

Prepare ye the way of the LORD



*and the glory of the LORD shall
be revealed, and all flesh shall
see it together.*

*2022 Advent Devotion Book
First Presbyterian Church*

This year, our Advent devotional book has been created from the past six years of our congregation's booklets.

The decision of our Worship/Music/Arts committee was to give ourselves a break and revisit previous material. It's a busy time of year, and nobody wants a pastor nagging them for promised contributions under tight deadlines.

And then the nagging pastor realized a lot of the material from the past six years came from his computer. What if he had a sufficient number of devotional reflections to fill a complete booklet? He did.

So, in an effort to simplify our Advent season, here are twenty-eight (or so) daily reflections on scripture texts to get us to Christmas. It's my gift for you, and the pages are intentionally undated so future worship and education committees can utilize it as they see fit.

In the future, we will most likely invite church members and friends to write for another booklet. But this year, let's take a breather from the ceaseless demands that we put on ourselves during this season and reflect on the Word of God together.

May your Advent season be joyful, peaceful, free from anxiety, and filled with hope.

Rev. Bill Carter

Week 1 – Watch at all times!

Sunday

Matthew 24:29-31

Here's one reason why people get nervous about Advent: because it speaks of the end of the world.

For thirty years, we have been flooded with films about terrible disasters. Asteroids veer toward earth, mountains explode, earthquakes send Los Angeles into the ocean, and the weather goes out of control. A widespread natural disaster could terminate life as we know it.

If they aren't enough, it appears the human race has a death wish. Wars drag on, despots plunder, mass graves are discovered, and absolutely nobody is interested in eliminating all the nuclear weapons in the world. We could blow ourselves up or shoot ourselves in the foot. Neither would surprise the writers of scripture, who know what people are capable of doing to one another.

But none of this is the Advent view of the end of the world. The Gospel of Matthew looks ahead, neither to an ecological disaster nor a human misfire, but to the coming of Christ, the Son of Man. He will come again to make all things well, to hand over a healed world to the Creator who loves it. With the blast of a trumpet, he will gather all his beloved people together.

We watch for a new heaven and a new earth. That's our great Advent hope. We don't have to give in to the despair or malaise of those who don't believe God cares about the world. We keep addressing the world's injustice, knowing the Judge will perfect justice. We care for those weakened or wounded, for their rescue is the key to our saving. We live out the love of Christ, offering it to every person, and that is our rehearsal for the day when God's love will be obvious to all.

Lord, come and make everything right. Don't allow the world's horror films define our future. Amen.

Monday

Matthew 24:32-36

Advent is not the favorite season for the person who likes to be in control. It sneaks up on us when we aren't looking. Jesus speaks of the coming of God and does so abruptly. "The day is coming . . . and nobody knows when." We don't know when it will happen.

In this section of Matthew's book, there are seven parables in a row that instruct us to be alert, to stay on our toes, to keep our eyes peeled. God is on the way, and we need to be as ready as we can. Then, as soon as Jesus says this, he adds, "But nobody knows -- not the angels of heaven, not the Son, only the Father."

This is unsettling to anybody who wants to run the world their own way. But it is the truth for those who wish to recalibrate their lives and trust in God. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes in his memoir:

“For me learning to be a Christian means learning to live without answers. Indeed to learn to live in this way is what makes being a Christian so wonderful. Faith is but a name for learning how to go on without knowing the answers . . . that's why I find that being a Christian makes life so interesting.”¹

So we must trust in God. We don't run the world. To honor God above everything else is to watch and wait when we aren't always sure what is going to happen next. To honor God is to let God break in however and whenever that happens. To honor God is to hang on and trust in God's covenantal love that everything will turn out well.

Holy One, help me to trust you with what I cannot control, which includes most of the situations of my life. Amen.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010)

Tuesday
Matthew 27:37-41

Listen to Jesus describe the coming of the Son of Man, not the first coming, nor the intermediate arrivals, but the final coming: "It will come like the flood of Noah, a total surprise; people will be eating and drinking and going to weddings – and BAM, then it comes."

"So will it be with the coming of the Son of Man," he says. Two folks will be picking vegetables; one is taken and the other is left. Two peasants will be grinding out the grain. One will be taken and the other is left. Which one do you want to be? The one who is taken or the one who is left? Either way, that's missing the point. Hope is not a preference. Nor is it a privilege.

No, hope is a punctured sky. That's my definition. Hope is when we are going about our business down here, doing our chores, living our lives, thinking what we've seen is all we're going to get – and God sticks a finger through the dome above our heads and we discover there's something so much more.

Hope is discerning the Son of Man is coming. Suddenly we realize the world is not going to stay the way it is. The systems that demean and defraud are not going to stand. The flattening of human relationships into use and abuse will no longer be the rule. The reduction of human life to empty consumerism will not abide.

Christ is coming. That is the truth that punctures the sky. It rips the lid off the closed systems of human operations. It is light that floods the darkness. It is love that exposes all the hurt that God's people have done to one another. It is the announcement that cruelty, greed, ignorance, and rebellion have run their course; now it is God's turn to rule over human life.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly! Amen.

Wednesday
Matthew 24:42-44

A few years ago, a thief broke into a church member's car while she sat in worship and stole a lot of money. She confessed with a sad smile, "I should have brought my money to church." And the situation was not funny. If you have ever been robbed, you know how it feels. **Violated. Intruded upon. Broken into.** Someone has come into a place that you held sacred, and they have plundered it against your will.

This is the picture of God on the first Sunday of Advent. God is a Thief who breaks into a place we thought was safe. And we can't protect ourselves from the plundering of our own houses.

The New Testament draws this picture numerous times. Jesus speaks twice of the Day of the Lord as the intrusion of a Thief. Twice in the book of Revelation, Jesus himself says, "I will come like a thief." The apostle Paul warned some church people, "Don't let God jump you unawares, like a thief in the night." God is sneaky, often up to something when it doesn't look like anything is going on.

In his commentary on Matthew, Dale Bruner says,

"One of the most surprising facts in Jesus' end-time teaching is that the last times will be *normal*. According to our passage, there will be parties, gourmet meals, courtships, and weddings right into the cataclysmic coming of the Son of Man . . . The Great Tribulation occurs *while superficially all seems well*. To the unobservant, it's party time. Thus Jesus' teaching of end-time normalcy should move disciples to look beneath surfaces to the deep structures of life - to see what is happening at levels we do not usually think to look."²

Pay attention, friends. As you look to the horizon, look beneath the surface.

Lord, what are you up to? Please show me and give me the faith to trust you. Amen.

² F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing Co.) 881.

Thursday Isaiah 2:1-5

Peace is possible, says the prophet Isaiah. People can come together, despite all that keeps them apart. The prophet says, “All the nations” will stream into the house of the Lord. He does say all the nations. Presumably, that includes all the people of all the nations. This is a really big vision.

Peace is the will of God. It is what God desires and what God makes possible. The prophet says peace comes as all the nations go up to, and through, the house of God. God’s ways are not the ways of war. God’s paths are the practices of peace. And when all the people are filled full of God’s instruction, they will get along. The nations will cooperate, rather than infringe, invade, dominate, or plunder.

It’s a big vision, a universal vision of what God values most of all: for people to live in peace. It’s so big that the prophet Micah pretty much copies the same words in his own book. As a good friend once said to me, “If a sermon is worth preaching once, it’s worth preaching again.” I don’t repeat my sermons very much, but repetition is fine teacher.

Someone said Isaiah’s vision is the kind of text to be read aloud in public, and often. “There is no shortage of occasions in the cycle of the year, and in the life of nations, for which such a reading would be appropriate: Memorial Day, Veterans Day, the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, the signing of peace treaties, or visits to the Vietnam War Memorial.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, p. 70). If we don’t keep alive God’s vision of peace, all we are doing is merely remembering war.

So the church gives this text for us to ponder in the first week of Advent, as we look ahead for the coming of Jesus Christ. The question, really, is how we turn the vision into reality.

Grant us peace, O Lord who blesses the peacemakers. Amen.

Friday Isaiah 2:1-5

According to the prophet Isaiah, after people are instructed in the ways of the God of peace, “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” We can’t leave peacemaking only in God’s hands.

Down in Mexico, there’s an artist named Pedro Reyes who had an imaginative idea. His city of Culiacan in western Mexico was overwhelmed by gun murders, and the city leaders had tried everything to reduce the violence. Pedro suggested an alternative, which the city leaders tried with a group of business leaders. If people turned in their weapons, they would receive coupons that could be traded in local stores for appliances and electronics.

They collected 1527 weapons. Forty percent of them were high powered weapons of military caliber. The army took the collection to a military base, and in a public act, they crushed the guns by a steamroller. Then Pedro had the metal taken to a foundry and melted. Then the metal was sent to a hardware factory to produce 1527 shovels. Just like the Bible passage, the weapons of war were transformed into farm tools.³

Yes, we must be realistic about what kind of world this is, and what kind of creatures we are. True peacemaking is hard work and beyond what any single one of us can do. Yet, the very fact that we have the vision of the possibility of peace means that it is our responsibility to keep the vision alive. It is God’s vision, given for you and me to live out the promise here and now.

Give us peace, at all times and in every way. Amen.

³ Find the story at <http://pedroreyes.net/>

Saturday
Psalm 72:1-14

“I’m done with politics,” said the angry man. “It doesn’t matter who’s in charge. All of them are bums and deserve to be replaced.” The complaints about political leaders bubble up in every generation, not long after they assume authority. Each one is an easy target for criticism. No matter what they do, somebody will oppose them. Support is rarely unanimous for any leader in the public eye.

Yet the Psalmist holds out hope that a new leader may turn out well. Psalm 72 is a blessing for a new leader, wishing a long life, a reign that builds national prosperity, fairness for all, and abundant food for the hungry. We can wish that for every national leader. Good rulers take good care of all the people under their charge.

A quick survey of Israel’s history suggests how rare it is to have a king or ruler who turns out well. The annals of Israel reveal a checkered history of corruption, godlessness, and violence. So the Psalm’s blessing takes on a prophetic edge, holding up a measuring stick for each new ruler, and pointing beyond them all to the One who will finally rule with the “righteousness of a king’s son.”

While we abide the exchange of political authorities this winter, we do not give up on God’s righteous values. According to Psalm 72, the ideal ruler “delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.”

God, we ask your blessing on our earthly rulers, knowing that they are ultimately accountable to you. Let them become a blessing for those they serve, especially as they provide justice and compassion for those most vulnerable. Amen.

Week 2 – Make straight a highway for your God

Sunday
Matthew 3:1-3

John the Baptist is bizarre, a prophet right out of the scrolls of the Old Testament. He appears in the wilderness, outside the city limits, with no warning, no backstory, no anticipation. His voice is the voice of Isaiah, crying out for us to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

Curious, then, is that next phrase: “make his paths straight.” God - or God’s Messiah – is approaching us as an initiative of heaven. This is sheer grace, God coming to earth regardless of request or invitation. For our part, we make it possible for God to come without stepping over the litter we’ve strewn on the path, or the obstacles that would slow down anybody approaching.

The Gospel story is drawing on the invitation of the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 40 of his scroll: “Every valley will be lifted up and every hill made low.” To translate in Lackawanna Lingo, “every pothole filled in and every speed bump removed.” This is the human work of Advent: we make it easier for God to approach us. We open our arms to receive, rather than cross our arms to shrug off. We take off the masks and get real. We name our needs and our heart’s desires. We allow ourselves to be found.

God’s coming could seem strange. It may smell like a wet camel. The holy breath may reek of bugs and honey. But the arrival will be a moment of deep honesty, a disclosure of truth that we’ve disguised yet always known. It will also come with the invitation to live completely in God’s light, loved, free, and known.

In the deepest recesses of our heart, isn’t this what we want more than anything else?

Holy God, come to us, abide among us, make us new no matter what. Amen.

Monday
Matthew 3:4-6

John the Baptist returns on schedule, always appearing early in Advent. He preaches his fiery sermon, promising to swing the axe and chop down every overgrown tree. People came from all over to go where he was. They left behind Jerusalem and its temple to go to the desert to meet God. They left behind the homes and businesses in the whole province of Judea, because meeting God was more important than the old routines.

They came out of a hunger to experience the presence and power of God first-hand. No more topical descriptions of religious trivia; they were coming for the real thing. The mystery and power of it was there all along – it's still right here – but the dust can settle, the zeal can chill, the once-vital faith can become mere habits, and good deeds are downgraded to items on a list.

Wouldn't it be great to know, that no matter how distant faith has been for a while, now God is calling you? That God is inviting you to a new level of joy. That the God who has been hidden for so long now wishes to make himself known - - not just to the world in general, but to you.

This movement toward God is the heart of our Christian faith. It's what lies behind all the hymns and the prayers and the rituals. And when you discover it all over again, it's like going home.

I am homesick, Lord. Bring me back to you. Amen.

Tuesday
Matthew 3:7-9

Down at the Jordan River, the Pharisees and Sadducees arrived to hear John preach. The Pharisees were the Bible Keepers, guardians of morality, purists in every regard – and they come to hear the preacher who dined on locusts. The Sadducees were the high brows, the liturgical elite, the religious nobility, and they came from the families from which all the highest priests were named.

Some suggest there might have been ulterior motives at work. The Pharisees hated the Roman army that occupied their land. If John declared God's kingdom is near, that the Messiah is coming on his white horse of power, they might want to be first in line to greet him.

And the Sadducees? They were willing to give a pass to the Romans as long they didn't interfere in their priestly duties and their commensurate income. Perhaps they came to keep an eye on the Pharisees, to make sure they didn't rabble-rouse around the edges. Who can say?

As we heard, John the Baptist won't have any of it. He calls out all of them as snakes. He accuses them of coming only to get a hall pass out of hell. He denounces their assumption that privilege will put them on the right side of God, saying, "I don't care who your granddaddy is; you're all a brood of vipers."

At heart, what is he saying? He is saying that religious people can fake it. That they may have no interest in preparing a way for the Lord to reach their own hearts. To put it in Jesus-language, John calls them to wake up and see the Light of the World is here. Jesus will expose every dark corner in our hearts, every broken deed whether done or left undone, every foul thought and every hurtful word.

So why not come clean—and live in the light?

Lord, your grace reveals my sin. Forgive me! Amen.

Wednesday
Matthew 3:7-9

John the Baptist proclaimed a universal call for people to return to God. It seems many Pharisees and Sadducees didn't think he needed to talk to them. In the verses today, his message to them - and to us - is inescapable.

It's all too easy for us to make fun of those first century religious leaders. We imagine them standing at a distance, smugly approving of "all those sinners" who need to welcome God into their lives, but then shrugging off the invitation for themselves. Our preachers portray them as self-satisfied, self-righteous, and holier-than-thou. We've been trained to look down at those Pharisees - and it's an easy way to avoid looking into the mirror.

The real questions are these:

- How are we keeping God at arms' length?
- How have we grown bored with Good News?
- Why do we avoid making necessary changes in our lives?
- Why do we think a call to a renewed faith is good for "them" but not for us?

John cuts through the denial and the dodging. He calls all people back to God and accepts no excuses. John invites us into the purging fire of God's Spirit, in the hope that God will change us for the better. But we must draw near enough to hear God speak, and then respond.

As Garrison Keillor once said, "Going to church no more makes you a Christian than standing in a garage makes you a car." I think we know what he means. Something more is required, and we know what it is.

Shatter my presumptions, O Christ, and ignite my heart with holy fire. Amen.

Thursday
Matthew 3:10

My good friend recently had five ash trees taken down. The Emerald Ash Borer had done its worst. The trees were enormous, even stately – at least one of them had seventy-five rings. For decades they stood as tall sentinels over the property. Yet the day came when they couldn't even be counted on for shade. They became a potential danger to the rooftops and the decision was made to cut them to the ground.

With laconic understatement, he decreed, "Years of firewood." So the living-yet-dead timbers will be repurposed as something useful. As firewood goes, ash trees burn like hell.

John the Baptist uses this striking metaphor to counter the religious people considered "living yet dead." They looked the part. They gesticulated as if they were holy. They measured their voices in pious tones. They claimed the pedigree. But there was no evidence of God at work in their lives, no graciousness, no generosity, no love, no self-sacrifice, no concern for anybody else. Merely the presumption of privilege.

These days, God doesn't seem to have a lot of time for people or churches that are merely going through the motions. God is looking for fruitfulness. For testimonies, not titles. For evidence of the Gospel's transformation of our lives, not a mimeographed booklet of what we used to do.

John the Baptist says God is a lumberjack with a fierce chainsaw. His cousin Jesus would famously say God is a gardener with a big, hooked knife, ready to trim away what is no longer productive. Same point.

Take this as a warning and get to work for the kingdom.

Lord, save us from all arrogance, and transform us into servants who will do your work even if it is difficult. Amen.

Friday

Matthew 3:11-12

I used to think that John the Baptist was the harsh one, the demanding one. As I listen to the end of his sermon, I realize he is pointing to Jesus. What does he say about the One who comes? Jesus will swing the axe, carry the winnowing fork, clear the threshing floor, and throw the chaff into the fire . . . Jesus is the One who will change us. Either he will make us more loving (and therefore more holy), or he will have little use for us (which would make us expendable).

The text for today is more about Jesus than it is about John. John takes his bony finger and points to a Savior who really can save us. He can save us from superficial religion that aims to merely make us feel good. He can save us from the presumption that all is OK with the world. He can save us from ourselves and all the stupid things we do. If we hand ourselves over to him, he will not only rinse us clean, but burn away all our destructive urges.

Jesus can change and save us, but he will not do it cheaply. Just as it once cost him his life, it's going to cost us everything. He will do surgery on our souls and that will take away our reputations. He will reduce us to becoming dependent, humble, and completely available. All our arrogance will be amputated. The path of healing will take a while, especially if it's going to last. Yet this is the way of salvation.

We have a God who not only wishes to untangle our crooked paths but expects us to be honest about them. This is the kind of Advent God who comes to us in Jesus. It's the kind of God that John knows – a God with the power to raise us up from dead and lifeless stones, a God who makes us a tribe of children who hunger and thirst for the world to be healed.

Straighten our tangled souls and strengthen our resolve to love you above all things. Amen.

Saturday

Matthew 3:11-12

What kind of baptism do you want? A wet one or a hot one? The wet baptism is like a bath. It rinses away the dirt. It makes us presentable. If done within the church, it unites us to the Tribe. We count it as the starting point of the Christian life, the setting out on a lifelong journey. People smile. The honored guest is frequently dressed in white satin. At the root of it all, it's a really big deal. This is the moment when God whispers, "Kid, you belong to me."

The hot baptism coincides with the wet one, but it's more than a photo op. This is the presence of God's Spirit, given through the grace of Jesus, and frequently described as fire. The Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal was a brilliant writer, much accomplished by the age of 31. Then one night, he had an experience of God for about two hours. All he could say about it was this: "fire."

John the Baptist says the fire will confirm what the water announces, yet it will do one thing more: it will remove from us all that is unnecessary and unworthy of the Lord. God's combustion will purify and refine.

This will not be easy. We want to cling to our bad habits. We want to develop our lives in a straight line without detour. We hope to get along without the pain, change, or grief that always accompanies growth. Yet this is not the way of God. God claims us in water and works within us as fire.

The big Advent question: what is God cleansing and purging in you?

*"Teach me to love thee as thy angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The fullness of the heaven-descended Dove;
My heart an altar, and thy love the flame."
(“Spirit of God, Descent Upon My Heart,” 1858)*

Week 3 – Rejoice! Rejoice!

Sunday

Isaiah 35:1-10

This undated poem points to a moment when God will give a home to those who have no other home. God will restore their lives. God will re-establish their physical well-being and affect the environment around them. “They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” That is good news. God promises joy.

Someone describes joy this way: “Such a gift, far from being a positive attitude or constantly upbeat mood, is best described as a deep confidence, even a kind of astonished laughter because of the discovery that there is One at work in our world more central to our stories than we are to ourselves.” (Tom Currie, *The Joy of Ministry*, p. 4)

Joy is more than a transitory emotion, as with all the other emotions that come and go. Joy is a “deep confidence” or an “astonished laughter.” It is rooted in the kind of God that we have. God’s work in the world is with those who have weak hands, feeble knees, and fearful hearts. It’s where confidence replaces the fear, where laughter interrupts the sorrow. Joy is the deep and abiding knowledge that, no matter what happens to us, God is with us, and God is working out the restoration of the world.

This is something that we can keep reminding one another. Isaiah’s poem is not a carrot on a stick, some vain hope that entices us to keep going. No, it’s this confidence that there is a greater love at the heart of the universe than what we see day to day, that there is a greater goodness than the recurring human nastiness, that there is a deeper wisdom than all short-sighted human foolishness, that there is truly a salvage operation that heaven is undertaking on earth.

Restoring God, save us, lift us, salvage us, and give us joy. Amen.

Monday

Isaiah 61:1-4

In this poem, the prophet sings of good news, freedom, gladness, and joy. He sings about a world where the greatest possible number of people will be happy and fulfilled. The prophet is so full of God’s Spirit, so anointed with power, that he makes a joyful difference in the world. When Jesus stood to preach for the first time (Luke 4:16-30), he announced this is why he has come into the world – if the world is ready to accept his offer.

There is nothing new about this invitation. When Jesus read the poem of Isaiah, it was already five hundred years old. And when Isaiah sang the song, it was much older than him. Chapter 61 refers to the Jubilee, marks by announcing “liberty to the captives,” “release to the prisoners,” and “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

As far back as Moses, the people were invited to make the fiftieth year different from all the other years. According to Leviticus 25, here’s what we are supposed to do in a Jubilee:

- We forgive everybody.
- We cancel all the debts.
- We let the land lie fallow. Even the land is to have a Sabbath rest.
- We return what we have taken from others.
- We free those held captive to the entanglements of poverty.

Jesus said, “This is the acceptable year of the Lord.” Blow the trumpet! Announce that all are forgiven and free! Everybody who heard him said, “What a wonderful idea!” And then they realized what it demanded of them.

Do we really want a Jubilee for Christmas? Really? More than anything else?

Lord, set us free as we work to set others free. Amen.

Tuesday
Malachi 3:1-4

Every December, I hear somebody singing a solo from Handel's "Messiah." It's a song that takes its text from the third chapter of Malachi's prophecy:

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?

Every time I hear it, that solo sings my hair. Malachi reminds us that the coming of God will be a great and terrible Day. It will be great because it reveals the glory of a Holy God. And it will be terrible because of ... the glory of a Holy God. Even if we are treasured by our Creator, we will be refined, purified, and smelted by fire. That is going to hurt.

What makes this particularly painful for me is that Malachi was addressing the clergy in his day. The priests around Malachi had one hand in the offering plate and another hand clutching their wallets. They were greedy and cheap. In short, they cheated God out of a full offering as they pranced around in clerical finery. They exerted authority over others while their own hearts were uncommitted.

No generosity in their souls. No graciousness or gratitude.

The refiner's fire comes as a gift from God. It expresses God's desire that we become a holy community of faith. God wants to work in us, and the best evidence will be our own generous and gracious lives.

Purify us, Holy God, until we are as generous as you are. Amen.

Wednesday
Isaiah 11:1-5

Isaiah declares the Promised One "shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear." The Messiah will be full of the Spirit of God. This Spirit will fill him with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might. He will be full of knowledge, with deep reverence for God. And he will also be fair.

That's where the prophet is pointing. He will not be swayed by visual deception. He will not believe the hype or nonsense of what others say. He will see things for what they are. This quality of clarity will determine how he judges.

Now, that word "judge" is a venerable word. For the Jews, it harkens back to a time when the land was governed by people called judges. They were local authorities. You took your case to them, and they decided. If there was something wrong, they had the ability to fix it. If a grievance needed to be addressed, they had the power to do so.

Their fairness depended on the quality of their character. If they were good people, they would make good decisions. If they were sleazy, if their opinions could be purchased, then the victims might be in further trouble. All the more reason why justice had to be independent from what the judge saw or what people were saying.

So we watch and hope for fairness, for the One who is not bribed nor swayed by public opinion, but regards each person as a child of God, worthy of love, worthy of justice. And while we watch and hope for that One to come, we can pledge ourselves to live as if he is already among us.

Holy Judge: come among us, see us for what and who we are, and decide what is fair for all. This we pray, even if it disrupts our lives. Amen.

Thursday
Psalm 9:18

*For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.*

It's an extraordinary claim, but how can it be otherwise? God's character is perfect goodness. God has no tolerance for anything less than goodness.

What saves our life from extermination are two other divine qualities: (1) God's long-suffering patience, which is an expression of love for us; and (2) God's determination to make all things right, even if it takes a while. As someone has said, God is "committed to a rule of just law, as one who can be counted on to intervene on behalf of those who are treated unjustly or against what is regarded as inequitable treatment."⁴

This is a good summary of Psalm 9. The psalm declares God will make everything right, that God is working even now to accomplish this righteousness. Given who we are or who we are prone to be, the psalm is God's invitation for you and me to stand on the right side of history, to defend the weak and redress the exploited. It is hard work, long term work, costly work; but it is holy work.

In the justice of God our judge, poor folk won't always be forgotten. For God is love - holy, righteous love. And seated on the throne, God always has the last word.

Remember us, O Lord. All of us. Amen.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) 234.

Friday
Psalm 42

Why are we cast down and disquieted? Let us count the ways.

I found a few words from W.E.B. DuBois, the eloquent thinker who believed all people are created equally in the image of God. In voicing his own disquiet as an African American, he pointed ahead to the final justice of God. He could hear it in the Christian spirituals, what he called the "Sorrow Songs" that emerged from authentic human pain. And he says:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond.

Dubois took a breath, and then he added:

If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, then (shortly) in His good time America shall rend the veil and the prisoners shall go free. Free, free, as the sunshine trickling down the morning into these high windows of mine, free as yonder fresh young voices welling up to me from the caverns of brick and mortar below – swelling with song, instinct with life, tremulous and darkening bass.⁵

With DuBois, we trust in the ultimate justice of things. So we pray,

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1994) 162.

Saturday
Romans 15:7-13

Every church believes it is warm and friendly, especially if the fellowship is tight knit. But not every church is welcoming. As I visit other congregations, I notice the people talking among themselves and ignoring me. The announcements are designed for the regulars. The pulpit jokes are for insiders. I've wondered as I've wandered: were they expecting me?

In this passage, Paul the Jew is speaking to a church full of Gentiles. He reminds them how once they were outsiders, and thanks to Jesus, now they are included. All the grand Jewish hopes for peace, joy, and salvation are now offered freely to the non-Jews who are adopted into God's family.

The apostle knew his Bible. As a Jew, he knew the law of Moses is clear: "You shall love the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). As a one-time defender of a Jews-only faith, he also knew what a long journey it is to welcome people that God loves - and you exclude.

So what will we do today to reach out to somebody who doesn't believe they belong? What will we do to extend our hand to the people who think they are unworthy of love? How can we offer the grace of Christ to the person who wants nothing to do with the church?

And whom can we invite to sit with us tomorrow – and Christmas Eve – in worship?

Enlarge my heart, O God of all. And fill our pews. Amen.

Week 4 – Unto us a child is born

Sunday
Luke 1:26-38

Picture the young Jewish woman in the small village. Every Sabbath, she goes to the synagogue. She sits with the other women and stays out of sight as was the custom. She sings the psalms, listens to the promises of God, joins in the prayers, and goes home to light the candles. Every week she does this. It shapes who she is.

Within the home, she learns the commandments of God: love the neighbor, gives alms to the needy, do justice, walk humbly. When she sees the beggar on the street, she reaches in her pocket to find a coin, and offers it with her blessing. It is a small thing, but it shapes her character. She sees the value of living like this.

It isn't entirely out of the blue that the angel comes with an enormous assignment. Mary knows how to trust. She has lived as God instructed. When Gabriel says, "You shall carry a child, and bear God's Savior into the world," she knows the announcement comes from God, the baby comes from God, and if this wild, unimaginable assignment is ever going to work, it's because it is carried, in no small part, on the shoulders of God.

So Mary says, "Let it happen." That's her way of saying yes. That's her way of trusting what she cannot yet see. She offers a simple yes, in spite of all the coming complications. And do you know why? Because her "yes" is her decision to go along with what God is already doing in the world. It's the same sort of "yes" we are invited to speak each day.

Lord, to all that you are doing to redeem the world, we say yes. Amen.

Monday
Luke 1:39-45

Today's text is a story about the turning of the ages. The old Elizabeth – barren like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah – is having a child because of the generosity of God. She stands for the women of every age who are disregarded and dismissed because they cannot produce for their men – and for them, God provides what their men cannot provide.

It resonates with an ancient vision of the prophet Isaiah:

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor!
For the children of the desolate woman will be more numerous
than the children of her that is married. (Isaiah 54:1)

Something is happening through Elizabeth – the barrenness of centuries of Jewish hope is now being countered by the grace of God.

Meanwhile, something is happening in Mary, the young unmarried woman. Her child comes as a complete gift, unrequested, unexpected, without the initiation of any man. The Holy Spirit visits Mary, and that's all it takes for her to have a child.

And this child of hers will grow to honor women and men as equal children of God. He will push aside the cultural restrictions of his day to speak to women, to heal them, to welcome their support of his work. He counters the world's disgraceful assessment of women with God's abundant grace.

It is no wonder that women sing first of his birth, just as women will first share the announcement of his resurrection.

Lord, be born in us today. Amen.

Tuesday
Luke 1:46-55

Writing from a privileged university position in Britain, C.S. Lewis said this text is “terrifying,” and should make our blood run cold. He points out,

"There are no cursings here, no hatred, no self-righteousness. Instead, there is mere statement. He has scattered the proud, cast down the mighty, sent the rich empty away...not (stated) with fierce exultation, yet -- who can mistake the tone? -- in a calm and terrible gladness."⁶

Some would soften a text like this, making it as sweet as a snicker doodle or as lilting as a Bethlehem lullabye. But this is the Bible, the real Bible. If we are courageous enough to hear what the Bible is saying, we hear of a revolution brewing -- and it is God's revolution. The revolution is called “Christmas.”

Meanwhile, the Emperor of the Universe announces the Savior of the World will be born in a little town that hardly anybody remembers. Ancient king David was born there a thousand years before. Not only that, the angel messengers are not sent to announce the news in the palaces of the global powers, but to anonymous sheep herders in the hills. They are nobodies who will probably not show up on Caesar's census.

Do you see the move? The powerful, like Caesar, are brought down from their thrones, and the lowly are lifted up. And this is God's doing.

*Lord, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.
Let me stand in all humility where you wish for me to stand. Amen.*

⁶ C. S. Lewis, "The Psalms" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967) 120-121.

Wednesday
Matthew 1:18-25

A righteous man. That's how the Bible describes Joseph, Mary's beloved. And he has a problem on his hands: what to do about a pregnant girlfriend?

As he fusses about his dilemma, he goes to sleep, entering a dreamland where he cannot defend himself from whatever pops up. Somewhere past our conscious defenses, the messages can get in. The ancients believed, and some still hold, that dreams are a way for God to speak to us, through all the unfinished business of the day still stirring in our brains. That's what happens to Joseph.

Now it's Joseph's turn to hear the whisper of an angel. "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child within her is a gift of the Holy Spirit." He didn't produce this baby because he is not in charge.

This is a most disruptive dream, and we can be certain he fussed about it. The gospel of Matthew doesn't say that, but I believe it. No matter how fearsome an angel or a dream might be, it takes time to work things through. Real change doesn't happen until we say so. There must come a point when we must give in and surrender. The ultimate test of righteousness is setting aside our personal agendas and accepting what God is doing right here and now, even if it demands a great deal of us.

Joseph is a righteous man. A just man. He chooses kindness even if it was an initial struggle. He chooses to trust that God is at work even if his life will be perpetually disrupted. He chooses to believe there is a fiercer grace at work even if he cannot control it. God is coming to save us through the unexpected child born to Mary. This is the hope at the heart of Christmas.

Lord, speak to us and help us turn your dreams into reality. Amen.

Thursday
Matthew 1:22-23

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

George Everett Ross was an Episcopalian priest. In one of his sermons, he said the secret of the Christian life is found in having a clear view of Christmas. God comes to share our human life, so that our human lives might be transformed. Here's how George Everett Ross said it in one of his sermons:

We come, all of us, to Christ in our loneliness and need, and we find that He is lonely, too. We show him our scars; He shows us His. We show Him our crown of thorns; He tells us the story of His. We thirst and so does He. It is upon the basis of our common humanity that God comes to us. As we share our sorrows and pains with Jesus, He shares God's love and grace with us.⁷

The word for today is Emmanuel: God is with us. In every way, God is with us. Every day of the year, God is with us. In every dark night, in every dark place, God is with us. Even if you forget everything else, remember this: God is with us. Every day of every year, let the children's Christmas carol be our prayer:

*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care
and fit us for Heaven to live with Thee there.*

⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, [Strong in the Broken Places: A Theological Reverie on the Ministry of George Everett Ross](#) (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 1995) 17.

Friday
Luke 2:1-20

Why do we exchange gifts at Christmas? To express love, to create more love. A good gift doesn't have to cost a lot. But it's the thought, the consideration, the precise selection that matters. That can be a lot of work, but we do it willingly for the people we love.

God does this willingly for you and for me. We don't know enough about the ancient shepherds to know if they were good or greasy. But Christmas was given to them out of love.

Or there's King Herod; he wasn't very good at all. He understood the Gift was so amazing it would take over everything, including his throne. Herod tried to dismiss the gift and it didn't work.

Even the world says, "We don't want this Baby Jesus, and we sure don't want him when he grows up." The world pushed him out – yet he came back a few days later.

The Gift of God in Jesus Christ comes regardless of how we behave. We hear it in the Appalachian carol: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die, for poor ornery people like you and like I." I am ornery enough that I want to fix the grammar of that verse and sidestep the sentiment. Yet Christmas comes to me, even though I am that ornery. It comes for you too.

This is the gift: God loves the world so much that God comes into the world. God keeps coming toward us even if we push him away. God comes to us in Jesus, to embrace us in grace until the day comes when we become grateful.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Amen.

Christmas Eve
Luke 2:8-20

*"God on high, the highest praise and peace to all down here.
God favors those who live with love and keeps them from all fear."*
The echo of that song in unexpected gladness rings.
And Christmas calls us to be still and hear the angels sing.

The angels point to Him tonight. He comes in mystery.
They point to him for He's the One who redeems history.
We're not left empty or alone, cut off from heaven's plan.
The song connects both strong and weak in one young Jewish man.

One day when Christ would show his strength in great humility,
He rode a colt into the town for all the world to see.
Bystanders waved their palms and raised their voices up to sing:
"All peace in heaven, glory too" -- the angels echoing!

That's what God wants – an echo! As the song starts from above,
It comes to dwell among us, then we give it back in love.
From God, through us, and back to God. That's how the carols move.
The world is filled with rhythm 'til we all get in the groove.

God starts the joy by sending Christ. The shepherds join the dance
And soon this night is filled with light, and all receive the chance
To lay down troubles at the cross, all sins abandoning.
And then the "world gives back the song which now the angels sing."

So now we sing. We must respond. For much is now at stake.
This world is shrouded in dark gloom and few dare stay awake.
The Caesars stomp with bloody boots and fill weak souls with fright.
It's up to us to echo grace. Our songs shall pierce the night.

Our mission is to sing, and serve all neighbors who cannot,
until the song consumes the world. This is God's joyful plot.
This day we echo angels as we sing of peace and grace.
We lift the song that we received. With candles, find your place.

Welcome, Jesus, Light of the World!

John 1:1-14
Christmas Day

I've always been stopped in my tracks by these lyrics in John's great poem: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born...of God."

Faith provides a birth within us, a birth that grows into new life. As Martin Luther preached creatively in one of his Christmas sermons,

Christ takes our birth from us and absorbs it in his birth, and grants us his (birth), that in it we might become pure and holy, as it were our own, so that every Christian may rejoice and glory in Christ's birth as much as if he had himself been born of Mary as was Christ... This is the only way in which Christ can be rightly known so that the conscience is satisfied and made to rejoice... This is what is meant by Isaiah 9:6, "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a son is given." *See to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you.*

That's what the Gospel of John is inviting us to claim. When faith in Christ takes birth within us, it grows. Just like the Baby Jesus. Faith starts small, just as small as a mustard seed, but then it grows and grows until it takes over. As Christ is born within us, his love heals our crippled spirits. His peace swallows up our divisions. His justice grows until it overwhelms the unfairness of the world. His truth increases until all things are claimed by his grace. Which is to say: Jesus Christ is the Lord of all.

I wish you all the joy that comes by welcoming Christ into your life. Trust in him. Live in him. And let him live in you.

Merry Christmas!