

The background of the entire image is a dark blue night sky filled with stars. At the top center, there is a bright, multi-pointed starburst or comet-like light source. Below the sky, the silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible, with small, warm white lights scattered throughout, suggesting a winter night scene.

Anticipate
ADVENT OF HOPE

Advent 2024
daily reflections

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

How fitting it is that we should come together—after a season of discord and division in our world—to put our differences aside and walk as children of our loving God on this spiritual journey through Advent.

In this time of hope and expectation I invite you to slow down and take time each day to pause and reflect with gratitude on the meditations that have been shared by your fellow travelers. As we reflect on these meditations on Holy Scripture, let us remember that Christ came for all of us to bring hope and reconciliation to a troubled world.

Let us walk together in love during this season of hope, love, joy, and peace. Let us rejoice together at the birth of our savior Jesus Christ.

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

Sunday, December 1

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. – 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12 (Full text, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

Advent is both a time for hearing again the prophecies of and stories about Jesus' birth as a human, and a time to eagerly anticipate Christ's return to earth in glory.

The church in Thessalonica was eagerly awaiting the return of the apostle Paul, their founder. Paul had been able to spend only a few weeks with them when he had to get out of town quickly. The Jews there were angered by his message of Jesus the risen Lord, and they were after him. From a safer place in Athens, Paul sent his colleague Timothy back to the church to encourage them. After hearing Timothy's report, Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, expressing his love for the believers and his eagerness to return to them.

Even so, the ascended Jesus has sent his Spirit to encourage us, the Church that has been eagerly awaiting Christ's return ever since. And the Spirit teaches us to love one another, just as he loves us.

As we celebrate our Advent traditions of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the infant Jesus in the manger, let's also kindle our love for the people and planet that Jesus left, for a time, when he ascended to be with God the Creator.

Lord Jesus Christ,

We long for your return even more than we long for another Christmas morning. And we know you long to return to us. Teach us to love as you love, and to work and wait for your return. Amen.

Linda Bieze, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, December 2

“He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” – Luke 10:2-3 (Full text, Luke 10:1-12)

How often do our minds dwell on scarcity? The laborers are few and the wolves are fierce, and the enemy works hard to keep us laser-focused on what we don't have. Hope falters and doubt creeps in. And our prayer (if there still is one) gets reduced, with the overburdened Martha later in this chapter of Luke, to “Lord, do you not care?” We feel our feebleness as lambs in the midst of wolves.

God invites you to lay down your worries and hear this assurance of abundance: The harvest is plentiful! We don't control the state of the world, our families, or even ourselves—but Jesus sends us out with confidence into the rough and tumble, providing everything that we need along the way. These disciples received food, shelter, peace, and purpose as they stepped into the call of God's abundant Kingdom.

“You are all we have. You give us what we need. Our lives are in your hands, O Lord.” We celebrate your abundant harvest and hear your call to join the mission, knowing that nothing is lacking when we are sent by you. Amen.

Irene Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, 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)

“The world of silence in which I am immersed
contributes to my prayer.”

-- Thomas Merton

I like silence very much. The television is rarely on at our house. In the car, much time is spent in silence. At my desk, the room is silent. I find it peaceful and comforting to withdraw even for a little while from the noise and confusion and irritations of everyday life.

But I have never tried to exercise the discipline of a Trappist monk like Thomas Merton. His life was spent not only in silence but in prayer and contemplation of God’s presence. In 1956, Merton wrote, “When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is full of prayer.”

Can even a small piece of what Merton describes be achieved amidst the noise of everyday life? Can I eliminate, even for a little while, the distractions and annoyances and daydreams that often fill my thoughts, and instead focus like Merton and the psalmist? Can I learn to avoid social media, set aside the books I enjoy, even limit time with family and friends to do this? Can I allow my mind to be filled with prayer?

It will require work and maybe more self-discipline than I have. Perhaps I can build on my affection for silence a few minutes at a time. I think the reward will be great and worth the effort.

Heavenly Father, help my soul to wait in silence and prayer so that I might grow in awareness and gratitude that you are my rock, my stronghold, and my salvation. Amen.

Judith Simonson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, December 4

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. – 1 Corinthians 15:20 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20)

Welcome to the fourth day of Advent. This is the time of year that we are spending time getting ready for Christ's birth at Christmas and for the anticipation of His return at the Second Coming.

Paul was talking with the group of his religious new members in Corinth. He is reminding them about Christ's rising from the dead and how that is the "first fruit" to all those who have died. Christ being raised from the dead becomes a wonderful gift to all of us. It gives us our reason to believe in God.

This is the season the Christ/Jesus is born here in the world. His reason for coming here is to create the removal of our sins. Without His birth, none of this would occur. His birth is the main focus throughout Advent, but we must also spend time remembering that He was killed so that His rising and the removal of our sinfulness could happen.

Enjoy the time and readings of His birth, but remember that He will create our acceptance to God.

Have you thought about both things that are part of this time? Can you tell others about this?

*Dear God,
Thank you for the birth of Christ
so that He could open our travel
into your Heaven.
Amen.*

Doug Karsen, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Thursday, December 5

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven... When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" – John 6:57-58a,60 (Full text, John 6:57-63)

A couple of years ago, a mentor suggested that I check out the second (less known) part of the Serenity Prayer. It goes like this: "Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it."

At the time, I was struggling to accept parts of my reality and often found myself repeatedly disappointed and angry. Allowing the world to be "as it is" can feel impossible—who can accept it? Sounds familiar, right? Reverend John Wilkinson reminded us in his recent sermon at Westminster that the disciples are surrogates for us; they are stand-ins for our own questions, experiences, and resistances. I felt so seen as I read this human response from the disciples.

There are things about the Gospel we will never understand — even those closest to Jesus couldn't wrap their heads around the mystery of it all. There are days when I wish everything was different, and I feel disappointed when reality bites again.

To accept what we cannot know is part of the mystery that allows us to receive and practice the gifts of the living bread that came down from heaven.

*This Advent, may our hearts be open
to the wildly inconceivable communion table
and what it offers our beautiful,
disappointed hearts.*

Martha Velting, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Friday, December 6

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. – 1 John 4:11 (Full text, 1 John 4:7-14)

“Where are you, God?” I ask when he feels distant, or when the world’s darkness seems overwhelming.

In Advent, we wait for God to be revealed, but Scripture reminds us that God’s presence isn’t distant or abstract. It’s found in the intimate, often unnoticed spaces of our daily lives—in acts of love.

Since God is love, wherever we experience love we know God is revealing himself. When we love others as God loves us, we become vessels of the Divine Presence, bringing light to those we touch. This is how “God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” God’s perfection isn’t about flawlessness; it’s about the wholeness of love reaching its fullest expression through our human hearts. Each kind word, compassionate gesture, and act of mercy creates a space for God’s love to shine.

In Advent, we celebrate Christ’s birth in Bethlehem and remember that, through the Holy Spirit, we are invited to be co-creators with God as Christ is continually reborn within our hearts. We reclaim the truth; we are the hands, feet, and body of Christ in the world.

Advent invites us to be transformed from the inside out, letting love flow so fully from within us that others encounter the Divine through us.

Lord,

As we journey through Advent, may we remember that your love is both our guide and our destination. May we open our hearts to receive and give love, knowing that your Divine Presence is revealed, perfected, and dwelling in us, through us, and among us. Amen.

Brian J. Plachta, St. Alphonsus Parish and friend of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, December 7

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. – Luke 12:35-36 (Full text, Luke 12:35-46)

I can get myself ready for a visitor (by cleaning the house), for a trip (by packing my bags), for a job interview (by dressing up and studying). But I have problems readying myself for the Second Coming of Christ. God won't tell us when this event will happen, and I really work better with a deadline. And I get impatient when waiting for anything.

Also, today's Scripture seems nebulous when it tells me to "be dressed for action," have my lamp lit, and wait like a slave. I know this does not mean wearing sweatpants. But the Second Coming means we are talking about the end of my life on Earth, and I wonder if I will ask the anxious question that a friend asked on his deathbed: "Is there something else I need to do?"

As I pondered today's full text, a light bulb went on when I re-read verse 37: "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will...come and serve them." Of course, that is how I can be ready: by following the example of Christ, the servant leader. If I can serve others with a humble heart and faithful spirit, maybe that is what being dressed for action means. Perhaps keeping my lamp lit to serve others is how I can be ready.

How are you preparing for both the birth and return of our Savior?

*Lord,
Help my actions to be pleasing to you
as I wait in faith. Amen.*

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sunday, December 8

For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. – Baruch 5:7 (Full text, Baruch 5:1-9)

As we anticipate the coming of Jesus into this world, we can be lulled into thinking of the celebrations of the season, the baby Jesus in the manger, the angels singing, the animals and shepherds standing in awe. Yet there is much more to consider.

What does the coming of Christ mean? To me, it means a change in the order of life here on earth. God levels the ground so that all are given the opportunity to thrive in God's glory. It means that barriers are removed enabling us to be equal in the eyes of each other as we are in the eyes of God.

We are called to our ministry as Christians to follow the teachings of Jesus and rejoice in living our lives, understanding that we all are created in God's image. That demands that we respect everyone, understanding that we are standing on the level ground that God created for us.

*Holy God, creator of the world,
Help us to grow in love for you as we celebrate the coming of your son into this world. May we treasure his teaching and example to enable us to live as you would have us do. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Judith Claytor, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, December 9

But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. – Romans 8:24b-25 (Full text, Romans 8:22-25)

With the 2020 pandemic, life was challenging for all of us. We were isolated. People died by the hundreds of thousands. People lost their jobs and their businesses. The negatives of society seemed magnified: gun violence, global warming, the national debt, political discord, and people acting uncivilized. I felt hopeless; life's problems were too monumental! I wanted to go back to my normal where I could cope. I prayed repeatedly to the point where it seemed my pleas were faithless and untrusting. I wasn't waiting patiently.

I had to open my heart to the goodness in life. My family, Westminster, hugs, kids riding bikes, Lake Michigan, gardening, chipmunks frolicking in the yard, smiles, and quilting sustained me.

I needed to hope for the future and have the courage to embrace life with God guiding me and Jesus beside me. I hope our future holds governmental integrity, communities working together, connection between all people, security in our country, and healthy medical options.

*Dear God,
Give me peace while waiting.
Challenge me to do my part
in bringing about positive outcomes.
Thank you for the gift of Christ Jesus
who gives me hope. Amen.*

Marilyn Lawrence, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, December 10

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. – 2 Peter 1:5-7 (Full text, 2 Peter 1:2-15)

Writing to fellow Christians, Peter is aware that he will soon die. He is urging his Christian family to stay strong, to be virtuous and Christlike during these violent times against Christians. As humans we can never be perfect, but we can practice our faith and by doing good works we will be worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven through Jesus, our savior and brother.

Advent is a time to prepare for the celebration of God's love for us with his greatest gift, the birth of his son Jesus. The Advent season is also a time to remind us to prepare for Jesus' second coming; 2 Peter 1:5-7 tells us how.

Doing what Peter instructs will bring God's other Advent gifts to us: Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love.

Psalm 1: "Happy those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked; nor go the way of sinners, nor sit with scoffers. The law of the Lord is their joy. God's law they study day and night."

Let us pray "Christ's Triple Coming" prayer from St. Joseph's Sunday Missal:

"Lamb of God, you once came to rid the world of sin; cleanse me now of every stain of sin. Lord, you came to save what was lost; come once again with Your salvific power so that those you redeemed will not be punished. I have come to you in faith; may I have unending joy when you come again in glory. Amen."

Cynthia A. Smith, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, December 11

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.” – John 10:11-12 (Full text, John 10:11-18)

What have you/would you sacrifice for another person?

Sacrifice: Give up something you really want to hold on to but is not an essential.

Sacrifice: Give up something you need.

Sacrifice: Give up some of your time.

Sacrifice: Give up your life.

Who are our sheep?

Our sheep: Our family.

Our sheep: Our friends.

Our sheep: Our fellow congregation members.

Our sheep: Fellow workers.

Our sheep: The people of Heartside.

Our sheep: The people of this world.

Are you a “good shepherd” or a “hired hand”?

While many in this world’s history have given their lives and are remembered for their sacrifice given in devotion to God, I don’t believe that is our calling. Rather we can make other sacrifices to witness to Jesus’ command to love each other, even those we may not know personally.

On this day, two weeks before we celebrate Christ’s birth, it would be a good time to reflect more deeply and even more immediately on what we can sacrifice for even one of the sheep of this world. And I do mean **SACRIFICE**.

Our dear Lord,

I thank you for your gift to us. Not only the birth of your son but also through your grace his willingness to sacrifice himself for our sins and exemplify a good shepherd. I need to find more ways to be like a shepherd rather than a hired hand who runs away from the sheep. Amen.

Kirby Hanson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 12

Gideon answered (the angel of the Lord), “But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.” – Judges 6:13 (Full text, Judges 6:11-24)

Talk about *chutzpah*; Gideon must have *invented* it! Approached by God’s angel to recruit fellow Jews and combat the Midianites, he counters with a somewhat saucy retort. After reminding the angel of God’s negligence to the so-called chosen people, he demands evidence of the Lord’s forthcoming support. And surprisingly the Lord accommodates. Upon a food offering laid out by Gideon, the angel produces a fire, cooking the lamb or goat to perfection. Armed with assurance, Gideon does the Lord’s bidding and frees Israel from the grip of Midian.

It’s a comfort indeed to know that the Lord makes allowance for human contrariness. I waffle between devout creedal faith and the question “is it a pipe dream?” Yet God accepts me in moments of piety and of doubt. When I act graciously to family and friends, and when I cut them off short, the Holy One keeps me within his loving circle. Never are we abandoned, whether in pleasant moods or foul.

Divine patience knows no limitations.

Eternal God,

We thank you for bearing with us, your children, whatever our dispositions. Though we may waver in faith, as well as in our behavior, may we always keep sight of your unwavering love for us. We ask this in the name of your Blessed Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hugh Dickinson, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Friday, December 13

***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
– John 1:14 (Full text, John 1:9-14)***

Throughout the prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18) we find the image of light compared to and contrasted with themes of glory, enlightening, life, and darkness. Advent is a time of waiting, preparation, and reflection. During this time of preparation in shorter daylight hours, we long for light, but even more for Christ's Light to shine redemption and restoration throughout this broken world—to make everything right again.

A hymn sums up much of what I feel when I read John's prologue and ponder the coming of our Christ. "Christ Be Our Light" is also known by its first line, "Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness," by Bernadette Farrell. Farrell captures this longing beautifully as she contrasts peace in a troubled world, hope in the midst of despair, food to satisfy the hunger, water to slake the thirst, shelter for the homeless, and warmth against the cold.

But we, the children of that Light, are called to action. We are called to be Christ's light in the world. We are called to be Christ's voice speaking hope. We are called to feed, shelter, and clothe the hungry, homeless, and cold. We are called to be servants to one another, manifesting Christ's kingdom come. And all of this is possible because Christ's light shines in us and through us into the world.

Let the chorus from Farrell's hymn be our prayer for today:
*"Christ, be our light! / Shine in our hearts. / Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light! / Shine in your church gathered today."*

And to that I add: *Use us to shine Your light into the world around us. Amen.*

Mike Reynolds, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Saturday, December 14

My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved and he who watches over you will not fall asleep. – Psalm 121:2-3 (Full text, Psalm 121)

Where do we turn when we have a problem? When people need money, they often go to a bank. When people need advice, they go to a counselor or advisor. We have systems set up so that whatever your problem is, there's a solution.

But these systems can fail. Banks can overspend. Advisors can give faulty advice. This is something we know as we consider these options, yet we decide to use them anyway. The psalmist who penned Psalm 121 disagrees. He says his help comes from the Lord.

It can be hard to rely on someone we can't see. Banks offer guarantees to back us up if they fail, but God doesn't work the same way. If we trust in God, we have a different guarantee. God says that no matter what, he will always do what's best for us, even if it feels wrong at the time. No fine print. That's it. We have a God who *will not let our feet be moved and won't fall asleep*. In the end, what more do we need?

Dear God,

Thank you for always doing what's best for me.

Help me to remember that, even when it's hard.

*Help me to trust in you and know
that you can and will do the rest. Amen.*

Milo Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, December 15

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel. — Isaiah 12:6 (Full text, Isaiah 12:2-6)

A small child counts time in days. How many till Santa comes?

A teen counts time in weeks. How many till Christmas break?

An expectant mom counts time in months. How many till the crib is occupied?

A working couple counts time in years. How many till we can retire?

All anticipate joy and peace and happiness... When the wait is over.

The wait is over.

Stop counting!

Jesus is near.

God is here.

Be spirited!

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Monday, December 16

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. – Hebrews 13:7-8 (Full text, Hebrews 13:7-17)

These days, “leaders” often refers to political leaders, and among those it may seem difficult to find any who have ever spoken the word of God to us.

But if we think of leaders in a broader sense, we must all have someone who touched us, someone we looked up to, who helped us on our formation journey. If we are lucky, it was someone whose own life modeled Christ’s behavior for us, helping us to feel the strength of God’s love for us. Maybe it was a teacher who made you feel special, or a grandparent who gave you a little extra love just when you needed it most. In showing you support and love, that person, whoever it might have been, was “speaking the word of God to you.”

During this Advent season, as we wait for Christ to again come as a tiny babe to lead us, let us spend some time to think about how we might take the love that was modeled for us and helped us, and use it to do the same for someone else in our lives.

O God,

As we await the coming of your Son, let us reflect on all who have guided us and helped us strengthen our faith in you. Help us to give thanks and lead others to your love and, by our actions, be brought closer to you, through the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Carol Faber, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Tuesday, December 17

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. – Psalm 19:14 (Full text, Psalm 19)

This plea is offered before sermons and homilies as one steps into the pulpit for our sermon. It follows years and hours of preparation by a pastor, priest, or rabbi. But it is not only for these moments. In this Advent week we recall two millennia ago how worried our God was about his people. So worried that God had nine months earlier approached Mary to bear Jesus into the world.

Times were dark. That was the Roman rule of Palestine and the western world. There are always echoes of this past in our Advents. Our words now, as then, can be harsh and angry, and our hearts rage or cry out in pain.

Peterson's Message Bible in Psalm 19 tells us: "There's more: God's Word warns us of danger, and directs us to hidden treasure. Otherwise, how will we find our way? Or know when we play the fool? Clean the slate, God, so we can start the day fresh! Keep me from stupid sins, from thinking I can take over your work; Then I can start this day sun-washed, scrubbed clean of the grime of sin. These are the words in my mouth: These are what I chew on and pray. Accept them when I place them on the morning altar, O God, my Altar-Rock, God, Priest of my Altar." (vs. 11-14)

*O Creator,
I have stewed, pondered, and ruminated over these words for two fortnights.
My heat has cooled, and I now bring my best hopes to you. Thanks be to you.
Amen.*

Bert Dugan, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, December 18

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. – Isaiah 11:3b-4a (Full text, Isaiah 11:1-9)

All too often I find myself and others judging people, things, and places. We have opinions about a lot of things...some good, some bad. I am not sure how we get out of this human habit to judge. Our bodies, both the physical and intellectual parts, are human, not godlike. We are no better than that person, place, or thing we tend to become judgmental about, are we?

If you ponder it for a moment, I think you would agree that we use our eyes, ears, and mind to form what we feel are warranted opinions or judgments, and we don't pull in what we know is right...what God taught us. It is our faith in Christ, through Scripture and faith community, that we can come to better understand the meaning of righteousness and justice in our daily lives.

Isaiah tells us that there will come a Leader who will, by righteousness and justice, judge us all in the same way. Not one different from another, but all as if we were made similarly in His image and likeness.

Let us, during this Advent season, become more attuned to what and how we think, judge, and form opinions about the world around us and the people in it. Let us pray for the eyes and ears to be the righteous person we are called to be.

Lord God our Father,

Please give us the understanding and the heart to live in this world as true believers of You and Your Son Jesus Christ, in the hope that we can find a way to put aside our human nature that wants to judge those around us. Amen.

Joe Chiaramonte, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, December 19

Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. – Psalm 80:7 (Full text, Psalm 80:1-7)

These aren't easy times. The nation is in distress, leaving us feeling broken and unsure. Christians and our churches are divided by deep disputes. Even though thousands of years have passed since the psalmist's repeated prayer, those words—"Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved"—still reflect our deep need for God's presence and our desire for His direction.

In trying times, we may feel as though God has turned his face away. Like the psalmist, we must bring our anger and exasperation before God, knowing that he still hears our prayers. This passage reminds us that God is not distant. He is our Shepherd, attentive to our cries. Even when life is overwhelming, we can trust that God desires to restore and revive us with his light and love.

We can take heart in the promise of restoration. The psalm reflects the same feeling we experience. It acknowledges pain, as it reflects hope. God's face shining upon us brings life, guidance, and peace. When we seek God, we find that his saving grace never fails. Pray for restoration, trusting in his ability to lead us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Lord,

You are our Shepherd and our light. When we feel lost or broken, remind us to trust in your power to build us into something new. Restore us to include the best of the old. We long to feel the warmth of your face shining on us. Lead us by your grace to better ways to forgive and love. Amen.

Mark Miller, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, December 20

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. – John 15:4-5a (Full text, John 15:1-11)

We know that we are made in the Creator's image (Genesis 1:27) and given Her sacred breath (Genesis 2:7). This is our true self. So why is Jesus reminding us to abide in God if we are already part of God?

I believe Jesus understands the human condition and how our ego can run amok. The ego protects us by developing defenses to help us cope with our suffering and wounds. However, these programs can take on a life of their own and create a false self, separating us from the Divine. So, what can we do to consent to God's presence within us and reconnect with the true self? I believe Dann E. Wigner's book, *Just Begin: A Sourcebook of Spiritual Practices*, can help.

Spiritual practices help affirm our awareness of the Spirit's presence and, through repetition, deepen our relationship with the Creator. One of my favorites is Centering Prayer, a meditative practice based on Matthew 6:6 ("pray to your Father in secret") and Psalm 46:10 ("Be still and know that I am God.").

Spending quiet time with the Creator and consenting to God's presence and action within us allows the Divine Therapist to help us identify, accept, and understand our wounds, and reconnect with our true selves. Practicing gratitude also can remind us of God's presence and love. This Advent, the Spirit may be calling you to try a new spiritual practice to open your heart and awaken to who you already are. This awakening may give you the courage to continue to love God and your neighbor as yourself.

Loving Creator, help us to always remember you are with us in each breath we take. Grant us the wisdom to daily reconnect with you and each other. Amen.

Jim Lozer, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Saturday, December 21

But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. – Hebrews 10:39,11:1 (Full text, Hebrews 10:35-11:1)

Chapter 10 of Hebrews tells us how we should live in response to God's gift of Jesus. The instructions include leading with confidence, having sincere hearts, holding onto hope, persevering through hardship, waiting with assurance, and encouraging one another.

We are not born with these skills. I wasn't born with the ability to be confident, work hard, or encourage others. These traits are learned. When I think back to my childhood, I remember being willful and having independent ideas about my life. My parents desperately wanted me to play the piano. They tried to reason with me, saying the piano would bring me joy; however, I wouldn't practice, hoping I might find joy later in life.

My parents modeled confidence, hope, perseverance, love, and other ways to live by faith in response to God. Plus, there were Christians (teachers, choir directors, pastors, camp counselors) who also showed me how to live by faith. It has been helpful for me to remember situations and people who played a part in my character development. Building good character takes work. It is an ongoing process.

Spending time with Hebrews has helped me evaluate how others see my life. God is encouraging me to trust in His promises with more intentionality.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for sending Jesus. May we not shrink back but believe in our salvation, leaning on your promises with sincere hearts, strength to persevere through difficulties, confidence in our faith and encouraging others to trust You. Amen.

Marcia Fortner, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sunday, December 22

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)

As I write this I am struggling with cellulitis. How I would love to be restored. It is keeping me from Mass and those I love in my community. It is keeping me from work and service.

In the times of old, all have struggled and maybe wanted things the way they used to be. But during this season of waiting, we must not lose hope.

Hope and trust in God brought a Savior. We too hope for our Savior's coming, restoring us in healing and peace.

*Come Lord Jesus.
The Spirit and your bride
say come. Amen.*

Margo Dean, OSF, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, December 23

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. – Colossians 1:19-20 (Full text, Colossians 1:15-20)

This verse, appearing two days before we celebrate the birth of Christ, is a power-punch reminder that the infant Jesus we celebrate with lights, bells, gifts, and song, carries the fullness of our Creator, Sustainer, Parent, God. All that is God is also manifest in Jesus.

We are reminded again that through this child, all humanity, all nature, all things will be reconciled through Jesus' bloody journey to the cross and crucifixion. We are not required to undergo actual crucifixion to be reconciled, but Christ has set the standard. We are to follow His example through our own journey to the cross.

Why the drama? Can there be peace through the blood shed by Jesus? It's complicated. And simple. Jesus simplified the way for us over and over in Scripture: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8) "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." (Corinthians: 13:13)

The joy and traditions of Christmas have their place. We pull together with the family we live with, our church family, neighborhoods, and the world. Celebrating in loving ways with family is a start. We are also called to reconcile with nature as climate change threatens every stream, forest, and food source. We are called to reconcile with those who are other—whether Christian or another religion (or none), race, creed, or culture. We must work for peace everywhere. Peace comes through love, respect, honoring those who are also made in God's image.

Lord God, Prince of Peace, as the bells of Christmas bring the news of your birth, help us to greet with joy the task of reconciliation wherever we may be called. Help us to hear the call. Give us the strength to respond in love. Amen.

Deirdre Toeller, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 24

O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. – Full text, Psalm 96:1-2 (Full text, Psalm 96)

Finally, we have reached Christmas Eve. This was always one of my favorite days because it meant that everything was ready for Christmas, and it was time to celebrate with tons of food, fun, family, and, of course, attending church to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child.

The beginning of Psalm 96 is a hymn of joy proclaiming a new song and a New Testament. In Matthew Henry's commentary, "Three times we are here called to *sing unto the Lord*; sing to the Father, to the Son, to the Holy Ghost, as it was *in the beginning*, when *the morning stars sang together*, is *now*, in the church militant, and *ever shall be*, in the church triumphant."

The second verse of the psalm calls us to proclaim this Good News of his salvation to all the earth. I hope all of you plan to praise and sing to God at church before beginning holiday celebrations with family and friends.

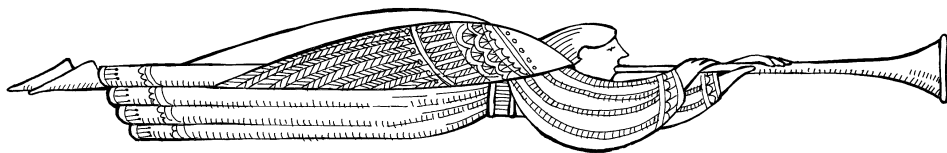
Jesus alone gives life, hope, peace, and love to all the children of God on this miraculous night. Come, let us sing to Him the beautiful lyrics from the third verse of *Go Tell it On the Mountain*: "Down in a lowly manger / Our humble Christ was born / And brought us all salvation / That blessed Christmas morn / Go, tell it on the mountain / Over the hills and everywhere / Go, tell it on the mountain / That Jesus Christ is born / That Jesus Christ is born."

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 at this Christmas and every Christmas, we can celebrate the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Aleta Wells, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Wednesday, 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



An Ecumenical Offering from

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