



Advent Devotional



This little book you are holding is titled, Advent Devotional. A simple title for a book that I think can have a profound and eternal impact on your life. Why have we called it Advent Devotional?

Life sure can get busy in between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Long before there even was a Thanksgiving, the Church called this time Advent. Advent is the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, along with the days in between. It is a time for the Church to slow down and ponder anew the marvel of the arrival of Jesus, while at the same time look forward to his imminent and promised return. Healthy, centering reminders for those of us who often get caught up in the busy secularism of the season.

Devoting is one of North Point's six markers for a healthy disciple. A growing Christian necessarily devotes themselves to the reading of Scripture, thinking about Jesus, and prayer. This little book is designed to help you devote yourself to Jesus during this busy Advent season. It functions quite simply: A passage to read each day. A brief reflection on that passage that we think will bless you. A prayer to kick start communion with God.

This little book is a special one for another reason. All of the devotional writings, AND the beautiful and poignant pieces of art that you find throughout were created by two of our North Point members! Traci Rhoades is the author of these thoughtful reflections. She is an accomplished blogger and author in her own right, and we are blessed to have had her and her husband Ryan at North Point for the past 14 years. I would encourage you to check out her web blog tracesoffaith.com to explore more of her thoughts and writings. This website also has information on her recently published book - "Not All Who

Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost.” Traci has also heavily invested in our Women’s ministry and our Youth and Children’s ministries over the years.

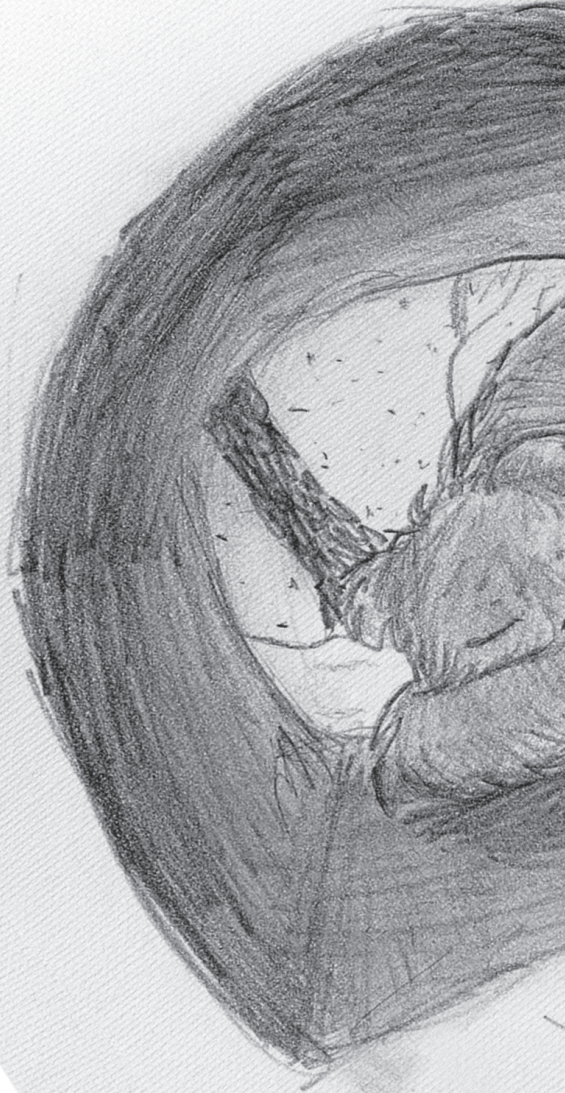
The artist who lovingly crafted these incredible drawings is the very talented Allie Rhoades!

Allie is 13 years old and in the 8th grade. She is a willing helper at North Point, and an active member of our MidPoint youth program. How blessed are we that she took the time to use her artistic gifts to bless us?

May this little book bless you and fill you with Advent Hope.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "SCOTT" in a cursive, slightly slanted font. To the right of the signature is a simple smiley face drawn with two dots for eyes and a curved line for a mouth.

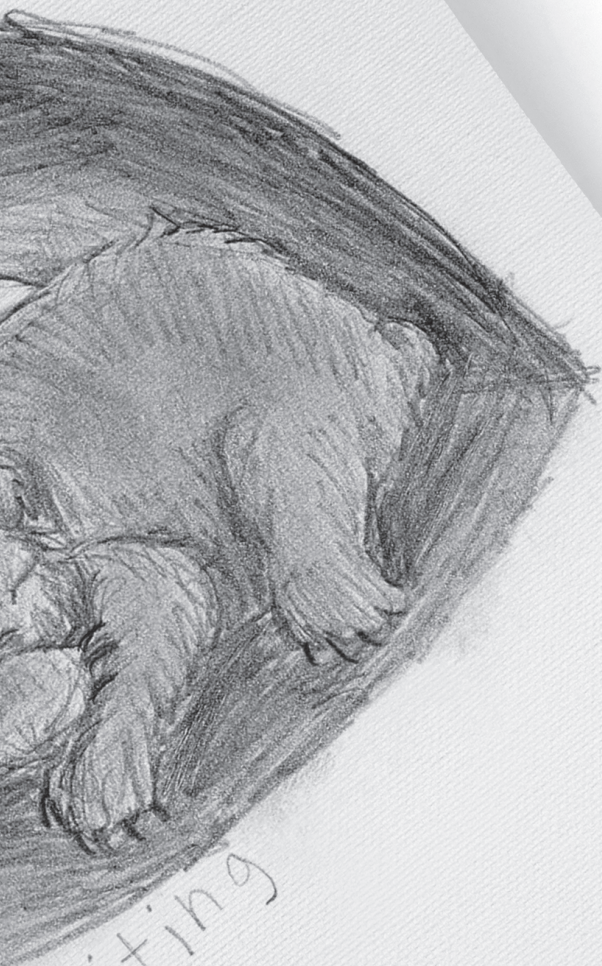
Pastor Scott



★ WAITING ★

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.*

PSALM 130:5



Waiting

DECEMBER 1

* Unless noted, scripture references are New International Version.

Jeremiah 33:14-16 NIV

¹⁴THE DAYS ARE COMING," DECLARES THE LORD, "WHEN I WILL FULFILL THE GOOD PROMISE I MADE TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH. ¹⁵IN THOSE DAYS AND AT THAT TIME I WILL MAKE A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH SPROUT FROM DAVID'S LINE; HE WILL DO WHAT IS JUST AND RIGHT IN THE LAND. ¹⁶IN THOSE DAYS JUDAH WILL BE SAVED AND JERUSALEM WILL LIVE IN SAFETY. THIS IS THE NAME BY WHICH IT WILL BE CALLED: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUS SAVIOR.

By the time of Jeremiah's prophetic days, the Jewish nation had split in two. Israel (the northern kingdom) fell to the Assyrian nation, forced into exile. Judah (the southern kingdom) fought off the Assyrians, but would later fall to the Babylonians. The major and minor prophets at the end of the old testament (so labeled because of the size of each book), spoke prophetic words during these tumultuous times. Often, a prophet from the southern kingdom would travel to the north with a word from God, or prophets like Ezekiel, also a priest, prophesied while exiled in Babylon.

Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem; and specifically, in Judah (the southern kingdom). He was there when King Zedekiah, Judah's last king, was taken to Babylon. He lived among the ruins in Jerusalem with the Temple defiled and all but abandoned. During his days as a prophet, he was thrown in a dungeon, held under house arrest, and even briefly taken to Egypt.

When reading scripture, context matters. We're reading ancient words the people would have heard not read, as most were illiterate. Jeremiah, and all the prophets, lived during a specific time in history. He prophesied in Jerusalem, but we're told in the ninth chapter of Daniel, his message reached the exiles too.

In Jeremiah's day, nothing made sense anymore. Friends and family were separated, the Holy City lay in ruins, and the people in exile wondered if God was going to show up. We know the rest of the story; those exiled in Babylon stayed in that country for seventy years before being allowed to come home. Some returned, and others assimilated into the foreign culture. But at the point in today's passage, all the people of God could do was wait, and hope.

Enter advent. The church's season of waiting. We too live in days when things don't always make sense. Holy things around us are often defiled, and the faithful seem assimilated to the ways of our world. During this season, we're going to look closely at what the Bible says about waiting. Christ has come, Christ will come again. In between, we observe advent (literally "coming").

Knowing all this, I'd encourage you to read today's passage again. It's a message of tremendous hope; then, now and forever.

PRAYER

“God of the universe, revealed to us in Holy Scripture through the writings of the prophets and the preaching of John the Baptist, you have called us to prepare our hearts for your visitation. Ready us afresh to hear your word and to respond as faithful servants.” Amen

Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church of America

DECEMBER 2

Psalm 125:1-10 NIV

¹IN YOU, LORD MY GOD, I PUT MY TRUST. ²I TRUST IN YOU; DO NOT LET ME BE PUT TO SHAME, NOR LET MY ENEMIES TRIUMPH OVER ME. ³NO ONE WHO HOPES IN YOU WILL EVER BE PUT TO SHAME, BUT SHAME WILL COME ON THOSE WHO ARE TREACHEROUS WITHOUT CAUSE. ⁴SHOW ME YOUR WAYS, LORD, TEACH ME YOUR PATHS. ⁵GUIDE ME IN YOUR TRUTH AND TEACH ME, FOR YOU ARE GOD MY SAVIOR, AND MY HOPE IS IN YOU ALL DAY LONG. ⁶REMEMBER, LORD, YOUR GREAT MERCY AND LOVE, FOR THEY ARE FROM OF OLD. ⁷DO NOT REMEMBER THE SINS OF MY YOUTH AND MY REBELLIOUS WAYS; ACCORDING TO YOUR LOVE REMEMBER ME, FOR YOU, LORD, ARE GOOD. ⁸GOOD AND UPRIGHT IS THE LORD; THEREFORE HE INSTRUCTS SINNERS IN HIS WAYS. ⁹HE GUIDES THE HUMBLE IN WHAT IS RIGHT AND TEACHES THEM HIS WAY. ¹⁰ALL THE WAYS OF THE LORD ARE LOVING AND FAITHFUL TOWARD THOSE WHO KEEP THE DEMANDS OF HIS COVENANT.

When I hear of someone going through a tragedy such as losing a loved one, my first prayer is that God would draw near to them. I lost my dad suddenly in 2006. We got two calls one evening while getting ready for bed in our Lake Orion home. In the first, he was fighting for his life. In the second, he was gone. My husband and I hastily packed our bags to make the drive to my hometown in Missouri. Since it was already late, we drove to Otsego, staying with my in-laws before driving the rest of the way. I got there and realized with dismay, I'd forgotten to pack my Bible. I asked my father-in-law if I could borrow his to read a psalm or two. The Psalms: God's faithful have been reading, praying, singing and chanting them for thousands of years.

I'd encourage you to read Psalm 25 aloud. The words of David have been written down for us, but they were likely prayed aloud in Jewish communities.

What gives us hope in this psalm (we will read the rest tomorrow)? David knew God to be trustworthy. When I was reeling with grief, desperate to get home, in pretty hopeless circumstances, I trusted God to comfort me as well. He did so through the psalms. This is true not only for David and me, but verse three tells us anyone who hopes in God will not be put to shame, left hopeless. Putting our trust in God is always wise.

What a good time of the year then to look at the psalms. Holidays can be a real struggle for many people. Father's Day fell about two months after my dad passed away. God and I sat alone that day, and he comforted me. "Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old" (Psalm 25:6).

His great mercy and love are available to all of us this advent season, as some remember loved ones who are missed, as others struggle financially with Christmas gifts and decorations, and while we all prepare for family dinners and parties with friends. When things are far from perfect, but you long to feel the Christmas spirit, pray the psalms. They've helped believers express their truest feelings since Bible times.

PRAYER

Dear God, *We trust you, but know things aren't as they should be. We live in a time of already, but not yet, and there is tension there. Thank you for being our living hope. Amen*

DECEMBER 3

Psalm 25:11-22 NIV

¹¹FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR NAME, LORD, FORGIVE MY INIQUITY, THOUGH IT IS GREAT. ¹²WHO, THEN, ARE THOSE WHO FEAR THE LORD? HE WILL INSTRUCT THEM IN THE WAYS THEY SHOULD CHOOSE. ¹³THEY WILL SPEND THEIR DAYS IN PROSPERITY, AND THEIR DESCENDANTS WILL INHERIT THE LAND. ¹⁴THE LORD CONFIDES IN THOSE WHO FEAR HIM; HE MAKES HIS COVENANT KNOWN TO THEM. ¹⁵MY EYES ARE EVER ON THE LORD, FOR ONLY HE WILL RELEASE MY FEET FROM THE SNARE. ¹⁶TURN TO ME AND BE GRACIOUS TO ME, FOR I AM LONELY AND AFFLICTED. ¹⁷RELIEVE THE TROUBLES OF MY HEART AND FREE ME FROM MY ANGUISH. ¹⁸LOOK ON MY AFFLICTION AND MY DISTRESS AND TAKE AWAY ALL MY SINS. ¹⁹SEE HOW NUMEROUS ARE MY ENEMIES AND HOW FIERCELY THEY HATE ME! ²⁰GUARD MY LIFE AND RESCUE ME; DO NOT LET ME BE PUT TO SHAME, FOR I TAKE REFUGE IN YOU. ²¹MAY INTEGRITY AND UPRIGHTNESS PROTECT ME, BECAUSE MY HOPE, LORD, IS IN YOU. ²²DELIVER ISRAEL, O GOD, FROM ALL THEIR TROUBLES!

We revisit Psalm 25 today. Again, I'd encourage you to read it out loud. Let's take a closer look at the literary style of this psalm. It's an acrostic, with each line being assigned a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (although a few letters are not used). Other psalms do this too, and scholars suggest a number of reasons for it.

First, if the psalms were meant for reading aloud, a rhythmic flow of words aids in worship; like in music, rhythms help us read and remember. Consider the first verse and chorus of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," a ninth century Latin hymn, which is popular during advent. Sense how the flow of words lends itself to contemplation.

“O Come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel.”

Another reason for an acrostic pattern is to summarize a topic. Referring to Psalm 25, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “David is pictured in this Psalm as in a faithful miniature. His holy trust, his many conflicts, his great transgressions, his bitter repentance, and his deep distresses are all here; so that we see the very heart of ‘the man after God’s own heart.’” As a parallel, consider what John the Revelator tells us about Jesus, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13 HCSB). God in his fullness.

Finally, the psalmists may have used an acrostic to aid in memorization. The psalms are found in prayer books, they comprise the lyrics to hymns and modern praise and worship songs, and are often read in worship service liturgies across Christian traditions. When we commit words like “May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you” (Psalm 25:21) to memory, we’ve got a ready reminder of our source of hope. Our integrity and uprightness, indeed anything good in us, is through Christ. From his birth, to the perfect life he lived on earth, to his death and resurrection, our hope comes from the Lord.

PRAYER

A benediction: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13*

DECEMBER 4

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 NIV

⁹HOW CAN WE THANK GOD ENOUGH FOR YOU IN RETURN FOR ALL THE JOY WE HAVE IN THE PRESENCE OF OUR GOD BECAUSE OF YOU? ¹⁰NIGHT AND DAY WE PRAY MOST EARNESTLY THAT WE MAY SEE YOU AGAIN AND SUPPLY WHAT IS LACKING IN YOUR FAITH. ¹¹NOW MAY OUR GOD AND FATHER HIMSELF AND OUR LORD JESUS CLEAR THE WAY FOR US TO COME TO YOU. ¹²MAY THE LORD MAKE YOUR LOVE INCREASE AND OVERFLOW FOR EACH OTHER AND FOR EVERYONE ELSE, JUST AS OURS DOES FOR YOU. ¹³MAY HE STRENGTHEN YOUR HEARTS SO THAT YOU WILL BE BLAMELESS AND HOLY IN THE PRESENCE OF OUR GOD AND FATHER WHEN OUR LORD JESUS COMES WITH ALL HIS HOLY ONES.

You might recall the epistles toward the end of the new testament are letters. The authors; Paul, Peter, James and others were Jewish people who became followers of Jesus. Going out into the known world, partnering with men and women in local communities, they planted the first churches. Many early Christians would have still attended synagogue, but also met with new believers in house churches. It's a lot for our imaginations, but a worthwhile exercise to consider.

Paul wrote two letters to the church in Thessalonica, and they were among the first letters he wrote. Eventually, these letters circulated among other churches as well, and like most of the Bible, they would have been read aloud in a group. Thessalonica was a major city, situated along the Via Egnatia road, linking Rome to India and China. It had a number of travelers, and Jews and Gentiles alike would have

called this city home. After Paul established the church, he sent Timothy and Silas there for a time to continue teaching the converts.

Among our selected scriptures passages, some will focus on the first coming of Christ, which is what we'll celebrate as Christmas a few short weeks from now. Advent, however, is a season reflecting on the idea that "Christ has come, and Christ will come again." I Thessalonians focuses a lot on this second part. Let's look more closely at this letter, from Paul, Silas and Timothy (I Thessalonians 1:1). These letters are deeply personal, yet are also full of universal application.

- Paul longs to see the Thessalonians again, so he can help them grow in the faith.
- With God's help, Paul wants their love to increase and overflow for one another and for everyone else.
- Then, when Jesus comes back with all his holy ones, this church, and all the churches who hear these words (that's us too) will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God. That deserves a hallelujah (praise the Lord)!

"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42:2).

PRAVER

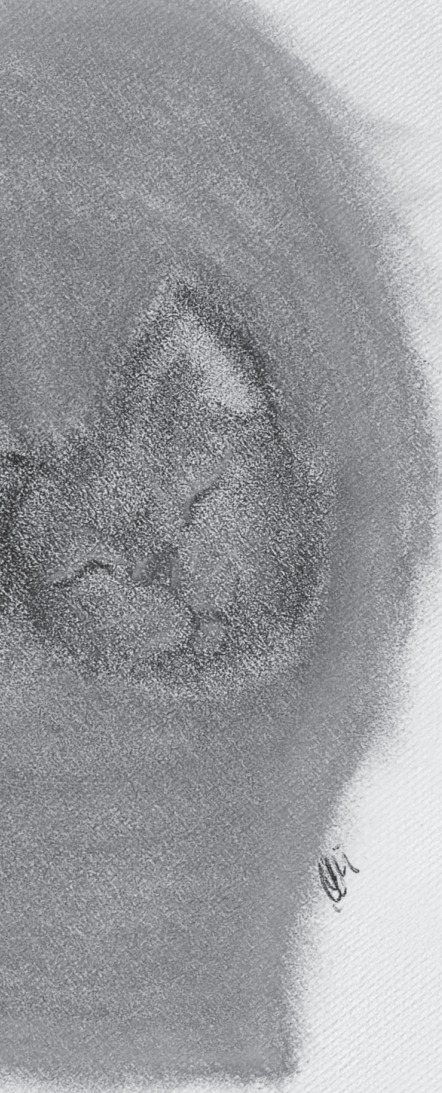
Lord, Give us a deep longing to see you. Amen



★ LOVE ★

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you
a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth
to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

ISAIAH 7:14



12



Love

DECEMBER 5

Luke 21:25-36 NIV

²⁵THERE WILL BE SIGNS IN THE SUN, MOON AND STARS. ON THE EARTH, NATIONS WILL BE IN ANGUISH AND PERPLEXITY AT THE ROARING AND TOSSING OF THE SEA. ²⁶PEOPLE WILL FAINT FROM TERROR, APPREHENSIVE OF WHAT IS COMING ON THE WORLD, FOR THE HEAVENLY BODIES WILL BE SHAKEN. ²⁷AT THAT TIME THEY WILL SEE THE SON OF MAN COMING IN A CLOUD WITH POWER AND GREAT GLORY. ²⁸WHEN THESE THINGS BEGIN TO TAKE PLACE, STAND UP AND LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, BECAUSE YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR." ²⁹HE TOLD THEM THIS PARABLE: "LOOK AT THE FIG TREE AND ALL THE TREES. ³⁰WHEN THEY SPROUT LEAVES, YOU CAN SEE FOR YOURSELVES AND KNOW THAT SUMMER IS NEAR. ³¹EVEN SO, WHEN YOU SEE THESE THINGS HAPPENING, YOU KNOW THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR. ³²TRULY I TELL YOU, THIS GENERATION WILL CERTAINLY NOT PASS AWAY UNTIL ALL THESE THINGS HAVE HAPPENED. ³³HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, BUT MY WORDS WILL NEVER PASS AWAY. ³⁴BE CAREFUL, OR YOUR HEARTS WILL BE WEIGHED DOWN WITH CAROUSING, DRUNKENNESS AND THE ANXIETIES OF LIFE, AND THAT DAY WILL CLOSE ON YOU SUDDENLY LIKE A TRAP. ³⁵FOR IT WILL COME ON ALL THOSE WHO LIVE ON THE FACE OF THE WHOLE EARTH. ³⁶BE ALWAYS ON THE WATCH, AND PRAY THAT YOU MAY BE ABLE TO ESCAPE ALL THAT IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN, AND THAT YOU MAY BE ABLE TO STAND BEFORE THE SON OF MAN.

Noting today's passage comes from the gospel of Luke, I thought we might be reading about the birth of Jesus, but that's found in Luke 2.

For so many of us new to the idea of observing Advent, it is easy to quickly forget its emphasis on learning to walk with God in the waiting times of life (which seems like most of the time really).

Furthermore, the scripture passages we're using in this book are taken from the Revised Common Lectionary, which cycles the church through the entirety of scripture every three years. A person who uses the lectionary in their daily Bible reading time, for example, would read select passages from the old testament, a psalm, an epistle and a gospel reading every day. This gives the people of God a spiritual rhythm to their everyday life. In the Western Church, our new church year starts with advent and we spend some time waiting for the gospel details to unfold.

All that to say, we won't read about the birth of Christ yet. Instead, our passage focuses again on the second coming of Jesus (be on the lookout for threads like this in the lectionary readings). In my Bible, today's passage has red letters, signifying Jesus is doing the talking. The chapter starts out with Jesus and some other people in the Temple. Do take note of the poor widow's offering at the start of the chapter, because Jesus sure did. Looking around at the Temple, Jesus predicts it will fall, the people will see a number of signs, and the Son of Man will come on a cloud with power and great glory. Jesus often went for the shock factor. What does he tell the crowd to do when they see the Son of Man coming? "Stand up and lift up your heads."

His advisement is still relevant today. Be careful that your hearts aren't weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life. Be always on the watch. Pray that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

PRAYER

Lord, *Help us to stay spiritually alert at all times. Give us the strength to withstand anything that comes our way, until the day we stand before you, heads lifted up. Eyes on Jesus. Amen*

DECEMBER 6

Malachi 3:1-4 NIV

¹I WILL SEND MY MESSENGER, WHO WILL PREPARE THE WAY BEFORE ME. THEN SUDDENLY THE LORD YOU ARE SEEKING WILL COME TO HIS TEMPLE; THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT, WHOM YOU DESIRE, WILL COME," SAYS THE LORD ALMIGHTY. ²BUT WHO CAN ENDURE THE DAY OF HIS COMING? WHO CAN STAND WHEN HE APPEARS? FOR HE WILL BE LIKE A REFINER'S FIRE OR A LAUNDERER'S SOAP. ³HE WILL SIT AS A REFINER AND PURIFIER OF SILVER; HE WILL PURIFY THE LEVITES AND REFINE THEM LIKE GOLD AND SILVER. THEN THE LORD WILL HAVE MEN WHO WILL BRING OFFERINGS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, ⁴AND THE OFFERINGS OF JUDAH AND JERUSALEM WILL BE ACCEPTABLE TO THE LORD, AS IN DAYS GONE BY, AS IN FORMER YEARS.

The prophet Malachi (literally “my messenger”) is at the end of our old testament. After years in exile, many Jewish people returned to Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people restored the temple and repaired the city walls. However, God knows his people still need reminding; he doesn't want their empty worship rituals, he wants their hearts. “I am not pleased with you,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will accept no offering from your hands” (Malachi 1:10b).

Although the NIV doesn't use the word, the opening line of today's passage is Lo! In total, Malachi uses this word five times in four chapters, indicating a sense of urgency. When scripture says “Lo!,” it means pay attention. Hundreds of years before Malachi, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about a messenger too, “A voice of one calling: ‘In

the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord: make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3). According to Malachi, after the messenger prepares the way, who will come?

The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple.

The messenger of the covenant will come.

Jesus is Lord.

Shortly after the days of Malachi, the Jewish people enter what is known to Christian scholars as the intertestamental period, a 400-year period before we begin the gospels, and the life of Jesus. More foreign rule, more tyrannical leadership, more fighting to be a people set apart for God. Did these men and women too reflect on the words we read here? How they must have longed for a messenger. In today’s world, spending five minutes watching the world news gives us a similar longing for Christ’s return.

This, this is the hope we have to offer a hurting world. We’re told, “Therefore, [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 9:15 HCSB). The gospel message proclaims salvation is ours by grace through faith. We’re no longer lost in sin, death has no victory over us, and we are set free to pursue a life with Jesus the rest of our days, into eternity. Christ has come, Christ is coming. The in-between is advent.

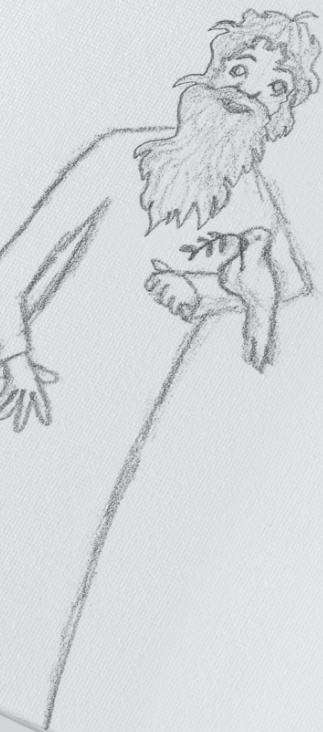
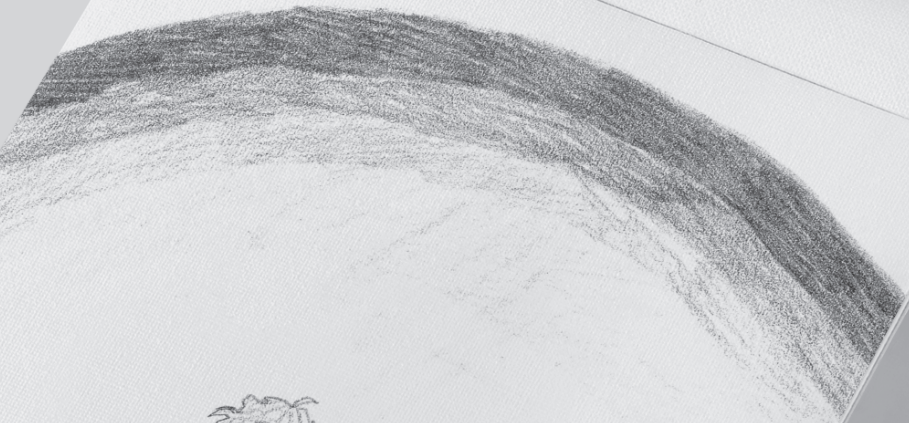
PRAYER

Dear God, *Thank you for the messengers in our lives. Those who prepare us to meet you. Lord, keep us hopeful, that your work on earth will continue, and we’ll meet you face to face someday. Amen*

★ HOPE ★

*I have set my rainbow in the clouds,
and it will be the sign of the covenant
between me and the earth.*

GENESIS 9:13



DECEMBER 7

Luke 1:68-79 NIV

⁶⁸PRAISE BE TO THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL, BECAUSE HE HAS COME TO HIS PEOPLE AND REDEEMED THEM. ⁶⁹HE HAS RAISED UP A HORN OF SALVATION FOR US IN THE HOUSE OF HIS SERVANT DAVID ⁷⁰[AS HE SAID THROUGH HIS HOLY PROPHETS OF LONG AGO], ⁷¹SALVATION FROM OUR ENEMIES AND FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US— ⁷²TO SHOW MERCY TO OUR ANCESTORS AND TO REMEMBER HIS HOLY COVENANT, ⁷³THE OATH HE SWORE TO OUR FATHER ABRAHAM: ⁷⁴TO RESCUE US FROM THE HAND OF OUR ENEMIES, AND TO ENABLE US TO SERVE HIM WITHOUT FEAR ⁷⁵IN HOLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE HIM ALL OUR DAYS. ⁷⁶AND YOU, MY CHILD, WILL BE CALLED A PROPHET OF THE MOST HIGH; FOR YOU WILL GO ON BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR HIM, ⁷⁷TO GIVE HIS PEOPLE THE KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION THROUGH THE FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS, ⁷⁸BECAUSE OF THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD, BY WHICH THE RISING SUN WILL COME TO US FROM HEAVEN ⁷⁹TO SHINE ON THOSE LIVING IN DARKNESS AND IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH, TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO THE PATH OF PEACE.

We're introduced to our first Christmas story character today. Enter priest Zechariah, stage right. For now, he has a non-speaking role. Earlier in Luke, we read he and his wife, Elizabeth, are from the Jewish line of priests. They are “upright and devout, blamelessly observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord” (Luke 1:6 REB).

The next verse begins with the word “but.” Nowhere is this word more important than it is in scripture. It should make us sit up and pay attention, for it tells us we know some of the story, but there is more. Elizabeth joins the unfortunate list of barren women in the Bible. She’d had months, even years, when she hoped her monthly cycle would not happen, but it did. This couple has experienced the disappointment of praying for something, but continuing to wait.

If we keep going in chapter one, we learn Zechariah and his group of priests were on duty in Jerusalem. He was chosen to burn incense in the temple of the Lord. There, an angel of the Lord appears and tells Zechariah his wife will have a son and they should name him John. Zechariah questioned the angel’s proclamation, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years” (Luke 1:18).

God’s response to his question is to take away his ability to speak until the birth of his son. When the people of God realize Zechariah received a vision at the altar, they want to know the details, but Zechariah remains mute on the subject. Months later (but still in chapter one), Elizabeth gives birth to a son and insists he be named John, even though this was not a family name. The people turn again to Zechariah. “He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote: ‘His name is John.’” (Luke 1:63). We know him as John the Baptist.

Immediately, Zechariah could speak again. His first words are the spirit-inspired prophecy we have as today’s reading. He acknowledges his baby boy as “the Lord’s forerunner, to prepare his way” (we’ve read similar words from Malachi and Isaiah).

PRAVER

Dear God, *Thank you for Zechariah and Elizabeth’s obedience. Zechariah’s song ends with words we need desperately today. Oh, that Jesus would “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). Amen*

DECEMBER 8

Philippians 1:3-11 NIV

³I THANK MY GOD EVERY TIME I REMEMBER YOU. ⁴IN ALL MY PRAYERS FOR ALL OF YOU, I ALWAYS PRAY WITH JOY ⁵BECAUSE OF YOUR PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL FROM THE FIRST DAY UNTIL NOW, ⁶BEING CONFIDENT OF THIS, THAT HE WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK IN YOU WILL CARRY IT ON TO COMPLETION UNTIL THE DAY OF CHRIST JESUS. ⁷IT IS RIGHT FOR ME TO FEEL THIS WAY ABOUT ALL OF YOU, SINCE I HAVE YOU IN MY HEART AND, WHETHER I AM IN CHAINS OR DEFENDING AND CONFIRMING THE GOSPEL, ALL OF YOU SHARE IN GOD'S GRACE WITH ME. ⁸GOD CAN TESTIFY HOW I LONG FOR ALL OF YOU WITH THE AFFECTION OF CHRIST JESUS. ⁹AND THIS IS MY PRAYER: THAT YOUR LOVE MAY ABOUND MORE AND MORE IN KNOWLEDGE AND DEPTH OF INSIGHT, ¹⁰SO THAT YOU MAY BE ABLE TO DISCERN WHAT IS BEST AND MAY BE PURE AND BLAMELESS FOR THE DAY OF CHRIST, ¹¹FILLED WITH THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT COMES THROUGH JESUS CHRIST—TO THE GLORY AND PRAISE OF GOD.

Welcome to Philippi. This inland city was built along the same major Roman road as Thessalonica, the Via Egnatia, in the Macedonia district. Its name implies a Roman colony, but there's still evidence of a heavy Greek influence. Philippi had a large working class, with a minority of retired Roman soldiers and families. Idol worship was common, especially emperor worship.

There were likely not many Jews in Philippi. In his letter to this church, Paul doesn't quote the old testament. Acts sixteen tells of women in the community, like Lydia, a seller of purple cloth, who gathered to pray at the river on the Sabbath, possibly because there was no synagogue.

So big picture, what does Paul write about to these new believers? JOY. A form of this word gets sixteen mentions in four chapters. If you have time, I'd encourage you to read the letter in full, which takes about ten minutes. There's a lot to love about Philippi.

Paul and Timothy (he's also mentioned in the opening verse) give thanks for the church at Philippi. I like their use of the term "partnership in the gospel" in verses five and seven. It shows each person has a role to play in God's kingdom. Of course, this all relies on the good work Jesus began in us, and the promise he will carry it on to completion (verse six).

This letter is one of four letters Paul wrote while under house arrest in Rome. Knowing this adds such depth to this encouraging letter to new converts, who he remembers fondly, a letter filled with exhortations to rejoice and live life with joy. Later in this letter, Paul writes he has "learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11) Notice it's not contentment about our circumstances, because pretending we are content (joyful even) about our circumstances when they might be especially trying or awful, would be a lie, and a fake Christianity. However, what Paul has learned, while in prison, and what he writes about here, is the joy we can have in knowing Christ, living for him whatever the circumstances. A subtle but significant difference.

PRAYER

A benediction: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen*

DECEMBER 9

Luke 3:1-6 NIV

¹IN THE FIFTEENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF TIBERIUS CAESAR—WHEN PONTIUS PILATE WAS GOVERNOR OF JUDEA, HEROD TETRARCH OF GALILEE, HIS BROTHER PHILIP TETRARCH OF ITUREA AND TRACONITIS, AND LYSANIAS TETRARCH OF ABILENE—²DURING THE HIGH-PRIESTHOOD OF ANNAS AND CAIAPHAS, THE WORD OF GOD CAME TO JOHN SON OF ZECHARIAH IN THE WILDERNESS. ³HE WENT INTO ALL THE COUNTRY AROUND THE JORDAN, PREACHING A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. ⁴AS IT IS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE WORDS OF ISAIAH THE PROPHET: “A VOICE OF ONE CALLING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD, MAKE STRAIGHT PATHS FOR HIM. ⁵EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE FILLED IN, EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL MADE LOW. THE CROOKED ROADS SHALL BECOME STRAIGHT, THE ROUGH WAYS SMOOTH. ⁶AND ALL PEOPLE WILL SEE GOD’S SALVATION.’”

When it comes to reading the Bible, we have a complicated relationship with the lists of names. First of all, they are not common today, so we have a hard time pronouncing them. Secondly, we know little of the context surrounding these names, so they seem meaningless. However, if you research the list of Roman leaders mentioned at the beginning of today’s reading, you’ll find it’s a who’s who of the governing authorities in Jesus’ day. The original audience would have recognized them as carrying great weight.

After a brief stop in Philippi yesterday, we return to Judea and the ministry of John the Baptist as an adult. Matthew tells us John wore “a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and honey” (Matthew 3:4 HCSB).

In researching and writing these reflections, I've developed a deeper appreciation for the prophets. I better sense their urgency, their desperate plea that the people pay attention before it's too late. God asked the prophets to do any number of extraordinary things in order to get the people's attention. John the Baptist shows up dressed funny and smelling of sweet locust, to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He picks up on the old testament prophecies of a coming Messiah. Unlike these other prophets, as John the Baptist is speaking of God's salvation, Jesus shows up in person, asking to be baptized. The one God's people have been waiting for is now walking among them. He lived, he died, and rose again that we might see salvation.

"Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us" (Romans 5:1 NLT).

Advent may be known as a season of waiting, but I hope you clearly see what the prophets foretold. We're not waiting for the good news anymore. We wait for the second coming, when "those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (Revelation 21:7).

PRAYER

Dear God, *Thank you for the salvation Jesus offers. May we live for you now, and in anticipation of all that is to come. Amen*

DECEMBER 10

Zephaniah 3:14-20 NIV

¹⁴SING, DAUGHTER ZION; SHOUT ALOUD, ISRAEL! BE GLAD AND REJOICE WITH ALL YOUR HEART, DAUGHTER JERUSALEM! ¹⁵THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY YOUR PUNISHMENT, HE HAS TURNED BACK YOUR ENEMY. THE LORD, THE KING OF ISRAEL, IS WITH YOU; NEVER AGAIN WILL YOU FEAR ANY HARM. ¹⁶ON THAT DAY THEY WILL SAY TO JERUSALEM, "DO NOT FEAR, ZION; DO NOT LET YOUR HANDS HANG LIMP. ¹⁷THE LORD YOUR GOD IS WITH YOU, THE MIGHTY WARRIOR WHO SAVES. HE WILL TAKE GREAT DELIGHT IN YOU; IN HIS LOVE HE WILL NO LONGER REBUKE YOU, BUT WILL REJOICE OVER YOU WITH SINGING." ¹⁸"I WILL REMOVE FROM YOU ALL WHO MOURN OVER THE LOSS OF YOUR APPOINTED FESTIVALS, WHICH IS A BURDEN AND REPROACH FOR YOU. ¹⁹AT THAT TIME I WILL DEAL WITH ALL WHO OPPRESSED YOU. I WILL RESCUE THE LAME; I WILL GATHER THE EXILES. I WILL GIVE THEM PRAISE AND HONOR IN EVERY LAND WHERE THEY HAVE SUFFERED SHAME. ²⁰AT THAT TIME I WILL GATHER YOU; AT THAT TIME I WILL BRING YOU HOME. I WILL GIVE YOU HONOR AND PRAISE AMONG ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH WHEN I RESTORE YOUR FORTUNES BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES," SAYS THE LORD.

King Saul was Israel's first king. He started out as a good king, but made some wrong choices, and in many ways ended up being a bad king. David was a good king, who also made some questionable decisions, but we know him to be "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). And so it goes. The Jewish nation, and later the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, have a lot of kings. Some are mostly bad, while others are mostly good. None are perfect.

One mostly good king is King Josiah, who ruled over Judah in 622 BC. Partnering with prophets like Zephaniah, he ushered in a number of religious reforms and a spiritual revival swept through the land. Although things were looking up, God's prophets again had a word for the flourishing - he wants a pure heart of worship.

My Bible gives today's passage the subtitle, "Restoration of Israel's Remnant." Something particular about this restoration catches my eye. The daughters, Zion and Jerusalem, are called to sing, shout, be glad and rejoice. This takes me back to yesterday's reflection on seeing God's salvation.

Why so much celebration? Is the second coming of Christ really worth waiting for with bated breath? Read the list of great reasons mentioned in the passage. Here's just one, mentioned in verses fifteen and seventeen, the Lord is with you. We have no better reason to rejoice than this!

One of the names for Jesus is Immanuel - God with us (Matthew 1:23). Read how John the Apostle put it, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 NASB). Who is this Word? Jesus. John the Revelator picks up on this idea and speaks of a future coming, "Look! God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

I never knew waiting could be so exciting. Jesus walked this earth for a time, literally "God with us." We also believe there will be a time when God will dwell with us again for all eternity. "Amen! Come Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20 HCSB).

PRAYER

"Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold, but I dread what was threatened when you said to me, 'If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you.' Wash my feet then, because I long for your companionship" (Origen c. 185-254 AD). **Amen**

DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 12:1-6 NIV

¹IN THAT DAY YOU WILL SAY: "I WILL PRAISE YOU, LORD. ALTHOUGH YOU WERE ANGRY WITH ME, YOUR ANGER HAS TURNED AWAY AND YOU HAVE COMFORTED ME. ²SURELY GOD IS MY SALVATION; I WILL TRUST AND NOT BE AFRAID. THE LORD, THE LORD HIMSELF, IS MY STRENGTH AND MY DEFENSE; HE HAS BECOME MY SALVATION." ³WITH JOY YOU WILL DRAW WATER FROM THE WELLS OF SALVATION. ⁴IN THAT DAY YOU WILL SAY: "GIVE PRAISE TO THE LORD, PROCLAIM HIS NAME; MAKE KNOWN AMONG THE NATIONS WHAT HE HAS DONE, AND PROCLAIM THAT HIS NAME IS EXALTED. ⁵SING TO THE LORD, FOR HE HAS DONE GLORIOUS THINGS; LET THIS BE KNOWN TO ALL THE WORLD. ⁶SHOUT ALOUD AND SING FOR JOY, PEOPLE OF ZION, FOR GREAT IS THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL AMONG YOU.

The early church fathers (men who carried on the tradition and teaching of the apostles, or as I tell the children when I teach them, our great- great- great- great- great- grandpas who lived after Bible times) saw the book of Isaiah (literally "Yahweh is salvation") as a fifth gospel. This book is quoted in the new testament more than any other prophetic book. No advent reading is complete without passages from Isaiah.

Today's reading starts out with "In that day..." and I'd encourage you to glance back at Isaiah 11 and see what day he is referring to here. Our reading offers two powerful songs of praise (divided into verses 1-2 as an individual worshiper and 3-6 a congregational hymn). Chapter eleven prophesies of a Davidic king, a descendant of Jesse (see the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1). Suddenly, these two powerful worship songs grow in meaning.

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1).

“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious (Isaiah 11:10).

Isaiah prophesied about Jesus centuries before the Messiah came to earth, and his original audience was those Israelites (northern kingdom) who were exiled to Assyria. However, the gospel writers quoted him often. As an example, the gospel of John speaks of this great prophet, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about Him” (John 12:41).

Isn’t it amazing we can still read Isaiah 12 and find the words apply today? I enjoy learning about the body of Christ around the world. Different church traditions and different countries. I’ve appreciated gaining some insight into what it’s like to educate pastors and plant churches in Mbaitoli, Nigeria, through the work of Leadership Education Mission for Africa (LEMA) Institute. Here we are, centuries after Jesus came to earth, and God is still on the move. He does indeed do glorious things.

PRAYER

A Prayer of Praise: *“Sing praise-songs to God. He’s done it all! Let the whole earth know what he’s done! Raise the roof! Sing your hearts out, O Zion! The Greatest lives among you: The Holy of Israel”* Isaiah 12:5-6 (MSG). **Amen**



★ JOY ★

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

1 PETER 1:8



DECEMBER 12

Philippians 4:4-7 NIV

⁴REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS. I WILL SAY IT AGAIN: REJOICE! ⁵LET YOUR GENTLENESS BE EVIDENT TO ALL. THE LORD IS NEAR. ⁶DO NOT BE ANXIOUS ABOUT ANYTHING, BUT IN EVERY SITUATION, BY PRAYER AND PETITION, WITH THANKSGIVING, PRESENT YOUR REQUESTS TO GOD. ⁷AND THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH TRANSCENDS ALL UNDERSTANDING, WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS.

We're back in Philippi today. The first verse of today's passage might sound familiar, as it was a popular praise song some years ago.

Verses six and seven offer perhaps the most encouraging words in the entire letter. Here it is in the New King James Version, which is how I learned it as a little girl. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 NKJV).

These verses offer a helpful rhythm. Let's break it down:

- The Lord is near (see v. 5).
- Don't feel anxious.
- Instead, pray, plead even, with God.
- Offer thanksgiving.
- The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds.
- As with all spiritual things, this is done through Christ Jesus.

Simple, right? Riiiiight. We don't do this perfectly, and we don't always remember to do it at all. But when we do, what a difference. Are there still times we need professional help to treat anxiety? Are there times we might need the help of medicine? Yes. We can trust this formula though.

My daughter spent two-thirds of her seventh grade year learning virtually at home. Middle school was no picnic already, but throw in a pandemic, months of social distancing, and virtual classrooms, and even my generally laid-back self grew anxious. My husband also worked from home for a time, which meant three of us trying to use a rural internet signal. Friends, I regularly prayed in this way. God and I would start our conversation first thing. As I sensed his nearness, I would find myself being more gentle with those in my home. All throughout those days of quarantine, I prayed, I pleaded, I gave thanks. Time and again, he gave me peace. There's still so much I don't understand about Covid-19, or the world we find ourselves living in these days, but my heart and mind are guarded through Christ Jesus. I know it's because I seek God in rhythms like this.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, *Today we offer up our children to you. For all the ways the last school year looked different, for the things they didn't get to do and the things they had to do, we ask you to use these things in their lives. Lord, as with the rest of us, draw our children closer to you. Give us peace, and guard our hearts and minds as we live for you each day.*

Amen

DECEMBER 13

Luke 3:7-16 NIV

⁷JOHN SAID TO THE CROWDS COMING OUT TO BE BAPTIZED BY HIM, “YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! WHO WARNED YOU TO FLEE FROM THE COMING WRATH? ⁸PRODUCE FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE. AND DO NOT BEGIN TO SAY TO YOURSELVES, ‘WE HAVE ABRAHAM AS OUR FATHER.’ FOR I TELL YOU THAT OUT OF THESE STONES GOD CAN RAISE UP CHILDREN FOR ABRAHAM. ⁹THE AX IS ALREADY AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES, AND EVERY TREE THAT DOES NOT PRODUCE GOOD FRUIT WILL BE CUT DOWN AND THROWN INTO THE FIRE. ¹⁰WHAT SHOULD WE DO THEN?” THE CROWD ASKED. ¹¹JOHN ANSWERED, “ANYONE WHO HAS TWO SHIRTS SHOULD SHARE WITH THE ONE WHO HAS NONE, AND ANYONE WHO HAS FOOD SHOULD DO THE SAME.” ¹²EVEN TAX COLLECTORS CAME TO BE BAPTIZED. “TEACHER,” THEY ASKED, “WHAT SHOULD WE DO?” ¹³“DON’T COLLECT ANY MORE THAN YOU ARE REQUIRED TO,” HE TOLD THEM. ¹⁴THEN SOME SOLDIERS ASKED HIM, “AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO?” HE REPLIED, “DON’T EXTORT MONEY AND DON’T ACCUSE PEOPLE FALSELY—BE CONTENT WITH YOUR PAY.” ¹⁵THE PEOPLE WERE WAITING EXPECTANTLY AND WERE ALL WONDERING IN THEIR HEARTS IF JOHN MIGHT POSSIBLY BE THE MESSIAH. ¹⁶JOHN ANSWERED THEM ALL, “I BAPTIZE YOU WITH WATER. BUT ONE WHO IS MORE POWERFUL THAN I WILL COME, THE STRAPS OF WHOSE SANDALS I AM NOT WORTHY TO UNTIE. HE WILL BAPTIZE YOU WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FIRE.

John the Baptist had some strong words for the Pharisees, keepers of the law and traditions, and Sadducees, Jewish aristocrats,—“Brood of vipers!” This is not the best way to “win friends and influence people,” as Dale Carnegie would later write about in his popular book. However, prophets didn’t come to do that; in fact, they refused to do that. A prophet’s job was to tell the people what God told them. Here, John has specific words for the children of Abraham, anyone

with two shirts, with food, for tax collectors and for soldiers. One of my favorite children's church songs, although these days it makes me dizzy, is "Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had father Abraham; I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord." According to the words of this song, and in the words for the crowd gathered around John that day, God's warnings are for all of us.

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." If we continuously repent of our sins before God, our lives should reflect a clean heart. We should better exhibit the fruit of the Spirit who lives in us, such as those qualities mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. As Christians we've already received the free gift of salvation, but our sanctification continues with the humility found in repentance, a turning away from sin, a turning again to Jesus.

Later in the chapter, "John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'" (Luke 3:16).

I thought through the use of fire in this verse. Let's turn again to the prophet Malachi. Four hundred plus years before John the Baptist makes the way for Jesus, Malachi told us the Messiah would be like a fire that refines, burning away the dross (Malachi 3:3). Our baptism in Christ offers both, the Holy Spirit and a refining fire that burns away our sins.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, *Today we offer up our children to you. For all the ways the last school year looked different, for the things they didn't get to do and the things they had to do, we ask you to use these things in their lives. Lord, as with the rest of us, draw our children closer to you. Give us peace, and guard our hearts and minds as we live for you each day.*

Amen

DECEMBER 14

Micah 5:2-5 NIV

²BUT YOU, BETHLEHEM EPHRATHAH, THOUGH YOU ARE SMALL AMONG THE CLANS OF JUDAH, OUT OF YOU WILL COME FOR ME ONE WHO WILL BE RULER OVER ISRAEL, WHOSE ORIGINS ARE FROM OF OLD, FROM ANCIENT TIMES.” ³THEREFORE ISRAEL WILL BE ABANDONED UNTIL THE TIME WHEN SHE WHO IS IN LABOR BEARS A SON, AND THE REST OF HIS BROTHERS RETURN TO JOIN THE ISRAELITES. ⁴HE WILL STAND AND SHEPHERD HIS FLOCK IN THE STRENGTH OF THE LORD, IN THE MAJESTY OF THE NAME OF THE LORD HIS GOD. AND THEY WILL LIVE SECURELY, FOR THEN HIS GREATNESS WILL REACH TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH. ⁵AND HE WILL BE OUR PEACE WHEN THE ASSYRIANS INVADE OUR LAND AND MARCH THROUGH OUR FORTRESSES. WE WILL RAISE AGAINST THEM SEVEN SHEPHERDS, EVEN EIGHT COMMANDERS.

We often skip over biblical cities. Their names aren't familiar and the town often goes by something different today. Scholars think Bethlehem Ephrathah may have been two separate names for the same place; Ephrathah, or Ephrath, the Canaanite city, and Bethlehem the Jewish label. The tomb of Rachel is found nearby (Genesis 35:19), and it's also the town where Naomi and Ruth settled (Ruth 1:19). We know it best, of course, as the birthplace of Jesus Christ. Bethlehem is a small town about five miles outside of Jerusalem. Later in life, Jesus spent a portion of his childhood years in another small town called Nazareth.

Often times when a prophet is introduced, it's by lineage (ie. Isaiah son of Amoz) but Micah, who authored the song in today's passage, is

identified by his hometown, Moresheth (Micah 1:1). Sometimes this town is mentioned with nearby Gath. You might recognize a Bible character who came from Gath—Goliath. Both were small towns in an agricultural area about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem (for point of reference, about the distance between Plainwell and Grand Rapids). Around the time of Micah's ministry, Gath would be attacked by Sennacherib king of Assyria, and eventually be captured by Hazael of Aram. Babylon would conquer the entire area fully. Micah knew about living in a lesser-populated, vulnerable area. This would affect him profoundly.

Note the cultural influences as we hear his cries of concern for the lame, outcasts, and the afflicted throughout his book. He stood up against the social corruption of the upper class. In her Advent collection, Fleming Rutledge writes, "To each and all, we bring this announcement: God will come, and his justice will prevail, and he will destroy evil and pain in all its forms, once and forever."

Read the prophecy in the first line of Micah's song again. A small town man writing about the small town of Bethlehem, small among the clans of Judah. Out of this town a shepherd will come, strong and full of majesty. He will be our peace.

We small town people have to stick together.

PRAYER

Lord, *We know you use everything in our lives for your glory. Let the fullness of our testimony speak to your goodness and faithfulness. Amen*

DECEMBER 15

Psalm 80:1-7 NIV

¹HEAR US, SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL, YOU WHO LEAD JOSEPH LIKE A FLOCK. YOU WHO SIT ENTHRONED BETWEEN THE CHERUBIM, SHINE FORTH ²BEFORE EPHRAIM, BENJAMIN AND MANASSEH. AWAKEN YOUR MIGHT; COME AND SAVE US.

³RESTORE US, O GOD; MAKE YOUR FACE SHINE ON US, THAT WE MAY BE SAVED.

⁴HOW LONG, LORD GOD ALMIGHTY, WILL YOUR ANGER SMOLDER AGAINST THE PRAYERS OF YOUR PEOPLE? ⁵YOU HAVE FED THEM WITH THE BREAD OF TEARS; YOU HAVE MADE THEM DRINK TEARS BY THE BOWLFUL. ⁶YOU HAVE MADE US AN OBJECT OF DERISION TO OUR NEIGHBORS, AND OUR ENEMIES MOCK US.

⁷RESTORE US, GOD ALMIGHTY; MAKE YOUR FACE SHINE ON US, THAT WE MAY BE SAVED.

This psalm mentions the Lord as Shepherd; it already feels like a psalm. Verse two lists three names. Joseph and Benjamin are the two sons of Jacob and Rachel. Ephraim and Manasseh are the two sons of Joseph and Asenath. The psalms don't typically reference a list of names, so why is this intentional branch of Jacob's descendants included? A few scholars noted this might have been a cry for God to bring the northern tribes (represented by Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh) and the southern tribes (the land of Benjamin sat on the border between the two) together again. The psalmist is crying out on behalf of a united Israel.

In our passage, the psalmist asks God to restore his people; to "Make your face shine on us" (and again in verse nineteen). I've had a number of pastors conclude Sunday morning worship services with this phrase, taken from what my Bible subtitles "The Priestly

Blessing.” Our church sings it on occasion; it is the blessing my husband and I have spoken over our daughter at night since she was a baby, and the words we prayed with you as a congregation when Pastor Jason baptized her. “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26 NKJV).

The psalmist asks God to restore them so they may be saved. Saved from what? We read in verse five God’s people have been fed with the bread of tears; tears by the bowlful. Not just because the Jewish nation is divided, and being taken into exile, but for what that signifies. The people of God feel abandoned by him. There is division at every turn. Leadership has proven unreliable. They are like lost sheep in need of a shepherd.

Lord, we see ourselves in today’s passage. Save us from ourselves. This advent season, we cry out as the psalmist did. Restore us as only you can. Shine your face upon us and remind us you never abandon your people. Then our own tears, the ones we cry when we think no one is watching, will become tears of restoration.

PRAYER

Today’s prayer is taken from an old hymn, “Revive Us Again.” As the psalms teach us, prayers can be sung.

*Revive us again—fill each heart with Thy love;
May each soul be rekindled with fire from above.
Hallelujah, Thine the glory! Hallelujah, amen!
Hallelujah, Thine the glory! Revive us again.*

Amen

DECEMBER 16

Hebrews 10:5-10 NIV

⁵THEREFORE, WHEN CHRIST CAME INTO THE WORLD, HE SAID: "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU DID NOT DESIRE, BUT A BODY YOU PREPARED FOR ME; ⁶WITH BURNT OFFERINGS AND SIN OFFERINGS YOU WERE NOT PLEASED. ⁷THEN I SAID, "HERE I AM—IT IS WRITTEN ABOUT ME IN THE SCROLL—I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL, MY GOD." ⁸FIRST HE SAID, "SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS, BURNT OFFERINGS AND SIN OFFERINGS YOU DID NOT DESIRE, NOR WERE YOU PLEASED WITH THEM"—THOUGH THEY WERE OFFERED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW. ⁹THEN HE SAID, "HERE I AM, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." HE SETS ASIDE THE FIRST TO ESTABLISH THE SECOND. ¹⁰AND BY THAT WILL, WE HAVE BEEN MADE HOLY THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST ONCE FOR ALL.

Pastor and Bible scholar Ray Stedman, describes Hebrews as “the most Christ-centered book in the New Testament.” He has this to say about the first ten chapters, leading up to today’s passage, “In the first ten chapters of Hebrews there is a very simple structure. Jesus Christ is being compared to a number of other leaders and systems and religious values that the people to whom this letter was first written had once felt were important.”

One by one, these people and things are found to be inferior to Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews has Christ quoting a portion of Psalm 40, proclaiming two times, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” The sacrifices and offerings of the people would always be incomplete. The body God prepared was that of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We might read passages like this and wonder if it's still necessary to offer sacrifices, of praise now rather than animals, and offerings, of our tithes, time, and talents. Read what the author of Hebrews advises later in this same chapter, "And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25 NLT). Gathering together develops a heart of worship among us. We help one another remember, we sing louder together, we collectively use our offerings for kingdom work, to show a lost world "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10b).

I hope you've talked to your friends and family about our communal advent experience. We're closer every day to Christmas, and the waiting is almost over. As we've discussed though, Christians are always a waiting people, longing for Christ's return. I love how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us" (1 Corinthians 13:12 MSG).

It really is something to talk about.

PRAYER

Lord, *Open up doors of conversation so we can tell our loved ones, even strangers, about Christ coming into the world. While we're waiting, in this season of advent, give us words of hope to share, for the same Jesus will someday come back again. Amen*

DECEMBER 17

Luke 1:39-45 NIV

³⁹AT THAT TIME MARY GOT READY AND HURRIED TO A TOWN IN THE HILL COUNTRY OF JUDEA, ⁴⁰WHERE SHE ENTERED ZECHARIAH'S HOME AND GREETED ELIZABETH. ⁴¹WHEN ELIZABETH HEARD MARY'S GREETING, THE BABY LEAPED IN HER WOMB, AND ELIZABETH WAS FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. ⁴²IN A LOUD VOICE SHE EXCLAIMED: "BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE CHILD YOU WILL BEAR! ⁴³BUT WHY AM I SO FAVORED, THAT THE MOTHER OF MY LORD SHOULD COME TO ME? ⁴⁴AS SOON AS THE SOUND OF YOUR GREETING REACHED MY EARS, THE BABY IN MY WOMB LEAPED FOR JOY. ⁴⁵BLESSED IS SHE WHO HAS BELIEVED THAT THE LORD WOULD FULFILL HIS PROMISES TO HER!

We're in Luke the next two days, and everything is coming up blessed. We all have times like this, where we feel like it's blessings everywhere we look. Of course, nothing like the blessing bestowed on Elizabeth and her unborn child, but sometimes things are really good. We're told just a few verses prior that Elizabeth is six months pregnant. At that time, which would be shortly after Mary had her visit from the angel Gabriel and received the news she would give birth to the Messiah, Mary hurried to see her relative. There's a lot of hurrying in the first two chapters of Luke—the wait is almost over.

Here, it's Elizabeth giving a blessing to Mary. I thrill at hearing women blessing women, don't you? We read Mary entered the home of her relatives. Elizabeth would have had no way of knowing she was coming, until Mary spoke a greeting. Upon hearing the words, before even seeing Mary, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped. The spirit filled her and loudly, she twice declared Mary was blessed and told

her the child she would bear is blessed. She called Mary, “The Mother of Our Lord.”

I told you it was a lot of blessings. Regardless of what our circumstances may be at any given time, the Lord has blessed us too, with salvation. We are no longer slaves to sin and death, but are free to live for him. We too can trust God will fulfill his promises. We can join in with Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, as he proclaims later in this chapter, “Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people” Luke 1:68 (CEB).

I doubt composer Ludwig von Beethoven imagined his melody as a Christmas hymn, and poet Henry van Dyke may not have had the Christmas story in mind when he wrote the lyrics, but I see a lot of Christmas imagery in this verse from “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee:”

*All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise.*

PRAYER

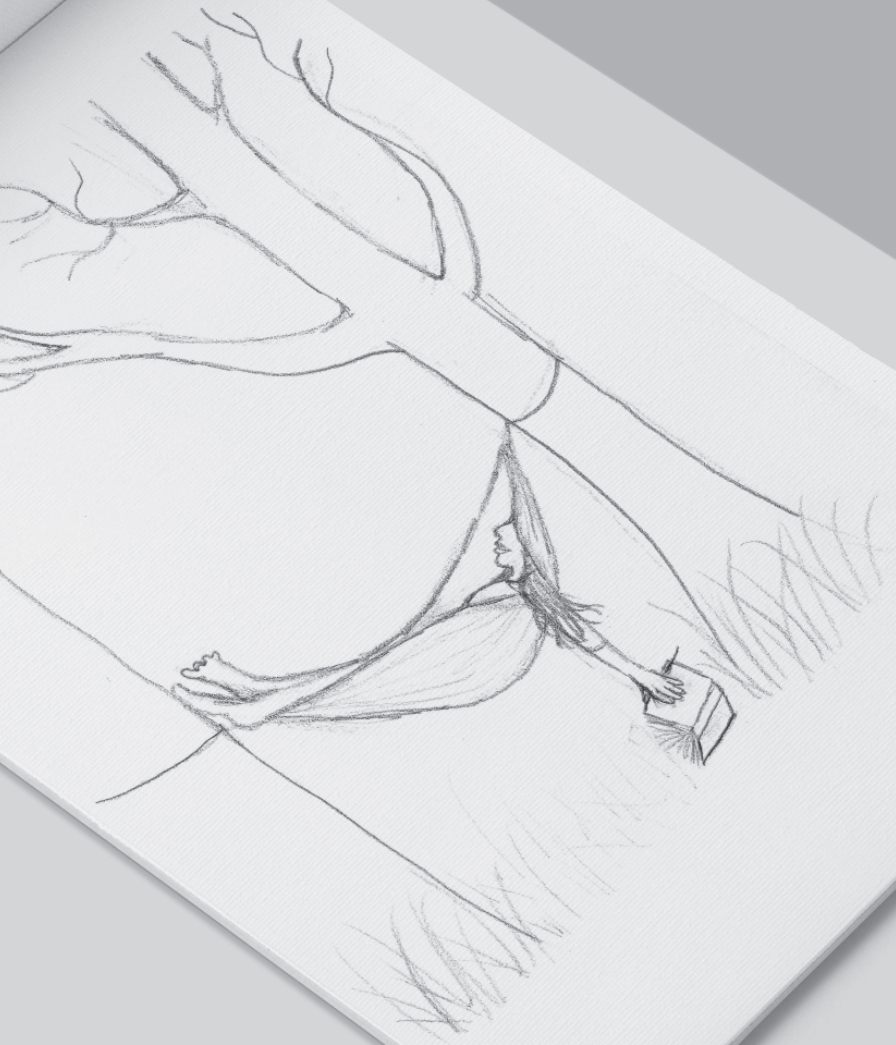
Lord, *Thank you for the obedience of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph. Thank you for those babies, John and Jesus. May our lives point to you as theirs do. Amen*



★ PEACE ★

*In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you
alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety*

PSALM 4:8



Peace

DECEMBER 18

Luke 1:46-55 NIV

⁴⁶AND MARY SAID: "MY SOUL GLORIFIES THE LORD ⁴⁷AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR, ⁴⁸FOR HE HAS BEEN MINDFUL OF THE HUMBLE STATE OF HIS SERVANT. FROM NOW ON ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED, ⁴⁹FOR THE MIGHTY ONE HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME—HOLY IS HIS NAME. ⁵⁰HIS MERCY EXTENDS TO THOSE WHO FEAR HIM, FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION. ⁵¹HE HAS PERFORMED MIGHTY DEEDS WITH HIS ARM; HE HAS SCATTERED THOSE WHO ARE PROUD IN THEIR INMOST THOUGHTS. ⁵²HE HAS BROUGHT DOWN RULERS FROM THEIR THRONES BUT HAS LIFTED UP THE HUMBLE. ⁵³HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS BUT HAS SENT THE RICH AWAY EMPTY. ⁵⁴HE HAS HELPED HIS SERVANT ISRAEL, REMEMBERING TO BE MERCIFUL TO ⁵⁵ABRAHAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS FOREVER, JUST AS HE PROMISED OUR ANCESTORS.

OK, you guys, entire books have been written on this passage, Mary's Prayer. If we could read Latin, we'd note the first word of Mary's song is "Magnificat," meaning magnify or glorify. That's exactly what Mary does here. It's humbling to offer my own reflections about Mary's initial thoughts after finding out she has been chosen to give birth to our Lord.

Honestly, it's often intimidating to teach or write about scripture, period. This is God's story, and these are the people and the very words he chose to tell it. However, in God's story is an invitation for all of us. "The Bible, all of it, is livable; it is the text for living our lives. It reveals a God-created, God-ordered, God-blessed world in which we find ourselves at home and whole," writes Eugene Peterson in

Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading. The best way I've found to make the Bible livable in my own life, to make myself at home in it, and to let it change me through the power of the Holy Spirit, is to interact with it. Not as an expert, but as a student.

Mary's Song is often compared with Hannah's Song in 1 Samuel 2. Many scholars go so far as to suggest it is a culmination of the the entire old testament. As I said, entire books have been written on these ten verses.

As a reflection here, I want to draw attention to Mary, and in particular, to the way she describes herself. She acknowledges having a soul that glorifies God. Her spirit rejoices in him. She identifies herself as humble and realizes all generations will now call her blessed. Mary's "Yes" makes her a partner in God's story forever.

Our role in God's story, our yes, will look decidedly different than Mary's. There is only and forever one mother of God. Still, I hope my posture toward God has striking similarities to hers. A soul that glorifies him, a spirit that rejoices in him, a humility and a realization that any blessing I receive from future generations will come from my obedience to what God asks me to do.

PRAYER

Pray the Lord's Prayer with me: *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"* (Matthew 6:9-13). **Amen**

DECEMBER 19

Isaiah 9:2-7 NIV

²THE PEOPLE WALKING IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT; ON THOSE LIVING IN THE LAND OF DEEP DARKNESS A LIGHT HAS DAWNED. ³YOU HAVE ENLARGED THE NATION AND INCREASED THEIR JOY; THEY REJOICE BEFORE YOU AS PEOPLE REJOICE AT THE HARVEST, AS WARRIORS REJOICE WHEN DIVIDING THE PLUNDER. ⁴FOR AS IN THE DAY OF MIDIAN'S DEFEAT, YOU HAVE SHATTERED THE YOKE THAT BURDENS THEM, THE BAR ACROSS THEIR SHOULDERS, THE ROD OF THEIR OPPRESSOR. ⁵EVERY WARRIOR'S BOOT USED IN BATTLE AND EVERY GARMENT ROLLED IN BLOOD WILL BE DESTINED FOR BURNING, WILL BE FUEL FOR THE FIRE. ⁶FOR 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. ⁷OF THE GREATNESS OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND PEACE THERE WILL BE NO END. HE WILL REIGN ON DAVID'S THRONE AND OVER HIS KINGDOM, ESTABLISHING AND UPHOLDING IT WITH JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM THAT TIME ON AND FOREVER. THE ZEAL OF THE LORD ALMIGHTY WILL ACCOMPLISH THIS.

If you grew up in the church like I did, any time you hear Isaiah 9:6 (“for to us a child is born, to us a son is given...”) you go right to Christmas in your mind. I couldn’t have told you one thing about the prophet Isaiah or this particular book of the Bible, but I had this verse memorized from a young age. I may have even recited it as an angel in a Christmas play or two, which is not technically what the angels said, but it’s still a powerful prophecy.

In Isaiah's day, the nation of Israel had been divided into two nations (northern and southern kingdoms) for a number of years. Assyria is just starting to knock on the gates of their walled cities, and even though things aren't that bad now, Isaiah prophesies very difficult times ahead. He was right, as were all the prophets sent by God.

Before reading Isaiah 9, previous chapters show us other glimpses of this child Isaiah envisions. Remember, whether they understand it fully or not, the job of a biblical prophet was to tell the people exactly what God told them. Often times a prophecy will point to something God will soon do in Israel, and something broader that God is doing in the future. In this case, salvation through Jesus Christ. These words echo the hope of advent, God with us. These prophetic words also point to the idea we've seen repeatedly this advent season, he has come, he will come again.

"Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14 NIV).

"He will pass through Judah, He will overflow and pass over, He will reach up to the neck; And the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel" (Isaiah 8:8 NKJV).

Isaiah's prophecies show us what God has been doing among his people all along, making all things right again.

PRAYER

Lord God, *We make these words of your prophet Ezekiel our prayer: "My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people" (Ezekiel 37:27). Come dwell among us, your people.*

Amen

DECEMBER 20

Psalm 96 NIV

¹SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG; SING TO THE LORD, ALL THE EARTH. ²SING TO THE LORD, PRAISE HIS NAME; PROCLAIM HIS SALVATION DAY AFTER DAY. ³DECLARE HIS GLORY AMONG THE NATIONS, HIS MARVELOUS DEEDS AMONG ALL PEOPLES. ⁴FOR GREAT IS THE LORD AND MOST WORTHY OF PRAISE; HE IS TO BE FEARED ABOVE ALL GODS. ⁵FOR ALL THE GODS OF THE NATIONS ARE IDOLS, BUT THE LORD MADE THE HEAVENS. ⁶SPLENDOR AND MAJESTY ARE BEFORE HIM; STRENGTH AND GLORY ARE IN HIS SANCTUARY. ⁷ASCRIBE TO THE LORD, ALL YOU FAMILIES OF NATIONS, ASCRIBE TO THE LORD GLORY AND STRENGTH. ⁸ASCRIBE TO THE LORD THE GLORY DUE HIS NAME; BRING AN OFFERING AND COME INTO HIS COURTS. ⁹WORSHIP THE LORD IN THE SPLENDOR OF HIS[A] HOLINESS; TREMBLE BEFORE HIM, ALL THE EARTH. ¹⁰SAY AMONG THE NATIONS, "THE LORD REIGNS." THE WORLD IS FIRMLY ESTABLISHED, IT CANNOT BE MOVED; HE WILL JUDGE THE PEOPLES WITH EQUITY. ¹¹LET THE HEAVENS REJOICE, LET THE EARTH BE GLAD; LET THE SEA RESOUND, AND ALL THAT IS IN IT. ¹²LET THE FIELDS BE JUBILANT, AND EVERYTHING IN THEM; LET ALL THE TREES OF THE FOREST SING FOR JOY. ¹³LET ALL CREATION REJOICE BEFORE THE LORD, FOR HE COMES, HE COMES TO JUDGE THE EARTH. HE WILL JUDGE THE WORLD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE PEOPLES IN HIS FAITHFULNESS.

Today's psalm is happy-clappy (scholars prefer the term "enthronement"), and that is perfectly OK. Other psalms are prophetic, offer lament, indicate a pilgrimage, or call down God's wrath on our enemies. The Psalms reflect real life, all of it. Remember the worship

song, Blessed Be Your Name? “In the land that is plentiful” and “in the desert place”... “when the world’s all as it should be” and “on the road marked with suffering.”

For months, our daughter has been telling us she’s ready for it to be Christmas. Every year, about mid-November, she’ll start asking to put up the Christmas trees. We leave nativity sets out all year long. We’ve always done a simple advent reading with her, and she has known the date for the first day of this advent season since approximately last January. There is nothing at all wrong with making a big deal out of the holidays in our memories and in our minds, especially Christmas, but our hearts need Advent too..

We need to get better at waiting. If we regularly observe advent, and other seasons in the church calendar, we prepare ourselves to live well spiritually when we need to say, wait on something, as an example. We might think, “Oh, this feels like advent. I know how to do this.”

Peanut Butter and Jelly. Advent and Christmas. As believers, this is the space we live in. That’s what I’ve come to appreciate about the church calendar and structured Bible readings like the revised common lectionary. Using a Bible narrative, there’s a rhythm to our days, reminding us we are his. Here are a few of the seasons and their focus; Advent (waiting), Christmas (he has come), Lent (self-examination), Easter (he is risen), Pentecost (big church party honoring the day the Holy Spirit descended on believers), Ordinary time (deepened discipleship). In community with the Church, we invite God to guide our days.

Like David in today’s psalm we can “Sing to the Lord! Bless his name! Share the news of his saving work every single day” (Psalm 96:2).

PRAYER

Lord God, *Thank you for the joy of Christmas. We’re in the midst of celebrating among our family and friends. May our advent focus help us remember the reason for the season, that saying we’ve heard for years. Lord, may it be all about you. Amen*

DECEMBER 21

Titus 2:11-14 NIV

¹¹FOR THE GRACE OF GOD HAS APPEARED THAT OFFERS SALVATION TO ALL PEOPLE. ¹²IT TEACHES US TO SAY “NO” TO UNGODLINESS AND WORLDLY PASSIONS, AND TO LIVE SELF-CONTROLLED, UPRIGHT AND GODLY LIVES IN THIS PRESENT AGE, ¹³WHILE WE WAIT FOR THE BLESSED HOPE—THE APPEARING OF THE GLORY OF OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST, ¹⁴WHO GAVE HIMSELF FOR US TO REDEEM US FROM ALL WICKEDNESS AND TO PURIFY FOR HIMSELF A PEOPLE THAT ARE HIS VERY OWN, EAGER TO DO WHAT IS GOOD.

This letter written to Titus by Paul reads as an early church instruction manual. Titus, who traveled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys, is now helping with a new church on the island of Crete. Here’s how Paul addresses Titus, “My true child in a common faith” (Titus 1:4 CEB). We get a real sense of the familial bond that had formed between Paul and Titus, and indeed with many men and women who helped start these early churches. As this is a short letter, I’d encourage you to read it out loud. Keep in mind it was eventually read to all the early churches. Some of you will remember starting North Point years ago, before we had a building. Like North Point, these churches were doing a similar thing, without the help of church history or denominational guidance. All were converts. All were new Christians. This letter would show them how to live for Christ, in their churches, their communities and beyond.

In today's passage, believers are encouraged to say "No!" to ungodliness and worldly passions, as should we. Also like them, we are called to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in our present age. In order for any of us to do these things, we need "It." We need the grace of God. Through him, we are redeemed, purified, and eager to do what is good.

This passage points to one of my favorite discoveries about reformed teaching (I did not grow up in this tradition); the emphasis on God as sovereign (ruler over all). As Pastor Jason often says, "We make a big deal out of God."

Our tradition's Heidelberg Catechism (a series of questions and answers meant to instruct young children and win converts) q/a one speaks to the ideas we read here. Even if you don't have it memorized, you might recognize it as a song we sing from time to time. I don't know if anyone has ever prayed a catechism teaching, but I think we could prayerfully reflect on it here. Join me. If you have it memorized, slowly read it this time. If it's new to you, let its truths wash over you.

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

PRAYER

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. Amen

★ CHRISTMAS ★

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

MATTHEW 1:21



DECEMBER 22

John 1:1-14 NIV

¹IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. ²HE WAS WITH GOD IN THE BEGINNING. ³THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE; WITHOUT HIM NOTHING WAS MADE THAT HAS BEEN MADE. ⁴IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THAT LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF ALL MANKIND. ⁵THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME IT. ⁶THERE WAS A MAN SENT FROM GOD WHOSE NAME WAS JOHN. ⁷HE CAME AS A WITNESS TO TESTIFY CONCERNING THAT LIGHT, SO THAT THROUGH HIM ALL MIGHT BELIEVE. ⁸HE HIMSELF WAS NOT THE LIGHT; HE CAME ONLY AS A WITNESS TO THE LIGHT. ⁹THE TRUE LIGHT THAT GIVES LIGHT TO EVERYONE WAS COMING INTO THE WORLD. ¹⁰HE WAS IN THE WORLD, AND THOUGH THE WORLD WAS MADE THROUGH HIM, THE WORLD DID NOT RECOGNIZE HIM. ¹¹HE CAME TO THAT WHICH WAS HIS OWN, BUT HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM. ¹²YET TO ALL WHO DID RECEIVE HIM, TO THOSE WHO BELIEVED IN HIS NAME, HE GAVE THE RIGHT TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD— ¹³CHILDREN BORN NOT OF NATURAL DESCENT, NOR OF HUMAN DECISION OR A HUSBAND'S WILL, BUT BORN OF GOD. ¹⁴THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND MADE HIS DWELLING AMONG US. WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY, THE GLORY OF THE ONE AND ONLY SON, WHO CAME FROM THE FATHER, FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH.

John's gospel doesn't share the traditional Christmas story. Since his audience is the whole world (see John 3:16) he writes with a much bigger picture in mind. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Make no mistake. When we read these words at the beginning of our Bible, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), Jesus was there.

John does give a literary nod to the Christmas story later on in the first chapter. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” or as we read in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 MSG).

What did John want the whole world to know? It was God and Jesus there in the beginning. Jesus is no “Plan B.” Jesus too creates things, offers life, and overcomes darkness. As John the Baptist proclaims in today’s passage, Jesus is light. Light, light and more light.

For a number of reasons, the Christmas season is difficult for some. I think it’s important we acknowledge that. As children of God, we are bearers of his light. Wherever we see darkness, we are to shine the light of Jesus. Maybe it’s a call to someone who might be lonely in this season. It might be setting an extra plate at your Christmas dinner table; sending a text or an email or making a phone call and offering a listening ear. Ask God where you can share your abundance of time, talent or money.

We’ll be gathering as a church family for Christmas Eve service soon. I hope to see you there, and I hope Silent Night hits a little more tender this year. In the poem, ’Twas The Night Before Christmas, there’s a line that says, “While visions of sugar plums danc’d in their heads.” After weeks of looking at revised common lectionary passages, I hope your heads are filled with visions of psalms and prophets and new testament writers. And Jesus. Always Jesus.

Advent is almost over. Christmas is coming.

PRAYER

Dear God, *Thank you for loving the world so much that you gave us your only begotten son. Help us believe. We long for eternal life. Amen*

DECEMBER 23

Luke 2:4-14 NIV

⁴SO JOSEPH ALSO WENT UP FROM THE TOWN OF NAZARETH IN GALILEE TO JUDEA, TO BETHLEHEM THE TOWN OF DAVID, BECAUSE HE BELONGED TO THE HOUSE AND LINE OF DAVID. ⁵HE WENT THERE TO REGISTER WITH MARY, WHO WAS PLEDGED TO BE MARRIED TO HIM AND WAS EXPECTING A CHILD. ⁶WHILE THEY WERE THERE, THE TIME CAME FOR THE BABY TO BE BORN, ⁷AND SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRSTBORN, A SON. SHE WRAPPED HIM IN CLOTHS AND PLACED HIM IN A MANGER, BECAUSE THERE WAS NO GUEST ROOM AVAILABLE FOR THEM. ⁸AND THERE WERE SHEPHERDS LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS NEARBY, KEEPING WATCH OVER THEIR FLOCKS AT NIGHT. ⁹AN ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO THEM, AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHONE AROUND THEM, AND THEY WERE TERRIFIED. ¹⁰BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, "DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS THAT WILL CAUSE GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. ¹¹TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS THE MESSIAH, THE LORD. ¹²THIS WILL BE A SIGN TO YOU: YOU WILL FIND A BABY WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER." ¹³SUDDENLY A GREAT COMPANY OF THE HEAVENLY HOST APPEARED WITH THE ANGEL, PRAISING GOD AND SAYING, ¹⁴"GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST HEAVEN, AND ON EARTH PEACE TO THOSE ON WHOM HIS FAVOR RESTS.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Yes, our salvation is a gift. However, here is something we have earned. We’ve journeyed all over our Bible, and as in any advent season, we’ve waited with hope and anticipation.

Y'all, read the Christmas story as recorded in the gospel of Luke.

I'd like to share some of my favorite parts with you. Out of all the Bible stories I learned as a child, this is probably the one I've heard the most. Growing up, we read it each year on Christmas Eve. It was a rite of passage for first my older brother, then me, then my younger brother to take a turn reading this beloved story.

I like the name of the town, Bethlehem. It's fun to say. I can just see baby Jesus being wrapped in swaddling clothes (that's not the term used in the NIV but it's how I learned it) and lying in a manger. Then how about those shepherds? Working hard, smelling bad, probably not too involved in Jerusalem's social life. God came to them first. At first, we read of a single angel, and said angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid, because they were. This was a common reaction to angels in scripture. Then, suddenly, such a great Bible word, the angel gets a backup crew. I was always taught they sang their lines, but the Bible actually says saying. Maybe somewhere in between, like chanting. It's a great story. The greatest story of all.

Often times, advent readers don't get to the end of Luke, chapter two, where we meet Simeon and Anna, the first people Jesus and his parents encounter when he goes to the Temple for the first time. Both of their responses to meeting him are powerful and show lives of devout faithfulness. I'd encourage you to read them sometime soon. For now, I'm going to let Simeon pray us out.

PRAYER

“Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. For my eyes have seen our salvation. You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32). Amen

CITATIONS

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