



2021 College of Regional Ministers
Advent Devotional Booklet

November 29, 2021

Spiritual Blessings in Waiting

2 Peter 3:1-18

Key Verse: "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish."

Our scripture text from II Peter gives counsel to all who find themselves waiting. The first readers of today's passage had many questions about the end times when the glory of God would be revealed. They were among scoffers who were questioning the veracity of God's promises. The author reminds the readers that God's timing may be different from their timing. Even when it might have seemed to them that God is slow to fulfill God's promise, they were to remain steadfast in their conviction that God is faithful.

The Advent season is a time of waiting, expectation, and preparation. We begin the church year in the spiritual posture of waiting. We do not control the coming of God. Our task is to prepare for it, to get ready to receive God's coming in its fullness. We must remember that "those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength..." (Isaiah 40:31)

We will miss the spiritual blessings that God intends for us if we treat waiting as wasted time. We have all experienced that side of waiting - just killing time as we wait for something to happen. We've spent hours waiting in lines for our turn, waiting in "waiting rooms" at doctor's offices or hospitals, waiting for the interstate to clear after an accident or construction delay. In those contexts we may regard waiting as a negative part of life. Time simply wasted. Time we'll never get back.

The text reminds us that preparing for what God will do next is not wasted time or effort. Preparing our spirits to welcome God's glory is good work, important work. For our hearts to be suitable dwelling places for God, they need to be at peace, the text says. For our hearts to be at peace we may need to forgive someone, or perhaps ourselves. We may need to work for justice for someone who is being left behind. We may need to invest in people around us in ways that bring them grace and hope. If we will see our time in waiting as time to prepare our hearts to be places of peace, then our waiting will a time of spiritual blessing. Perhaps that what the Advent season is all about. We believe the glory of God is on its way, and so we prepare ourselves spiritually to be suitable vessels for the One who wants to be incarnate in us.

Prayer: Merciful God, Forgive us when we are immature in our waiting. May we wait with faith, believing you are on your way to us. And may we seek peace in our hearts so that you may dwell with us when you arrive.
AMEN

Rev. John Mobley

Christian Church in Alabama-Northwest Florida

November 30, 2021

God's Eternity and Human Frailty

Psalm 90

*For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades
and withers.*

Psalm 90, with its message about the eternal nature of God's love and the very temporary nature of human lives, reminds me of a song from one of the great musicals of the 20th century, the *Sound of Music*. Maria, a young woman with a lively spirit, is on the verge of becoming a nun, but her zest for life confounds the religious leaders who wish she would obey the rules. While they debate whether they should kick her out of the abbey, they sing:

*How do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How do you make her stay and listen to all you say
How do you keep a wave upon the sand
Oh, how do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?*

The answer is obvious: you don't. You don't catch a cloud and pin it down. You don't keep a wave upon the sand. You don't hold a moonbeam in your hand. The problem lies in the very desire to hold on. All these ideas are based in the human desire to make permanent that which is impermanent. One of the subtlest of human sins is the desire to hold onto, to possess, to own something that is not meant to be owned. We see Peter make the same mistake when he offers to build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. We want to hold onto life, to believe that "this night will last forever." But life is a gift, here today and gone tomorrow, like grass that springs up in the morning and withers in the evening.

The psalmist suggests that wisdom begins with accepting our impermanence. *Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* We are not called to build fortresses of permanence, but to blossom like a flower, to shine in all our radiance, to share precious moments with each other. We are not called to protect ourselves by hiding behind walls, or to "build bigger barns" so we can hoard our wealth. We are not called to figure out how to live forever; we are called to figure out how to live right now, how to share and celebrate God's love this very day. If we learn to "count our days," if we learn to accept that life is a temporary situation but that God's love is eternal, perhaps we will truly live into an understanding that God's love is our dwelling place. Imagine God's love so fully revealed that we stop fearing death and begin to embrace life in God's love.

Rev. Jay Hartley
Christian Church in Arizona

December 1

Isaiah 1:24-31

Whenever a portion of scripture begins with the word “therefore”, I feel led back to the begin to see what the writer is asking us to conclude. Unlike the word “but” which asks us to negate what has come before, “therefore” asks to consider what is most important, it is the reason for what has come before.

The imagery of the first verses in Isaiah 1 are awful and filled with fear. Later verses fare no better as the prophet makes the case against the nation’s leaders. Isaiah’s words to them sound like a dressing down from an angry boss. He name-checks the kings, the ones with responsibility for leading the people with wisdom and strength and he calls out their foolishness and weakness. They are loved by God, and they have been nurtured by God, but they are acting like petulant teenagers ashamed to be seen with their God. They have not worshiped with integrity, they have neglected the poor (symbolized by widows and orphans), and God is utterly disgusted with them.

Isaiah offers to Judah and to us a bleak word to a people who have deeply disappointed God and it does not fit with what so many of us think of as the spirit of Advent. We want Advent to be a pre-Christmas celebration, a series of parties and events that remind us that Christmas is on the way.

Advent is that and it is also a worship season that like Lent, invites us to reflect, discern and repent. It asks us to hear how God is inviting us into a new era, a time when the reign of Christ begins in an unlikely place and time. Today’s reading us focus on the need to reflect and repent.

God’s wrath will be poured out and Judah will feel it because the kings knew better but did not do better. There will be reconciliation and restoration for those who let go of their corruption and indifference and who seek redemption and who will do right by the people and by God. For those who will not, they will not. It seems as it ever was.

There does come an offer of reconciliation (24:16-20), followed by more awful accusations. These words of the prophet feel punitive rather than hope filled. This feels too much like tough love turned abusive language. It is hard to see a glimpse of love waiting to be revealed.

I read a statement the other day of someone who said, “I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful.” Hope is in the God who was with Isaiah and the God who was with Jesus. That is the same God who is with us.

That is the God who stands with us when we fall and when we stand strong.

We make amends and commit to real change.

We pay attention to who is in need, and we act to help meet those needs.

We lead with faithfulness and compassion, and we love the people whom God loves.

Imagine faithful obedience not born of coercion or fear but out of our love of God and love for the people in our communities, especially the most vulnerable.

Imagine living in a spirit of confession and repentance.

Imagine seeking and doing justice for everyone.

Imagine God’s love revealed in the way we treat people and in our love for God.

Rev. Dr. LaTaunya Bynum

Christian Church in Northern California-Nevada

December 2, 2021

Malachi 3:5-12

This is perhaps not the first passage one might expect to reflect on as we enter into these opening days of Advent. It doesn't seem entirely hopeful, happy, or maybe even as light hearted or uplifting as we would like. Too often we want to hear only words of affirmation, joy, "its-going-to-be-okay-ness." Seldom do we want to be convicted, challenged, and woken up to what it truly means to be children of God and the community of Christ. Yet...we need to be called out to stand up and stand apart, to live into the incredible opportunity and wonder of walking in the footsteps of Jesus the Christ. We are not called into complacency, *status quo*, or apathy. We are a covenant people, in relationship with a jealous, steadfast, and awe-inspiring God who demands we keep up!

This passage is exactly what we need to be reminded of as we enter into this period of anticipation and reflection. These powerful words by the ancient prophet remind us that the God who parents us has never forsaken us even when we have turned away in selfishness, shame, or fear. Malachi unflinchingly reminds us that God has never turned away from us...and never will! Even when we embrace scarcity and cry that we do not have enough, turning our backs on the steadfast promise that we have abundant life...God never turns away from us. Even when we turn inward, protecting our seemingly fragile resources and fearful of an uncertain future...God never turns away from us. And yet...we turn away from God. We lean into our own insecurity, defensiveness, protectionism, and garrison ourselves away from the cries and needs of the world clamouring at our walls. We turn away from God and the world created out of Divine Love...and we rob that Love of the abundance, gifts, and grace we are called to share.

Friends, we have all travelled through a life-changing, tumultuous, and catastrophic recent past. We have all suffered and experienced more trauma and pain than any of us could have imagined. And...we were never abandoned by the God who called us into being. Through it all, we were accompanied, strengthened, undergirded, and loved by the Creator, the Sustainer, the Giver of all Life. That kind of grace should inspire us to reflect on the magnitude of abundance with which we have been blessed. That kind of love should embolden us to keep reaching out beyond our own needs, our own walls, our own biases and fears, to ensure that the world around us and all those who suffer know that kind of assurance and love as well. It is my prayer and hope that we continue to break out of our cocoons and with wings of hope, grace, compassion, and wholeness, shower our communities, neighbourhoods, and neighbours, with not just a tithe of our capacity...but with the abundance of it.

I hope that this passage becomes one of inspiration for us all. A reminder that when, especially when, the going gets tough...we are bound up in thrice-wound cords of love and strength that will not only get us through, but will enable us to be vehicles of grace and healing for and with others. Let us return to the God in whose embrace we find our life-source! Let us return to the spirit of generosity, unity, peace, and wholeness that captured our hearts and called us to a new life! Let us be joy-filled and grateful not only for the love showered on us, but for the call to be partners with the Source of All Love in an enterprise that is transforming for all.

Rev. Jen Garbin
Christian Church in Canada

December 4

Luke 1:68-79

You, Child . . .

When I heard a similar phrase “you child” in our house growing up, it was usually my mother or grandmother calling out to one of us. It was spoke with seriousness. It meant you had better pay attention, listen carefully and do what was required. And do it now! In today’s Advent text Luke captures Zechariah Song about he and Elizabeth’s son: John The Baptist. Can you imagine Zechariah’s joy? The son he never thought he would have is named and called by God to be God’s prophet. The prophet who will prepare the way for God’s Son, Jesus the Christ, Savior of the world. We are most familiar with his wife, Elizabeth’s praises, “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” (1:24-25). But it was to Zechariah that God’s messenger Gabriel first brought the good news, even though he was made mute because he could scarcely believe what God was going to do for he and his wife Elizabeth. And yet Luke tells us that Zechariah was filled with the holy spirit and spoke the words of Luke 1:68-79 over his son John. Words of praise and prophesy. Blessed be the God of Israel for God has favored and redeemed God’s people. God has remembered and not forgotten us because of the covenant God made with our ancestor Abraham. God has not forgotten us in our struggles and sins/missteps. God will redeem us and restore us as God’s own. Zechariah goes on to speak these words to his only son, John: And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. You will go before God’s son to prepare his ways.

Guess what God’s beloveds? So, it is to each of us as followers of Christ! We are named and called. You, Child, whom God has named “beloved” servant, prophet, child. You, child, go before Jesus the Christ and prepare his ways. You, child, make known that Christ died for our sins and that it is through his death that we are saved. You, child, make known that God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son that whoever believes in his Son will not perish but have life with God forever. Period. You, child make known that we who are rescued and saved by Christ are called to love God, in holiness and righteousness all our days. You, child know this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me/us, because God has anointed me/us to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me/us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). You, child, you Disciples of Christ, you go prepare the ways for Christ coming. Now!

Rev. Joan Bell-Haynes
Central Rocky Mountain Region

December 5, 2021

Philippians 1:3-11

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:8-11)

Life is so uncertain. It's hard to feel peaceful when everything keeps changing and when the world feels less and less safe all the time. On the second Sunday of Advent, we focus on **peace**, knowing that even in the midst of so much unpredictability and dangers of many kinds, that we find our peace in Christ and we are called as the Church to reflect that peace to a hurting and bewildered world that desperately needs the healing presence of Christ. That feels like an overwhelming task, when we ourselves are still trying to figure it out and find our own peace.

Paul begins his letter to the Philippian church like most of his letters, giving God thanks for them and for their faithful witness to our Lord Jesus Christ, even in face of challenges and dangers. We are in unprecedented times in the life of the Church and our own lives, as we seek to respond to the many needs of our families, congregations, communities, and to the world. We don't have all the resources or all the answers, as the questions themselves keep changing. Paul's prayer is that our "**love may overflow** with more and more knowledge and insight to help us determine what is best"—may we be encouraged knowing that we will continue to learn and grow as we seek to reimagine and renew our lives and the life of the Church. May we receive the gift of peace as Paul reminds us that "the harvest...comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God"—it's not all on us to figure it out, thank God! We are called to continue faithfully and lovingly be Church, however, whenever, wherever we are. What greater gift of peace can we offer at a time such as this than to exemplify the overflowing love of Christ!

God of love, may you fill us with the anchoring assurance of peace in a season filled with uncertainties that rock our world. Assure us anew that we can lean upon you when life is so unsure and is constantly changing. Help us to be that loving presence in an anxious and troubled world yearning for peace. Teach us your wisdom, knowledge, and insight that will help us determine what is best, for each new day. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Rev. Dr. Betsy Goehrig
Christian Church in Florida

December 6, 2021

In Your Weeping, Serve, Proclaim, and Hope
Romans 8:22-25

Advent season is a moment where God is preparing for us a reality that we cannot yet see. Even though we see pain and suffering in our current world, our solace, as displayed in the scriptures, is that none of this is new to God. God is working behind the scenes to bring forth a world and a perspective that makes room for God to redeem our suffering and bring forth peace and a new day.

The amount of human suffering that we have witnessed over the last many months sometimes seems unbearable. Part of it feels unbearable because we don't always know what to do or say. The other part is not knowing where God is in the mix. As a result, we end up weeping inside and outwardly feeling helpless and hopeless. This becomes a suffocating sense of anxiety that floats over individuals and collective communities waiting to land with little or no warning. It is hard work to navigate life in a way that anxiety does not overcome us. It is essential to know that feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are not the end of the story. However, weeping, rather than overwhelming us, can be the part of the story that draws us closer to God.

Drawing closer to God allows us to weep, yet know that we do not weep in vain. Weeping can lead us to action. David says, as we weep, we are to go out and plant or serve and have hope that we will return with a good harvest that brings joy (Psalm 126). When we weep, that is the time to serve the needs of others and see joy come forth in our togetherness.

The prophet Isaiah said, when we weep or cry out, we must proclaim the power of the Word of God, which is God's self who brings comfort and healing into our lives (Isaiah 40). In our weeping, we must speak/live the word of God with conviction so that the power of God manifests comfort, peace, and healing in our situations and the lives of others.

Lastly, Paul tells us that as we weep, our weeping is a reminder that despite what we see, feel, hear, and know through our senses, God is in our midst, always working on what is unseen to bring about what we hope for (Romans 8:22-25). Therefore, we must be bearers of hope in our weeping, reminding others that what we need will come to pass, and we shall be made whole in a new day.

As we draw near to God, we can weep – and still serve. We can weep – and still proclaim the power of the Word of God. We can weep – and still hope for a new day. In her poem, "The Miracle of Morning," Amanda Gorman speaks of such a new day.

While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,
Our people have never been more closely tethered.
The question isn't if we can weather this unknown,
But how we will weather this unknown together.
We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind
Are also the moments that make us humans kind;
Let each morning find us courageous, brought closer;
Heeding the light before the fight is over.
When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing
In testing times, we became the best of beings.

Rev. Denise Bell
Christian Church in Georgia

December 7, 2021

Psalm 126

“The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced “

Psalm 126:2b

Psalm 126 is a prayer of Ascents from the Post Exilic Era. As the Psalmist remembers the deliverance and restoration of the Israelites from Babylonian captivity, it reveals the tension between memory and hope. The Israelites remembered their situation of despair to victory, from disillusionment to moments of peace. God delivered, and the cycle was lived and remembered repeatedly, “God delivered us once, and God will do again.” While they lived in despair, they looked toward a better and brighter day.

The psalmist reminded his readers how the nation thought it a dream, to be filled laughter and shouts of joy, so much to the point that it was said, “The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.” Joy to the point that, while they had to go out and sow in tears, the hope was that they would reap in joy, bringing in the harvest from that which had been sowed in tears.

As a nation, we have been in our own form of captivity over the past two years. We see, hear of, and many of us have walked with families devastated by COVID-19. Shackled by disease, death, and destruction, we despair over national leaders divided, leading to hostage and hatred among people of different ethnicities and cultures. Many of us live in fear at the core of our souls, forbidding us from experiencing the joy that we proclaim we have, as believers. We fear that one nation and/or race is better than the other; and that if we are all treated equal, it somehow takes away from the status and wealth of the other. We fear that our babies won't have the opportunities for a future and hope, if we surrender, confess, forgive, and make a commitment to work for the good of all God's people.

This Advent Season, our prayer is one of imagination. We imagine a nation that is healed, whole, full of joy and laughter. We imagine believers in covenant with each other, while having sowed tears in love, help, and compassion. We thank the Psalmist for the reminder to dream and imagine a world filled with laughter and tongues with shouts of joy. We trust in the one that promises us joy repeatedly, even amid pain and suffering. This joy is anchored in the birth of a baby, Jesus Christ, weighted with joy unspeakable, full of glory. And this joy, that we proclaim, the world didn't give it to us, and the world can't take it away. We hold to this dream with memory and hope for all of us. Our prayer is that you will too.

Rev. Dr. Nadine Burton

Executive Regional Minister

Great River Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

December 8

What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

Luke 7:18-30

Our General Minister and President, Rev. Teresa Hord Owens calls us as Disciples to “Imagine God’s Limitless Love” and reminds us that “this moment, like all wilderness moments, holds great opportunity for us, if we are brave enough to imagine what might be.”

I imagine the folks portrayed in Luke’s scripture who went out to see John the Baptist in the wilderness were bravely seeking some meaning and purpose in a time of chaos and capriciousness. They were “turning” away from the palaces, expensive clothes, and self-indulgent living of an Empire system bloatedly consuming with impunity while blessing only a few. In their repentance, they were braving the wilderness to see and hear a word from God.

Jesus responds to these disciples of John who had been sent to ask who he is, by telling them to “go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” (NIV) Jesus’ word invites reflection: How do we expect the Holy to show up in the world? What evidence do we need? What draws our attention---palatial consumption or gracious extravagance?

This scripture passage is inviting a new way of seeing and hearing, or if you will, imagining God’s love revealed. It invites us to consider what it would mean to turn from the trappings of “success” and enter the wilderness freely? To follow in Jesus way: to bravely re-orient our living “as a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world” away from ourselves and toward those whom Jesus sees.

As the Church itself became bloated with power and consumption of empire in the Fourth and Fifth century CE, we forgot our calling. It was the desert Abbas and Ammas who went out into the wilderness seeking and bringing the renewing voice of God in the poverty of spirit.

In the wilderness, “we do not call the shots; we receive the grace of divine love that empowers us to do new things, to give birth to new life. It takes an inner space of poverty for the seeds of new life to be planted. When we own nothing, we are ready to receive everything” (Delio, Ilia, OSF: “The Hours of the Universe: Reflection on God, Science and the Human Journey, Orbis Books, 2021; p. 187). This is the poverty that allowed Mary to say, “be it done unto me according to your word.”

“The person who possesses and controls cannot receive, and the person who cannot receive cannot give thanks. Christmastime should be an awakening of consciousness that all is a gift freely given and that our task is to receive in poverty of spirit and give thanks. The lowliness of Christ’s birth shows us where the gift of divinity is to be found: in the poor, the humble, the forgotten, the weak, the simple, the laborer, the immigrants, the unwed, the old, the dumb ox, and the smelly sheep. The Most High God, whose incomprehensible love cannot be purchased or downloaded, bends low to embrace us in our frail humanity so that we might be raised up into the heart of divinity” (Ibid).

Imagine. God’s Love. Revealed.

May our hearts, minds, bodies, spirits be ready to receive God’s Love.

Rev. Dr. Teresa Dulyea-Parker

Christian Church in Illinois-Wisconsin

December 9

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

The early church was scattered across a big geography. The Apostle Paul travelled extensively to connect with these congregations, to help start new communities of faith, to train leaders, and to resolve disputes. He also promoted an offering. The offering was for the church in Jerusalem.

That congregation, the first place that Christianity took root, had developed an extensive ministry to care for widows and orphans. It is described in the book of Acts. This social ministry had become bigger than the Jerusalem church itself could manage or support and so they looked for mission partners to assist them, not unlike how we fund our ministries today through Disciples Mission Fund and our special day offerings.

Paul made it a part of his ministry to encourage the churches scattered across Galatia and the Roman empire to help with this ministry. He did so for several reasons. The need was real, of course. There is historical evidence that Palestine faced famine conditions in the mid 40's A.D. That coupled with overpopulation in the Jerusalem area and double taxation imposed by Roman occupiers led to persistent food shortages. That was reason enough to promote this offering. But it was not the only reason.

Paul also believed that by encouraging the far-flung churches in Galatia to support this project in Jerusalem he could begin to connect their lives. He wanted them to understand that they were not disconnected franchises of the Jesus movement, but rather one church united. Funding a project together was a tangible way of identifying, claiming, and expressing that connection. They would be less likely to view one another as distant, other, and strange if they were engaged in a common work.

The third reason Paul promoted this was he knew it would be good for them spiritually. This congregation in Corinth had a very diverse membership that reflected the diverse cosmopolitan community in which it was located. That diversity was a gift, but it also led, at times, to division and quarrels. Paul on more than one occasion seeks to give them counsel about how they relate to one another including his attempts to help them recognize each other's gifts, his attempts to resolve tensions around the fact that some persons gobbled up more food at the potluck before everybody had a chance to go through the first time. You know the usual church stuff!

He also lifts up the Macedonian church as an example. He tells the Corinthian church that the Macedonian church, who are clearly not as well off as the Corinthians, begged him for the opportunity to support this offering. He says that "entirely on their own they earnestly pleaded with him for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." Surely you can do that or more he says to the Corinthians.

There is also a little back story on this too. We know from comments Paul makes in chapter 9 of this book that one reason that the Macedonian church got so excited about this offering is that when Paul visited them he boasted about how excited the Corinthian Church was about this offering. Now, it appears, a delegation from Macedonia is going to bring their offering to Corinth so that it can be combined with the offering there before Paul heads back to Jerusalem. Uh-oh. It is time for the Corinthian church to come through and not be outdone by their country cousins. So, Paul says, excel!

Little human dramas like this have always been a part of the life of the church even to today. But the needs then and now are real. Paul was right. Sharing in a common mission work is spiritually healthy for a church and deepens the relationship between congregations, witnessing to the unity that Christ wills his followers to enjoy. Thanks be to God!

Rev. Rick Spleth
Christian Church in Indiana

December 10, 2021

Isaiah 12:1-6

If I were to ask you to imagine God's love and then describe it, what would say? What would God's love look like or feel like. How would it sound? What response would it evoke in you?

In fact, if you have something to write with and write on, take a few moments to write down how you imagine God's love. Or if you want, draw a picture.

I am pretty sure what we read in Isaiah 12, probably is not what you have drawn or written or even imagine or are they?

In the six verses of this chapter, Isaiah is speaking words of thanksgiving and praise. He is grateful that God's anger has turned aside and instead God is offering comfort. Is this a revelation of God's love? Could be.

Next, Isaiah talks about God being his salvation so that he no longer lives in fear, but trusts in God, who is his strength and might. Is this a revelation of God's love? Yeh, when I think about it, love does go hand and hand with God's love. In fact, I am reminded that in the first letter of John, there is a verse that says "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. (4:18)"

Finally, Isaiah exhorts his readers to give thanks and praise for the way God has saved us because we have been deeply and unconditionally loved.

As I pondered this chapter, I found myself remembering the ending of the first book from the Harry Potter series. For those who have read this book or even seen the movie, or even if you have not, the ending has Harry Potter asking Professor Dumbledore why Voldemort couldn't touch him. Dumbledore responds to the effect that his mother had loved him deeply, and when we have been loved with that kind of unconditional, sacrificial love it leaves a mark on us and affords us a kind of protection that can't be touched by evil without being destroyed.

I believe, God's love is revealed to us whenever we feel a well spring of joy swell within us until it burst forth in joyful praise and thanksgiving. It is revealed when we thank God for our lives even though we are in midst of chaotic storms and life seems to be becoming a part at the seams. Love is revealed when we realize that we are never alone in life, because God is always there with us. God has never forsaken us. And God has never stopped loving us. And that is truly something to thank God for.

Rev. Ken Marston,
Christian Church in Kansas

December 11, 2021

Isaiah 12:2-6

Search online videos of songs based on Isaiah 12:2-6, and you will first find gentle music sung in worship services where English is spoken in comfortable sanctuaries in neighborhoods relatively “*safe and secure from all alarm*” most days – attributed to better city planning and selective development and investment. I drive to such worship spaces past communities where my privileged “security” is experienced differently among those who live there.

One warm Sunday morning, as a wasp flew in through an open window at Cephias Chapel outside of Little Rock, Pastor Bernard Mattison preached to a small congregation of Disciples of Christ for whom every day held reminders of the racism and economic inequity that still persists like dust. When Pastor Mattison led us in singing, “*What a fellowship, what a joy divine . . .*,” it was not a casual choral recitation but an earnest, joyful testimony. The energy, emphasis and syncopation reflected a lifetime of “*leaning on the everlasting arms.*” On that day, in this community where Disciples really did count on God and each other, I wondered if Isaiah would have sung his song that way with others who truly found their salvation in God. Could I learn to live to sing Isaiah’s song that way too?

Thank you, God, for waking us up this morning with a mind to pray! Save us from misguided efforts at self-salvation, trusting too much the idols we have made of certainty, comfort, and control. Maranatha! Amen.

Rev. Bill Rose-Heim

Christian Church of Greater Kansas City

December 12, 2021

Imagine Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20

We are currently living in a time of, at the very least, sadness and distress. Our current situations and circumstances have led many to expect and anticipate the worst and/or to begin proclaiming the end of life as we have known it. Beloved of God, perhaps it's time to refocus and look deeper into this season of distress. Perhaps it's time to consider what may exist despite our circumstances. Perhaps it's time to have the Joy of imagination. Hear these words from the prophet Zephaniah:

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (3:14,17) (What book of the Bible is this from?)

Even in distress, one can imagine that Joy is accessible - the joy of a child's laughter, the joy of a caring phone call, and the joy of good friends. The accessible joy of God's grace. Yes, joy is accessible. Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let Earth receive her King.

I know that this is easier said than done. But I am a witness that if you allow yourself to experience the joy of imagination your souls will be refreshed, your relationships rekindled, and your passions renewed. If you stop and think about it just at the right time, JOY broke through in its fullest and most glorious display, visible, physical, alive and breathing. Joy broke through in a little stable, as God sent forth His Son. "*rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee o Israel*"

In the fullness of time, God restored our joy. Christ has come and our joy is made complete. And since our joy is made complete, we can:

- Imagine Joy in our memories of where we were and what has happened to us and for us because of Christ.
- Imagine Joy in the fulfillment of hope made possible when we remember the instability, fear, or guilt of our former life and see how the unstable was made stable, the fear answered, and our guilt forgiven.
- Imagine Joy that comes from knowing that God who is responsible for our beginning and end has come to us.
- Imagine Joy knowing that God is Good even in the midst of a trial knowing that God will sustain us during our difficulties.

So, during this advent season, on this day when we light the candle of Joy and remember the words of the Apostle Paul in the book of Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* (4:4). I invite you to seek and experience God's joy even in the midst of uncertainty and hardships. I invite you to seek and experience the Joy of celebrating the baby Jesus. I invite you, even if you are in a place where it is hard for you to experience this joy; I invite you to have the Joy of imagination. I invite you to count nothing hopeless for a joy imagined comes and comes and keeps coming. Imagine it my friends. Imagine it!

Rev. Dr. Don Gillett

Christian Church in Kentucky

December 13, 2021

John 3:1-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 NIV) This very familiar passage of scripture confirms Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God's love. Isaiah prophesied "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6).

These are manifestations of God's love.

We are amid commemorating the anticipation of the birth of the child, the son that fulfills the prophecy. The one about whom the angels sang, the one who the shepherds left their flocks to seek, the one who the Magi traveled from the East to worship.

It had been declared to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. His testimony while holding the Christ child in his arms "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." God's love revealed.

We responded to the message of the Gospel and confessed our belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and accepted him as our personal Savior. God's love was revealed on a very personal level. Not so much imagination, but faith and understanding. The gift of salvation, saving us from our sins with the promise of eternal life.

As we travel on life's journey we encounter mountains of disappointment, sink holes of sorrow, detours of sin, barriers of doubt, along the way. As we overcome these obstacles, that deliverance is God's love revealed as we continue to walk by faith.

Jesus calls upon us to love each other. "A new command I give you: **Love one another**. As I have **loved** you, so you must **love one another**. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you **love one another**." (John 13:34-35) Much of the division and rancor we are experiencing in society today would be minimized if humankind would obey this command. It should come naturally for followers of Christ. Imagine God's love revealed through you.

Rev. Eugene James
Christian Church in Michigan

December 14, 2021

Isaiah 11:1-9

Long before boxes of a selected Christmas card were mailed to names entered in our address book... Even before we photocopied, mimeographed, or shared files of cartoons to make coworkers smile... Even longer before we posted on social media memes, emojis, and GIFs to comment on the urgent message of the day... Paintings by Edward Hicks were perhaps the first in the United States to go viral.

Technology in the early 19th century provided Hicks with oils, canvases, and brushes to paint; wooden frames to secure and display; and horses and saddles to transport. What else was needed? Eyes that have now glanced on his estimated 62 similar works of art in various galleries, court houses, and town halls are in the untold millions.

The devout Quaker wanted to share broadly his urgent message for peace – his vision of the “Peaceable Kingdom.” Isaiah’s passage alone is a stunning word portrait. He places directly in our imagination odd combinations of animals and people that would be expected to devour one another naturally. Instead, there they are, side-by-side in harmony. Hicks transposed these Biblical images to canvas in beautiful but muted colors in pure Folk Art style. Moreover, instead of merely reproducing his first painting, he would redesign each picture befitting the location where it would be sent. In the background would be relevant scenes of settlers, Native Americans, treaty signings, legislation, cooperation in work and harvest.... Most people couldn’t read so the opportunity to see Peace helped all *Imagine God’s Love Revealed*.

Every Advent, I reassemble a jigsaw version of the Peaceable Kingdom that hangs in the National Gallery of Art. (When I open the box, some of the pieces have remarkably remained connected from the prior Christmas.) My family loves puzzles at Christmastime, and I appreciate the contrast between Grandma Moses-type scenes, Thomas Kincaid, Santa, and Coke bottles. Indeed, constructing Peace can be as elusive as finding color themes among 500, to 1,000, to 2,000 pieces. But with each winning snap of a match, the bigger picture becomes clearer, and the small accomplishment is celebrated.

“And a little child shall lead them” (v. 6). My jigsaw painting actually depicts three children. One is scratching the nose of a leopard, one is hugging a tiger and patting a lion, and two are placing their hands over the holes of an adder’s den. Indelible images of children rarely leave one’s mind – especially of the Christ child in the creche. Were Hicks still painting today might the children depicted bear striking resemblances to Malala, Greta, and Amanda G.? – or any number of our remarkable youth at Disciples church camps?

Hicks bordered one of his paintings with the phrase, “Above, below, where'er the astonished eye. Turns to behold, new opening wonders lie.” Today, may you gaze at all your surroundings with astonished eyes, and unopen what wonders that should appear. Let us pray:

Prayer: Holy, leading, child. May our love for you and our embracing of your teachings for Peace go viral. When we encounter those with whom we fear would be an unlikely pairing, maybe our astonishing unity be noticed by others seeking a better world. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Paul Koch
Christian Church of Mid-America

December 15, 2021

Luke 7:31-35

It is all about compassion.

The word "compassion" originally comes from the Latin word "pati", which means to suffer, and the prefix "com" means "with." So it literally means to suffer with. Therefore, the connection of suffering with another person brings compassion beyond passive sympathy into the new realm of empathy. In today's bible verse, Luke 7:31-32, Jesus described the people of his generation as the people who are indifferent to each other. This description can easily be applied to our generation too. Since we cannot truly "suffer with" we are unable to "joy with." People are indifferent to the great pain of others and are only focusing on their small misery. But Jesus came to this world in this dark hour of hopelessness and ultimate loneliness. God came to this world in the form of man since God loves the world so much. Jesus showed us ultimate compassion. Since he truly "suffered with" the people, he could wholeheartedly rejoice with them and willingly became "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Advent season is all about the compassion which God showed us through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sisters and brothers in Christ! let's celebrate this wonderful season with one another! Let's dance with the rhythm of joyful neighbors and let's weep together with people who are suffering. That is the new beginning that Jesus initiated in the oppressed land of Palestine 2000 years ago. Let's start new beginning here and now since we are His Disciple who follows his footstep. Shalom!

Rev. Chung Seong Kim

Executive Pastor

December 16, 2021

Imagine A Shining Face

Psalm 80:1-07

Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. Psalm 80:7

Advent is the season of untold glory, and unexpected hearing. It is not an invitation to naïve hearing, muted hearing, selective hearing or hearing loss. It's an invitation to imagine a shining face.

Against the backdrop of communal grief and loss, the psalmist doesn't ask for incremental blessings or momentary glory. Amid sustained disappointment, ongoing uncertainty, and no report of impending victory, the plea is not merely for a glimpse of the face of God or a bargain for a preview. God's face is not for sale. It is a gift. The shining face of the creator is a gift that comes to us by hearing. It's a gift that disrupts the accumulations of defeat and misery, the advancement of our own personal interests, and the calculations of death.

More than just a chronicle of former expressions of grief and appeal on behalf of Israel, the cries of the psalmist parallel our own cries over the last year: "Hear us...restore us." Hear our pandemic prayers and post-pandemic hopes, restore our connection with ourselves, and our faith in future possibilities. The God who transplanted a vine from Egypt, and repositioned a narrow indoor pulpit to address multiple global audiences at one time is the same God that used a small lamp to be a light to the nations. The God of the psalmist is the same God who hears the cries of the overwhelmed and the underwhelmed, the least and the most, makeshift proclamations, and the cries that ring out like sirens from the margins of our society and our souls.

Our capacity to hear doesn't start and stop with our ears. Wisdom cries out in the work of our ministries and in the streets. The Psalmist echoes the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6, "May the Lord make his face to shine upon you." We're invited to take off our sunglasses, our spiritual blue blockers, and all that inhibits our encounter with the light of the master's face. We don't need protection from God's face or the face of the coming Christ child. The face of God will not overwhelm, harm or destroy. When God's face shines, the lowly are exalted, holy hearing stretches imaginations, communities flourish, and disciples shine.

We are invited to imagine a radiance born of promise, and to make space for forms of light and visions of God's face we've never seen before. We are invited to imagine gifts within and among storied people beyond the narrative arc of our re-occurring nightmares and our best fairytale's. We are invited to imagine uncluttered and audacious hearing. Imagine the living God as the location of our testimony.

Rev. Yvonne Gilmore

National Convocation

December 17, 2021

Hebrews 10:32-39

“But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.” Hebrews 10:39

Resilience – the ability of a person or an organization to respond to or recover from a crisis or adversity. (dictionary.com)

We all need a measure of resilience from time to time. The audience of Hebrews needed a measure of resilience. We don't know with certainty the author, or the audience, or the situation of this book of the Bible, but in reading the passage for today we can infer a few things. They were weary. There were challenges facing the community. And some, at least, were falling away and losing heart.

We get that. It's been a challenging year, for the second year in a row, in the life of a pandemic. It continues to be a challenging time in our society, in our congregations, for our world. Some have faced additional challenges and hardships: illness, loss of income, loss of loved ones, the usual challenges of life with a pandemic thrown in. We are weary. We get discouraged. Some have lost heart and have fallen away.

Into our weariness comes a word of hope and encouragement. “We are among those who have faith,” writes the author of Hebrews. We are among those who know a power beyond ourselves. We are among those who know a God who meets us in our weakness and strengthens us for the road ahead. We are among those who know that our resilience isn't dependent upon our own strength alone. We are a people of faith. And our faith tells us that Spirit brings light to our darkest moments, and encouragement when we falter. When we gather in community, we are surrounded by those who can believe for us when our own beliefs are in doubt. At the table where all are welcomed, we feast on bread for our journey and receive the cup of love poured out for us and all the world. And we are renewed.

Our faith doesn't promise us an easy path, but it does remind us we do not walk the path alone. In our weariness may we find strength. In our doubt, may we find hope. In our discouragement, may we be resilient. Poet Shane L. Koyczan is quoted as saying, “If your heart is broken, make art with the pieces.” That's resilience. Former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying, “Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” That's resilience. Author, Maya Angelou is quoted as saying, “I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it.” That's resilience. In the midst of our weariness, may we find resilience.

God of life, hope, faith, love, enter into us and our communities today. Grant us courage for the living of these days. Grant us strength for the journey and hope for tomorrow. Let us rest in the certainty that even in our weariness we are not alone. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Messick

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Northern Lights Region

December 18, 2021

Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35

For everything there is a season the writer of Ecclesiastes teaches us. Everything, no matter how small or large, has a time. A time to be born even as she is in labor (Isaiah 66: 7-11). A time to be shepherded and restored by the glow of God's warmth (Psalm 80). And a time to die (Luke 13: 31-35). But between and in the midst of those times in our life is a time to be faithful.

As the 3rd week of Advent comes to a close, take a few minutes to consider in quiet reflection, and maybe in writing, the many ways that your week has brought you through your tears (Psalm 80: 5), through pain (Isaiah 66), and lament (Luke 13), and led you to a deep sense of joy.

What have been your paths to joy this past week? Did you do something intentionally so that you might experience joy? Or was it something that happened along the way to something else? Were you alone, or with someone else? Maybe even a group of people? Were you sitting and reflecting and talking? Or, were you acting, moving, doing?

After you've taken some time to reflect on those questions, maybe even written a few notes in your journal, ponder with me for a moment how we in the Western World have often considered our Scriptures as a means for our personal faith; for learning, and growing, and choosing. And, yet, so much of Scripture uses the personal as metaphor for the community, for society, for all of God's Creation. Birth reflected on by the author of Isaiah is not about a woman going through birth pains, but about Jerusalem who gives birth, and a people who turn away from their very source of nurture and sustenance – Jerusalem's bosom.

Consider the Psalmist who is seeking to capture people's hearts with such beautiful poetry and imagery, reminding the people of Israel that they have had many leaders, but that the true Shepherd is God. The God of Creation is also the God of Restoration. If only we will reflect *together* how we are not saved only once, but are in constant need of being restored. Not only personally, but as a community, and as a nation.

And when we have spoken up and out, taken action that is aligned with our faith shaped in part by the Scriptures, and people come to tell us to be quiet or we will be persecuted, from where will you find the strength to remain faithful? How will you move beyond our social teachings and constructs that tell us to go along to get along, to maintain the peace (a cheap peace?), and has turned genuine kindness into something less than kind?

As you consider the ending of Week 3 of the Advent Season, a time of joy, take some time to respond to the following questions, and any other questions that surface for you:

- ❖ When have you experienced joy in your personal life?
- ❖ When have you experienced joy in the community of the church?
- ❖ When has your neighborhood or city reflected joy?
- ❖ When has joy been a part of your life's story as it intersects with the rest of God's Creation?

Rev. Chris Morton
Christian Church in Nebraska

December 19, 2021

The New Normal

Hebrews 10:5-10 New Living Translation

5 That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, "You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer. 6 You were not pleased with burnt offerings or other offerings for sin. 7 Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God— as is written about me in the Scriptures.'" 8 First, Christ said, "You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them" (though they are required by the law of Moses). 9 Then he said, "Look, I have come to do your will." He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. 10 For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.

The term new normal continues to be used to describe how we live, observe our faith traditions, and contribute to the world during these uncertain times. In Hebrews, the writer grapples with what used to be and what has become.

The law of Moses, established through the Levitical system, offered bulls and goats as sacrifices for sin. Then, with the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the Gentiles were invited into covenant with a new High Priest. As Lord and Savior of the world, Jesus was the new normal. He became a caveat for humanity, transforming a table of slaughter into a table of communion.

Just think about it for a moment. COVID-19 with its mutating strands, economic strain deepening the poverty pit, racial and cultural gaps ever-widening, and political polarization (even in the church) of epic proportion – all of these issues in some way tie us to systems that do not promote the welfare or common good of society nor do they enliven hope. However, these deep concerns might be spiritual opportunities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer advised, "The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come." Advent gives us a proper glimpse of the promise of something new that transforms our normal from static mechanics to fluid possibilities based on clear identities. The prospects come with two-fold anticipation.

First, we anticipate the time to reflect on what it means for Christ to come into this world and reconcile us to God. Then, with unending gratitude, we embrace Jesus Christ, the hope of glory as the touchstone of our faith. Because guilt and shame have been washed away, replaced by a confident hope in God, we sing the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Advent is a reminder of the reckless love of God and reconfirms who we are by God's grace and what we are sent into the hungering and thirsting world to do.

Second, the light of the Advent candle beckons us out of the darkness of doubt into the brightness of hope, peace, love, and joy. Illumination helps us properly assess the times in which we live, align our focus within the framework of our faith, and walk boldly into the unknown. As we trust the new terra firma under our feet and firmament over our head, we position ourselves to find the answers to questions such as, in this season, who does God call us to be? What partnerships should we engage? How can our gifts best be kindled for kingdom advancement? What after serving its purpose should now be celebrated and retired? What is the new thing God is doing among us?

May our eyes and ears be opened to see and hear how God through Christ is making all things new. And may we step forward without trepidation into new possibilities, taking the risk to be the church God is calling us to be. Yes, Christ has come to a troubled world already, and indeed, Christ is coming again.

Bishop Valerie Melvin

Christian Church in North Carolina

December 20, 2021

Colossians 1:15-20

As the church is gathered in this holiest of seasons, we are reminded again and again that we stand in the very presence and peace of Christ. The gospel is proclaimed in fresh and life giving ways, and this is very good news! The sights of the seasons engage our vision, the expressions of love in Advent stir our hearts, and the hymns of the church lift us to new heights of both praise and proclamation. Gospel, good news, happens in glorious fullness in Advent.

Our lesson of the day is fully endowed with the total Christ story from creation to the cross, and in it the author offers a hymn that shapes the liturgy of our daily walk with God. There is praise, adoration, attribution and hoped for (not to mention boldly and lovingly accomplished) peace in this sacred text. It is a beautiful hymn of the season that has the inspiration embedded within to lift the church and each member of the body to new heights of praise and proclamation.

It is a gift to be reminded that fullness, wholeness, reconciliation and peace have, and still do to this very day, come to the world in Jesus the Christ. The deepest longings of our deepest human desires are fulfilled in the one whose birth the church is preparing to receive. Again, good news comes to us in the total Christ revealed among us.

Embedded within the sacred text of our hearts, too, is inspiration to lift high our heads in praise and proclamation. Deeply embedded within the rhythm of Christ's Church is a hymn that is sung, offered, and shared lavishly in the season we consecrate as holy. Just as we celebrate the truth of the incarnation of God with us, we are enlisted and assigned by virtue of our baptism to be an incarnate people who carry and share the very real presence and peace of God into this day. Today we may just encounter one who is feeling untethered, disconnected, broken, irreconcilable and lacking any sense of the peace that passes all understanding. Be awake and watch for this one, and may we each remember that the gospel good news is that within us is a hymn to be shared with God's precious ones. Like the saints and faithful church in Colossae may we sing and proclaim and praise as we prepare for the coming of Christ anew. As we are being re-membered let us rekindle within our common lives that we really do stand in the very presence and peace of the Christ who loves us more than we can ask or imagine. We can even confess that Jesus is closer to us than the beating of our own hearts.

May our hymn of praise and love be shared with all we meet today. In Christ's most holy name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Thaddaeus B. Allen

West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Northeastern Regions

December 21, 2021

Philippians 1:1-12

Do you like it when someone says to you, "I thank God for you"? I love this about the Apostle Paul, who in his letters reminds people that he is praying for them, that he never tires of giving thanks for them. It didn't matter if the letter was going to draw their attention to something that is happening between them, he always sought with his words to encourage and teach, and he gave thanks for them.

This impresses me because I have understood how important it is to thank the people around me, to thank God for their lives that bless mine, and those of many other people. We need each other, and as we are called to serve one another, the "thank yous" received and given in the process become a refreshment to the soul and encourage us to continue doing them in the joy of our Lord and for His glory.

In these words I remind you, my beloved in the Lord, that we, Regional and General Pastors, thank God for your lives and we always remember you in our prayers. The privilege of walking with you allows us to hear all that God is doing in mighty ways, by and through his church and with and in the world. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

May the Lord multiply his mercies and his favor for all of you in your lives, families, ministries and of course, in your faith and encouragement to move forward, continuing to the goal in Christ Jesus, who is our Lord and Savior and who calls us to be instruments of love, justice and reconciliation. Go and give thanks for someone today.

Rev. Lori Tapia

National Pastor, Obra Hispana

December 22, 2021

Micah 4:1-5

As we invite ourselves to imagine God's love revealed, we celebrate the gift of Jesus Christ. By using familiar image and metaphors, Jesus often taught about what the reign of God would look like on the earth when he taught about "the kin[g]dom of God". In every parable, Jesus invited us to consider the God whose love is limitless by asking us to think about those things that could be grasped in concrete ways, be it a story about sowing seeds, forgiving a prodigal son, or searching for a sheep that was lost. While we revel in and enjoy theological arguments and engagement with often lofty and scholarly language, Jesus knew that we could get to that understanding that was beyond us through the window of the familiar. He understood that language is simply our best attempt to explore and explain the love of God, God who is beyond our understanding, and whose love is not only limitless, but overwhelming to our senses and even to our intellects.

The prophet Micah invites the people of Israel to imagine the reign of God as a return to a familiar place: the house of the God of Jacob. (Micah 4:2) By situating them (and us) in this holy place that holds so much meaning, he invites the people to learn of God, return to a relationship that will prepare them for what is to come. They are to learn God's ways and walk in God's paths. Then, God moves.

Peace is abundant in Micah's imagination, and the weapons of war have been turned into tools of nurturing and development. No longer will the people use swords for war, but they will turn to the work of planting and making provision for the nations. Swords become the blades of the plows to be used in this work of planting and bringing about a harvest of provision and peace. Spears become tools for tending to the fruit of the harvest. Instead of destruction and war, there will be nourishing abundance because we have taken the resources we have and turned them over for use in establishing God's reign of peace.

When we take the resources God has given and use them to invest in the provision of needs, we create a world where everyone has enough, where "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid;" (Micah 4:4). God's love revealed through Jesus Christ calls us not to establish wealth for ourselves, but to ensure that there is enough for all of us. We must respond to the call of the prophet to use the resources God has given to create a world where "they shall ALL [emphasis added] sit under their own vines...." When God's love is revealed and shared in this way, when they ALL have enough to meet their needs, fear is gone, for "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18, NIV). We must bear witness to this limitless love by ensuring that they ALL have enough. This is the kin[g]dom of God. God's abundant love assures us that such a world can indeed be so.

Rev. Terri Hord Owens
General Minister and President

December 23, 2021

Luke 1:46-55

Most of us long for equilibrium in life, to have a sense of order and balance in the way things are and most likely will be. I know for certain that I hunger for stability and calmness. Perhaps this yearning to know what to expect next comes from a reasonable need to plan ahead, or maybe it springs from the desire to be able to turn our hearts and minds from the basics in life in order to enjoy the extras that bring added joy and delight to us. For whatever reason it is a common human necessity to have enough familiarity and constancy in life to get through today and to plan for tomorrow.

Oh, of course I am fascinated by the occasional disorder and disarray, but only when it is predictable and on my terms. Such organized chaos might be the fun house at the amusement park with its slanted floors and mirrored walls, or a Picasso painting at the museum offering one-eyed, angular, convoluted portraits. But unexpected chaos wreaks havoc on me and fills most of us with anxiety, forces us into survival mode, and makes it impossible for us to plan for the future.

For many people, especially those who have been marginalized by the inequities of our world, a life of chaos is sadly more familiar than not. If the only jobs available are low-wage jobs, which are usually the first to be cut in an economic downturn or civil unrest, then losing the only source of family income creates instant and severe instability. If you are a Person of Color and feel at risk just walking out the door just because you may be targeted for bigotry, hatred, or even violence just because of the color of your skin, your accent, your religion, or your citizenship status then life always feels out of balance and planning ahead may feel pointless. For those whose daily lives are so uncertain, then the idea of a major societal upheaval might feel like the chance to finally balance things that have been unequal for generations.

Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55, sung while she is pregnant with Jesus and in the presence of her supportive relative, Elizabeth, fills the air with the music of sacred imbalance and holy chaos. Scripture makes it unequivocally clear that Mary and Joseph existed in a world of gross inequity and sickening persecution. Whether it was because of their religion, nationality, life of poverty, her sex... or the fact that the world around them linked all of these in a wicked cycle of oppression and violence, they lived in turmoil. Thus, for Mary, turning the world upside down likely was a very good thing. Scattering the proud... bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly... filling the bellies of the hungry while the rich grovel for food... this disorder may actually envision a reordering of society.

What does Mary's song, like Hannah's generations before (1 Samuel 2:1-10), mean for us today? Many of us, in the United States and Canada especially, have felt the anxiety of a world upended by a global pandemic, seemingly unending and intractable racism, and deep political polarization and are longing for stability, familiarity, and predictability? What if after meditating on Mary's song we imagine her vision as a mandate for today, to take this tumultuous moment and finally right the wrongs of generations of injustice and rebuild a world built on the values that her son, Jesus, would later preach and emulate? May we hear Mary's words anew for us today and seek to live them faithfully, even in the midst of the chaos of life.

Rev. Allen V. Harris
Christian Church in Ohio

December 24, 2021

Imagine God's Love Revealed

Luke 2:15-20

Christmas Eve of 1992 my husband, Doug Wirt, was serving as Associate Pastor of the First Christian Church in Portland, Oregon. Our son, Rollie Wirt, was born on December 14 and newly home from the hospital, not sleeping through the nights. The early 8 p.m. Christmas Eve candlelight service was Doug's turn to bring the Christmas homily. In the glow of the candles and within echo of Christmas carols, Doug pulled up a rocking chair next to the communion table and sat down. I got up and I handed him our son, and as Doug rocked in the rocker, a homily he had recorded earlier in the day played over the sound system as he held a, thankfully, quiet baby.

The homily was about the amazement of holding a baby and wondering about the future, about making a commitment to an unknowable set of events. He pondered about life, hope, disappointment, and God's encompassing love, all while the candles glowed around them.

This image of Christmas Eve comes upon me again every year, and I'd venture that you, dear reader, have a Christmas Eve or two lodged in your heart as well.....a time when the world held wonder and the flickering lights/candles/hope held your attention and invited reflective awe.

Willie James Jennings in this 2017 commentary on the book of Acts, says of the writer of Luke/Acts, "... reveals the Spirit, who joins us in time, sharing our spaces and partaking in the places we inhabit as places fit for divine activity (Pg 4 Westminster/John Knox Press)." This passage invites that type of space for divine activity.

In this passage earth and heaven collide in a tiny child with a future yet to unfold and a story yet to be told and still told today. In that moment of revelation and crashing reality of a baby in a likely not tidy stable, with animal husbandry workers and angels celebrating the same event together, God is revealed with loud song and a gigantic star. An economically poor young couple away from home because their government required their migration in order to count them, welcome a son, moving the census number up by one and the faith of multitudes up over millennia.

Multiple versions of verse 19 of this text flesh out Mary's experience of this series of events culminating in this manger scene.

But Mary **treasured** these things and **continued to think** about them. (NCV)

But Mary **treasured** all these **words** and **pondered** them in her **heart**. (NRSV)

Mary **kept all these things to herself**, holding them dear, **deep within herself**. (Message)

Mary **kept all these things**, and **pondered** them in her **heart**. (KJV)

Mary **remembered** all these things and **thought deeply** about them. (GNT)

But Mary **treasured** all these things and **turned them over in her mind**. (JB Phillips NT)

but Mary **quietly treasured** these things in her **heart** and **often thought about them**. (LB)

These translators and interpreters of the text bring their reflections on the story with them. Mary treasured quietly or otherwise, pondered, kept these things or words to herself, and remembered the events.

These interpreters that give us scripture in our current languages also speak differently about where within her Mary held tightly onto these experiences/words... in her mind, her thinking, her heart, or deep within herself.

Like Mary who was living this experience in real time, we in 2021 hear this narrative and are invited to treasure it and ponder its meaning alone or with those we love. Once again in this year we are urged to think and feel deeply, and allow this story to catch our hearts and imaginations, to take our breath away with its beauty, and to change us. In the nativity we encounter the wonder provoked by God's divine activity in this moment and in this space we inhabit.

Rev. Cathy Myers Wirt

Christian Church in Oregon and Southern Idaho

December 25, 2021

Isaiah 9:2-7

Isaiah 9:6-7 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. 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.

During our daughter's young years, we often joined her best friend's family for celebrations. I cherished these gatherings because I knew Max would also be there. Max was a wonderful grandpa, father, and husband, and he was also a minister. Max always prayed beautiful words before we filled our plates with delicious food. In every prayer, he always included these words, "Thank you, God, for these precious young people joining us at the table today. We know these young people are yours and are destined for greatness beyond our imagination." These words are written on my heart, and I frequently use them when I am with parents.

Children are precious, of course, and babies . . . well, babies have a particular way of capturing our heart and drawing out of us more joy and love than we ever imagined. We can hardly wait to see a newly born baby, to hold them, to cuddle them, to watch their facial expressions, or just watch them breathe.

Today, Christmas Day, we are celebrating the birth of a new baby! His parents were not at a local hospital, nor were they surrounded by their family and friends in the waiting room. However, this baby is something to behold! We can only imagine holding him, cuddling him, watching his facial expressions, and watching him breathe ~ filling our hearts with abundant joy and love. This is a baby truly destined for greatness beyond our imagination, and his parents named him Jesus, Emmanuel, "God with us". GOD. WITH. US.

Throughout the year, we get so focused on Jesus as an adult that we tend to forget this little one who enters into this world as a vulnerable, totally dependent, beautiful baby boy. Today, Christmas Day, let us just pause to remember and dwell with this baby, who is God's, and who is destined for greatness beyond our imagination.

O Holy One,

Creator of every breath of life,

We join our voices with the angels all singing,

"Glory to God in the highest

and on earth peace and goodwill."

For Mary's safe delivery of this beautiful baby boy

and for Joseph's presence beside her.

For your strength

amidst their weariness

we sing!

We join our hearts with Mary and Joseph's

in their love to embrace this precious baby.

We rejoice

in your love and protection

that set this child of yours on a journey

destined for greatness and miracles

to bring love and peace and grace among all your people . . .

which is still way beyond our imagination.

Amen!

Rev. Pamela Holt

Christian Church in Oklahoma

December 26, 2021

Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings - Year C
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 - Luke 2:41-52 - Colossians 3:12-17

Our Devotion

A few days after Christmas, our world has been filled to overflowing with the refreshing Advent experiences of hope, joy, love, and light. Following this beautiful Spirit of peace, unity, and house of varying traditions. Somehow, this wondrous world vision begins to lose hold and dissipate. We're returned to the race of schedule and our attention draws toward the next media concern. Seemingly, this air and movement are beyond our control. As its turning occurs, we feel a buyer's remorse and what comes to mind is our role/s with obscurity.

This year, which were the marketing campaigns that drove our frenzy for the latest crazes? What were the expected gifts you or I did not receive this year? Maybe, it was not the season's wild commercialization. Were there prayers that had gone unanswered? Did the inexplicable occur? Was it trauma/s from the pandemics? What concerns and anxieties are you anticipating carrying into the new year? I think you might be able to get the picture and just how easy it can be to lose sight of this wondrous vision.

Whether it is in Hannah's resolve in prayer with her deepest need and vow, its fulfillment, and / or the subsequent dedication of her son to a life of service.

Whether it is in Mary and Joseph's worship, followed by an anxious searching for their missing twelve-year-old, found in the temple, where their son felt most at home, identified and personified. Later, that same Son would grow and give all his self for all of humanity, the Church and toward its rebuilding.

Whether it is in the counsel of the Colossians, to allow the word and peace of Christ to rule in their hearts. And whatever they do, in word or deed, do everything... giving thanks to God."

We could see in these pericopes, our lives, and the church in brief sketch, with needs to recover or hold our devotion. Let us not lose our focus or spirit of gratitude. We are called both, now and in the days to come to open our hearts to peace and thankfulness. These are to be embodied not only for our "normal" days, but especially during these trying times of pandemics.

Hannah, Mary, and Joseph amid heartbreaks and difficulties can be counted as devoted in prayers and in their searching. Their sacred encounters inspire ordinary people like you and I not to lose hope, patience, nor our faith. Even, in the face of the challenging conditions, changing cultures, and the reimagining of our traditions.

Christmas has already emerged for every following new day, month, and year to come. Let us not lose the beauty of this wondrous world vision. We can purpose ourselves to continue and live in the word and peace of Christ, by which always better can occur, not only as individuals, but for this fragmented world, with longing of our tangible actions, to bring healing and wholeness. If only, we might work to keep Christmas all year long.

May we live in yield of our devotion to Christ and this wondrous vision for the world.

Rev. Richie Sanchez
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Pacific Southwest Region

December 27, 2021

I'll Follow Jesus

John 21:19b-24

This Scripture is a part of a larger passage that is very dear to me. John 21:15-25 includes the text used in my ordination service. I remember that day so clearly. I traveled down the old familiar roads to the church where I was baptized. It was the place where I first confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This was the place where as an elementary student I first accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

On my ordination day, there were people gathered from around the wider Church. They were there from churches I had served as a student minister, as a reconciliation intern, and from Lexington Theological Seminary. They gathered to celebrate and encourage. Some came forward to lay their hands on me. Oh, the outpouring of love! The look of joy on my grandmother's face! A dear sister-in-Christ came forward to help button the many buttons on my new robe. I remember my mother/pastor placing a stole around my neck. The ordination prayer was deep, beautiful, and heartfelt—I still carry it in my Bible. It was quite a day.

Yet what I remember most was the solemnity in my heart. It was a serious undertaking for me. The preacher delivered a thought-provoking sermon. I was being asked how much I loved Jesus and the Church. Did I love the Church—the Gospel of Jesus Christ—enough to give my life to it? I am a PK (Preacher's Kid). I knew the sacrificial life many ordained people often live. I knew some of the challenges. I knew the sense of fulfillment and soul satisfaction that also could come with following Jesus. I had seen it in my grandmother (a deacon) and grandfather (an elder). I saw it in my mother and father (both clergy).

In a different way than on the day of my baptism, I was vowing that I had decided very publicly to follow Jesus. No turning back. I was making vows to live my life a certain way, to serve God a certain way. While I spoke particular words of affirmation aloud that were written by others, in my heart between God and me, I spoke private words. I said to God that it was my heart's deepest desire that I would always be found faithful to my call in God's eyes. I have striven to do this to the best of my ability by the grace of God.

As Christians, we all make certain vows to follow Jesus. Some days are more challenging than others to stay as faithful as we would like. Yet in the panoramic view—wide and long—there is such a fullness of joy and an abundance of goodness, grace, mercy, justice, and kindness to a life lived in followership of Christ. This is true especially when one finds contentment in living the call that God has made on one's life as an individual with little comparison to what the call of our fellow Christian may be.

Today is a great day to reconsider the call that Jesus has made to you to follow Him. Where is Jesus calling you to go? What are you being called to do? This season of your call may bring an interesting twist. Discern anew. May the road ahead lead you into a deeper and fuller relationship with Jesus Christ because of your love for Him and your willingness to follow Him.

Rev. Dr. Dara Cobb Lewis

Christian Church in South Carolina

December 28, 2021

Revelation 21:1-7

Until That Day

The epic of history portrayed in this text does not describe the destruction of creation and the transportation of humanity to some other galaxy. Popular religious fiction and secular depictions of heaven as a cloud-based, bright, other-worldly destination are not supported in much of the biblical reflections on heaven. The God who made the world and called it good does not intend to abandon it as eschatological garbage. The Church is a communion of hope that orders itself life around the future story God intends for creation. While someday we might want the world to simply be erased, God seems to have other plans.

For the writer of Revelation, John of Patmos, the "sea" was a symbol of chaos. It was a symbol of the unknown and unpredictable traumas people endure. These devotions were prepared to be read at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022. Yet, many of us are still trying to make sense of 2020. The "19" in COVID-19 stand for the year this virus was observable in humans 2019. We have been working to suppress and mitigate this disease for significant time. We have witnessed painful acts of bigotry and aggression toward people of color included the tragic murder of George Floyd by a person sworn to protect him. This past year also witnessed a terrifying riot in the United States Capital. In Canada, the remains of hundreds of indigenous children taken from their homes and housed in church-based homes were found--painful evidence of mistreatment and cover-ups. These past two years have had more than their share of mourning, crying, pain and death.

Many of us have not been able to worship in face-to-face settings like we would like. If we did, sorrow would have been our only offering in the offering plate. Familiar hymns would have become laments no matter how glorious the music and profound the lyrics. And in the face of all that we have been through, the promise that one day God will "wipe every tear from our eyes" provides hope and reassurance. Yet, in the context of this Advent and Christmas-tide season, we can also be comforted with the knowledge that God meets us here. Through the Incarnation Christ, God disproved our mythologies of impervious non-empathy. God does not require us to ascend some impossible climb of glee, fake smiles, and painted-on positivity. Instead, the new heaven and new Jerusalem comes from God, comes with God, to renew this earth and us with it. Jesus walked our roads and carried our sorrows and even in resurrection Jesus bears the scars of our suffering in his hands, feet and side. God will one day dry the tears from our eyes, but until that day God cries with us, comforts us, strengthens us, and directs us.

Rev. Dr. Andy Mangum

Christian Church in the Southwest

December 29, 2021

A New Strength for A New Time

1 Chronicles 28:1-10

The words of this devotional are written purely by faith, believing during these unprecedented times, God has generated within each of us a new level of care, compassion, and strength. Enough supply to guarantee our victory in the face of any unsettling or storm daring to cross our paths. Even if the eye of that disruption demands our physical, spiritual, financial, and emotional realignment. Friends, God's amazing love for us, is deeply embedded throughout the purposes and presence of God. There is a covenantal commitment within this presence that directly connects us to the promises of God in this lifetime or the next. There is an unwavering plan for all of Humanity, and I know that it shall come to pass. You and I are conduits within this plan. Sure, it may be filled with up and downs, in need of readjusting, however it is destined to keep hope alive, and help humanity find its narrow way back from fragmentation.

This global pandemic may have thrown some of us off course. A myriad of great thoughts and ideas having had to take a backseat to the care and welfare of all. Some plans got postponed. *Be not discouraged!* Our recovery is inevitable. A shifting is taking place. One having the distinct capability to enlarge our purview of who God truly is, and how actively the Spirit is at work in the world. Ponder King David's words to Solomon:

First Chronicles 28:10,

"Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you to build a house the sanctuary. Be strong and do the work."

You have been chosen to do some fantastic work, even amid turbulence. Imagine David relinquishing the dream of building to Solomon. This is a picture of turbulence. Living out the effects of his past, David needed to reimagine things differently. Solomon would now fulfill his legacy. God did not scrap the plan. It had to be reimaged. In fact, God honored the integrity of the plan, by not requesting someone from different family complete David's task. Instead, God moved down the family line. Sometimes life throws a curve ball, and we must discern what God is revealing to us in the moment.

In 1969, a woman dreamt of attending flight school. Plans shifted when she gave birth to a baby girl. Thoughts of college and career were postponed, while positioning herself differently to make a living. Years later, by the grace of God, the woman's two daughters together obtained more than seven graduate, and doctoral degrees. Her dream of a flight school was never realized. What is revealed is the fact that God's grace is never denied. The ideal of formal education and self-sufficiency for her children was only realigned. The word *post* means, "behind, following after or later than." Nowhere does it insinuate something is, "over, done and finished." My friends, this is what the grace of God looks like. Can I get a witness?

Paul writes, ***"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it, but each one should build with care."*** 1 Corinthians 3: 10.

It is the grace of God that sustains us, even pandemics, climate change, racism, political and civil unrest. It is also this grace that keeps standing strong, trusting in the promises presented through the birth of the Christ Child. *Things will get better.* There is a platform we can each experience, that supersedes our own personal woes. *LIFE!* We must position ourselves creatively to adequately reimagine God's love being displayed in every way possible. Make the choice to bring your full self to the party. Consider the fact that you have been chosen for this exact moment in time. We are the difference the world needs now.

Rev. Dr. Christal L. Williams

The Christian Church (DOC) in Tennessee

December 30, 2021

2 Chronicles 1:7-13

Here is a praiseworthy example of Solomon's legendary wisdom. Assuming the throne, he prays not for power, prestige, or wealth, but rather knowledge to lead well. In great love, God not only grants this request but also blesses Solomon with many of the things he did not ask for.

The end of the year encourages us to reflect on what we have done and how we have lived these twelve months. Such reflection often invites us to imagine what we might do differently. Many people create lists of things to change and do differently in the future.

Even if we don't make New Year's Resolutions, I wonder how often our ideas about improvement focus on changes that will impact us personally. Do we imagine changes that will mostly be for the benefit of others around us or for ourselves? When we consider changes, do we consider our lives from the perspective of the others who are or may be affected by how we live?

Given the (guilt-induced?) pressure we feel for self-improvement, I also fear that our reflections may be incomplete, missing the unrequested blessings that God has showered in our lives. Please let us never be so focused on the things we feel we have left misdome, badly done, or undone that we are oblivious of God's extravagant love to us. After all, once we recognize some of those blessings given to us, we might even glimpse how God's love reaches others *through* us.

Generous God, grant me a bit of Solomon's wisdom and blessings. As this year ends, open my eyes to the ways you have touched my life, even providing things I never imagined asking for. At the beginning of a new year, open my heart to living for people around me – my family, my friends, my community, your church, and your world. May the changes of my life be worthy of your great people in your good creation. Amen.

Rev. Josh Patty

Christian Church in the Upper Midwest

December 31, 2021

Just behind the butter, Christmas is

On my first day of College, I had to call my parents and inform them my carefully planned scholarships had gotten messed up and I needed \$600 before I could attend class. They, both eighth grade graduates, simply replied, "We will see what we can do." When I hung up the phone, a public phone in the middle of the hallway and in full view and earshot of all other rooms on the floor, I told myself over and over that things would somehow be OK. I wanted to believe the words I was saying in my head, but I was also running an internal argument with those words because I also knew that my parents did not have access to \$600.

I returned to my room and closed the door almost ready to give up. I must have fallen asleep because when I heard the knock at the door, I was face-down in my pillow and in the middle of a dream. As I wrestled myself out of my napping mental state and moved toward the door, I happened to notice, that by the numbers on the clock, I had been asleep for four hours. When I opened the door, my parents were there smiling, and my mother reached out and hugged me while my father handed me \$600 in cash. To this day I have no idea where they obtained the money on such short notice and honestly, I never asked.

I do not know if not making a big deal about thanking someone was part of the wider culture I grew up in, or if it was just something my family invented. This non-reciprocal approach to good deeds seemed to be based on the idea that when someone does something for you out of kindness, you can ruin it by drawing too much attention to the action. This is a hard thing to describe to southerners as it seems backwards to the ways they were taught in their culture, as I have learned in my life in Kentucky and Virginia. However, it was engrained in me that when people do something nice for you, you simply accept it and avoid large displays of thankfulness, because anything else would insult the giver by suggesting that they had done something for you just to get the thank you. So, for the next several years, every time I went home, particularly during Christmas break, I would put any extra cash I had saved up in my parent's refrigerator just behind the butter. True to my family teachings, they never asked or thanked me about that either.

It was this time, just after Christmas that my only son was told he had a cancerous 9-inch tumor in his chest. I was lost and began to argue with God. In that very moment, so many of you showed up at my door, through cards, emails, phone calls, Facebook posts and more. Sometimes, when life bullies us the most and our hope is nearly lost, we don't necessarily need others to be "light of the world," we just need to see the reflection of it in the eyes of others. For many years to come, it will be a Butter world for me and just behind it will be my thanks to all of you.

Read John 8:12-19 which in part says . . .

"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"

Rev. Bill Spangler-Dunning
Christian Church in Virginia