

FOREWORD

ADVENT 2022

In the following pages, you will find heartfelt reflections from people of faith. They represent prayerful responses to Scripture passages for every day of the season of Advent. Please join with me by offering a prayer of thanks to God for all who have contributed to this year's reflections.

This Advent, we find ourselves longing to move further away from the pandemic while still in it. Even while these reflections were written and submitted, more information about the virus is coming to us. And yet, as people of faith and hope, we ask God to be with us in the midst of infections, serious consequences of climate change, and social and political challenges, which impact us all.

Advent at St. Mark's is a season of blue rather than purple. For us, blue is a symbol of hope as well as the color of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Our vestments and banners are blue, and we relish a hope-filled season of private prayer, prayer at worship, and prayers joined with others in this community and around the world.

I hope and pray that we will experience God's love each and every day of Advent in new and marvelous ways. God is with us, and we commit to being with God, as we mark four weeks of reflections, anticipation, and joy.

The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato

Rector

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday, November 27

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. – Romans 13:11 (Full text, Romans 13:11-14)

"Time to wake up!" We know that feeling when someone says this, but our body is not of the same opinion. Muscles ache. Mind seems like it's moving through molasses. Reluctant feet hit the floor. Mouth opens for hastily prepared breakfast. Lips utter a few "good mornings." But are we awake? We are encouraged to be awake to more than our surroundings and our work. We need to be awakened to "Coming."

Advent is a season of renewed battle within, to allow Jesus to be our motivation. Perhaps we find ourselves bound by the pressures of work and family, the expectations of those around us. It seems like our happiness is disappearing; we are angered when another expectation is placed upon us. We get into arguments to release the pressure inside. Ironically, we become jealous of those we want to love us because their interests are elsewhere. Somewhere in all this our hearts fall asleep to anything more, anything else.

"Time to wake up!" Set aside darkness; put on light. Abandon selfishness, and put on care for others. Fight the attitude that says, "If I feel good, I am good." Fight the urge to lash out in anger; fight indulging in temporary physical pleasure. Fight by waking up to a motivation that is ours by invitation, not by effort, by letting our guard down to a God who is coming to us again.

*Lord,
help us be Advent awake, seeing in the mirror the face of the one whom God loves,
a Savior who has come to us again this day. Amen.*

Michael Wentzel, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, November 28

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent. – Acts 17:29-30a (Full text, Acts 17:22-31)

If all offspring were as mindful and reverential of their parents as we are called to be of God, Dr. Spock may never have become a household name. My kids aren't there yet, and I don't expect they will be. They're human after all. While my boys surely don't worship me, I can draw a parallel between their unrealistically high estimation of me and the idolatry of God that Paul was warning the Greeks of in this verse.

God is not an idol, and there comes a time when every parent decides to say, "Enough is enough. I've put up with your silliness for too long. It's time you shape up." The difference between when I say that to my kids and when Paul warned the Greeks to repent is that there's a lot more at stake in God's case, and it's done unselfishly from a place of much greater love.

I am not an idol; I am a human father. God is not an idol; God is all-encompassing love. We'd be wise to remember that when we try to mold God into something more convenient instead of understanding that God can't be improved on and is already big enough for everyone. It's especially worth remembering this Advent season as we await the birth of God's only son.

*Heavenly Father,
Help us stay focused on the size of your love and forgiveness
instead of our own human arrogance
so that we may love and honor you always. Amen.*

Bryan Bickford, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, November 29

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” – Luke 10:23-24 (Full text, Luke 10:21-24)

Everyone is constantly searching for something to cling to or make them happy. Something to give them hope and help them go on with their day. Whether it is dealing with stress and anxiety, losing a child, or suffering from a significant medical condition, there is a deep desire for something greater than our own strength. Jesus lets the disciples in on a secret – that they have what many people want and desire. They have heard the words and have seen the miracles of God through Jesus. As children of God and disciples of Christ, we too have seen and heard. This is something to rejoice in as we begin this journey of Advent.

This Advent, invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in showing others the fruits of this discipleship in Jesus Christ, and allow them to be blessed as you are!

*Lord,
Give us ears to hear and eyes to see your goodness in the world around us.
Let us not be afraid to spread that joy of the coming of the Lord this Advent. Amen.*

Erin Spruit, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, November 30

For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." -- Romans 10:10-11 (Full text, Romans 10:9-18)

Sometimes hope can seem, well, hopeless. After all, to hope is to be vulnerable, even foolish.

Welcome to Advent. In Advent we confront our uncertainty. Our problems can be so daunting: the struggle for justice, the challenge of climate, the emptied pain at home, and more. And problems are not just outside; we also struggle with darkness of our own doing.

Like the ancient prophets of Israel, we ask for light, a word. How do we go on? Romans gives two words we can rely on. The first is our reality: Our hope begins with the belief in our heart

and a matching confession, “Jesus, you are Lord.” And second, there is God’s generosity. Hope is for Jews and Greeks, church insiders and outsiders. This hope is yet to be revealed but we can trust it now.

Advent invites us to face our fears and our own failings, knowing that God is not only with us but ahead of us. Joy awaits so we can take heart today.

“No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

For our prayer, let’s turn to the text of Paul Gerhardt, translated by Catherine Winkworth:

*“O kindle, Lord most holy, your lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.”*

Keep us ready to respond and constant in hope as we await the Day of your Dawning. Amen.

Bill Harris, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Thursday, December 1

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. – James 1:2-4 (Full text, James 1:1-11)

This passage in James has always been one I have thought about a lot – to be joyful when facing difficult times, promising that testing of our faith develops perseverance. What a curious thought. Perseverance. Persistence. Stick-to-itiveness.

I have watched people with serious diseases do just this. It seems God gives them strength to do so just as those who suffer the loss of a child or spouse. I experienced this recently with lengthy back surgery. God and many faithful praying friends brought me through.

The promise is that we may be mature and complete, lacking nothing. God is faithful!

How does this relate to the Advent season? One of the words in this passage is “joy.” How joyous we feel as we think of God sending his Son to redeem us and the world.

Father God,

We thank you for the Advent season when we remember how you sent your Son as a baby to us.

We thank you for the many Scriptures that remind us of your great love. Amen.

Julie Griffin, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Friday, December 2

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times

or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” – Acts 1:6-8 (Full text, Acts 1:1-9)

“Are we there yet?”

My kids pestered me with this question when I drove us on family road trips – just as I peppered my father with the same query. I knew that Dad would get us to our destination, but when? I *needed* to know, because, well, waiting is hard!

“Are we there yet?” In today’s reading, the Apostles asked Jesus a version of that same query – with more urgency. After all, Jesus was about to ascend to his Father. And his followers wondered if the time was NOW for the kingdom to be restored in Israel. But Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know.” He also tells his followers that they will get power from the Holy Spirit.

I think I understand why this pre-ascension passage is part of Advent: They both are about waiting – one is for the birth of The Promise, the other for the Second Coming.

But what do we do in the meantime? Jesus has an idea: “Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That seems more productive than asking, “Are we there yet?”

*Lord,
Grant me patience to endure the long journey.
Help me to be your witness in my neck of the woods. Amen.*

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, and the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, December 3

For God alone my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken. – Psalm 62:1-2 (Full text, Psalm 62)

In this Advent season we find ourselves in a time in which we are easily shaken by personal and communal events.

We are shaken by a spouse or a dear friend with Alzheimer's.

We are shaken by a personal illness, an accident, and aging.

We are shaken by the violence and poverty in Ukraine, Haiti, and in our own communities.

We are shaken by gun violence in our schools, churches, synagogues, and public places.

We are shaken by the toxic polarization here in western Michigan and throughout our country.

In Psalm 62 we see that when David is shaken, he turns to his rock and his salvation: God. Waiting in quiet is hard, but God desires our silence and listening. We are invited to turn to God in silence and prayer. It is there that we will find comfort and strength.

*God,
Help me to quiet myself and take three minutes today
to listen to your voice, my rock and salvation. Amen.*

Dan Pierson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew, and Catholic Information Center

Sunday, December 4

***The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. – Isaiah 11:6
(Full text, Isaiah 11:1-10)***

Isaiah 11 is a prophetic vision of the peaceful Kingdom to come. Isaiah predicts a time when the world will be immersed, like the waters of the sea, in the knowledge and love of God. It is an image that shows us what God intended for his creation. In 11:6 he promises a future king who will bring peace and change the world in profound ways...where enemies live together in peace.

Isaiah's prophesy gives us hope in a very troubled world. It is an invitation to hope for all things. It is hope for reconciliations we can't begin to imagine. As Christians, we know that that hope has come to life in a little child, Jesus. He showed us how to live together. He taught us to welcome the stranger, care for the poor, feed the hungry. He taught us to love one another, even our enemies. He gave us hope for a better world.

Gracious God,

*In this season of Advent, as we wait expectantly to celebrate the birth of our Savior,
fill us with hope for a brighter future.*

*Help us to be peacemakers in the world you intended for us...
a world where there is peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.*

The Rev. Jan Gockerman, Deacon, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, December 5

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. – Colossians 1:19-20 (Full text, Colossians 1:11-20)

The Apostle Paul could surely dazzle with words – or confound. He sometimes leads me into verbal mazes.

In Colossians 1:11-20, Paul describes a Christ that, to me, is both amazing and impossible. Paul's Christ permeates all, *is* all. Christ is everywhere, everything, inescapable. "... the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things...were created, things visible and invisible. ... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Whew! It's not that I don't like and even find comfort in this rapturous vision of Jesus. I do. It's that I find it hard to grasp. Paul the mystic, the wordy wanderer, is not writing for me, who likes the tangible – not, anyway, until today's verse, beginning with the heart of it: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..."

OK, now I'm starting to *see*. This indescribable god found a home in a human body. And the Father is pleased with the Son. As a proud father, stepfather, and son myself, I get it. The Bible tells us in-the-body stories like how this itinerant rabbi scolded money changers, dined with outcasts, and had his flesh ripped by nails from his own weight. God in the flesh.

May each of us seek to be a body of Christ within the greater body of Christ.

*God,
Help us to see Christ embodied in each other and in ourselves. Amen.*

Ted Hartzell, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, December 6

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” – Mark 10:13-14 (Full text, Mark 10:13-16)

I grew up in a “no nonsense” family. I remember times when admonitions were given before I even did something. That certainly put me in my place, complicating my understanding of love. After reading these verses I concluded that some disciples grew up amid similar circumstances and that possibly they believed as grownups they had earned the authority to curtail the actions of children.

That was my close-up view of the scene. But stepping back, I saw tenderness and love. Little children were brought to Jesus, who welcomed them with open arms, even while being indignant at the actions of the disciples. Stepping back even further, I saw lots of God’s love to celebrate. Love brought the children to Jesus, and Jesus returned that love to all, even the disciples. His admonition taught them to love!

Honestly, I really needed to read and devour these words. Too often I am like the disciples. Although it's easy to accept God's love for children, little children grow up, and too often I can't accept that God's love is for all – innocent children and not so innocent adults, myself included. So now what?

Now I suspend judgment and simply love.

*Dear God,
I often fail to accept that your love is unconditional.
Open my eyes and heart to extend your love to all,
young and old. Amen.*

Donna Engstrom, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, December 7

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. – Psalm 103:8,10 (Full text, Psalm 103:1-4,8,10)

My very first response was THANK GOD! Because, I need all his mercy, graciousness, slow-to-anger and steadfast love every day. I need it all so I can be the woman he created me to be. I need it all so I can be a witness of such wonderful reflections of God. And mostly I need it all for the times I am not merciful, slow to anger, or abounding in steadfast love.

I find it all in my morning prayer time and Scripture reading, my reaching out for Christ throughout my day, in nature, in the Eucharist and – when I don't do it so well – in the great

sacrament of reconciliation. God's wonderful, steadfast love is all I need to continue and take nothing for the journey.

God's love is sometimes beyond my capacity to thank him, but the Holy Spirit always seems to give me the right words.

*Thank you, God, for so great a love.
May I continue to walk in your love
and abound in spreading it wherever
your will takes me. Amen.*

Margo Dean, SFO, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, December 8

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. – Luke 1:38 (Full text, Luke 1:26-38)

The collective Christian imagination seems to have this vision of Mary as being a passive vessel, a docile and perfect teen plucked from obscurity to be the mother of Jesus because of her faithful, meek, and mild nature.

When I think about this moment of the Annunciation, I see no meekness in Mary. It must have taken incredible courage to say yes to what the angel before her was proposing. She could have said no and had an interesting anecdote to tell friends about her curious late-night visitor. Saying no would have been the normal thing to do, right?

But she said yes.

She took the courageous path knowing that it might cost her the respect of her community, her future husband, and even her life. And she did it with a servant's heart. This courage, and the fortitude she would show through a pregnancy, difficult journeys, and the unconventional birth that was to come make her one of the boldest people in the Bible.

Mother Mary, meek and mild? No way. More like Mother Mary, brave and dauntless.

*Dear God,
As we prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus,
help us to be more like Mary:
full of courage and open to your will. Amen.*

Angie Brown, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Friday, December 9

Thus says the LORD, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I, the LORD, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go. – Isaiah 48:17 (Full text, Isaiah 48:17-19)

Famed conductor Benjamin Zander tells a story of two prime ministers discussing affairs of state. A man bursts in shouting. The hosting prime minister responds, “Peter, kindly remember Rule Number Six.” Peter immediately becomes calm and apologizes. Fifteen minutes later a woman calms down the same way. Curious, the visitor asks, “What is Rule Number Six?” The host replies, “It’s simple: Don’t take yourself so seriously.” The visitor asks, “What are the other rules?” Answer: “There aren’t any.”

In what inevitably becomes the overwhelming busyness of Advent and the whole holiday season, it is far too easy to become obsessed with the “perfect moment.” We agonize over the perfect gift, the perfect holiday meal, the perfect time with family and friends, the perfect church service, the perfect Christmas card, the perfect outfit, the romanticized perfect season. However, Isaiah reminds us that God teaches us to profit, to let good happen, to put things in the right order, to prioritize *right relationship* – with God, with each other, and with everything around us – and to not take ourselves too seriously in molding and shaping the “perfect holiday experience.” If we follow these reminders, our “peace will be like a river.” (Isaiah 48:18)

This is not to say that we shouldn’t take this holy season seriously, but that any drive toward the “perfect” anything is simply an assured attempt to fall short and miss the important moments of grace all around us.

*May we let this season unfold in majesty and awe
with simple assurance that Christmas is coming. Amen.*

Josh Zallar, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Saturday, December 10

By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours? – Sirach 48:3-4 (Full text, Sirach 48:1-4,9-11)

The Book of Sirach is from the Apocrypha. It was written in Hebrew by its author, Ben Sira, sometime before 180 B.C. The Latin Vulgate Bible referred to the book as Ecclesiasticus, i.e. “the Church’s book.” Other earlier Old Testament wisdom literature lacks reference to Israel’s sacred history and traditions, but Sirach lifts up biblical history in this section (chapters 44-49) in the “Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors.”

In today’s verses Sirach lifts up for us Elijah, the greatest of Israel’s prophets. Elijah avenged his generation’s “every kind of wickedness.”

In 2022, do not we American Christians need to “bring down fire” on our churches and our nation as they, and we, practice the idolatries of egotism, fear, hatred, and division? In these times it often feels as if our churches, nation, and world are ablaze, and not in a good way.

May we always know that the cleansing fire, wondrous deeds, and glory are God’s and not ours!

May we remember that the cross comes before flag, money, power, or any of our other idolatries and every kind of wickedness.

God,

*Fill us with Elijah’s passion for you and your justice and love,
especially in these times of selfishness, egotism, power politics,
and nativist jingoism, driven by fear and hatred. Amen.*

The Rev. Charles Homeyer, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sunday, December 11

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. – James 5:7-8a (Full text, James 5:7-10)

Patience can come in a variety of forms. It could be waiting for a late bus half an hour longer in hopes of getting to Mass on time, or waiting for Christmastime snow. It could be simply not thinking about your presents under the tree. It could be something like delaying the bliss of your heated car for another five minutes to buy a homeless man a sandwich.

Advent itself invites us to be more patient. There are so many things we all *want* during the Christmas season, but we don't really *need* now or ever. If we pause for a second to wait, we can see the wonderful gifts God has already given us.

Also, could it be that this verse is showing God's patience as a farmer who is waiting for us? Maybe we're the crop, receiving the early and late rains? Could the crop be a model for what we should do?

*Dear God,
Thank you for this Advent season.
Thank you for waiting for the early and late rains with us.
Without you, this universe would not even be here.
Thank you for not giving up on us.
Please help us to be more patient, even when it's hard. Amen.*

Milo Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, December 12

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” – Mark 12:42-43 (Full text, Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus is focused on watching all as they come into the temple. We wonder: Is he contemplating whether each gives automatically? Or is he looking at their faces, body language, and deeply into their hearts? Are they giving with gratitude, generosity, deeply caring for others?

Do each of us take these verses directly into our hearts? Do we understand that when we give, we are using our hearts as well as our heads? Are we just “putting an offering in the plate as it passes us” or are we deeply giving with prayer and love for the Lord? Are we giving with gratitude for all that God does for us every day?

I believe the lesson is that each of us, no matter our status, must give what we can – at times, more than we can – and that our gifts need to come deeply from our hearts with a commitment to God that we will strive to be a better individual.

Give from your heart! Believe with your heart, your mind, and your soul that you are doing the right thing, and that you are answering God's Call. Give as a thank you to God for his everlasting love and guiding hand.

Dear God in Heaven,

Guide us as we make our pledge to our church and our community, to give with love because we care, because we are grateful for your all-caring love and support and guidance.

Help us to share a "giving heart" in honor of you and your guiding love throughout our lives and beyond. Amen.

Dr. Jacqueline Taylor , St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Tuesday, December 13

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. – John 1:9-10 (Full text, John 1:9-14)

When I first read John's Gospel, it was very confusing to me. How can you be "in the world" and bring it "into being"? Later, I came to realize that we cannot really understand Jesus. He is far more immense and magnificent than we can comprehend. Though his thumbprint is on everything in the world, even his disciples did not know or understand him. Therefore, I believe it is arrogant to think we know what God wants or whether he is "on our side."

We must struggle with our ignorance and vulnerability and quietly search within ourselves for Jesus, the true light. To love God and our neighbors with all our heart, we must open our heart, let go of our need for control, and risk being hurt and disappointed.

*Almighty God,
Thank you for the beauty and majesty of your world.
Thank you for your love and grace.
Help us to walk humbly with you and acknowledge our vulnerability and faults.
For it is our cracks that let in your light. Amen.*

Michael Ryan, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, December 14

Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and ‘Because I am going to the Father?’” They said, “What does he mean by this ‘a little while?’” – John 16:17-18a (Full text, John 16:12-22)

The disciples are confused, and Jesus has no simple way of explaining what is going to happen on Easter, even though Easter is the essence of Jesus’ revelation to the world. “In a little while” is

not a satisfying answer to the question that the disciples have asked their teacher. It may be the only answer to the question that Jesus can give at this point.

Today's Christians still have questions that don't seem to have satisfying answers. At least the disciples were able to see and talk to Jesus. Jesus points to the Spirit coming at Pentecost, but our world still falls apart and it is hard to hear the voice of the Spirit. It is hard to understand the promise of joy that appears in the next verses when Jesus says that "no one will take away your joy... I will tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

How do we deal with the victory of Jesus and the troubles of our life? How can we feel defeated after the promise of joy and victory?

The powerful difference in Christianity is that we are not simply given ideals, rules, and a moral code. In Christianity, God lives in his followers to achieve the same victory in them demonstrated by his Son, Jesus. In that indwelling is peace despite the foment and troubles of the world around us.

*Lord,
Today, in our confusion,
we remember that joy and victory have been promised
as we continue to ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Mark Miller, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 15

Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is King! He has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." – Psalm 96:10 (Full text, Psalm 96)

People want leaders who will solve their problems. Hence, Israel's repeated insistence on having a king in Old Testament times, and our furor over politics in modern times. This also explains the expectation that the Messiah would come as a political leader.

The Messiah, though, surprised everyone by coming into the world materially poor and politically powerless. But it turned out that this King had more meaningful power than any human leader could. He went for the heart instead of the pocketbook or the throne. He rooted us into something truer than the superficiality of striving for political power, teaching us a new way of seeing the world and the Kingdom of God. He showed us the path to healing, conviction, and peace.

This is the kind of kingship that only God can provide, because he has been King since the beginning. He "made the world so firm that it cannot be moved" – we need not fear the winds of change. He "will judge the peoples with equity" – we need not fear the judgments of others. As we once again welcome Jesus into our world and our hearts, we remember that God's kingship continues to be powerful, just as it was in the roughness of that hewn manger holding the Son of God, and that the world he made is firm and unmovable. The Lord is King!

*Jesus,
We root ourselves into this world you have made,
grateful for your invitation to give up striving for power
so we can rest in your kingship. Amen.*

Irene Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, December 16

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. – Isaiah 56:7b-8 (Full text, Isaiah 56:1-3,6-8)

Some eight centuries before Christ, Isaiah declared Israel and its temple a place of hospitality to all nations. Quoting the prophet, Jesus would stand up for the right of foreigners to worship, undistracted, in the temple courtyard (Mark 11:17).

Today in our own century, the opportunity re-emerges. For several years now, Muslims have outnumbered Episcopalians in the U.S. population. Our neighboring town of Holland, long touting a Dutch heritage, houses an ever-increasing number of Hispanic residents.

One of our former presidents hawked the slogan “America first.” Might we people of God invest that slogan with a different and upgraded meaning: i.e., not first in wealth, military power, or political domination, but first in the ability of varied peoples to live in harmony and productivity? More and more, we appear to reflect the diversity. With divine help, we can parlay that diversity into a truly “advent” nation, prepared to receive the Redeemer’s ultimate entry.

Eternal God, whose love extends to people of all temperaments, nationalities, and races, help us to mirror that love as we relate with others, both close-at-hand and far-reaching, that your reign may become present in our time. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Dickinson, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Saturday, December 17

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork. One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another. Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world. – Psalm 19:1-4 (Full text, Psalm 19)

I am often struck by the quiet of December. Late in the summer the songbirds slip away, group by group. Mornings that have been rich with fluted trills are left to the chatter and chirp of squirrels and sparrows. By the last days of fall, time and wind have brought the leaves to the ground and even those stalwart little creatures are tucking in; snow perhaps covers burrow entrances and nests, silencing rustles. By late December nights, the full moon is waning as the longest darkness of the year stretches over us.

These lines of Psalm 19 remind us that in this deep, quiet time creation yet hums and whispers its song of the wonder of being. Stars wink and dance in the night sky and frost shines in the sunlight. The night and the day sing of God's presence here, in the winter of our seasons, in the sorrow for our world that can't seem to hear or see, in our fear for what may come to harm. They sing of God's plan for the turning of time. Wordless and yet full of this story, soundless and yet resonate, they invite us to join in the music of praise, hope, and faithful anticipation of what *will* come by God's grace.

*Creator God,
Help us to treasure the quiet of these winter days
that we might listen more deeply for your word.
We would put our hearts to your work as we sing your praise. Amen.*

Sherrill Vore, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 18

Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved. – Psalm 80:3 (Full text, Psalm 80:1-7,16-18)

Restore us, O God

Restore us.

Bring us back to a safe harbor, free from discrimination,
free from harassment, free from fear.

Restore us, O God

Restore us.

Bring us back to a place of growth, a place of abundance,
a place of universal prosperity to be shared.

Restore us, O God

Restore us.

Bring us back to a place of trust, a place of faithful connection,
a place of peace in You.

Restore us, O God.

Bring us back.

Amen.

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Monday, December 19

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.” – Luke 1:13 (Full text, Luke 1:5-25)

In today's Gospel, we begin Luke's Infancy narrative with the conception of John, the forerunner of Christ. Gabriel's announcement of John's very conception is a feast in the Eastern churches, a recognition given only to Mary and Jesus in the West. Elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth reflect while waiting on the Advent of God to bring about the gift of incarnation of human life.

Waiting is not something we relish. Yet it is awaiting God in the flesh through whom we come to fulfillment. This is not “cheap grace” or “cheap hope.” John the prophet's human life did not end in a Christmas card sentiment.

O God who comes,

We wait to celebrate your taking on flesh and recognize that all in life is your gift. As with John the forerunner, whom you “filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb” (Lk 1:15), we trust that you will bring all things to good, knowing that neither the world nor ourselves are perfect receivers of what you will bring to fulfillment. Your Son, Jesus, found there was “no

*room in the inn.” We too struggle, hope, and wait with all our sisters and brothers for your
Coming where, for many,
there is no room. Amen.*

Robert P. Marko, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, December 20

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. – John 15:9-10 (Full text, John 15:1-11)

In just a few days we will celebrate the arrival of Jesus on Earth. God in human flesh. God incarnate. Jesus, our example and teacher of how to live in this world, is a gift of love from our Creator.

Jesus lived his life among the marginalized, going to the places of the lonely, unloved, and left out, loving through relationship and service. He declared the greatest commandment is to love one another. In John 15:9-10, Jesus said if we keep his commandments we will abide in his love. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, “abide” means “to live or stay somewhere.” We might then read Jesus’ exhortation in this way: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;

live in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will live in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and live in his love.”

We can abide in his love through our love of one another. Jesus showed us how to break down barriers that divide us: Go into unfamiliar places with those unlike us; listen to life stories and allow them to become part of us as we rid ourselves of misconceptions, power, and greed.

What hope might arise if we truly live in solidarity together by giving ourselves to one another? In this Advent season, where might we go to build relationships with the lonely, unloved, and left out in our communities?

*Jesus,
Help us to love one another.
What greater gift than to live in the love of God through you! Amen.*

Cathy Stevens, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Wednesday, December 21

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. – Hebrews 11:1 (Full text, Hebrews 10:35-11:1)

One of the most rewarding practices in reading a familiar Bible passage is hearing it in new ways. As a child, I remember reading Hebrews 11:1 and understanding faith as “assenting to the correct beliefs.” I was taught that I should know and believe the most important, fundamental things about what it means to be a follower of Christ to have any hope and comfort in life and

death. I still see the logic of reading Hebrews 11:1 this way; having conviction in things not seen certainly requires an element of being bold in believing.

In college, I learned that some words in the Old Testament that are translated as faith could also be understood as faithfulness, following through on an existing commitment. It's possible the writer of Hebrews had this in mind. Many of the exemplars of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 were certainly bold in believing; they were also audacious in action. They followed through on their calling even when it looked outlandish to those around them.

I now hear both interpretations. Our confidence in belief may spur us to venture well out of our comfort zone. A commitment to live into God's promises may reinforce our convictions as we notice the many ways God is walking with us.

God of Advent,

You are most deserving of our faith and our faithfulness.

You went ahead of us into this world and now we may follow in your footsteps. Amen.

Brian Kamstra, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Thursday, December 22

Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.” – 1 Samuel 2:1 (Full text, 1 Samuel 2:1,4-7)

A bit of backstory first. Elkanah had two wives: Hannah, his first and favorite, and Peninnah, his second and very prolific wife. As Hannah had not been able to bear children, she was scorned and ridiculed by Peninnah. Hannah prayed so hard and earnestly in the temple that Eli thought she was drunk. After she explained her plight to Eli, he blessed her, and when she returned home, Samuel was conceived.

To say Hannah was overjoyed is an understatement. She acknowledges that having her son was God's action, not her own. While Peninnah and others saw her barrenness as a punishment from God, Hannah sees that her long wait only pointed to the strength of her prayer, her belief in God, and in God's ultimate grace.

In Hannah's rejoicing she points out that it is God who brings good things to the poor and cuts down those who trust in their own strength. It is her reliance on God that has brought joy into her life, to the dismay of her tormentors. In her victory over barrenness, she is so thankful that she dedicates her son Samuel to serve God in the temple.

Holy God,

Give us hearts like Hannah, so that we can recognize the power of your presence in our lives.

Thank you for your boundless blessings.

In Jesus' Holy Name, Amen.

Pat Baxter, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, December 23

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. – Psalm 25:10,14 (Full text, Psalm 25:4-14)

Fearing the Lord is having faith that he knows what is best for us. When we respect the Lord, we have his friendship and we can lean on him to carry our burdens of loss, pain, and unhappiness. When we see his greatness, we have great respect for our awesome God.

The most enlightening effect of knowing the fear of the Lord is “the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10) It is the beginning of a true friendship with God. His love is endless and, if we adhere to his covenant, we will reap the benefits of his love.

Proverbs 8:7-9 is a glimpse of the other side, an arrogant man who does not fear the Lord. He has no need of wisdom and he does not fear God because he thinks of himself as a god; and because he has no faith in the Lord, he has no salvation. “He who corrects an arrogant man earns insult; and he who reproves a wicked man incurs opprobrium. Reprove not an arrogant man, lest he hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Instruct a wise man, and he becomes wiser; teach a just man and he advances in learning.”

Let us pray for discernment and wisdom:

*“Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth,
give me an undivided heart and revering your name.” (Psalm 86:11)
Teach me wisdom and knowledge for in your commandments I trust.” (Psalm 119:66)*

Cynthia Smith, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, December 24

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” -- Luke 1:78-79 (Full text, Luke 1:67-79)

Well, here we are at the end of Advent and it is Christmas Eve. Hopefully all our preparations are completed, and we have plans to welcome the infant Jesus at church this evening before we begin our holiday celebrations with our families and friends. Our Scripture passage comes from the last few verses of Zechariah’s Song to his baby son, John the Baptist, who is to go before Jesus and announce His coming to the Jews. God had not forgotten Israel nor has He forgotten us who have fallen on dark times spiritually. Tonight, He sends his Dayspring, a light to the world to save sinners. Jesus alone gives life, hope, peace, and love to all the children of God on this miraculous night. Come, let us adore Him.

“Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth.”

Have a blessed Christmas, everyone!

*Dear God,
Thank you for sending Your Son on this glorious night to be born to a virgin,*

*to live a perfect life, and to die on the cross for our sins.
Thank you for His triumphant resurrection
and that this Christmas and every Christmas
we can celebrate the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Aleta M. Wells , St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday, December 25

Christmas Day

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" -- Luke 2:8-14

