

Union Presbyterian Seminary's 2016 Advent Devotions



**Daily Devotions written by Union Presbyterian Seminary Faculty & Staff
To Be Paired with PC(USA) Daily Prayer**

www.upsemdevotions.wordpress.com

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Grace and Peace to you this Advent season!

It is with great joy that I share with you Union Presbyterian Seminary's third seasonal devotion! This project began as a simple suggestion early in the fall of 2015 as a special addition to our "Congregational Corner". Only hours after we announced our first Advent devotion, hundreds of alumni and friends of Union had subscribed to the devotion via email and shared it with their own friends and family. Each day, we journeyed through Advent, side by side, reflecting with Union alumni in many different stages of ministry. We gathered again during Lent, reflecting weekly with Union trustees and current students as we wove our way to the Cross.

This Advent season, I invite you to join members of Union's faculty and staff of both the Richmond and Charlotte campuses, in daily devotion.

Each scripture selection (with the exception of a small handful) has been selected from the PC(USA) Book of Daily Prayer. You are encouraged to follow along with both the devotion and this daily prayer practice as we once again embark on the journey to the manger, where we will celebrate Christ's birth with one another.

As we prepare for the journey, please be sure to both subscribe to the online devotion via email AND download the PC(USA) Daily Prayer "App" in your mobile app store (or use your "little red book"!)

Instructions for Subscribing to "Seasonal Devotions":

- 1) Go to www.upsemdevotions.wordpress.com
- 2) Under "Follow Blog via Email", enter your preferred email address
- 3) Check your email each morning during Advent! Devotions will go "Live" at 8am each day and will automatically be sent to all subscribers.

Instructions for downloading the Daily Prayer app:

- 1) Open your app store on your mobile device and search for "PCUSA Daily Prayer"
- 2) Purchase the app! Note: This app cost \$2.99.
- 3) Open the app! It will automatically open to the correct day and time (morning, afternoon, evening)- each devotion will note the time of day during which the scripture is used.

We pray that this devotion will serve as a beautiful resource for you during your own Advent journey, and that it will help each of you reconnect with your Union friends and family in a new way. You are invited to comment on each devotion and share as you feel led so that all might find nourishment during this Advent season.

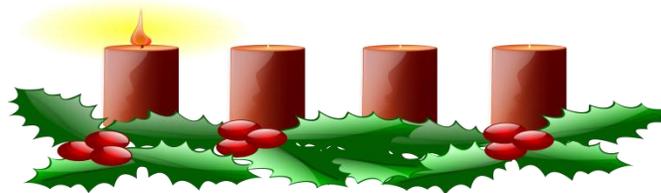
Grace, Peace, and Advent Joy,

Rev. Jordan B. Davis (M. Div. '14)
Church Relations Officer

The First Sunday of Advent, November 27

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹²But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25: 1-13 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



I was recently reminded by some friends that as we begin Advent, we also enter the darkest time of the year. The days don't just seem shorter because of our growing "to do" lists, we *really* are working with less daylight! This is my favorite time of year though, despite the lack of daylight. After school activities are coming to an end so we eat dinner earlier and gather in the living room earlier. As the yard darkens, the house warms and we sit together in the soft light of the Christmas tree as we read and color, enjoying family time that is harder to come across the rest of the year.

We have prepared, and now we wait with one another. The Nativity sitting in front of the TV will be prominent in the coming weeks as we gather each night with one another and with our family and friends who will visit. One might say that we have our lamp in this common space, sitting at the ready for when the Bridegroom arrives.

The question that is raised on this first day of Advent, though, is are we as prepared as we ought to be? Yes, the ten women each picked up their lamp and went but only half of them grabbed the oil on the way out!

Advent comes around every year and provides a wonderful space for family traditions to be created. Every day the children race to the "Advent Calendar" to see what shape the chocolate will be that day, the carols and hymns play softly in the background of the shopping stores, the collections of family ornaments are placed throughout the house. Churches around the world will gather for pageants and cantatas after families stand with one another and light the candle for the Advent wreath. We are preparing, but are these preparations now on "auto-pilot"? Do we know what we are preparing for, do we know and have what we will need?

Half of the women grabbed only a lamp with no oil, but the other half grabbed both. When the bridegroom arrived they lit their lamps with the oil they brought and went to enjoy the party. They didn't just go through the motions of preparing, they were truly ready and they reaped the benefits of that.

The mistake that has been made, the warning that is being shared, is not about believing- the women did believe, because if they didn't they would not have taken up their lamps and come to wait; it is not about staying awake- none of the women were reprimanded for falling asleep. The mistake that has been made, the warning that is being shared, is that the women with no oil did not fully take part in preparation for return of the bridegroom.

Are we fully prepared and actively waiting? Are we actively praying AND listening for God's Word in our lives? Are we reaching out to God's children and helping them to prepare in their own way? Are we fully aware of and sharing the many ways that God is working in our lives and the world as we all come together in the soft light of the Christmas tree and wait?

These are the questions that we should consider today as we embark on this Advent journey. These are the things that we should be talking about and considering with our loved ones as we join together in the dark of night.

The women didn't travel or wait alone. They waited with one another. They might have even reminded one another to grab the oil on the way out.

We do not travel alone either. This Advent season, we travel with one another. We travel with our families and friends. We travel with our sisters and brothers around the world, side by side, guided by the one true Light.

Let us open our hearts and minds to one another so that we might come to know the Bridegroom in a new way this year. Let us reach out to one another so that all might see and hear what God is saying to us this Advent season.

A Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent

Creator God and Guiding Light,

*We pray that as we embark on this journey, as we actively prepare and wait,
we will find what we need in one another.*

*We pray that Your Light will guide our conversations and our lives,
so that we might be ready when the Bridegroom arrives.*

*We pray that in Your Light, we will see those who are without
and find ways to offer the Light that we carry
so that they too might join us on this journey
of hopeful waiting and joyful celebrations.*

We pray all of this in the light of your Son, the one whom we await.

Amen.

Rev. Jordan B. Davis
Church Relations
Richmond, VA

Monday, November 28

1 From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to all of you.

²We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. ³This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. ⁴Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. ⁵We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. ⁷As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. ⁹People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, ¹⁰and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10 (CEB)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



One of my favorite family pictures captures an image of life with our then two year old son. My husband is at the breakfast table in his bathrobe, cup of coffee at the ready, and reading the morning newspaper. On the other side of the table sits our toddler. He, too, is wearing pajamas, but he's added his father's tennis shoes to his feet and has them propped up on another chair. His milk sits in front of him and he also holds a fully spread open newspaper, looking like the mirror image of his father. Imitation. Our son grew up to enjoy the morning paper over a cup of coffee and part of the reason, I think, is that he learned to model his father in many ways by imitating him as a child. Children grow through imitation – observing and then doing. And so do Christians.

Paul frequently asks those who receive his letters to imitate him (Philemon 3:17; 1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul makes this request not because of his own superior faith, but because Paul seeks to reflect the Christ whose life is truly worthy of imitation. Unlike children who frequently complain with indignation, "He's copying me!", Paul shares his gratitude that the Thessalonians understand that reflecting Christ in their lives enables them to serve as models for others who are then drawn to Jesus.

Who has served as a model of the Christian life to you? I think of my parents whose commitment to justice, whose love of the Bible and love of the church helped shape my life. I remember John Trotti, former seminary librarian, whose kindness and hospitality made a space for all he met. I think of a woman in my congregation who lives on a very limited income, but speaks of her commitment to tithing and the gift that has been to her life. I am challenged by a friend who considers herself an introvert, but pushes herself to really engage with people in the changing neighborhood around our church because she feels God is calling her to do just that.

But maybe a more important question to ask during this time of Advent preparation is how are you imitating Christ in your life? Do others see in you 'work that comes from faith, effort that comes from love, and perseverance that comes from hope in Christ?' Paul connected the hallmarks of the Christian life – faith, hope and love – with actions and efforts that showed others that those gifts were indeed theirs through the Spirit. But we tend to recoil at the idea that people will be watching us and expecting us to be models of Christ-like action. But Christ's commandment is clear: Let your light shine before others (Matthew 5:16). The light that we reflect is Christ's light and it is ours through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So during this Advent season, let part of your preparation be observing and practicing the gifts God shares with us through Christ. In observing the stories of Christ's encounters with others, imitate his radical welcome. As Christ disturbed the powers of the world that enslaved and dismissed people, imitate the justice he enacted. In observing the love of God for the world, imitate Christ's vision of the beloved community. Relying on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, let us be imitators of the one who brings joy, peace and wholeness during this Advent season.

A Prayer for the Second Day of Advent

Gracious God, we are grateful for your gift of those who have modeled Christ-like love and service in our lives. Through the gift of your spirit, may our own lives of faith, hope and love point to Christ who comes to bring the peace and wholeness to the world. Amen

Ann Thomas Knox
Director, Instructional Resource Center, Library
Richmond, VA

Tuesday, November 29

⁹ He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. ¹⁰ At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. ¹² He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.

¹³ "Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.'

¹⁴ "But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

When the people heard this, they said, "God forbid!"

¹⁷ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone'?"

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

Luke 20: 9-18 (NIV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



The season of Advent offers a stark contrast to the constant commercialization of Christmas that barrages our senses and urges us to buy presents for friends and family. The demands of our consumeristic culture call for shopping orgies, festive celebrations of fancy food and drink, and lengthy wish lists of items that are supposed to increase our personal (and private) sense of happiness. To mark our lives with the lessons of Advent is to step outside the commodification of Christmas into a time of simplicity and waiting. Christian communities invite us to escape the noisy marketplace into the discipline of quiet contemplation about where and how we may encounter God's presence in our lives. Even the simple task of reading Scripture during this Advent season requires us to pause and re-orient ourselves around the demands of the Gospel on our lives. To read this challenging parable from the Gospel of Luke during Advent season prompts us to ask a series of questions about our relationship to God, to our neighbors, and to the earth.

1) We start by acknowledging our place of privilege and responsibility. As those who have been entrusted with the gifts of this good earth, how do our practices demonstrate respect and care for the earth? In what ways do our Christmas preparations and celebrations serve the demands of the marketplace and in what ways do they promote a sustainable economy? Several years ago, our family decided to pare down our gift-giving. Each year, we send our extended families Christmas wishes along with a notice about a non-profit organization that we are supporting in their names. It is one small way that helps us turn our focus towards those who struggle for basic needs of food, housing, and health care.

2) Who is suffering around us? Who are those whom are enslaved and mistreated in order that our holiday festivities may demonstrate our desire for success and worth to others in places of power and privilege? This parable challenges us to turn our gaze away from the tinsel and bright lights towards those whom work in sweat factories and on industrial farms to produce cheap goods for our constant consumption. This parable calls our attention to welcome the stranger and work for the liberation of those whom we often ignore. To fail to pay attention to these signs is to risk missing the presence of Christ in the midst of those who suffer. To pause and listen during this season of Advent is to hear the cries of undocumented workers and all those who struggle for just pay and fair conditions. A friend of mine regularly volunteers to prepare, serve, and eat meals with day laborers who often are paid below minimum wage.

When we look more closely at this parable, then we realize that the story of Christ is wrapped around the stories of the abuse and maltreatment of those who live in the margins of society. This Advent, let us reflect on how our practices of hospitality make room for us to recognize God's presence as we welcome strangers and outsiders into our communities.

The season of Advent comes as a gift to us that invites us to pause, reconsider our priorities, and adjust our practices in order to make room for the gift of the Christ child in our lives. When we learn to look for the beloved of God in the midst of suffering, then we find ourselves making different choices: to care for the earth and welcome strangers. These are the actions that allow us to heed the stern warning of this parable from Luke's Gospel and build on the cornerstone of Christ's presence in our lives. How will we respond to this call to change our lives during this season of Advent?

A Prayer for the Third Day of Advent

We give thanks, God, for your willingness to be present in the midst of suffering in our own lives and with those who live in the margins of society. During this season of Advent, help us to turn our attention away from the noisy marketplace of consumption to the gift of your presence in unexpected places so that we may welcome your beloved Son and build our lives on a solid foundation, through Christ we pray. Amen.

Paul Galbreath
Professor of Theology
Charlotte, NC

Wednesday, November 30

Praise the LORD!

*Because it is good to sing praise to our
God!*

*Because it is a pleasure to make beautiful
praise!*

²*The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem, gathering up
Israel's exiles.*

³*God heals the brokenhearted
and bandages their wounds.*

⁴*God counts the stars by number,
giving each one a name.*

⁵*Our Lord is great and so strong!
God's knowledge can't be grasped!*

⁶*The LORD helps the poor,
but throws the wicked down on the dirt!*

⁷*Sing to the LORD with thanks;*

sing praises to our God with a lyre!

⁸*God covers the skies with clouds;*

God makes rain for the earth;

*God makes the mountains sprout green
grass.*

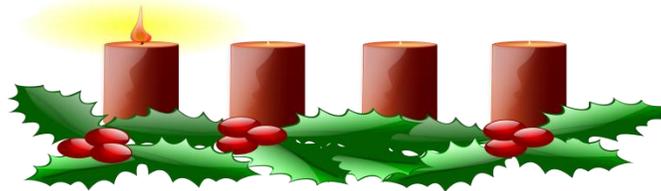
⁹*God gives food to the animals—
even to the baby ravens when they cry
out.*

¹⁰*God doesn't prize the strength of a horse;
God doesn't treasure the legs of a
runner.*

¹¹*No. The LORD treasures the people
who honor him,
the people who wait for his faithful love.*

Psalm 147: 1-11 (CEB)

(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Quantum physics is changing the way we understand the universe. Here's a prime example. If you split a subatomic particle and separate the parts across the expanse of the universe—light years away from each other—each part still demonstrates an awareness of the other part, with no apparent communication between them. This kind of quantum relationship—called entanglement—is radically different from the gravitational forces Newton observed in a falling apple or the action and reaction observed in billiard balls striking each other. We have no idea how quantum entanglement works. It is a mystery.

Or consider this: that which we long assumed was physical, is less physical than we thought. When you break down matter into atoms and then break down those atoms into smaller and smaller subatomic particles, you realize that matter isn't actually made up of static building blocks. Rather, everything in the universe is made up of particles in motion, behaving in ways we don't understand. Everything that exists—including you and me—is fundamentally relationships of energy.

Quantum entanglement. Relationships of energy. These contemporary scientific concepts are enticingly compatible with ancient theologies, like the notion of one God existing as three persons in interpenetrating relationship. Or the idea that the divine will binds the universe together and sustains it in through sovereign and providential grace, expressed beautifully—in a cosmological worldview very different from ours—in Psalm 147. God is infused in the universe, in the history of God's people, in the lives of those who struggle. Everything that exists is intimately connected by what we might call divine entanglement.

In her recent book, *Grounded*, Diana Butler Bass notes that even though most churches still operate as a mediating institution within a three-tiered universe—with God in heaven, humanity in the world below, and an underworld we try to avoid—many people in today's world experience God in a profoundly different way. Instead of a distant God from whom we

are separated, people both inside and outside of the church are rediscovering the ancient wisdom that God is actually very near us, all the time. Bass considers this a spiritual revolution; a great awakening.

The traditional spiritual posture of Advent is waiting for God to enter the world in the birth of Jesus. But if we understand that God is already in the world—indeed, deeply and inextricably intertwined with all of creation—then perhaps Advent takes on a slightly different meaning. Instead of us waiting for God, what if God is waiting for us? Waiting for us to realize that God is already here among us and within us. Waiting for us to align our wills with the divine will that is woven into the fabric of the universe. Waiting for us to be born anew and grow into the likeness of Christ.

Awakened to and transformed by this reality, we would truly join the psalmist in singing, “Hallelujah!”

A Prayer for the Fourth Day of Advent

Open my mind, Lord, to new ways of thinking. Open my eyes, Lord, to see you in the world. Open my heart, Lord, to the birth of Christ within me. Open my hands, Lord, to love and serve all of creation. Amen.

Rev. Dr. John W. Vest
Visiting Assistant Professor of Evangelism
Richmond, VA

Thursday, December 1

¹ For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.

² He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

³ How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering
fence?

⁴ Their only plan is to bring down a person of
prominence.

They take pleasure in falsehood;
they bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. *Selah*

⁵ For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.

⁶ He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

⁷ On God rests my deliverance and my
honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. *Selah*

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

¹⁰ Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart
on them.

¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,

¹² and steadfast love belongs to you, O
Lord.

For you repay to all
according to their work.

Psalm 62 (NRSV)
(For use with the EVENING Daily Prayer)



In 2006, my wife and I purchased our very first home in a quickly growing community outside Nashville, TN, just a couple of miles from the plant that manufactured Saturn vehicles. The new construction of a first home was an exciting part of the process and date-nights for us often consisted of going to take pictures of the house in various stages of construction. We sensed an excitement in the community about the future of the area and new residents flooded in. And then, of course, the financial crisis struck. General Motors scrapped the Saturn brand in 2009 and many of the workers were laid off. The local economy tanked; the housing market suffered as home values plummeted and inventory abounded. When it came time for us to move in 2011, what we thought would be a great first investment turned out to be anything but. We learned a very hard lesson that not much in this world is solid and dependable, even things as big as the American economy.

In Psalm 62, the Psalmist has experienced this lesson in the arena of human relationships. Whoever they might be, the Psalmist has found that people can be adversarial and unreliable, like leaning walls and tottering fences in danger of collapsing (v. 3). They are “but a breath” and a “delusion” (v. 9), not able to hold up to the challenges that life brings (v. 9). By contrast, the Psalmist pronounces determined confidence that through it all, God is unwavering, reliable, and steady. While the human community fails, the Psalmist’s language celebrates an experience of God’s dependability in no uncertain terms. God is a rock and fortress (vv. 2 and 6), a refuge (v. 7), and the source of power that displays steadfast love (vv. 11 and 12). The Psalmist declares a foundational truth of faith: people and institutions are bound to end in disappointment, but God is utterly trustworthy.

The Psalmist calls us to consider: In what and in whom do we place our trust?

Advent points us in the direction of this Psalm's claim. The story of God's coming work in Jesus Christ reminds us that we cannot manufacture our own rest, peace, security, and salvation. Neither can we find the full measure of them in the people and institutions around us. Our faith and trust best lie with the God whose steadfast love comes over and over to us, and through a child who comes to fully embody God's love. In Advent, we align our voices with that of the Psalmist, taking stock of where we have placed our trust and singing the praise of God's unfailing love and protection. Of course, that does not mean that this kind of faith comes easily. While we might identify with Psalm 62 as an expression of our deepest experiences of faith, sometimes repeating this psalm as our own becomes a kind of hopeful prayer for what our faith might be. There is room in the psalm for both declaration and aspiration.

In 1991 the Taizé Community in France set this psalm to music. Entitled "In God Alone," the song can be found in the PC(USA) hymnal *Glory to God*, #814. For those unfamiliar with the music from Taizé, the songs are short and repeated, functioning as meditative, prayerful songs for the gathered community. You can find a version of the song online [here](#). The words for "In God Alone" are simple; perhaps you will join your voice to the Psalmist, praying/singing them as your own today on the Advent journey:

A Prayer for the Fifth Day of Advent

*In God alone my soul can find rest and peace,
in God my peace and joy.
Only in God my soul can find its rest,
find its rest and peace.*

Richard W. Voelz
Assistant Professor of Preaching & Worship
Richmond, VA

Friday, December 2

¹ *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

² *Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

³ *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?*

⁴ *But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.*

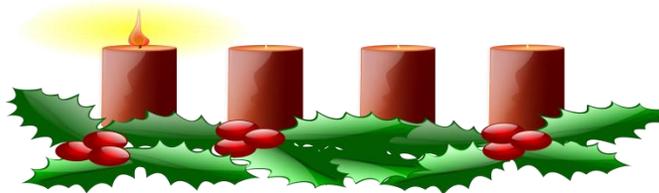
⁵ *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;*

⁶ *my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the
morning,
more than those who watch for the
morning.*

⁷ *O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.*

⁸ *It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

Psalm 130 (NRSV)
(For use with the EVENING Daily Prayer)



We often try and reach perfection during Advent. Even before the season begins, we're bombarded with advertising about how we can make this Christmas the picture perfect one. Yet it's not the kind of perfection that we need. We want the perfect decorations, perfect tree, perfect gift, and perfect meal. We think that everything being just right will make this season the best one yet. But more often than not, the tree doesn't quite fit the room, half of the light strand goes out, the cookies burn, and you can't seem to find the one toy on the top of the Christmas list. We think this perfection will fulfill us and the lives of those around us.

But we aren't perfect. We're a broken people in a broken world. Striving for perfection can distract us from the true pain of not only our lives, but the lives of those around us. We are reminded that even with our imperfections, God still hears our cries. There is no way for us to ever be perfect. We will always have parts of our lives that aren't what they should be. The beauty of not only this text, but the whole Advent season is that God loves us enough to send his only son to redeem us. It can often seem like an impossible The catch is that it's not on our time, though often we get into our head that it can be.

The Christmas season can often seem like a waiting game. Kids wait to get out of school for break and the arrival of Santa. Parents wait in long lines and mall traffic to get presents for friends and family. We all wait in long lines at the post office to make sure our loved ones far away get their gifts in time. There's time traveling, cooking, preparing the house, and every other small detail that makes this season what it is. Even with everything that takes up our minds during this busy time, we're still waiting.

Much like a child on Christmas morning, we are reminded that our waiting does come to an end. Christ does arrive and washes clean the sins of us and our world. We are blessed with the gift of redemption and forgiveness not only now, but until the kingdom comes. The psalm reminds us that this gift is guaranteed. We know it will be there for us. We don't have to worry about the store being sold out or waiting in line for days. God's love and compassion for us is abundantly given. We only need to trust in His word to know that we will receive it.

A Prayer for the Sixth Day of Advent

Dear Lord, We ask for patience during this joyful season. Patience with others, patience for ourselves, and patience with you. Help us to understand that while we might not see it, your plan is unfolding just how it should. Be with those who's impatience is wearing them down, who may not be able to see the big picture that you have for us.

Thank you for all the gifts that you have given and continue to give us each and every day. Continue to be with us during this time of waiting and until your kingdom comes. Amen.

Hayley Matthews
Alumni Office Program Associate
and Development Coordinator
Richmond, VA

Saturday, December 3

⁵ Some people were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and ornaments dedicated to God. Jesus said, ⁶ “As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished.”

⁷ They asked him, “Teacher, when will these things happen? What sign will show that these things are about to happen?”

⁸ Jesus said, “Watch out that you aren't deceived. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I'm the one!’ and ‘It's time!’ Don't follow them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and rebellions, don't be alarmed. These things must happen first, but the end won't happen immediately.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics. There will also be terrifying sights and great signs in the sky. ¹² But before all this occurs, they will take you into custody and harass you because of your faith. They will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³ This will provide you with an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance. ¹⁵ I'll give you words and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to counter or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed by your parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends. They will execute some of you. ¹⁷ Everyone will hate you because of my name. ¹⁸ Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost. ¹⁹ By holding fast, you will gain your lives.

Luke 21: 5-19 (CEB)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



This reading for Advent is the opening of the third of Luke's three major discourses that position disciples—and readers listening in—for the future that beckons. Jesus highlights challenges to faith that his followers will face and underscores the importance of persevering faithfulness that trusts the future to God. As time stretches on, people of faith who seek to bear witness to the truth they know will experience hardship, and they may come to wonder why the fulfillment of God's purposes seems to delay so long. Where is God? Where is the evidence of God's presence and faithfulness? When will help come? How long must we wait?

Right after Jesus has commented on an impoverished widow's sacrificial donation to the temple treasury of “all she had to live on,” some of Jesus's companions are impressed by the beauty and opulence of the temple buildings (v. 5). Jesus has a different perspective: sometime in the future, the temple will be a heap of rubble (v. 6)—as indeed happened a generation later, with the Roman armies' destruction of the temple in the year 70. Where do we place our trust: in money, buildings (even sacred sanctuaries)? Or in God?

Jesus then responds to concerned questions about the when and how of this worrisome future. There will be a long period of turmoil, strife, and distress, but these do not mean the End is near. The disciples will have work to do in the meantime: in a world stressed and distressed, they have a calling, to bear witness to the truth they know. If they are faithful to that calling, they will meet opposition and peril, but God will be their guide and support, and through it all will never abandon them (vv. 12–19).

So this passage issues a summons to faithful service of God in the meantime. But it also offers a message of consolation and hope, as we read through to the end of the discourse (vv. 20–36),

and through to the end of the story (the Easter narrative in Luke 24, and on into the book of Acts). The Acts narrative shows the fulfillment of the picture of discipleship challenge and hardship Jesus previews in 21:12–19. But the challenges to faithful discipleship extend into our own time.

We hear the eschatological tones in advent texts like this one with some bafflement and perhaps even discomfort if we inhabit spaces of privilege. But we need to attend to this aspect of life and experience, of our world, if we are truly to ready ourselves for the advent of a Savior who will disrupt comfortable patterns of life and relationship and society that are also oppressive and death-dealing.

So we pray, with the early church: Maranatha: "Come quickly, Lord!" Even into our space and time: come to deliver, to bring release, to bring life; come by your Holy Spirit to sustain us in faithful living and restore our hope, even and especially when the evidence of our eyes and ears tells us there is little reason to hope.

A Prayer for the Seventh Day of Advent

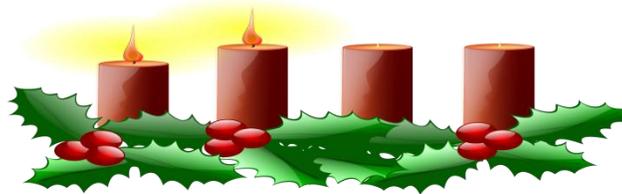
God of every season of life: in this season of waiting and longing, we are all too aware of world events and personal experiences that cry out for a word of healing, of hope. By your Spirit, kindle renewed hope within us. Help us to trust in your faithful working in our lives and in the world even now. And help us to face the future—with all its unknowns—as people of hope. May we find ways to foster that life-nurturing hope and faith in others among and around us. Maranatha: Lord, come. And in the meantime, guide us, encourage and strengthen us, give us courage to be your persistent voices of witness in a too-broken world. Amen.

John Carroll
Harriet Robertson Fitts Memorial Professor of New Testament
Richmond, VA

The Second Sunday of Advent, December 4

¹ Praise the LORD!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
² Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
³ Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

Psalm 150 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Psalm 150 is a Psalm which calls us to universal praise of the Lord. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. We are to praise God in and out of God's sanctuary-wherever God may be. We are to praise God for the mightiness of God's work. We are to praise God with the calm and quiet of the stringed instruments and with loud and boisterous clanging of the cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.

Advent is a time that I especially yearn for calm and reflective waiting on the Lord. Each morning, I desire peaceful stillness and reflection. I desire for my reflection, praise and waiting on the Lord to be peaceful like soothing music from a stringed instrument as a violin slowly plays a lullaby. Yet the calm of the stringed instrument type of praise and waiting seems to turn into harried, clanging instruments by the day's end. The world's demands of me and life's distractions take over like banging cymbals and replace the calm and soothing waiting I sought and intended that morning. A day can start out with joy and humming of 'Come Thou Long Expected Jesus' while I move about my tasks, and by lunch time I might find myself gritting my teeth and hollering 'How Long O Lord!?!' as I sit in traffic rushing from one commitment to the next. Sometimes I find it difficult to continue praising the Lord amid the loud clanging of life, especially during Advent. The demands of the world and the frenetic pace of the advent season just seem to take over.

But we are called to universal praise of the Lord in Psalm 150. That's praise of all creatures at all times and in all circumstances. That's praise in the calm of life when the smooth stringed instruments are playing, but also praise in the chaos when the cymbals of life are annoyingly clanging. And maybe it's exactly into that chaos that we need most to praise the Lord. Hollering into the chaos only exacerbates the chaos. But finding a way to praise the Lord amid the chaos, changes the chaos. God has always worked wonders amid the chaos. God finds a way through the chaos.

It's into our chaos that God chose to enter in the form of a lowly child instead of a raging warrior. God chooses to remain with us in the chaos of life and it's into that same chaos into which he will return again. That is worthy of our universal praise. God turns the soothing sounds of the strings and clanging noise of the cymbals into beautiful music. Both play important parts in a symphony, the strings and the cymbals. Praise the Lord.

Advent is a time of waiting. Psalm 150 calls us to praise the Lord while we await his return, no matter our situation. Let's praise the Lord this Advent season in the peace and in the chaos. *'Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free, from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.'*¹

A Prayer for the Second Sunday of Advent

*Gracious and loving God, we praise you and thank you that you are ever present amid the peaceful times and the hectic times in our lives. We are grateful that you chose to humble yourself to live among us and to show us what your love looks like in human form. We ask that you turn our hearts and minds towards you this Advent season so that as we await your return, we do so in ways that show your love to the world. Turn our praise and our lives into beautiful songs for the whole world to hear. 'Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee; here, Lord, abide. Let me thy inner presence feel; thy grace and love in me reveal.'*² Amen.

Lisa McLennan
Associate Director of Admissions
Charlotte, NC

¹ *PCUSA Glory to God Hymnal, #82-Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*

² *PCUSA Glory to God Hymnal, #93-Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates*

Monday, December 5

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



When quite young, one of our children would occasionally ask "What is it time?" The child would then quickly add, "It's not nap-nap time! No! No!" The question, unorthodox syntax included, did not mean what time of day is it according to the hands of the clock. It meant what are we supposed to be doing now, with our hands, so to speak.

The Thessalonians have a similar question about time. They believe Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, will return very soon to bring to fulfillment the universal reign of God that Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection have inaugurated. They now sense that this wonderful and longed-for "coming of the Lord" is overdue. Pastoral, theological, and ethical concerns arise among them.

Paul cradles his response to the Thessalonians in personal warmth and apostolic concern, urging them to encourage one another in the midst of their uneasiness (4:18; 5:11). This inclusion of encouragement is the literary equivalent of Paul wrapping his arms around the Thessalonians, not just sending them accurate information. What he has to say, although finally based on his apostolic commission to proclaim the Gospel, is equally deeply lodged in his relationship with and affectionate hope for the Thessalonians.

Within this apostolic embrace, Paul sends a calming and hopeful reminder to the Thessalonian congregation, regardless of its uncertain present and future, of God's care (1: 4; 5: 9). Moreover, God's care is not some amorphous, general feeling. It is not a generic attribute or static category of the divine nature. It is, rather, a concrete and effective care, not simply an idea or a system, but a living, breathing, cruciform reality in the midst of the congregation's life. This care has become incarnate in what God has done "for us" (note Paul's solidarity with his readers in his use of first person, plural pronouns) "through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us . . . so we may live for him" (5:10). In a deft rhetorical move, Paul urges the Thessalonians to reclaim limited knowledge as an original feature of God's care, which care, he notes, in addition to taking incarnate degree and intensity, has always included for the faithful the limits of what can be known, limits the Thessalonians must not allow to distract them (5:1-2; 6) .

The congregation in commercial and imperial Thessalonica would no doubt have had access to several prevailing Greco-Roman philosophical systems. Each of these systems in its own way removed or at least diluted any sense of divine concern for or divine beneficial engagement with the world, and, in effect, cast communities and individuals unto their own devices, whatever shapes these might take, to navigate the fickle winds and storms of disinterested fate until time itself ran out on them.

For Paul, and for the Thessalonians, a world-altering aspect of the news of God in Christ is that God has not left history adrift on the tides of time. God has reset the age. Time is now characterized by the wonderful reality that the one true God of all creation has, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, entered completely and passionately all the broken seasons of the world to bring their bruised and bruising drift into life-giving purpose. God has included the Thessalonians, and others near and far (1:7-8) in the great work of salvation accomplished in "our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). That is what time it is. That is what time now is for the Thessalonians.

Paul hopefully characterizes this time as "day" as contrasted to "night" (5:5; 8), a time not of sleep and intoxication (despair and self-indulgence?), but of seeing clearly ("light") and living with purpose (being "sober") as individuals and as a community (5:10). Furthermore, Paul continues, it is a time not to be defined by fear or anxiety or resignation or striving to wrench security from the fleeting hours of the clock, but rather a time to be filled to its redeemed brim with meaningful labor, esteem for those who serve the congregation, peace, admonishing the idle, encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, being patient with all, eschewing vengeance, seeking good for each other and for all, rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, welcoming the Spirit, practicing discernment, and abstaining from every evil (5:12-22).

This quality of time will by no means be an easy season for Paul's beloved Thessalonians as they wait for "that day" (5:5) when they will "be with the Lord forever" (4:17). Defensive armament --breastplate and helmet-- will be needed during this time for the life of faith, love, and "the obtaining of salvation" (5:8-9), a life into which the Thessalonian congregation has been providentially summoned and in which the congregation will be providentially sustained (5:24). Be the need for such armor as it may, the Thessalonians are called to trust that all time is now God's time, a gift in and from and before the God who is pleased to redeem time itself, and to make effective in Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit the very life of Christ in and through the Thessalonian congregation (4: 1; 5:23-24). This, Paul, urges the Thessalonians, is what time it is, both now and even until the Lord, whose Name is above every name, returns.

Bless'ed be the Name of the Lord.

A Prayer for the Eighth Day of Advent

Loving and Holy One, open our eyes to see what time You have made it to be, every moment, so that we and the many may live to glorify and enjoy You forever.

*Oh to You alone be all praise and adoration, as in the beginning, so in the end, now and always.
Amen.*

Carson Brisson
Associate Professor of Bible and Biblical Languages
Charlotte, NC

Tuesday, December 6

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴² "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

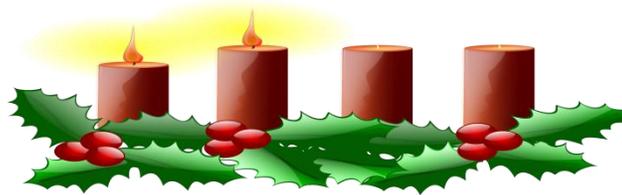
⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

⁴⁴ "'The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'"

⁴⁵ If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Matthew 22:34-46 (NIV)

(Note: This text selection follows daily lectionary for year B)



William Arthur Ward once said that we have "three enemies of personal peace: regret over yesterday's mistakes, anxiety over tomorrow's problems, and ingratitude for today's blessings." We lose our peace, because we fail, time and again, to "let go and let God" over things beyond our control and also because we fail to recognize thankfully God's blessings among us. The Pharisees and the Sadducees did not regard Jesus as a godsend, not to mention as God, and lost their peace and felt threatened when Jesus taught and acted differently and with authority (Matthew 21:23). So they attempted to regain their control, asking Jesus difficult questions. But they turned out to do what the writer of Ecclesiastes calls "a chasing after wind" (9 times!, NRSV) or, as Paul puts it, to "fight like a boxer beating the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26, NIV). Jesus bested his opponents, responding to their daring questions with amazing and astounding answers.

And now Jesus turns the tables on them, asking them a very disquieting question about who their waited-for Messiah is. Their tightly controlled idea of Messiah was, most of all, "the son of David." Matthew, starting with its genealogy, obviously follows their train of thought with regard to this subject. David, not Abraham (cf. Matthew 1:1), ought to be their reference point. Behind this Davidic orientation (or even concentration) lay their religio-political aspirations well expressed by the people's hosannas: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:9, NRSV) People were waiting for a new king who would liberate them from the Roman Empire and bring back the glory of King David's reign. Jesus seemed to be capable for the job. And

he was qualified, for he was the son of David. That was at least what those who welcomed Jesus thought and yet Jesus' opponents did not concur with them.

Both religious leaders and people were regretful over the past and anxious over the future and not content with what they had in Jesus the Blessed Son of David. They did not want to follow Jesus as they lost sight of what their tradition took to be the base line of all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40): the "double love of God and of neighbor" (Augustine). Jesus put this double love into practice and invited them to do so. And they knew what they had to do but did not want to do it. They only wanted to justify themselves. The sad reality is that we do the same and raise the same self-justifying question as they did: "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29) And the answer of Jesus is still the same: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), an anonymous son of Abraham who was sent by God to help an anonymous robbed Jew.

A Prayer for the Ninth Day of Advent

God of all, grant us wisdom to welcome unfamiliar godsendings into our lives and help us to practice the double love together with them. Amen.

Dr. Sung Hee Chang
Assistant Professor of Christian Education & Director of Supervised Ministry
Charlotte, NC

Wednesday, December 7

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

John 8: 2-11 (NIV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



In an age of Instagram and Twitter and Facebook, we are used to sending short messages to each other to let our friends and acquaintances know how our day is going, what we're eating, and how cute our kids are. Sometimes we write rants against the actions of people or societies.

In this passage from John, Jesus' "posts" were not on an iPad or laptop. They were in the dust at his feet as the scribes and Pharisees accused a woman of adultery. Their accusation was made, as often was the case, to trick Jesus into condemning himself; the proverbial lose-lose situation. If Jesus said they should stone the woman, he would be in danger of arrest by the Roman authorities, who did not permit this. If he absolved the woman of her guilt, he would be accused of breaking the Law of Moses, as written in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22. Funny thing about that law, though. It clearly states that both the man *and* the woman involved in the adultery should be put to death. We don't hear that the man is present, so really, the Pharisees and scribes are themselves breaking the law.

Then Jesus bent down and wrote something in the dust. Was it, as many believe, a list of the names of his accusers, the names of those who have sinned against God and humankind? We don't know, but he then stood up and said "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," and he stooped to write some more. After that, the accusers went away, one by one, leaving Jesus and the woman alone.

I think Jesus had compassion for both the woman and the religious leaders. The woman lived in a culture where women were not allowed to be educated, where they were often married off to older relatives at the age of 12 or 13, where they were not valued for anything except cooking, cleaning, and child-bearing. Was this adultery a means to escape a husband who beat her, or a way of asserting some level of her personhood? The scribes and Pharisees, too, may evoke compassion when we think that they had been raised since early childhood to

follow the letter of the law vigorously and without question, like children today who from a young age hear only racist or sexist rhetoric. It is not until that deeply ingrained hatred is challenged, might they stop and really think about what it means and how it hurts others.

In thinking about Jesus' life and ministry as a whole, I'd like to imagine that rather than judging the woman or her accusers, Jesus might instead have bent down to the ground and written something like, "Love one another as I have loved you." And that's what made the condemners walk away, and what gave the woman hope.

What words would you like to imagine Jesus writing in the dust to the religious leaders? What words would have meaning for the woman and/or the leaders? What words would you want written to you, to give you hope and peace in waiting for the coming of the Messiah? Maybe those are the words of encouragement that we should be posting!

A Prayer for the Tenth Day of Advent

God of love and mercy, we are so thankful that we can come to you with our failures and you love us anyway. For we know that you did not send your son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. Help us to extend that compassion to everyone we meet, even those who seem most unlovable, so that, through you, we may work toward a more just and loving world as we await your coming again.

Marilyn Johns
Director of Program Development,
The Leadership Institute
Richmond, VA

Thursday, December 8

Liturgical artist, Union alumna and staff member, Crystal Sygeel, pauses for a reflective encounter with the shepherd, psalmist, and king, David, in this season of Advent.

Psalm 62 (For use with the EVENING Daily Prayer)

Song of Trust in God Alone

To the leader: according to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.



¹ For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.

² He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

My soul is actually quite turbulent, loud, a noisy cymbal, a clanging gong- which reminds me that I Corinthians Chapter 13 verse 1, describes that as the opposite of love. I think I am already off to a bad start.

And not I'm not much better off with verse 2 of Psalm 62. Ultimately, I'm certain that God is my salvation. But I'm shaken on a fairly regular basis by forces within and beyond my control.

*Wouldn't it stand to reason if I knew God was my rock,
I wouldn't rattle around like a shaky tea cup so much?*

³ How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

⁴ Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.

They take pleasure in falsehood;

they bless with their mouths,

but inwardly they curse.

Selah

*At first, I'm reluctant to admit any resonance with being a battered victim
but then it occurs to me that I know something about feeling like a leaning wall,
a tottering fence.*

*I'm not aware of any conspiracy against me, but I'm aware of feeling overwhelmed,
over-extended. It creates a darkness, a tunnel vision, a waiting for something to break through
and wake me, or save me.*

*In this season of Advent, the Christ Child comes to set things aright: leaning walls, tottering
fences, people waiting in overwhelming darkness.*

⁵ For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.

⁶ He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

⁷ On God rests my deliverance and my honour;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.
Selah

*Pour out my heart before God? What would I say?
Or more to the point, what would I not say? My list of worries and
grievances is long.*

*But that notion makes me squirm in my chair.
Why list the worries and grievances first?*

*Where is my praise and adoration?
This is the season of Advent and God is on the way.
Where is my joy? My anticipation?
My longing to draw close to Bethlehem with wonder and awe?*

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

¹⁰ Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

*An exhortation to remember what this life is truly all about. When you and I are able to kneel
at the side of the manger, status, wealth, and achievement all fade away. The seed of desire
to walk the path of righteousness - to make the world as it should be- is planted in the heart.*

¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
¹² and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all
according to their work.

*In this season of darkness and waiting, I'm traveling once more to Bethlehem to see you.
Though sin and failure are sure, I'm hoping against hope that there will be one less time I fail
you, one less time I squander the gifts you've given me, one less time I turn my back on the
world you have called me to serve.*

*Steadfast love does belong to you, O God...because you came in human form, with all of
your power, you allowed us to cradle you in our arms. Steadfast love belongs to you because
you later invited us into ministry. And when it seemed we had lost everything in your death,
you returned everything to us in your resurrection.*

*You took a chance on us, and every time we failed, you still believed in us.
You believe in us, you believe in me, even now.*

Rev. Crystal Sygeel
Communications & Event Coordinator
Richmond, VA

Friday, December 9

¹³But we always must thank God for you, brothers and sisters who are loved by God. This is because he chose you from the beginning to be the first crop of the harvest. This brought salvation, through your dedication to God by the Spirit and through your belief in the truth. ¹⁴God called all of you through our good news so you could possess the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions we taught you, whether we taught you in person or through our letter. ¹⁶Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. ¹⁷May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say.

3 Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us so that the Lord's message will spread quickly and be honored, just like it happened with you. ²Pray too that we will be rescued from inappropriate and evil people since everyone that we meet won't respond with faith. ³But the Lord is faithful and will give you strength and protect you from the evil one. ⁴We are confident about you in the Lord—that you are doing and will keep doing what we tell you to do. ⁵May the Lord lead your hearts to express God's love and Christ's endurance.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5 (CEB)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Some years the cards piled up in a basket. Whether they were whimsical nods at the current pop culture or religiously over-toned, Christmas cards and letters signaled the arrival of the season. They announced a connection from across town and from far away. Friends and family shared their story with our family, and we joined together to celebrate good news.

The letter to the church in II Thessalonians was probably never intended to be viewed as a Christmas card, but yet it has a similar tone. While scholars might debate about the author, the readers, the church, seemed to recognize the voice. The letter was from a friend. Someone they knew, someone they loved, had met them in the midst of their fear and frustration and failure, to offer comfort and good news. A friend retold a friend the story of what God was doing in the midst of their lives. Good news was proclaimed. While this church was weary awaiting the second arrival of Christ, they were reminded of the gifts that had already been given. They were reminded that while they waited, they were loved. This letter announced a connection as well, reminding the church that in spite of any current situations that threatened to unravel their faith, that they were held and bound in a love greater than themselves.

The cards may not pile up as high this year. Some friends may choose to tweet and post versus hunt for an age old stamp. However they come to us or however we send ours out, stories shared this advent and Christmas gives us the opportunity to tell our good news to one another. Whether you find yourself writing one last paper, or preaching one more advent text, whether you tell your family or tell a friend, announce the good news that we are held together and bound in a love greater than ourselves. Whether you are grading the semester's work, setting the policy or writing the check and sending the tuition support, remember to be the church in the world by being the church to the one standing or sitting right next to you. Burst in on the mundane with thanksgiving and doxology to proclaim to one another the story of Christ's love for us all. Show up in someone's life to remind them that you love them. Your Christmas letter may be the gift they are waiting to receive. Signal the season, connect across

town or from far away, because someone you know needs to hear from you and celebrate good news.

A Prayer for the Twelfth Day of Advent

Immanuel, for your letter to the church, for your Word sent into the world, we are ever grateful. For the lives of your people who have touched our own over the years, for friendships made in seminary halls and in congregations and across family tables, we give you thanks. Help us to be mindful of the words we use this season whether spoken or written. Help us Lord, to use our gifts for your glory, to bear joyful witness to one another of your love. As we wait for you, help us to love one another and in so doing to bear witness to your love for us already present in our midst. Grateful for your good gifts to us and for one another we ask your continued blessing, in Christ's name. Amen

Susan Griner
Associate Director of Student Services
Charlotte, NC

Saturday, December 10

¹² Jesus was in one of the towns where there was also a man covered with a skin disease. When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged, "Lord, if you want, you can make me clean."

¹³ Jesus reached out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do want to. Be clean." Instantly, the skin disease left him. ¹⁴ Jesus ordered him not to tell anyone. "Instead," Jesus said, "go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses instructed. This will be a testimony to them." ¹⁵ News of him spread even more and huge crowds gathered to listen and to be healed from their illnesses. ¹⁶ But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer.

¹⁷ One day when Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and legal experts were sitting nearby. They had come from every village in Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem. Now the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal. ¹⁸ Some men were bringing a man who was paralyzed, lying on a cot. They wanted to carry him in and place him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but they couldn't reach him because of the crowd. So they took him up on the roof and lowered him—cot and all—through the roof tiles into the crowded room in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

²¹ The legal experts and Pharisees began to mutter among themselves, "Who is this who insults God? Only God can forgive sins!"

²² Jesus recognized what they were discussing and responded, "Why do you fill your minds with these questions? ²³ Which is easier—to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" ²⁴ But so that you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins" —Jesus now spoke to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, get up, take your cot, and go home." ²⁵ Right away, the man stood before them, picked up his cot, and went home, praising God.

²⁶ All the people were beside themselves with wonder. Filled with awe, they glorified God, saying, "We've seen unimaginable things today."

Luke 5: 12-26 (CEB)

(Note: Not a part of daily lectionary)



December is a great, if sometimes exhausting, month to be a musician. It is the month of the year when our lives are filled with music, holiday music at the mall or choir cantatas at church or carols on the radio. As a professional musician, I sometimes cringe at the music I hear during December—"Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" is perhaps my least favorite piece of music in the world—but I do find myself seeking out music for the season that might deepen my understanding of the rich prophetic words that we hear in Advent and the uncommonly beautiful birth narrative that we hear at Christmas. One of my favorite cantatas for the season is Benjamin Britten's *Saint Nicolas*, a semi-sacred work based on the legend of Nicolas, the patron saint of travelers, seamen, and children. Nicolas's story is far from dull, and Britten's

musical settings of a Nicolas's dramatic call and a narrowly averted shipwreck are particularly thrilling.

The most bizarre part of the story and the cantata would have to be the story of the pickled boys. Yes, pickled boys. Clearly, there is nothing holly nor jolly about boys who have been pickled. In the story, three starving travelers enter a city in search of food. As they sit down to eat, Nicolas warns them not to eat the meat, for he knows that the meat comes from three pickled boys. He then performs one of his most remarkable miracles by bringing the boys back to life. After they've been pickled. And partially butchered. Can you imagine a preacher preaching this text on Christmas Eve?

What I find most moving about the cantata is how it ends. After all that has taken place in the story, Britten concludes with a version of the hymn, "O God, in a Mysterious Way". What other hymn could follow a story so strange?

"Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'" This is how Luke's account of the healing of the paralytic man ends. When God has done something that we struggle to understand, perhaps the best course of action is to glorify God and name the strangeness. It's not entirely unlike the angels who came to the shepherds, glorifying God in the midst of a night that went quite differently than the shepherds had thought it would. We mainline Christians can be afraid of change, and we like to understand exactly what is happening when it happens. Perhaps there is wisdom in the actions and words of those present with the paralytic man, who chose not to attempt to explain a God who is sometimes beyond explanation but rather to glorify a God who moves in a mysterious way.

A Prayer for the Thirteenth Day of Advent

*O mysterious and unfathomable God, we are fearful and full of doubt. Help us to have faith in your sovereign will and to delight in the unexpected ways you work in this world. Help us to welcome Christ into our lives again this Advent season. It is in Christ's name that we pray.
Amen.*

Doug Brown
Director of Music and Adjunct Instructor of Church Music
Richmond, VA

The Third Sunday of Advent, December 11

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

Hebrews 12: 18-29 (NIV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



It was a holy gathering; and the people gathered to hear a Word from their God. The mountain was burning with fire, and there was darkness, gloom and storm, even a trumpet blast. As if this was not frightening enough, there was a voice speaking these words, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death". The event was so terrifying that even Moses was trembling with fear, and the people begged not to hear further words.

"If even an animal..." underscores that there is no human being who would be spared in case one touches the mountain. If an animal (a non-sinful creature) must be stoned to death, what about human beings (sinful creatures)? In such a case, as sinful creatures, would they even consider reaching out to God in their helplessness and hopelessness? Does this give hope to the Church or to anyone today?

A friend of mine from Rwanda had a conversation with a child soldier (a Rwandan orphan) back home. This child was promised provision and protection by a so-called mentor (who enrolled him into the rebels' army). As a child soldier, he carried guns and killed. The child said that he was given commands that were unbearable, in such a way that he was fed up. He detests any connection to a guardian (even God), because he does not see God as different from the terrible guardian he just experienced. Now, how would such a child feel if the only God he encounters is the One through Hebrews 12:18-21? Excited? Probably not.

Neither the Hebrews nor the child soldier nor we would be longing for a God described in Hebrews 12:18-21, since God's people at the scene begged not to hear any further words from God. The child soldier had already experienced enough, a very traumatic life. The writer

of this text knew that the readers have many struggles; some of them had been abused; others are immigrants, some were denied their civil rights, fighting horrible diseases and facing racial discrimination; others were battling economic disadvantages, addictions; and some were already traumatized through civil wars and were hungry and thirsty for hope. Now, where then will they find hope for which they are so desperate? Is there any God of righteousness, yet of grace, love, compassion and mercy who will provide that hope?

ADVENT points us to a season of hope and preparation to welcome Jesus Christ into the world. He is Emmanuel (God with us), fully God, the Almighty – the source of righteousness, love, grace, salvation, renewal of life, providence, protection, mercy, forgiveness, hope; yet He is fully human. He has experienced our struggles, thus He is the best to understand our weaknesses. He walks with us and shares our pain and our joy. In contrast to Hebrews 12:18-21, Hebrews 12:22-24 highlights the fact that the readers have come to mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, a place where God dwells with God's people, where God is no more distant but near, no more terrifying but throwing a joyful feast to God's people. With God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there is hope here and now, and hope for tomorrow.

A Prayer for the Third Sunday of Advent

Lord, our God, this season of ADVENT reminds us of your breaking through into the world in our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ. As we prepare through this season to enter into that holy moment, we hold on to the hope that you brought. We acknowledge, as sinful people, that we fall short of your righteousness. We did not participate in your mission to help your people who have been abused, or have immigration issues, or have been denied their civil rights, or are facing racial discrimination, or battling economic disadvantages, or those who are fighting addictions, horrible diseases and so on. Yet your love, your grace, your mercy and compassion, and your forgiveness make hope available to us here and now, and tomorrow and the life to come. We ask for your forgiveness, Lord. We have hope that your work among us will alleviate their burden. Now, help us to see where you are working and what you are doing so that we may participate in your mission, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our redeemer, the One who taught us to pray (Our Lord's prayer). Amen!

Pastor Yao Thomas Agbemenou
Library Assistant
Charlotte, NC

Monday, December 12

¹ Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: ² May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. ⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. ¹¹ For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

2 Peter 1:1-11 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Can you think of a time in your life when you felt, "ineffective and unfruitful"? I can think of several, but the one that came to mind when I read this passage was about ten years ago. I was looking through a college alumni magazine that had arrived in the mail and happened upon an article about young graduates who were making an impact on the world. Glossy photographs captured an upbeat meeting at a coffee shop where they had gathered to network with other professionals and their cheerful, well-groomed faces were full of confidence and optimism. From my point of view as an unemployed graduate student, it was like looking at a photograph of a lush garden or a tropical vacation while in the dead of winter. I knew what it felt like to be there but it wasn't where I was. My life was in a holding pattern and my confidence was at a low point. A sense of promise that I had felt in more productive times seemed dormant and uncertain. Just then, the words of a song playing on the radio caught my attention:

"There's a battle ahead. Many battles are lost, but you'll never see the end of the road while you're traveling with me. Hey now, hey now, don't dream it's over."

(Crowded House. "Don't Dream It's Over." Capitol, 1986.)

My mood brightened as I heard a message that resembled that of 2nd Peter to its original recipients - people who, like me, were in an extended season of advent. They were at a vulnerable, stagnant point between two periods of promise, uncertain about the future, but they heard a voice saying, "This isn't over! The one who called you is traveling beside you. You have what you need. Keep at it." I needed to hear that word of encouragement because, though my situation was about to change, it didn't feel like it. I had grown short-sighted and fearful of battles ahead - but a more fruitful season was just around the corner.

Are you at a low point in life? Is it hard to have confidence in what lies ahead or to envision a return to more hopeful days? If so, may this Advent season remind you of God's faithfulness and care. Don't dream it's over. Rather, in the words of 2nd Peter, "may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." Keep at it, and check out that song!

A Prayer for the Fifteenth Day of Advent

*God of glory and goodness, we give thanks for your faithfulness and providential care.
May remembrance of your promises, presence and power
give us the confidence we need to face the future with hope and determination. Amen.*

Dr. Christopher Richardson
Seminary Librarian
Richmond, VA

Tuesday, December 13

LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

²You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.

³You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

⁴Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward
us.

⁵Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all
generations?

⁶Will you not revive us again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in
their hearts.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who
fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

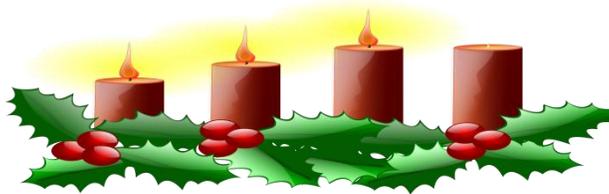
¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each
other.

¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the
sky.

¹²The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Psalm 85 (NRSV)
(For use with the EVENING Daily Prayer)



There are times when it seems as if the world around us has become almost unrecognizable. Economic unions are dissolving, far off countries at war bring home the reality and the fragility of our global interconnectedness, refugees seeking asylum are pawns rather than persons buffeted by the political whims of countries swayed by fear. In our own nation, power rather than governing for the common good, contentious elections that pedal misinformation and fan mistrust appear to be the order of the day. The value of lives, enlivened by the very breath of God, are judged in seconds by individuals and sentenced to death in the streets while video recordings bring it into our living rooms and on to devices that have become an extension of bodies. Has there ever been a season, in recent memory, when we more desperately needed the Advent of hope?

While the manifestations of today's uncertainty may be distinctive to our *Sitz im Leben*, the underlying human experience is not new. The foremothers and fathers of the faith faced their own challenges and struggles. We have only to look to the Psalms to catch a glimpse of personal and communal disquiet that could emerge among God's people. While not as stark as Psalm 13 or Psalm 22, Psalm 85 gives voice to an anxiousness that wonders at the relationship between the author's tenuous context and God's anger, "Will you be angry with us forever?" "Where is God in the tumult?" "How will God act in this situation? How will we know?" This very act of wrestling and questioning is an affirmation of the steadfastness, love and faithfulness of God and the hope that all is not lost and we will not forever dwell in this uncomfortable place.

So how does the Psalmist move from despair to hope? Old Testament scholar, Patrick Miller, during a lecture on the Psalms once made the connection between memory, story, and

hope. In short, he said that it is the memory of God's steadfast love and faithfulness that provides hope beyond current circumstances. The wellspring of this memory is, of course, chronicled in the full sweep of scripture. It is the telling and retelling of these stories of God's mighty acts of transforming presence, self-giving grace and liberating salvation that generate memory and opens one to hope.

Psalm 85 captures the interplay between communal lament, rehearsal of story, genesis of memory and the advent of hope.

Lament

Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?

Story

Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

Memory

You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.

Hope

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him that his glory may dwell in our land.

We would do well to walk the path of the Psalmist this Advent season. In the face our communal lament let us rehearse the story of God's definitive proclamation that the Creator is not yet finished with creature or creation. The God who became flesh and dwelt among us continues to abide in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit in a broken and hurting world. Let us remember in this "already but not yet" time that the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord reigns for us even as it did in days of old. May the very *ruach* of God move us to hope that love and justice and kindness will meet and righteousness and peace will indeed kiss.

A Prayer for the Seventeenth Day of Advent

Gracious and Sovereign God, we praise you for your faithfulness throughout the ages and in the present. Quicken within us the memory of your steadfast love and transforming grace in all circumstances. Move us to the hope that righteousness and peace are possible and compel us to work for both in this broken and hurting world, the world into which your Son was born and to which he will come again. Amen.

Rebecca Davis
Associate Professor, Presbyterian College
Visiting Associate Professor of Christian Education, UPSem, Charlotte

Wednesday, December 14

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

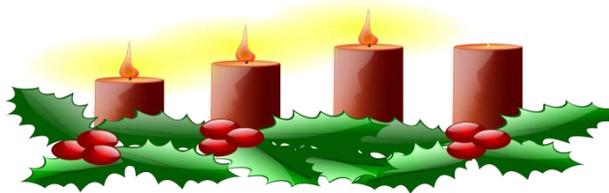
3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark 1: 1-8 (NRSV)

(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Good news was needed then; in a world where powerlessness, social injustice and power struggle seemed to prevail. Good news is needed now when once again the world is engulfed in violence, social injustice and prejudice; torn by wars, poverty and ultimately, the outcome of power struggles. Good News of Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ an announcement powerful and hopeful, God is still with us, echoed by the beautiful words from Second Isaiah. God will comfort, God will grant a new vision. A vision of a path made straight, a messenger declaring the coming of God's powerful One in the wilderness, of all places. This powerful One is announced by the “cool wild man,” according to some of my Sunday School kids, after all, being dressed in camel's and a leather belt is pretty amazing. John, the Baptizer points to the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And people respond to the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. A response made possible by God's grace, a grace that calls, and beckons and causes us to respond and repent and remember once again, our baptism. God's grace preparing us once again for the coming of the One, for the coming of God's kingdom, for God's ever faithful work in us and through us in Jesus Christ. A new beginning that to this day is a continuation of God's purposes now accomplished in Jesus the Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Good news: no matter how dark the world may be, no matter who has the power to obstruct. God's presence with us in the wilderness embodied by Christ becomes a presence we share with those who live in wilderness offering the hope that seems to be buried under so many obstacles that cover the way. Good News in Jesus Christ, is not characterized by historical or theological nostalgia or even a church growth mantra. Rather, it is a call for new life, for transformation. This new life must be characterized by the practices of God's kingdom and is based on forgiveness; forgiveness received and forgiveness given. As L. Gregory Jones reminds us, “the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ gives a new perspective on histories of sin and evil, on their betrayals and being betrayed, on the vicious cycles of being caught as

victimizees and victims." It touches the wilderness in us and in our culture, those deep wounds of trauma, cultural and historical divides caused by systemic ills such as prejudice, racism and economic distress.

Communal practices of forgiveness are not easily maintained nor accomplished, because forgiveness is not an easy path to walk. But in the end, it is a path that will lead to life; life through and in Jesus the Christ, in whom God's love is given unconditionally, in whom restoration, redirection and call can indeed be a new beginning; God with us now – God's grace at work in us, through us until the kingdom is realized.

A Prayer for the Eighteenth Day of Advent

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the new paths you make in the wilderness. Help us to walk in your way, a new way of forgiveness and love offered in the coming of your son, Jesus the Christ. Grant us the ability to forgive and to proclaim the good news that in you, new beginnings are possible. May our way of living, may our faith empowered by your Spirit, bring you honor and shine bright as a sign of your kingdom. Amen.

Rev. Dorothee Tripodi
Associate Director, Supervised Ministry and Vocational Planning
Liaison to the Alum Office
Richmond, VA

Cynthia Jarvis and E Elisabeth Johnson: *Feasting on the Gospels - Mark: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 2014

Gregory L. Jones. *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995

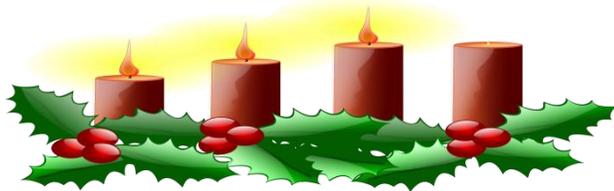
Blount Brian K. and Charles Gary W. *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press. 2002

Thursday, December 15

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
⁴ O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80: 1-7 (NRSV)

(Note: This text is the EVENING lectionary text for Saturday, December 10)



While working as a hospital chaplain, some of the most difficult nights were holidays and, in particular, Christmas. There are two different worlds: outside the hospital and inside the hospital. Outside the hospital, people are going to church, singing carols, and opening presents. Inside the hospital, some of the medical units may have decorations, but the Christmas season does not stop sick people being admitted, accidents from happening, and death occurring.

These nights and days were difficult because I knew families and individuals left the hospital forever associating Christmas not with the birth of Christ but with the pain of grief. I imagine that many of these families felt similar to the Psalmist in Psalm 80.

The Psalmist cries for God's presence, a presence which they cannot find, so that they may be restored. You can hear the anguish and desperation for God to shine His face, "that they might be saved." However, their words and prayers are not heeded. Biblical scholar Jim Mays shares that the prayers of the Israelites' are not wrong or bad, but they do not make a perceived difference to ones praying (v.4)

As a result, God's people feel humiliated and mocked because their enemies see their God as one that seemingly does not care or does not exist.

Echoing the Psalmist, families inside the hospital cried out for God's presence.

"Stir up your might,

And come and save us!" (v. 2)

Yet, their cries and prayers were not always enough to change the outcome, and a loved one died. Undoubtedly, their tears rivaled the abundant tears of Israelites (v. 5).

As the families left the hospital on Christmas Eve or day, there was a distinct irony in the fact that on the day celebrating Emmanuel, God with Us, many of these people left questioning God's presence.

The folks in the hospitals are not the only ones who feel this way. You may go to church with someone, work with someone, or are friends with someone who is wondering where is Emmanuel? Indeed, you may feel this way. In a world where hatred and violence, natural disasters, and human disasters fill our news feeds and televisions, it can be hard to believe that the light actually overcomes the darkness.

What I love about the Psalms is the permission to cry out God in anguish, but the Psalmist continues to trust and moves towards praise. After the painful words in Psalm 80, we read of songs and shouts of joy, tambourines, lyres, and harps. (Ps. 80:1-2)

As we wait for our expectant Christ Jesus, let us be mindful of those who are not yet ready to sing songs of joy, but are still crying for God to shine His face upon them and seek His presence. Perhaps, it will be through our presence that those crying out will sense Emmanuel's ever surrounding presence.

A Prayer for the Nineteenth Day of Advent

Loving God, Even when we think you don't hear our prayers and cries, help us to know that you always do. We can be confident of your presence because of your love shown through Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. Help us to be with those who are suffering during this season and all season. May they see Christ's image through us. We pray this in the name of your Son who also cried out to you. Amen.

Rev. Mairi Renwick
Director of Admissions
Richmond, VA

Friday, December 16

²Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, ³"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

⁴Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. ⁵Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. ⁶Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me."

⁷When John's disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. ⁹What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.

¹¹"I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven is violently attacked as violent people seize it. ¹³All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came. ¹⁴If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let the person who has ears, hear.

Matthew 11: 2-15 (CEB)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Why would John the Baptist, prophet, messenger called to prepare the way for Jesus, cousin to Jesus, baptizer of Jesus, who knew Him in the womb, need to ask Jesus if he was the one to come? For me John's questioning had more to do with his and Jesus' disciples' rivalry as depicted in Luke 7:16-18, Matthew 9:14, Mark 2:18 and John 3:25 than John's uncertainty. John's disciples would have had a pretty hard life trying to follow him through the wilderness, imitating his way of wearing clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around the waist and having a diet of locusts and wild honey and hearing John proclaiming a message that made folks uncomfortable and feeling that their world was being turned upside down. Jesus' disciples, as it appeared to them, had it easier and hence the rivalry. This rivalry must have been pretty intense as all four gospel mention it and the comparison of the two groups of disciples on fasting and prayer and cleansing rituals and who was the valid baptizer. So John who is sitting in prison with an uncertain future must have been feeling an urgency that his disciples heed his prophetic message and follow Jesus. Especially since his disciples seemed to be just hanging around the prison, with nothing to do except gossip and worry about him. Also John would have been concerned about the rivalry that would have made it difficult for his disciples to believe that Jesus is that one that John speaks of his not being "worthy to untie the sandal straps". John had a plan, he sent two of his disciples to find out if Jesus is the one and "Jesus responded, 'Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me'". (Matt 11:4-6) With this humble act, John has gotten himself out of the way so that his disciples can follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

This story coming at the beginning of a new Christian year, Advent, challenges us all to evaluate why being a disciple of Jesus matters? How do we define discipleship? What in our lives is competing for our attention so that following Jesus wholeheartedly is a stumbling block. What humble acts will help us to decrease so that Jesus may increase. After reflecting on these questions for a while, let us rededicate ourselves to follow Jesus with all our heart, mind, soul and strength as we begin another year.

A Prayer for the Twentieth Day of Advent

*Jesus, help us to follow you
Help us and your whole church to work together to bring the good news
of God's kingdom to all people.
Help us to work for peace in our communities and the wider world.
Guide the leaders of the nations to work for peace and for the good of all people.
Help us to be active members of the communities to which we belong,
and to look for opportunities to work together to serve others.
Help us to comfort and care for those who are sick, distressed or in any kind of need.
Help us, as we remember the dead, to look to the day when
we will share with them in the eternal joys of heaven.
Help us to pray continually for the needs of the world,
and to have faith in the power and love of God.
We offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus*

April Swofford
Executive Assistant to the Dean of Union Presbyterian Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, VA

Prayer excerpted from:

<https://becausegodislove.wordpress.com/2015/11/06/jesus-help-us-to-follow-you-intercessions-for-an-all-age-service/>We offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus

Saturday, December 17

1 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song,

his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker;

let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

3 Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.

5 Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their couches.

6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats

and two-edged swords in their hands,

7 to execute vengeance on the nations

and punishment on the peoples,

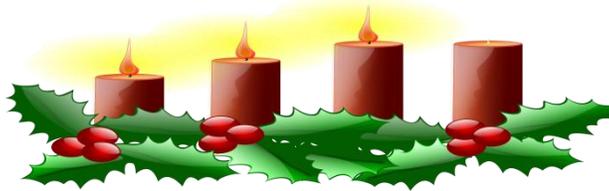
8 to bind their kings with fetters

and their nobles with chains of iron,

9 to execute on them the judgment decreed.

This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord!

Psalm 149 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



This psalm begins like many others. We are called to sing, dance, shake our tambourines and rejoice with abandon before the Lord in the assembly of the faithful. Yet there is a twist – this psalm doesn't let us off the hook so easily. It's verse after verse of praise and then, suddenly, in the midst of this great exuberance, the Lord says, here is your double edged sword to bring vengeance and execute judgment upon those who would oppress you.

I'm not sure I would know what to do with a double-edged sword. Most likely I'd hurt myself. Perhaps that's the point, to remind us that we also stand under God's judgment and that it is only God who may wield true justice. Yet God hands us such a sword, and says we are free to use it - but be careful of the follow through because we might pierce our own hearts in the process, just as we have pierced God's, if we wield it without compassion, if we serve our own sense of justice and not God's. So perhaps the glory is not found as much in the sword itself, but in the choice to use it for violence and division, to crush one's enemy, or to set it aside in favor of picking up the cause of justice instead.

For we are all under the sovereignty of God, and when we pray, proclaim, and offer ourselves without restraint to the Lord, placing ourselves in His hands, we realize what fetters have been loosed from our wrists, what chains of iron have been removed from us. We come to recognize that we do not deserve this celebration; we have not earned any part of it, but because the Lord desires to lavish the faithful with grace and robe them with gladness we may claim a share in God's righteousness.

As we come into this Advent season, we are beginning a new year. A re-setting of the calendar as we recall the promise and hope of our Lord's birth coming into fullness only a few weeks away. And there is no room for a reckoning sword in the midst of a manger – it has no purpose to fulfill in a place that shelters and warms and offers rest for the weary. But there is room for song and praise and joyful laughter. There is room to dance with the shepherds, and embrace the animals, and turn our gaze in awe and wonder toward the newborn babe. And it is in this way that our enemies are overcome, because there is no defense against divinely gifted joy. It cannot be crushed or stolen or imprisoned. No earthly power may threaten the heart of joy that dwells faithfully on the Lord. Herein lies our true victory in the season of

Advent, for the rulers of this world cannot assail hope and love, nor prevent our praise from escaping our throats. In this we are invincible for our strength is, was, and will be forever in the Christ, our Lord.

A Prayer for the Twenty-First Day of Advent

God who sings in us, we pray for daily reminders of the joy you have poured into us as your beloved children. We ask to be reminded also of our own short-comings so that we might never stand in judgment of others, but recall the double-edged sword of your truth and our own need for forgiveness. May the season of Advent enter our hearts fully and find a place to dwell throughout the year so that we will be in an attitude of constant thanksgiving and songs will fill our throats with the sweet rejoicing of those who have hope in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Nadine Ellsworth-Moran
Assistant to the Dean in Charlotte
and Associate for Advancement
Charlotte, NC

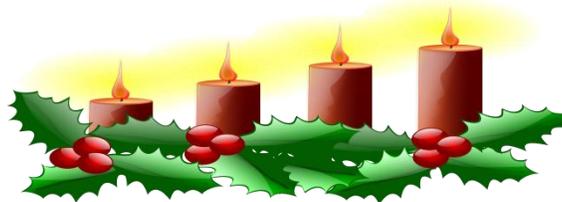
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Ephesians 6: 10-20 (NRSV)

(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



When I was a child, our Sunday school teacher had us draw a picture of the armor described in Ephesians 6:10-20. I remember drawing a stick figure that wore a Roman-style breast plate, carried a medieval shield, and donned a Peter Pan-esque triangle hat with a notched belt and football cleats. I could muster this creative image as a child because I believed God's armor was literal: there *must* have been someone walking around in biblical times with my exact outfit! No doubt, she was a rock-star for God.

Some days, I wish God's armor was literally in my wardrobe. I wish that I could put on pieces of clothing to give me the power and strength. If only my stick figure creation would come to life and help me combat the chaotic, the messy, and the hostility of our world!

My belt of truth would suck in my lying gut and gird me against dishonesty. My shield of faith would ward off doubt and relinquish me from burning questions. My loafers full of peace would keep tumult at bay. Finally, God's own Spirit, God's very Word, would be in my hand and on my tongue to strike down naysayers and any others who misspeak! I'd turn into the Ultimate Warrior.

But if this were true, I'd miss the entire point. This metaphor about armor spoke volumes to the original hearers in Ephesus, a minority group of converted Gentiles, and they did not hear a loud, rally cry to battle.

Rather, they heard a call to **stand** in resistance and **withstand** the hostility of the world, **together**.

God's armor is not intended for one, but for all. As a community of believers, they are to resist the larger, darker spiritual and cosmic forces who called for allegiances apart from their faith

in Christ Jesus as Lord of all. New Testament scholar Sarah Henrich summarizes, "believers are girded in truth, faith, peace, the Spirit through the word, and in prayer for their defense and strength³". These characteristics of faithful living, with the support of God's Spirit through prayer and supplication, keep believers battle-ready to face the world.

For the past 18 months, we have witnessed **the** most hostile, mud-slinging political campaign in our nation's history. By the time you are reading this devotional, we will have chosen a new President of the United States of America. Some will be rejoicing in victory while some will be withered in defeat. Many of us may feel like we ought to don God's armor to fight. But if we do so, we will be missing the point.

As we wait in hopeful expectation for the coming of our Lord into our beautiful, messy world, let us be encouraged to **stand** in resistance and **withstand** the hostility of the world, **together**. Rather than perpetuating doubt, spreading slanderous speech, believing lies over truths, or succumbing to apathy and fear, let us boldly proclaim faith, hope and love, **together**.

A Prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

*God of mercy,
We wait in advent expectation for your coming,
To tent with us in all of our mess.
Allow us to stand arm in arm,
Linked together by the power of your Spirit,
To speak truth, honestly, with peace and righteousness
On our lips.
May we boldly proclaim hope and love into the darkness.
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

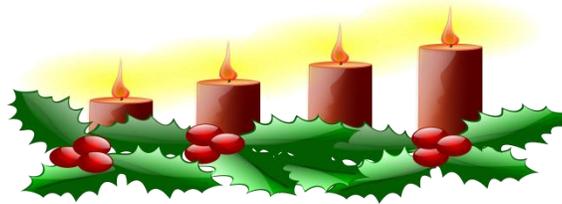
Rev. Nicole C. Ball
Church Relations
Richmond, VA

³ "Commentary on Ephesians 6:10-20 by Sarah Henrich." *Ephesians 6:10-20 Commentary by Sarah Henrich*. The Working Preacher, 23 Aug. 2015. Web. 28 Oct. 2016.

Monday, December 19

⁴⁶ "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸ That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

Luke 6: 46-49 (NRSV)
(Note: This is not from daily lectionary)



Don't we wish we knew the answer to *that* question! The season of Advent confronts us with many such questions of Jesus – two others found in this short text alone – but, likely we are no closer to finding a suitable answer to his queries of us, than were the disciples when they first encountered *God with them*.

Taken at face value, these four stories – vignettes – Jesus offers in this 'Sermon on the Plain' may **seem** unrelated. Yet, for some reason, Luke chose to group these four little scenes together when he wrote his version of the gospel. What did Luke see in these teachings of Jesus, that we might miss, ordinarily? Perhaps a common thread that runs through these illustrations is simply the experiences of the Christian life. *Each story tells of at least one aspect of that journey of faith.*

One of which is *preparation*. While Luke calls the story of the two blind people, a 'parable,' it reads more like a 'proverb,' – a saying from the Wisdom literature – in asking,

"Can one who is blind, lead another blind person?"

Jesus may be raising the question in order to give the listener a mental image: Blind leading the blind. Common sense would dictate, of course, that it would be far better for the one who is leading – whether in a physical or a spiritual sense – to be able to see the way ahead. Here at the seminary – as in other schools – we place a high value on learning and following the truth as an important way of being able to see. Learning requires preparation...doing the homework that is necessary to prepare the way of the Lord, and guiding others to do the same.

Carrying that sight motif a step further, the second vignette (in verses 41-42) reminds us in our journey of faith through Advent of our personal need to *look inward*...to be able to see *ourselves*. The hyperbole of Jesus describing some lug with a wooden beam in his eye trying to extract a tiny speck from the eye of another, should cause us to smile... Until we realize, of course, that this is precisely what you and I do when we see and find fault in others before we see our own failures of faith. Jesus bids us to look inward – to *reflect*, if you will – before we cast our gaze toward others and perhaps their shortcomings.

If you care to follow the thread of faith in our journey just a bit further in this text, it might lead you to *expression* (verses 43-45). “*Each tree is known by its own fruit.*” The world, of course, is not simply black or white...neither can it be classified simply as good or bad. All of us fall somewhere in-between the two extremes. While none of us possesses the whole truth, we are called to express what we believe about Jesus in our journey of faith with others, as we watch and wait for Christ to come again.

And the last of the four components of Christian faith, described here, is really what lies in the beginning... (verses 46-49) our *foundation*. Not only have most of us found a need for some foundation that is strong and firm against the onslaught of life's turmoil or challenge... We also need to build on that foundation a faith in *the One* that won't let go...

A Prayer for the Twenty-Third Day of Advent

You have called us, O God, to a journey of faith. As we continue on the way, guide us by your Spirit to prepare for, reflect upon, give expression to, and build on the foundation which is ours through Christ...who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Rev. W. Clay Macaulay
Director for Alumni Development
Richmond, VA

Tuesday, December 20

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1: 5-17 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



The scripture leading to the birth of Christ was full of good news and heavenly proclamations. First with Gabriel bringing news about the birth of John to Zechariah. An angel then appearing before Mary and Joseph foretelling the birth of Christ, and a great chorus appearing in the night to the shepherds tending their sheep in the field. News of great joy was brought to people who were least expecting it... a barren aging couple, an unwed virgin girl, and farm hands. It is like reaching the crescendo of a beautifully composed music—with everything coming together paving the way for Christ's ministry, the Gospels! You know the music doesn't just end there.

Often Christmas is about the birth of Christ but there is much more. Baby in the manger, chorus of angels, shepherd, sheep, donkey, wise men and camels bring back fond memories of growing up in a church. That is only the beginning!

During this Christmas season, are we prepared to accept the greatest news of all? That God is full of Grace, Mercy, Forgiveness, and that we are all God's children regardless of our race and gender...that God loves us all through Christ, God's only son. In celebrating Christ's birth, are we ready to abide by his teaching to love God and our neighbors as ourselves? Are we ready to clothe and feed the least ones among us? Do we accept Christ's calling for us to feed the lambs and tend the sheep; that we include and not exclude other children of God?

You see, Christmas is only the beginning of our faith journey. As we sing our favorite carols this Christmas let's prepare our hearts for the journey ahead. The way forward has been paved! Let's lift each other up and take the first step forward together.

A Prayer for the Twenty-Fourth Day of Advent

Lord, as the celebration of Christ's birth fast approaching, prepare our hearts to receive that great abundant of joy and prepare our feet to walk the way that Christ has taught us. Amen.

Richard Wong
Vice President, Advancement
Richmond, VA

Wednesday, December 21

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."³⁸Then 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: 26-38 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Gabriel's admonishment to Mary, "Do not be afraid," is a call to freedom.

Into a world fraught with anxiety, the New Testament steps with a resounding, confident call for confidence. Gabriel's "do not be afraid" is a pronouncement for Mary about how to approach the wild things that are going to happen to her. Gabriel gives direction to Mary of what she is to do—she will bear a son and name him Jesus. He gives information about who this son will be. He tells her about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Gabriel attests that nothing will be impossible with God. Gabriel, sent by God, comes to a specific city (Galilee) in a specific time (the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy) to a specific woman, (Mary) to announce the dramatic, eternal event of God's supreme accommodation and redemption—the advent of "God with us." Not only is this event God's initiative and miracle, it is news of comfort that God communicates—to Mary in this incident reported by Luke, and to us, as readers/hearers of this text.

Mary initially feels "troubled" by Gabriel's greeting and presence. Luke uses the word "troubled" only four times in his gospel. Twice here, in this first chapter, when Zechariah and Mary are both troubled by Gabriel's appearance, and later, when Jesus pairs the word with the word "anxiety" in speaking to Martha, and finally, after he is resurrected, when he asks the disciples why they are troubled by his presence. In all these cases, being troubled is being fearful and anxious: Zechariah and Mary don't know what to make of Gabriel's visit; Martha is anxious about duties and pressures; the disciples are startled by Jesus and are afraid that they are seeing a spirit.

Being troubled—being anxious and fearful—is the opposite of freedom because in fear we are focused on unknown future events that might occur to hurt one of us or our loved ones. When we fear, we miss the gifts of the present. Fear is slavery to the temporal and to the personal,

slavery to the individual, to the self. In a sense, fear is the way of idolatry because when we fear, we seek to impose control on circumstances, and so put ourselves in the place of God.

When Mary declares that she is “the handmaid to the Lord,” she does the opposite-- identifies herself as one who serves God. When she says, “let it be to me according to your word” she is affirming not so much her own answer to a call, but an **awareness of the power and might of God**, witnessed to her though Gabriel and reported to us by Luke.

Paul explains in the letter to the Romans, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15). Freedom from fear is a gift that comes to all --in this text, and in the Christmas event.

A Prayer for the Twenty-Fifth Day of Advent

Eternal and most merciful God, we thank you for this season of hope. We thank you that we can go out to the world in the confidence of your love, presence, and guidance.

This confidence sustains us, makes us want to reach out to others, and gives us peace.

We thank and praise you in the name of Jesus the Christ, Amen

Anne Kort Rankowitz
Director, Curriculum Resource Center
Charlotte, NC

Thursday, December 22

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

Luke 1: 39-48a (NIV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Advent and the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke have been a favorite reading for my family since I can remember. Every year starting with the first Sunday of Advent my family would begin reading the Gospel of Luke that gives this wonderful story.

In this part of the nativity narrative God has given two promises to two women both delivered by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel informs Mary about Elizabeth and she travels to Elizabeth's house to spend a few months with her cousin. Gabriel has assured Elizabeth that her son would be filled with the spirit, and sure enough upon hearing Mary's greeting John jumps with excitement within the womb, knowing that the Messiah is present. Two women - both pregnant as a true confirmation of God's fulfilled promise. Now we may never have had an encounter with the angel Gabriel but we have received numerous gifts and promises from God which can be accepted only by our own faith. But all too often our faith remains small and unblessed until we begin to act on this faith. This active faith will then open the door to all of God's blessing and confirmation. So during this season of Advent what promise has scripture laid on your heart? Are we acting on this promise from scripture or are we still held back by doubt?

In the Anglican daily office, we end the day with Mary's song, the Magnificat, the first of four nativity hymns which only appear in the Gospel of Luke, (along with Zechariah's *Benedictus* (1:68-79), the angels' *Gloria* (2:14), and Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (2:29-32)). But Mary's song is so much more than how we should end our day. Mary's song comes from a heart filled with the expectation that God's promises would continue to be fulfilled. The lowly lifted up. The hungry fed. So what do we take away from this wonderful description of the joy-filled and song-filled meeting between these women? As I re-examine through prayer I find these verses encouraging me, in the midst of my surroundings, to look beyond myself to see what God has in store for me and for all of us. Elizabeth did that. Mary did that. They heard the voice of Gabriel, saw the creation of God in fulfilled promise, and worshipped Him. May this Advent find us all hearing and seeing and responding to the promises of God in our own lives.

A Prayer for the Twenty-Sixth Day of Advent

Creator God, we pray today that you will help us continue to find encouragement in Mary's song so that we might also see your promise fulfilled in our lives and our world. Amen.

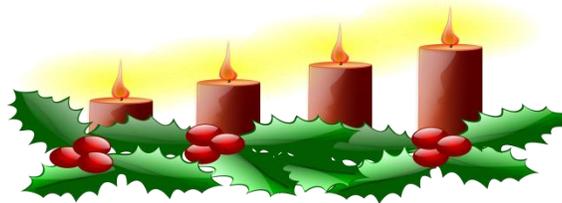
Rick Smith
Technology Operations Specialist
Richmond, VA

Friday, December 23

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Luke 1: 57-66 (NRSV)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



I love maps. I always have loved maps. When I was a child, I enjoyed browsing through a *Rand McNally Atlas* of the United States, imagining where a car might take me when I was old enough to drive. Maps fed my curiosity about unfamiliar places. Maps allowed me to explore what my future might include.

As I entered young adulthood, with my own car, maps became a guide as I ventured into new places. With a map, I could locate a predictable route to my destination. With a map, I could navigate alternative routes when traffic slowed because of road construction or an automobile accident.

As I gravitated toward middle age, maps became a symbol of predictability. I like adventure. I especially like adventure that I can anticipate and make as predictable as possible. Over the course of my life, however, I have learned that some things do not turn out as anticipated. At times, this may generate disappointment; other times, new possibilities.

Perhaps you have your own maps that feed your curiosity, guide you along the way, or provide the comfort of predictability. Perhaps you have imagined, or still imagine, how your future might turn out, for better or worse. Perhaps there have been times when the future has not turned out as you once expected. And that creates the possibility of a new advent.

In Luke's gospel, Elizabeth once was barren. Her future with Zechariah was predictable: they would have no children. The words of an angel of the Lord altered this anticipated future. She would conceive and bear a son who would be named John. Zechariah could not comprehend this, becoming speechless.

In due time, Elizabeth gives birth to a son. To neighbors and relatives, she predictably will name her son Zechariah after his father. She responds, *No; he is to be called John*. They turn to Zechariah, who confirms in writing, *His name is John*, and whose speech then is restored. Filled with awe and wonder the neighbors ask, *What then will this child become?* They sense, as the hand of the Lord is upon him, that they stand at the advent of something new. Advent is a powerfully predictable season of the year. For many, it promises to be a time of joy as we prepare for gatherings with family members and friends, share special meals,

exchange gifts, and sing familiar carols. For many, it is a predictable time of sorrow, even to the point of barrenness, as we anticipate spending another season alone, missing deceased loved ones, regretting alienated relationships once vibrant, and anticipating that this will be another gift-less Christmas.

For all of the ways we have made Advent predictable, I fear we miss its intended nature. Its predictability centers on God's sovereignty and initiative to act. Its annual gift to us is an invitation to open ourselves to God's presence and movement in our lives. Where this takes us is not always predictable. This is the power of Advent – a transforming power that cannot always be mapped.

A Prayer for the Twenty-Seventh Day of Advent

Open us to your presence, O God, that we may experience your power and grace. Open us, that we may discover how you are calling us to grow in faith. Open us, that we may be responsive to others, particularly those for whom Advent is a time of pain. And open us, that we may praise you for your abundant goodness. Amen.

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Christmas Eve

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he
appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 1: 67-80 (NRSV)

(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



In most settings where I have served as a worship leader, the goal of the worship committee for the Christmas Eve Service was clear: keep the mood quiet, and reflective, and calm. We had to negotiate the issues of crying babies and intoxicated college students. Our music selections were consistently on the "peaceful" versus the "marching" side: "O little town of Bethlehem;" "In the bleak midwinter;" "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." We dimmed the lights. We lit candles. Sometimes we even instructed the congregation to leave without talking!

Then, this year, into such a "peaceful" context, crashes Zechariah's song. It's a Victory Song. It's a Victory Shout. It's almost a Victory Taunt. When God's people got squeezed tight, and shut down; when the commands of the Pharaoh became murderous, and the fetters on our ankles began to cut; when we faced a world that not only seemed out of control, but stacked against us; we dreamed of a day when God might send a savior, a messiah, to set us free. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us . . . that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (verses 68, 69, and 71)." Strike up the band! Let loose the confetti! Let's have a parade!

"Now, now," the preacher sometimes says. "Let's not get too excited. God's people *thought* that this savior would make some changes, but he really just came to be with us, as a baby, in a manger. All is calm; all is bright. Yes, God came to redeem us from our sins, but not to redeem us and others from the structures that bind us. Light your candles and go in peace." And thus, the incarnation is reduced to a blessing on the way things *are* rather than the opening salvo of a new age that will push us toward where we *ought to be*. We leave the sanctuary quietly, reflectively, not only without talking, but without expecting transformation – in ourselves or in our world.

It is true that this victory will come in surprising ways. It's more like a birthing than a battle (the language of "tender mercy" in verse 78 has its provenance in the gut/bowels of God). It creeps up on us more like the dawn (verse 78) than with any explosions deemed "shock and awe." Its goal *is* to guide ours' and others' feet into the ways of peace (verse 79) - but this is *not* peace without repentance (John the Baptist will make this clear), *nor* peace without justice (of which the scriptures seldom if ever speak).

Maybe it's time to try out some of our newer hymns this Christmas Eve. I've got a suggestion. It's sometimes called the Canticle of Turning, but it shows up in *Glory to God* under the title "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout." Just one stanza. Let's call it our Christmas Eve prayer. But, my friends, let's pray it with gusto!

A Prayer for Christmas Eve

*Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast;
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound,
Till the spear and rod can be crushed by God who is turning the world around. Amen.*

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Christmas Day

⁷ Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. ⁸ The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. ¹³ This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. ¹⁵ If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. ¹⁶ We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

1 John 4: 7-16 (CEB)
(For use with the MORNING Daily Prayer)



Christmas is love. The season for giving gifts is itself the ultimate gift. Of love. God so loved the world that... Well, you know how it ends. Love so spectacular that the man behind it was willing to give his life in a divine effort to make ours better. Christmas is how it begins. Love so amazing that God reaches out through transcendence and takes hold of us and draws us close.

Reflecting this morning through the lens 1 John4:7-16, I see the love of Christmas in three beautiful dimensions.

In the first dimension, I see God. Breaking through. A desperate love to reclaim a cherished people. There is no doubt that we are broken. Separated from God. Divided from each other. Because of the choices we make, we push ourselves further and further away from being the kind of people God knows we can be. So far distant from God, we become vulnerable to other forces and powers. Captured. Imprisoned. And then, on that first Christmas morning, God breaks in. On this day, a child is born. To us. For us. To break us free to become the people God has always known we could be.

In the second dimension, I see us. Reaching out to God. Desperate to hold on, to be drawn back into relationship, to show that we are able to respond to the love of the Christmas break-in with the gratitude of our own boundary-breaking love. Where there are divisions that separate us from each other, where there are hurts that drive us away from each other, the author of 1 John seems to believe that we have the Christmas capacity to love as God loves. The author of 1 John seems to believe that we have the capacity to give the best of ourselves to make better the lives of those around us. If God is love and we are God's people, then love is not only what we do, love is what we are. We so love the world that...well, you know how it is supposed to end.

In the third dimension, I see the Spirit. Because God's Spirit dwells in us, we are God's own. Christmas day is every day for us because every day we celebrate that God intervened for us and remains with us, sustaining, encouraging, reclaiming us. This is a gift beyond compare. The gift of Christmas. And we have it. Every day.

A Prayer for Christmas Day

Thank you, Dear God, for the gift of your love, incarnate in the life of your son. Help us, through the presence of your Holy Spirit, to cherish his life by living his life in the way live our lives. On this Christmas morning, may we not only remember your love; may we not only celebrate your love; may we live your love.

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