative purposes. Rather, we are invited—in our limited time and limited ways—to be worshipful participants in what God is doing across creation.

Like the news of a sixth mass extinction, Psalm 150 is displacing. Because God is not confined to the sanctuary, the psalmist calls on praise to arise in the firmament. The clap of human hands cannot be heard there, but the beating of griffon vulture wings in the skies above Ethiopia can. God will be praised with or without us. While humans have rerouted rivers and manipulated the elements, sometimes to catastrophic consequence, human hands have also fashioned bone and bark into trumpets, reed and bamboo into pipes, skin and wood into lutes and tambourines, and alloyed the basic elements of copper and tin into cymbals. For the psalmist, these instruments join a cosmic chorus that are voicing creation's praise.

Advent is an interlude for quiet listening. During this time of waiting and anticipation, may we pay closer attention to the de-centering and displacing hums, chirps, whistles, and drumming of so many other creatures who are inviting us to live lives of joyful care while joining them in the worship of the Creator.

PRAYER

Lord God, grant us a spirit of listening that would open us to our fellow creatures, so that, through them and with them, we might come to know you more deeply and praise you more fully. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2023

Written by the Rev. Chris Taylor '19, Admissions Counselor

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 122

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

DEVOTIONAL

This summer, my wife and I had the opportunity to tour the Milan Duomo in Italy. Along with other tourists we marveled at the size and decoration of the interior; we stood atop the rooftop terrace gazing up at the Gothic spires, arches, and gargoyles adorning its exterior; we descended beneath the front piazza to see a baptismal pool dating to Ambrose's time as bishop in the fourth century.

The Duomo is surely both a place of worship for residents and tourists alike. Just that same morning, a new bishop had been ordained. During our tour, my wife stopped to light a candle in memory of her late Catholic grandparents, knowing they would have loved being there. Other visitors sat and prayed.

Our journey there had been long—Milan was the last stop of our multi-country vacation. We were tired and ready for home, yet the holy met us there all the same. This house of the Lord in Milan is akin to Jerusalem, akin to wherever you find a sense of home in godly community. As the psalmist muses on reaching the destination of Jerusalem, planting one's feet within the house of the Lord, I cannot help but imagine our Advent journey.

No matter how we get there, regardless of the craziness and chaos the season entails, we arrive at Christmas and are met by the holy one, "God with us" in the newborn baby

Christ. And when we do may you be filled with the gladness, peace, and security the psalmist prays upon those entering Jerusalem.

PRAYER

Hey God, we are so grateful for this Advent journey we are all on this year. Through the ups and downs, the energy and the tiredness, bring us to Christmas with a renewed sense of gladness, peace, and security knowing we are in your presence. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2023

Written by Maj. Corinne Cameron '23, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 33

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

19 to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.
20 Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.
21 Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

DEVOTIONAL

Today finds us in mid-December, less than two weeks away from Christmas. A lot of planning has brought us to this point, and we are now fulfilling these plans. For those of us involved in feeding programs, it is quite likely that our initial planning began in the summer with securing locations, obtaining insurance certificates, and ordering food. Choir leaders and bandmasters will have planned (and ordered music) with rehearsals that have been underway for a couple of months. The temptation at this point is to rely upon the plans that we have made, to see us through to the finish line. The morning Psalm for today cautions us from relying upon our own plans as we discover in verse 10: the Lord “frustrates the plans of the peoples.”

While I certainly do not hope that any of our plans are frustrated today, as plans shift, as wrinkles in our day occur, we have the choice to either become frustrated or to seek invitations from God within the wrinkles. To turn away from relying on the counsel of our own plans, to relying on the counsel of God. To see God in the faces of the people we serve, to encounter God in an unplanned line-up, to breathe and turn our eyes away from our human planning and consider the incredible plan that gives to us this season. As our eyes and hearts return to God’s plan, we will find these invitations from the closing of our psalm: hope in God’s steadfast love (v. 18); our hearts trust and find gladness in God (v. 21); and to feel the steadfast love of God resting upon us (v. 22).

PRAYER

Our steadfast Lord, help us rely upon you today and not just on our human plans. Help us seek you when our plans go astray, and in this seeking help us encounter your invitations to hope in you, find gladness in you, and to rest in you. We give to you this day, we give to you the remaining twelve days of our Advent season. May your plans be our plans. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2023

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

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 23:1-12

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

DEVOTIONAL

All of us desire to be someone of great worth and value. We live in a day and age where people determine their value by the number of likes, views, retweets, and followers they can rack up. With the advent of social media, there are seemingly endless opportunities to create new paths toward what many would deem greatness. While some have experienced the thrill of going viral and getting to know first-hand how it feels to be “great,” the reality is that most of us will never go viral or have millions of followers. Despite this truth, there is good news in this passage for all of us. We all can be great. But how do we get there? How do we become great? What must we do to experience greatness?

The answer to the questions above is provided in verse 11 by Jesus when he says, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” Before giving the key to greatness Jesus provides examples of what greatness is not. It is not in the seat that someone possesses. It is not the position that one may hold, nor is it how many people see what you do or who you are connected to. But rather, greatness is determined by service.

I love the way that Matthew shifts as he brings this passage to a close. In verses 7-10, he shifts from focusing on earthly positions that we hunger for to Jesus as the ultimate example of what we should seek and desire as followers of Christ. May we not only remember the example of Jesus who came to serve, and not to be served, but may we be moved to

serve others in the same manner knowing that service we render to others supersedes any power, position, and prestige that we might possess in the eyes of God. As this is the case, I encourage you to serve, serve well, and remember the servants during this season of Advent. When people are consumed with stuff and things, may we focus on service.

PRAYER

May the grace of God, the sweet communion of God's Holy Spirit, rest, rule, refresh, and reform, until we meet at Jesus' feet, the bishop of the church, the bishop of our souls. Go in peace, go in love, go and serve. May the Lord be with you. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2023

Written by the Rev. Dr. Edwin Chr. van Driel, Directors' Bicentennial Professor of Theology

SCRIPTURE

Amos 9:1-10

1 I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said:
Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.
2 Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.
3 Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them.
4 And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes on them
for harm and not for good.
5 The Lord, GOD of hosts,
he who touches the earth and it melts,
and all who live in it mourn,
and all of it rises like the Nile,
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;
6 who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth
the LORD is his name.
7 Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the LORD.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,

and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?
8 The eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom,
and I will destroy it from the face of the earth
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,
says the LORD.

9 For lo, I will command,
and shake the house of Israel among all the nations
as one shakes with a sieve,
but no pebble shall fall to the ground.

10 All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword,
who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us."

DEVOTIONAL

Amidst all the eschatological and apocalyptic imagery that the Advent lectionary during these weeks selects from the Scriptures, today's readings draw particularly on the violent power of nature. One of the assigned psalms speaks of smoke and devouring fire, thundering, lightning, hailstones, and coals of fire (Ps 18). The other one references snow like wool, frost scattered like ashes, blowing wind, and flowing waters (Ps 147). The Amos text above references the mourning that the destructive powers of nature cause on the earth (vv. 5-6).

After the last few summers, I wonder if for many of us these images start to feel less and less as the vivid metaphors we once took them to be, and more and more as frightening, menacing realities. Language that speaks of the melting of the earth suddenly does not seem poetic license, but a real possibility.

If this is the case, and if this kind of scriptural imagery may be more realistic than we even thought or feared, these texts also give us a word of consolation. They tell us that even if God's justice delivers us up to the terrible consequences of our own destructive behavior, we nonetheless will not fall out of the hands of the living God. The melting glaciers, the rising waters—they are not the result of random, unimpeded, unrestrained forces. In all their violence these powers still come forth out of God's vaults and upper chambers. We are still in the hands of one we know by name. We are still held by the one who says that as "his eyes are upon the sinful kingdom, and he will destroy it from the face of the earth, he nonetheless will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (v. 8).

PRAYER

God of hosts, who has given us to know you by name, even as the waters rise and sink, and as you touch the earth and it melts, we entrust ourselves to you, knowing that you will be true to your promises of forgiveness, and salvation, and life. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2023

Written by the Rev. Darren Rogers '17, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 148

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

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Psalm 148 is a beautiful illustration of all creation being encouraged to "Praise the Lord!" For all creation was created to reflect and magnify the creator's glory. Humanity was created in the image of the Almighty to praise the Lord: "Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord" (Ps 50:6). Isaiah described mountains and hills breaking out in song while trees would clap their hands in adoration to God (Isa 55:12).

However, as our world deteriorates, and humanity marginalizes the pain of those who do not look like them, how is it even possible to come alongside the psalmist, amidst such intense suffering, and still praise the Lord?!

Human nature might suggest that it is much too hard to praise the Lord when life is challenging beyond measure and that the life is too painful to voice our praise. Yet, the psalmist resolutely exhorts us to "Praise the Lord."

Psalm 148 begins with God being praised in the highest corners of heaven by the angels and all his host. That praise flows and filters from heaven down through the rain clouds, over mountains, through fire, hail, snow, frost, and wind. It is expressed in every living creature on land, sea, and air. But the question to be answered is, will humanity come alongside of creation to glorify of the Lord through praise? The fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer is realized when humanity joins creation to praise God. If the Lord is praised on earth as he is in heaven, then his kingdom will come, his will be done, and God's presence will inhabit the praises of God's people on earth as God is in heaven. Yes, we can, and must praise God in this world of pain and suffering because praising God brings the kingdom of heaven into our broken world.

PRAYER

Lord! You are worthy to be praised! Let all of heaven and earth bow before you and offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. You inhabit every utterance of praise that we offer to you. Help us to look beyond our present circumstances and praise you until your kingdom comes and your will is done on earth as in heaven! Amen!

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2023

Written by the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13, Board Member

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 24:1-14

1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs. 9 "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one

another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

DEVOTIONAL

I have had the privilege of traveling to many countries and I love doing so. One of the places I had the opportunity to visit and will always cherish was my time in Israel and specifically, the time I spent in Jerusalem. The experience of visiting many of the places Jesus walked, prayed, taught, was crucified, and resurrected from the dead, was life changing. I remember walking up the winding road to the Mount of Olives, and passing by a man with his donkey. That experience felt like I had been transported back to biblical times. Standing on the Mount of Olives, the place where, according to Luke 22:29, Jesus went to pray, to pour his heart out to God, was a surreal and sacred experience.

After reading today's devotional passage, I closed my eyes and began to reminisce about some of the things I saw while standing on the Mount of Olives. I remember the opulence and majesty of the Temple Mount; I remember the perfect imperfection of the centuries-old walls surrounding the Old City; and I remember being overwhelmed and comforted as I walked into the Chapel of the Ascension, and the Spirit of God enveloped and surrounded me. Truly, the presence of the Lord was in that place and on that mountain.

As my attention returns to today's devotional scripture passage, I am not surprised by the disciples' curiosity about when the end time will come. Although this is a familiar passage, my spirit is troubled by the fact that many of the events Jesus described as foreshadowing the end of days—false prophets, people betraying and hating one another, falling away (from the church), increasing lawlessness, love growing cold, wars and rumors of wars—all of these signs are evident as I write.

Jesus speaks of these end-time signs and that his return is at hand, and he also shared the good news: the kingdom of God will be proclaimed throughout the world. That's the message of Advent. Even though life as we know it is and can be unsure, unsettling, and tenuous, as we wait for the next moment, day, month, or year, we are not without hope because we have the assurance that God is with us and will come again. So, we wait with expectation, surrounded by the Holy Spirit, much like I was while in Jerusalem, with the comfort, peace, and faithful promises of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Faithful and gracious, God, we place all of our hope and trust in you as we move, breathe, and have our very being,

for you have promised that despite everything that life may present, you are with us, and the kingdom of God shall be proclaimed. Today, we proclaim boldly, in and through Jesus Christ, that you have overcome all of the uncertainty, sin, and calamities of this world. Amen.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 17, 2023

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

SCRIPTURE

Amos 9:11-15

11 On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; 12 in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this. 13 The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. 14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God.

DEVOTIONAL

In Barbara Kingsolver's most recent novel, *Demon Copperhead*, she explores in vivid detail the social, structural, and moral crises of our contemporary era. The protagonist—named Damon but called “Demon”—is shuffled from home to home by social services after losing his parents. Unable to make meaningful attachments and without any adults capable and willing to care for him, Demon falls from the graces afforded most kids, finding himself facing a capricious and cruel world all by himself. Kingsolver's narration shines a flood light on the parts of everyday life in late-capitalism we would like to ignore. The economic pressures on families press parents into impossible choices between rent and food, parental neglect and a wage. Corrupt public officials and corporate greed siphon resources away from the poor, leaving behind failing schools, substandard health care, and lost opportunity. An avalanche of bad news that can lead to cynicism.

In our text for today, the prophet Amos refuses the moral paralysis or cynicism that can come from an honest assessment of the suffering around us. A time will come when God will take sides and rebuild what has been torn down, when God will restore the land to abundance, and Israel will flourish. This promise hangs in the air as a counter-narrative, an imaginative construal that invites impatience with the current order. It is an impatience picked up by the Hebrew prophets who come after, an impatience manifest in a Nazareth synagogue when a young rabbi reads “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives.” It is also the impatience that characterizes our Advent hope—may the light shine out from this darkness, and may we have eyes to see. May our hearts learn hope. Amen.

PRAYER

(today’s morning psalm, Psalm 24)

1 The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
2 for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
5 They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

7 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
8 Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
10 Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. Selah

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2023

Written by Katelyn Fisher '22, Administrative Assistant for the Center for Adaptive and Innovative Ministry

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 12:1-10

1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days. 7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.”

DEVOTIONAL

My Christmas Eve memories are infused with a reminder of waiting. As a young girl, I longed for the day when I would be mature enough to be chosen as Mary in our annual Christmas Eve pageant. In my memory, Mary was always beautiful, demure, and wearing powder blue taffeta, and I felt desperate to one day be her representative. My imagination for the mother of God never included anything about birthpangs, being clothed with the sun, or being confronted by dragons. I never did get the opportunity to play the part, but perhaps the fulfillment of my childhood Christmas wish came not in the donning of the regal blue gown, but in the moment I gave birth to my third child. All birth is difficult, and this one un-medicated; “crying out in birthpangs” somehow seems too gentle an expression to describe the guttural sounds emitting from my throat unbeknownst to me. Despite my fragile body and broken spirit, my son was born into the world and I was left with an adrenaline of triumph coursing through my veins.

We may not all give birth to children, but every one of us is called to participate in the restoration of God's kingdom. Mary pronounced the vision of that kingdom as a place where the mighty will be brought low and all the hungry filled with good things. And yet the fruition of this vision feels so far away. May these words of Scripture act as a midwife offering sustenance to continue in your difficult labor: the dragon of injustice will be thrown down. If that feels like an impossible task, I can assure you that the birth of a child through our fragile broken bodies does as well, and yet God's power sustains us as we co-labor to bring it to bear.

PRAYER

To the God who is with us in the waiting, may you provide us glimmers of hope in the hours we are most weary. May we remember the power we yield because it is you who fills us. Help us to use that power to contribute to the kingdom where the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023

Written by Dr. Dan Frayer-Griggs '08, Visiting Assistant Professor of Bible and Interim Director of the Center for Writing and Learning Support

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:1-25

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. 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

Compared with many other species, newborn humans are remarkably immobile and dependent. While the offspring of giraffes and antelopes, ducks and geese are precocial, meaning they can stand and walk very soon after they're birthed or hatched, we're born without the capacity to do much besides nurse, cry, and make messes. We may crawl at around nine months and walk at around twelve, but it's several years before we can feed and fend for ourselves. We are, in a word, vulnerable.

It's striking, then, that Luke moves so swiftly from situating his narrative in "the days of King Herod of Judea" (v. 5)—a monarch notorious for having his own wife and three sons murdered because he perceived them as threats to his power—to recounting the promise of the birth of John, a frail and helpless infant born to elderly parents. The good news that Gabriel brings to Zechariah counters the oppressive powers that be, not with a display of strength but with the promise of a vulnerable child.

It seems that children's ability to so radically turn their parents' lives upside down has much to do with their vulnerability. If children were born fully capable and independent, those who love them wouldn't drastically rearrange their lives. We receive and care for them because of, not in spite of, their vulnerability and need.

This is how John the Baptist comes into the world in Luke's Gospel—not initially as a fiery prophet of judgment, but as a weak and helpless child who turns Elizabeth and Zechariah's lives upside down. And so it is with Jesus, who comes to us in his vulnerability to meet us in ours. In this time of Advent, let us wait with open and attentive hearts, listening for the still, small voice of the God revealed in the self-emptying love of Jesus, and let us be transformed by that love.

PRAYER

Compassionate God, teach us to be imitators of Jesus, not clinging to status or ambition, but opening ourselves to vulnerable relationships with one another and with you. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2023

Written by Elizabeth Baisley, Welcome Center Front Desk Coordinator

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

DEVOTIONAL

In my house hangs a tiny reproduction of a wood-and-ivory retablo that depicts the annunciation. The work of an anonymous artist of the late Middle Ages, it shows an angel in whose left hand is a lamp, and whose right hand, in a gesture of blessing, indicates the ground upon which

he stands. He faces the Virgin Mary, in whose left hand is a book—the Word of God; the open palm of whose right hand indicates the same ground. Above her haloed head is a bolt-from-the-heavens: the Spirit, poised to enter into the world. Mary's facial expression is (to me, surprisingly) neutral.

In Luke's account of this event, Mary is described as perplexed, pondering the angel's greeting ("favored one!"). The angel responds with the news that God has chosen her to bear His son. Mary, no stranger to basic biology, asks for an explanation, and gets a whopper.

Both Luke and my anonymous artist have captured something extraordinarily powerful: a liminal, human moment, a moment of wonder, similar to what T. S. Eliot ponders in his poem, *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*: "Do I dare disturb the universe? In a minute there is time / for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." This moment is about possibility, rather than probability. We teeter on the edge of the world as we know it and the world as it could be.

Mary's astonishing words of assent to this announcement—"Let it be with me as you have said"—make possible all that comes after. They bring long-promised hope, wisdom, and justice crashing into the world. I look at my tiny icon and wonder how this woman is even standing up, but stand she does, in faith and love.

PRAYER

God of power and mercy, we wait in joyful hope on the verge of the possible. Grant that we may hear your voice and give us the humility to do our part in the coming of your kingdom, in the company of all your saints and in the name of your son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2023

Written by the Rev. Dr. Donna Giver-Johnston, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:39-56

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

would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

DEVOTIONAL

This is a favorite passage of Scripture. It captures a tender moment filled with genuine surprise, prophetic words, and jubilant joy! Mary's powerful words are commonly called the Magnificat, Latin for "magnify."

Mary extols the mighty one for the great things done for her. Mary esteems God's holy name for showing mercy from generation to generation.

Mary exalts God for showing strength: God brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things; came to the aid of those in need. Mary glorifies God with what has become known as a song of power, promise, and praise.

For what better way to magnify God's holy name?

Songs are powerful! They join us to those around us, connect us with a purpose larger than ourselves in protesting evil, proclaiming good news, and promising peace on earth. Songs are powerful! When we sing Christmas carols, it seems that all things are possible, even the Word to become flesh and live among us.

As a pastor, a great joy of the Christmas season is to lead worship services in nursing homes. I remember once being assigned to the Alzheimer's floor, warned by the nurses that I would likely not get any response. But in December, hope springs eternal; and so I said, "Good afternoon." No response. I read Scripture. A woman raised her hand and called out, "Charlie took me to dinner." I smiled. I started the Lord's Prayer. Silence. Then, I did something crazy. I said, "Let's sing a Christmas carol: Joy to the World, the Lord is come." I started singing alone. But, then I heard a voice join in, "Let earth receive her king." Then another voice sang out loud, "Let every heart prepare him room." I heard a woman cry out, "I love this song." It was as if a choir was singing together, "And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and

nature sing, and heaven and heaven and nature sing." In that tender moment, it sounded to me like a *Magnificat*, as if heaven and nature were singing together with power and promise and praise.

PRAYER

Let us pray: Holy God, with Mary, our souls magnify you. We extol, esteem, and exalt your holy name. Our spirits rejoice in your power and mercy. We glorify you for your love born unto us in Jesus, for us and for our salvation. We join our voices with heaven and nature in singing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!" Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2023

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

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2 Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
4 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.
5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
8 It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

DEVOTIONAL

Every Advent I hope to spend December preparing for Christmas with holy reflection on what it means for Jesus to be born among us. Instead more often than not, I spend this season waiting for the other shoe to drop.

You know what I am talking about: the perfect Christmas gift won't arrive until after the holidays, the weather that keeps friends and family apart, the lead for the Christmas Eve service gets sick at the last minute, or family traditions keep getting put off until later. These are the small things that somehow become big things.

We can't forget about the hard stuff when everything goes off the rails, like when we are celebrating Christmas in the midst of grief, we get bad news from the doctor, or broken relationships make the holidays complicated.

Then there are the big things that stop us in our tracks—worries about yesterday, sins that haunt us, fears for the future, hate, war, judgment. These are like false prophets telling us the opposite of what Christmas is all about—hope in our Savior who brings love, grace and truth.

Our Psalm tells us to watch for these moments . . . but not the way you might expect. It isn't because we are supposed to fix it in order to get back to that perfect Christmas, but to notice how Jesus shows up when everything falls apart. The first Christmas included a young pregnant couple without a place to sleep, a king who was willing to kill all children to keep power, and a God who came to be among us in the chaos. This is where we find Christmas hope.

It will be like this every Christmas until Jesus comes again. So instead of stressing out about things that don't go right, I am going to remember the hope I have in Jesus because these are the exact moments when God always shows up.

PRAYER

Jesus, when it all feels like my world is falling apart, remind me that you came in the chaos and you will come again in my chaos. Help me live into that hope. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2023

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

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 31:10-14

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

DEVOTIONAL

By this time in the holiday season I've had enough. I'm tired and my Christmas spirit is gone. I have nothing left to give, and I am counting down the days to Christmas. Not because I am excited, but because I want it to be over. The Christmas list has worn me down. Not the Nice or Naughty List. The list of things I have to do. And the list of constant problems: cranky customers, staffing issues, inventory shortages, extra expenses and late nights. As God ransomed Israel, I need God to ransom me from this holiday madness.

Every year I make a conscious effort to stay focused on the true meaning of Christmas. Promising myself that I'm going to enjoy this season of wonder and excitement. And revel in the love of God who left everything to be born of a woman. To. Redeem. Me. Offering the perfect gift. The ultimate gift of hope, peace, joy, and love. But then December 23 rolls around and I'm ready to give up.

Jeremiah paints a picture of what Christmas joy can look like. Similar to a scene from one of those Christmas movies, where everyone is happy, blissfully walking in the snow to deliver homemade cookies before returning to their beautifully decorated home. If we truly accept the gift of Christmas, the birth of our Lord and Savior, we can be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. We can sing aloud and rejoice in the dance and be merry. Our life can be like a watered garden, and we may never languish again. This is what I want my Christmas season to look like. The Holy Trinity has it all wrapped up for me. Now all I have to do is accept it.

PRAYER

God of all peace, we thank you and we praise you for the gift of your Son. Forgive us for losing sight of your redemption. We ask that you turn our mourning into joy, giving us gladness for sorrow, and teaching us to be satisfied with your bounty. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2023

Written by Tracy Riggle Young, Senior Director of Enrollment Services

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 150

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

Visitors to our home, particularly in this season of Advent, quickly recognize that music is the heartbeat of our family dwelling. Silence and quiet are hard to come by as music permeates my children's bedrooms and the Alexa constantly hums while my husband is working his magic in the kitchen. Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker," classic folk songs from James Taylor, and Taylor Swift's latest re-release have become the heartbeat of our home. Music is for us all a mode of expression: a way to process the stress of a given day, a coping mechanism to help us deal with our emotions, a brief escape from the monotony of the day, an encouraging beat to inspire an impromptu dance party and, perhaps most of all, a way to connect more fully to God and one another.

The psalmist reminds us, in the book's final appeal, to praise God in all aspects of our lives. We are told that this praise can take many forms—from clanging and clashing symbols to the light strum of the strings and harp. In this season of preparation and hopeful anticipation, may we all find space to fill our lives with music. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the season, create moments to partake in the sounds and songs of worship. Let us come together united in one voice of praise in the small moments of music that bring us all together.

PRAYER

God of all creation, on this eve of Christ's birth, ground us in your Spirit. Soften our hearts to one another as we exchange tokens of our love and adoration. Slow our minds and stress so that we may rest in wonder of you and your creation. Strengthen us in our commitment to praise you in all things. Inspire us to worship you with song and sound so we may never forget you as the ground of our being. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2023

Written by the Rev. Andy Greenhow, Chief of Staff and Secretary to the Board of Directors

SCRIPTURE

Micah 4:1-5, 5:2-4

1 In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
2 and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their
own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
5 For all the peoples walk,
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God
forever and ever.
2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the
LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

DEVOTIONAL

Sometime in the spring of 2016, John Hodgman joked on his podcast that his full-time job was thinking about the musical *Hamilton*, a remark that I found extremely resonant. One song I listened to on repeat was "One Last Time," in which George Washington informs Alexander Hamilton that he is willingly stepping down from the presidency in order to model the peaceful transition of power. Washington's farewell address as it is sung dreams lofty dreams for the young American nation, including the hope that "everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one will make them afraid." Washington referenced this Scripture and sentiment often, most notably in a letter outlining his hope that Jews would find a safe home in the United States.

Even then, I thought of myself as a hardened cynic, but I now look back at Hamilton-obsessed Andy and cringe. The rise

in anti-Semitism, disregard for democratic ideals, contested transfer of power, and so much else leads me to ask how I could have been such a Pollyanna, weeping in my office as I listened to a musical.

But then I remember a remark professor Angela Hancock made in a recent sermon in Hicks Chapel: when holding new babies, people make big promises. And this morning, we are all holding a new baby. So let's make big promises.

Let us promise to dream eschatological dreams about justice and peace on earth, about the bounty of the earth providing enough for all, about unity and the end of fear—and promise to act in service to those dreams. But for me, the bigger promise will be to dream all of this without embarrassment or self-consciousness. It helps that today, we cradle the fulfillment of these dreams in our arms.

Merry Christmas!

PRAYER

Incarnate God, grant us faith to trust the promises you have made, promises that find their fulfillment in your Son. Free us from the shame that prevents us from a wholehearted embrace of your vision for the world. Help us hold the magic of the incarnation in our hearts. Amen.

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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