

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
2020

Where
New Life
Starts

Dear Reader,

We often think of this time before Christmas as part of the Christmas Season. Instead, it is really the penitential season of Advent. This can be a time of deep reflection as we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Christ, the Incarnate of God.

This year, we meditate on these scriptures with the theme "Where New Life Starts." We offer this collection of writings to you as a framework for your own Advent meditations. Each reflection is unique, written by a diverse group of people from diverse backgrounds. Each meditation is beautiful in its own way.

Please join us in all our opportunities for worship, service, prayer and observance. The calendar for the season is available on our website: www.santamonicaumc.org/advent; further information is also available by calling the church office at (310) 393-8258.

May you find these days to be holy and blessed.

Mary Crawford
First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica
Spiritual Formation Council

NOVEMBER 29

Isaiah 64:1-9

A Prayer of Lament for Today

O God, we have sinned against your children, against those who are our brothers and sisters. You are One. We, therefore, are all of the same family, though we do not act like it.

Instead, we have cultivated a sense of “us” and “them”, one group better than the others, one group more worthy of privilege than the others.

We long for you to make clear your will, to make one of those grand signs like in the Bible: an earthquake, a burning bush, a blood-red moon.

But you don't work with us that way. There will be no supernatural sign, only our hearts saying “This is wrong.”

Forgive us! Forgive us!

Give us perception and determination to call out the sin when we see it—both as individuals and a society.

Lead us in a way of healing. Give us the strength and courage to change the way things are into the way they should be.

For you are our God, and we are your children. And we acknowledge our calling to be your hands and voice in our time.

– **Mary Crawford**

NOVEMBER 30

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

These lines of lament; this song of longing for God's leadership and guidance and protection from destruction; this hymn of pleading for renewed connection or covenant; may sound a bit odd to our modern ear. But we know this feeling, don't we? To feel vulnerable, alone, out-of-sorts, and uncertain about the future, even endangered.

In those times, as in our own, matters of faith are not easy, not simple. Faith requires a confidence which can be hard to muster and challenging to trust in.

But that lack of ease is also at the heart of Advent; of waiting in darkness for birth/rebirth/new life.

As the poet puts it:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

- T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

- **David Bremer**

DECEMBER 1

Psalm 80:8-16

In World War II they called it a “foxhole prayer” – the kind of prayer that is prayed by someone who is afraid, uncertain and not on the best of terms with God. “Oh, Lord, help me; get me out of this fix alive and I’ll be good. I’ll go to church, I’ll sing in the choir, I’ll volunteer with youth, I’ll tithe...man, I’ll be a missionary if that’s what it takes. God help me!”

Now, I’m not against praying in a crisis. I prayed like this all the time when I was younger, especially when I wanted my parents to buy me something or if I needed to pass exams in school. I admittedly have also prayed these prayers as an adult, bargaining with God for what I want or think I need, carried away in the fear and uncertainty of what I want to avoid at that moment in time. But we can be short-sighted in these prayers when we expect an easy, clear and forthright answer directly from God.

We bargain with God not only when we want to avoid something, but when we experience suffering. Where have you been all year God - during the pandemic and economic suffering, struggles with racial and systemic injustice, a year of isolation and loneliness? If we do this or change that, will you come and save us, free us from this suffering?

Those aren’t easy questions and the Psalmist doesn’t seem to find out any more than we do in our questions. But the Psalm does show us, in wrestling with their questions through prayer, how we can too can move forward. Praying to God in the midst of suffering and doubt, anger and pain. Bringing it all to God is the only way forward.

Advent is (or should be) a time of spiritual renewal and revival. We renew our focus when we pray, bringing everything to God. We remember what is genuine and important within us and with God. Let us not forget this season of anticipation and the revival of God’s love as it is born again in a little baby called Jesus.

– Adam Guerrero

DECEMBER 2

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

This passage includes a greeting from Paul to the churches in Corinth. It is fairly straight forward, and even potentially overlooked for more familiar or “juicy” passages that chart the drama of this Christian community or offer instruction, correction, and a deeper understanding of Christ. However, at the beginning of Advent, in this treacherous year of 2020, I think it is just what we need to remind us about who we are, and how God continues to offer God’s self to us.

According to apostle Paul, the Corinthians are a people blessed and enriched by God...and so are we. Paul begins his letter (1:2) recognizing that his message is for “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That includes us at First UMC Santa Monica, and so many in our neighborhood, city, state, nation and world. Paul reminds us that we are people receiving God’s grace and peace to enrich us, strengthen us, and cultivate spiritual gifts within us. God’s grace is already stirring within our communities and us. Paul’s greeting reminds us give thanks in return.

This year has certainly included enough hardship, grief, fear, strife, anxiety, and isolation for us to question God’s blessings. The community at Corinth was only slightly better off as they engaged in quarrels, division, arrogance, condescension, and exclusionary individualism. Yet Paul recognizes that God was still at work in them and their circumstances, calling them into greater fellowship with Christ.

Paul’s certainty of God’s continuous grace and peace through Christ is just the reminder we need in this messy, difficult, sometimes heart-wrenching world. This grace and God’s faithfulness do not negate the realities of our experience, but rather give us strength to make our way through them together.

– Rev. Keri Olsen Paget

DECEMBER 3

2 Peter 3:8-15a

When we moved to Champaign, Illinois, where I had taken a post-doctoral research position, the first thing I had to do after finding an apartment, was to get the utilities turned on in it. I called the relevant authorities and was able to arrange to get them all turned on the same day, a minor miracle in itself. Everything went smoothly except for the Water Company. They told me that someone would be out to turn on the water in the morning. So, there I sat in the apartment, hour after hour, but no one arrived. After sundown, I turned on the tap just to see if I'd missed them somehow. And I had: It so happened that the place where the water was turned on was not visible from the apartment.

While I do not intend to compare the Champaign Water Company with God, it does seem that God often works this way: When we expect God to do something, we (impatient creatures that we are) want it done NOW. But God operates on a totally different time scheme than we do. As Psalm 90 (paraphrased by Isaac Watts, in UMH, #117) reminds us,

A thousand ages, in thy sight, are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun.

Not only that, but God does not always do what God does in ways that we recognize. While we wait, tapping our fingers, we can miss the fact that God has already acted.

So here we sit, waiting impatiently for Christmas to arrive, missing the fact that Christ is constantly being reborn in and among us.

– **Dick Crawford**

DECEMBER 4

Mark 13:24-31

The Bible is full of fig trees. A fig tree supplies the leaves covering Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And it is a fig tree that Jesus curses for failing to feed him (Mark 11:14). Here, Jesus holds up the fig tree as a symbol of hope: as surely as a budding fig means summer is close, so should we be sure that “days of distress” will be followed by Jesus’s return.

It is an especially apt symbol, it turns out, and I am here to share some great fig facts I learned from a book called *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers* by Mike Shanahan. The pandemic has sent my reading down unexpected paths.

- There are more than 750 species of ficus (fig).
- Fig trees feature in creation stories around the world. It was under a fig tree that Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha.
- It was once believed that figs were miracle trees in that they produced fruit without flowers. But the secret is their flowers are actually inside the fruit.
- Each fig species is pollinated by just one or more species of tiny fig wasp that burrows into the fruit to pollinate, lay eggs, and die (remember that next time you bite into a newton).
- Fig trees provide food for a greater variety of birds and mammals than any other tree.
- It has been theorized that our hands and opposable thumbs evolved so that our primate ancestors could quickly judge the ripeness of figs.
- Figs are a “framework species” for reforestation, providing canopy to attract seed spreaders, and shade to discourage weeds. They are “a magnet for biodiversity.”
- Fig trees have been known to kickstart plant growth on islands scrubbed bare by volcanic eruptions, or where farming has destroyed jungles. This is why there is now an effort to use fig trees to return life to areas made barren by cast mining.

So be good to the ficus in your office. If you are looking for hope and a place where new life starts, you can’t do much better than a fig tree.

– **Sam Johnson**

DECEMBER 5

Mark 13:32-37

The theme for this year's Advent is *Where New Life Starts*, and, in this passage, God tells us to Watch and Pray. This year has been a trying year with the pandemic we are in the middle of with no end in sight. God tells us that even through this darkness we should **watch** and **pray**.

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows.”

God tells us to watch out for ourselves as we watch and pray.....

“For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be.”

These are the beginnings of sorrows.

God tells us to watch out for ourselves as we watch and pray.....

Where does new life start after all this? How do we come out on the other side renewed to start again and move forward?

God tells us to watch out for ourselves as we watch and pray.....

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” God knows where new life will start again.

God tells us to watch out for ourselves as we watch and pray.....

“And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” New Life will start again.....

– **Chris Reagh**

DECEMBER 6

Mark 1:1-8

When I read this passage, my first thought was “baptism by fire.” That is, learning something the hard way through some challenge or difficulty. In a way, these last nine months have felt like a “baptism by fire.”

Living through this worldwide pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives. We’ve been challenged physically, spiritually and emotionally. As a church community I have no doubt that we’ll get through this...together.

What’s uplifting is how we’re living through this challenge. For months now, I’ve witnessed remarkable acts of kindness, charity and love. From our youth to our seniors, there’s been an outpouring of genuine concern for our neighbors, friends and community. Together we’ve grown stronger and more generous - generous with our time, our resources and our love.

It’s as if we instinctively leaned into our faith and transformed this challenge into an opportunity to lift each other up in so many ways.

So what have I learned from this “baptism by fire?” I’ve learned that we’re truly blessed to have each other and together we can overcome just about anything.

As we move forward together, and when life returns to “normal,” I hope we never forget these times. I pray that with God’s grace we will emerge even more connected to our faith and to one another.

What a wonderful gift that would be!

– Anne Premer

DECEMBER 7

Isaiah 40:1-5

These words from Isaiah are among the most beloved in the Old Testament. They appear regularly in the church liturgy this time of year as well as in hymns and oratorios.

At this point in Isaiah, the Israelites are just coming out of the Babylonian captivity that resulted because of their faithlessness, which is well documented in the earlier chapters of Isaiah.

Here Isaiah declares, “You have paid the penalty for your faithlessness. Now I (God) am leading you back to your homeland to start life anew. And by this action you will know my presence and grace.”

At Advent, this passage reminds us that Jesus’ coming was a further effort by God to deliver people from waywardness and wrong direction. It is a time when we can look at our own lives as to how well we are following God’s direction for ourselves.

Today, that is still God’s will for us — to lead us out of bondage to our own wrong direction and home to new life in God. Then perhaps our lives can represent something of God’s grace to our world!

–**Jean Young**

DECEMBER 8

Isaiah 40:6-11

While these verses speak to God’s eternal love—his guidance, strength, and care—what struck me most about this passage was the repetition in verses 6-8. Here, we the people, the flesh, are likened to grass, and our loyalty to God to flowers in a field:

“The grass dries up / and the flower withers / when the Lord’s breath blows on it. / Surely the people are grass. The grass dries up; / the flower withers, / but our God’s word will exist forever” (40:7-8).

On first read, I found this comparison odd—that one’s faith would be compared to a withering flower. And yet, as I think more deeply about Advent, a season of waiting before “new life starts,” I am struck by the cyclical nature of this passage. For me, the repetition of this phrase, “the grass dries up; the flower withers” signifies the beginning of new growth, while encapsulating the idea that nature does not dry up or wither only once, but rather repeatedly.

Like grass, flowers, and all living things, we will have seasons of withering and also seasons of growth and bloom. And it is in that repetition, in the reiteration of this cycle that I believe we get a real sense of what it means to be a people of faith, of hope, and of new beginnings. I believe that it is in that space between withering and blooming once more that we come to understand that we are always starting anew—that with every change brings the opportunity for new life to start.

For me, this is especially poignant in light of this past year—living amidst a pandemic, a cultural reckoning with racial and social injustice, and a deeply divisive political climate. Surely we have felt withered. And yet, this transformative year has also acknowledged, revealed, and inspired more inclusive and compassionate ways of being. When I am able to remember that “withering” is endogenous to life’s very nature, I am reminded of the hope that new life brings, the very hope we celebrate this and every Christmas season.

– Kaitlyn Plukas

DECEMBER 9

Psalm 85:1-7

The opening verses of Psalm 85 bring remembrance and lament. While not the gorgeous uplifting images that come later in this psalm, remembrance and lament also bring important food for the soul in this Advent season, especially this year.

Psalm 85 opens with a reminder of how our God has saved God's people in the past—blessing the land, restoring the people, forgiving our sins and iniquity.

Is this not an appropriate moment for communal lament?

In a time when the devastating impact of climate change wreaks havoc around the globe, do we not yearn for God to restore the land?

In a time when the cumulative impact of life during the pandemic saps our spirit and depletes our joy, do we not fervently pray to God to restore us to the fullness of life?

In a time when we witness the cruel impact of our propensity to dehumanize “the other,” do we not plead to God to forgive our sins and iniquity, remaking us all in the sacred image in which we are all created?

Psalm 85 opens with a call to remembrance which grounds us in our faith, in the love and gracious mercy of our God. “Lord, you were favorable to your land, you restored the fortunes of our ancestors...restore us again.”

Advent always points backwards and forward, back to the remembrance of our help in ages past, finding there the courage to face forward to where new life starts.

– **Rev. Patricia Farris**

DECEMBER 10

Psalm 85:8-13

A Prayer for Goodness and Peace

Lord, help us learn to listen, wrapped in stillness and quiet.
When we live in folly and confusion
we cannot hear your voice speaking peace to us.
With your help we must forgo those lost and wasted times.

We must choose to hear you, to draw into our souls
your words to us of calm and goodness.
As we listen for your voice, let us understand your will for us.
May we rejoice in the glory of your creation, and our role in it.

In our deepest moments, bless us with the insight
of mercy and truth meeting together in goodness.
May we feel the joy of knowing truth as goodness on earth,
and mercy as its companion on the pathways of our lives.

We thank you, Lord, for the gifts of your goodness
and righteousness, looking down on us from heaven.
May peace, soft as a kiss, now flow from these gifts,
bringing with it healing, hope and mercy.

In our quiet listening, may righteousness grow within us
as new life, setting us in the way of your footsteps.

Amen.

– **Laura Kinney Farrand**

DECEMBER 11

John 1:6-8

Flows River Jordan.
John Witness Beloved Light.
Deeper new life starts.

– Art Dodd, Jr.

DECEMBER 12

Psalm 126

It has been quite a year for all of us, hasn't it? Rarely in our lives are we tested as we have been in the past year – the specter of coronavirus ever hanging over us, imperiling health and lives; the separation from others through the self-imposed isolation of social distancing and from the more intimate barrier of masks; the disruption from our work lives and our social lives; the displacement of physical spaces intruding on routines in nourishing our bodies and our souls. Yet through it all, we continue to persevere.

The Psalms are meant to be sung and Psalm 126 is no exception. In Jewish tradition it is often sung during Shabbat. It is a common part of vespers. Vivaldi included it in his sacred compositions and it was the inspiration for *Bringing in the Sheaves*. Even in modern times it is well represented in contemporary Christian music. In the simple six stanzas two themes dominate – “The Lord has done great things” and “They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy.”

In these difficult times, is it always valuable to reflect on the great things that God has done in our lives. More importantly though we must feel in our souls that perseverance through difficult times as we have experienced in this past year will yield a reward. As we turn this chapter in our life we look forward to new life full of joy and happiness.

In this transformative time of Advent, I urge you to search out musical renditions of Psalm 126, to listen to the embodiment of hope and new life within them, whether religious or secular, classical or spiritual or contemporary. Experience the jubilation and daydream of the wonderful life to come just around the corner. Appreciate that our current toils will lead to great joys.

Amen.

– Ben Ing

DECEMBER 13

Luke 1:47-55

This passage occurs in Luke's gospel soon after Mary has learned she will bear a Savior; and she has hastened to share the news with her kinswoman Elizabeth. This passage, known as the Magnificat, is placed here as Mary's exuberant song of praise for what God is doing in her. But it also declares that God is keeping faith with God's promises, dating back to Abraham, to redeem God's covenant people Israel; and in so doing it sets forth the agenda God has for humanity which will be manifested in Jesus' ministry. The lowly are to be lifted up, the hungry fed, and the down-trodden given new hope. It is evident Mary saw herself as one of the lowly; and so her exaltation symbolizes what God is doing in sending a Savior.

To me it seems ironic that a season that celebrates the coming of a Jesus who pointed us to care about the last and the least has become such a consumerist binge to provide gifts for our own personal networks. Is not some refocusing in order? If Advent could become a time when we gave significant focus and support to address the needs of the hungry and homeless among us, would that not be a more fitting way to mark Jesus' coming? In this year of darkness, our growing public attention to the need for greater justice and opportunity for all people is a hopeful sign.

Jesus came that we all might have life and have it abundantly. May this Advent be a time when new life starts in us because we help to make new life possible for others.

– Rev. Larry Young

DECEMBER 14

Isaiah 61:1-4

The power of the Holy Spirit leaps from the page in these words of hope from Isaiah. After years in exile, God's people are fatigued, bereft, and spiritually moribund. The Temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt but the city was still in ruins. The salvation of Zion seemed illusory. The weary people hungered and thirsted for the Spirit of God.

No wonder Jesus chose this Scripture to read in the synagogue in Nazareth after 40 days in the wilderness fasting and praying and buffeting the torments of Satan. He was physically exhausted, emotionally empty, and famished, but Jesus went to Nazareth as he had gone into the wilderness – filled with the might and power of the Holy Spirit.

Life in these days seems like exile. The absence of corporate worship, the disruption of the joys of daily living, and the fear and anxiety over housing, medical care, and unemployment often feel like end times. We are sick of it, we are tired of it, we long for things to be the way they were.

Through Isaiah, the Holy Spirit reassures the people that their God did not deliver them from captivity just to abandon them to mourn hopelessly in Zion. The Holy Spirit rushes in to restore the people's zeal and will to do God's work for the salvation of all. With God, his people will be "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory."

Circumstance has distorted our familiar landscape and planted us in foreign soil. We are rooted in God who wills us to bear good fruit wherever we are planted. The Holy Spirit moves in us to bring the fruits of renewal, gladness, and hope to a hungry world.

– **Linda Diane Anderson**

DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 61:8-11

We Can Choose

Isaiah declares that the Spirit of the Lord God is upon him and has anointed him to bring good news to the afflicted.

In today's verses Isaiah reassures his people that the Lord loves justice and will make an everlasting covenant with them and their offspring will be blessed.

I especially relate to the 11th verse with its imagery of the earth and garden sprouting new life and comparing that to the Lord causing "righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations."

In our uncertain times this year we have the threat of the COVID 19 coronavirus, the divisiveness of our national election, and the threats of global warming for our environment. It behooves us to listen to the prophet Isaiah.

Do we also love justice? How do our actions show it? Are we aware of an everlasting covenant with God and all the blessings therein? Are we grateful for that? How do our actions show our gratitude?

We can choose to live in fear, anxiety, or anger.

OR we can choose to live in praise, thanksgiving, and joy.

Let's choose NEW LIFE!

Then we will be truly blessed and can be a blessing for others.

–Joyce Landsverk

DECEMBER 16

Luke 1:26-38

What an incredible and at the same time, weighty gift is given to Mary. Also incredible is the grace which she receives the great responsibility – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” This was always something that I found frankly intimidating and unrelatable.

When I was a teenager, I was given the opportunity to sing the song “Breath of Heaven” by Amy Grant. The music is beautiful and a bit haunting as well. This song beautifully spoke to me about how possibly Mary could have been scared and worried and even may have doubted herself. And yet at the same time, the lyrics speak to a beautiful prayer of putting her faith and concerns to God. If you have not heard it, I recommend listening to it after reading these verses.

The prayer in the song is a beautiful ask and is a good reminder for me when facing the challenges I, and perhaps you, face in these unique and challenging times. To me, the chorus feels like a hug from the Holy Spirit.

So I share with you a hug from me and the Holy Spirit in these words:

Breath of heaven,
Hold me together,
Be forever near me,
Breath of heaven.
Breath of heaven,
Lighten my darkness,
Pour over me your holiness,
For you are holy.
Breath of heaven.

- Sarah Rold

DECEMBER 17

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Rejoice always. Pray Continually. Give thanks in all circumstances.”

These three instructions seem simple. We should be happy, we should pray, and we should be thankful. Most of us can agree that we should do these things, and in our minds, I think most of us try to live this way.

I rejoice at the happy moments: new babies, weddings, local sports team victories. I pray... well, when I feel like I need to. I consciously give thanks whenever there is something to be thankful for. I can read these instructions and be satisfied that I'm following them well. Or can I?

Upon a second reading, there are more words to each instruction: always, continually, and in all circumstances. These are the words that challenge us.

We are not called to rejoice at the happy times; we are called to rejoice ALWAYS. We are not called to pray when necessary; we are called to pray CONTINUALLY. And we are not called to give thanks when we see something we appreciate; we are called to give thanks IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.

This is a lot harder. Can we rejoice in our faith when the rest of our life is a struggle? Can we pray even when we aren't "feeling it?" Can we give thanks for the bounty given to us even if it feels like it's not enough? Suddenly I'm no longer so confident.

But this passage was not written to guilt us into joyful gratitude. Instead, it is to remind us that there is so much to rejoice at, so much to pray about, and so much to be thankful for, that we should constantly be doing all these things, "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

In these turbulent times, it is easy to get distracted. As we move through this Advent season, let us recognize that God has given us everything – and we should always, continually, and in all circumstances, have that at the front of our minds.

– Matt Crawford

DECEMBER 18

John 1:19-23

This year has been a rollercoaster filled with good memories and hard times. For some it has been a relentless year filled with fear, loneliness, isolation, relentless loss and anxiety. For others, this year has been a blessing in disguise offering opportunities for change in ourselves and in our life together, space for creativity and innovation, self-care, newfound hobbies, and more time together with family. This year has challenged us as individuals, as a church community, as a nation, and global community.

However, as this year comes to a close, “What do you have to say about yourself?”

In those moments of fear and unknowing did you push through? In those moments of joy and happiness did you rejoice and appreciate your blessings?

The hard times and good times are equally important and make us who we are. Recognizing both can help us grow, learn, and improve who we are. We are constantly growing and changing. Going through the bad times where we make mistakes, endure hardships, and are unsure of what our next move should be, are the moments we truly blossom and become stronger and wiser.

We have all grown stronger this year as we battled months of unknowing. Acknowledge and recognize how far you have come and how much you have grown this year. Embrace all the good and bad memories this year has brought and carry them with you. They are a part of you and will be the foundation you will need to face the good times and new struggles that have yet to come.

– **Jamie Jones**

DECEMBER 19

John 1:24-28

In this season of Advent, we await the Messiah just as John the Baptist alerted those who were being baptized in the River Jordan and those sent by the Pharisees. He assured them that he was not the awaited one but (in modern terms) “Just you wait, the best is yet to come!”

In this most challenging of years wouldn't it be wonderful if we could take that promise as a motto for living through all of this turmoil. “The Best Is Yet to Come!” We have experienced unprecedented wild fires, riots, political unrest, human rights issues, and topping it all off a pandemic that has brought us to our knees. Because of the pandemic we can feel isolated. As a senior citizen I yearn to be around the darling children in our family before they grow up! But in my heart I know that with them, “The Best Is Yet to Come.” The forests will grow again, people will be heard, we will build skills to listen to one another, vaccines will be created as evidence that “The Best Is Yet To Come.” The adult Jesus began his journey during a most challenging time and gave us a way to live our lives to the fullest in service to God. “The Best Was Yet To Come.”

Just as in the season of Advent we know that the birth of Christ embodies “The Best Is Yet To Come.”

– **Claudia Flanders**

DECEMBER 20

Luke 2:8-20

I am writing my Advent devotion on Wednesday of election week, waiting for votes to be counted and results finalized. I came across a quote, “Some of you have never waited for a high school cast list to go up and it shows.” It brought moments of waiting to mind – waiting to see if you’ve been chosen or selected or invited to this or that. Waiting can be brutal on us mentally and emotionally.

There is a meditation that uses the metaphor of trapeze bars, with the space between one bar and the next when we are hurtling in between, as the place of unknowing and fear. In order to reach the next trapeze bar, you must let go. Crossing the dark void when the past is behind and the future is not yet here. It is uncomfortable. It is a vulnerable, fearful, anxiety-producing place of in-between and waiting.

For followers of Jesus, Advent is a season of waiting. In some ways, it is a less fearful time and holds more anticipation. It is a time to prepare our hearts and lives for celebrating the birth of Jesus. A time to make space for something meaningful in our lives and adjust our focus to be more Christ-centered.

In the humblest and most unlikely of circumstances, a child is born who will be the Prince of Peace and Savior. The peace he brings will come not from military might, but from justice and mercy and will lead with the power of self-giving love. It is strangely appropriate that news of Jesus’ birth comes first to shepherds. We tend to romanticize them, but in the first century shepherds were not considered desirable company. It is to them the angel announces: “Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Jesus comes to bring peace on earth by reconciling us to God and one another with the power of love that casts out fear. As we await Christmas Day, we stand in the holy, liminal space of Advent—preparing our hearts and our lives. We remember that God is our source of new life and hope and we open our arms wide to receive the trapeze bar of Christmas day, the birth of a tiny baby who’s love brings peace on earth.

– Tricia Guerrero

DECEMBER 21

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

What was he missing? Was something nagging at King David's mind and soul? He was settling into his new home, a place fit for a king. The wars were over (at least for a while), the wandering had come to an end, it was a time for thankfulness, even leaping and dancing in the joy of it. Yet what was it?

The David we know from all the stories is a complex man: warrior, king, a man of destiny and dynasty; a troubled man, betrayer of those loyal to him, a flawed husband and father. A man of great victories and vision; a man of terrible miscalculation, sometimes completely lacking in awareness.

David spies the contradiction: he lives in the finest of houses; the Lord, his Lord, is still in that tent that covers the Ark of the Covenant with God, the one that has followed his tribe through all their wandering. Something should be done about that.

Then God reminds David that his faithfulness is enough. He does not need the temple. That task is for another generation. You will have your kingdom forever, says the Lord, no matter what. Temple or no temple.

What do I miss? Or is it just that I don't see that what I have is enough? That I can lay the burden down?

– Michael Olsson

DECEMBER 22

Psalm 89:1-4

Psalm 89 was written in dark times not unlike our own and yet it proclaims God's steadfast love and hope for the future. In the excitement leading to Christmas, let us remember that anticipation of a new beginning is an act of healing. Let us rejoice and meditate on these edited lyrics from "Something's Coming" by Stephen Sondheim.

Could be! Who knows?
There's something due any day;
I will know right away,
Soon as it shows.
It may come cannonballing down through the sky,
Gleam in its eye,
Bright as a rose! Who knows?

It's only just out of reach,
Down the block, on a beach,
Under a tree.
I got a feeling there's a miracle due,
Gonna come true. Coming to me!

Around the corner,
Or whistling down the river,
Come on, deliver
To me!
Will it be? Yes, it will.
Maybe just by holding still,
It'll be there!

Come on, something, come on in, don't be shy,
Meet a guy. Pull up a chair!
The air is humming,
And something great is coming!
Who knows? It's only just out of reach,
Down the block, on a beach,
Maybe tonight...

- **Dorothy Nichols**

DECEMBER 23

Psalm 89:19-26

I want to call out a footnote from the New International Version (NIV) translation of today's scripture. In verse 24, the psalmist writes "... and through my name his horn will be exalted." The footnote says, "*Horn* here symbolizes strength."

My prayers over the past 9+ months have been for strength. Night after night, I ask God for strength. Let's be honest. This has been a **rough year**. Coronavirus. Politics. Work from home / distance learning. Masks. Fires. Anxiety. Fear. And death. So much death. Any one thing is a lot to grapple with on its own, but when combined it's enough to break anyone's spirit.

But there is hope. God knows when we are facing tough times, insurmountable odds, and He always sends us strength. Strength in a text from a friend. Strength in a smile, behind a mask, from a stranger. Strength in laughter, strength in love, even strength from tears. And strength through His son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you, God, for the much-needed strength, this year and in the years to come. You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior. Amen.

– Whitney Hagan

DECEMBER 24

Romans 16:25-27

If you have ever talked to me during the Christmas season, you will know it is my least favorite time of year. My inner punk rebels at the consumerist culture, media narrative and dreaded cliches of gift giving. The holiday lights fuel the flames of my frustration, as commercials tell me that, as of November 1st, I am behind on my Christmas shopping.

January 2020 was no different. I poo pooped anyone who had their lights up after New Years, and made the usual complaints about the Hallmark Channel's year round Christmas theme. Then, from the days of jovial office chat followed by dinner with friends and family, we suddenly turned to isolated home offices and dinners for one with whatever was left on the shelves of Trader Joes. To top the cake, you forgot to get toilet paper last week.

Despite the obnoxiously cheery songs, and the movie take overs, I want Christmas to come this year. In the midst of the chaos, riots, and full-blown shutdown, Christmas is our reminder that Jesus was with us this past year, and will be there for us again the next. This year, more than ever, we need to remember the strength God gave us to make it through 2020. We need to find the simple joys that proved that not even a global pandemic could break the spirit of God's people. This year each ridiculous, annoying, and cringeworthy Christmas moment will remind me that Jesus is born, and light, hope and peace return to our world renewed.

I invite you to take this moment to think of the joys in 2020, both big and small. The moments where you knew God was with you, moving you slowly but surely towards the renewed hope in Jesus' birth, our reminder that hope was never canceled; love was never gone. Jesus was there. All was well.

– Molly Smith

DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-14

John recognizes something that no other Gospel writer seems to have quite picked up – a new beginning being offered to us all as a gift from God. This is perhaps why the scripture begins with a clear echo of the beginning of the book of Genesis. But instead of it leading to one man and ultimately his failure to follow God's law, John makes clear that this is offered to all mankind – each individual man and woman. And couldn't we all use a fresh start in this year? Hopefully, we can reach out to this life that is the light of humans and that the darkness has not understood, to use some of John's terminology in a fairly recent translation.

The next part of the scripture emphasizes the importance of a very early witness – John the Baptist – who we remember as the one who baptized Jesus at the beginning of His ministry. But even if not contemporary with Jesus, we are still witnesses today, even after all this time. This little child, whose birth we celebrate today, came into the world at a very dark time when slaughtering infants was the approach to maintain the ruler in power, who feared a takeover by a new king (but one who would ultimately assert that his kingdom was not of this world).

John tells us of a God who can speak things and even life itself into existence, and thus establishes the divinity of Jesus as the word that God has spoken and the true light, far beyond the star that guided wise men to his birthplace. Yet John also encapsulates the lack of understanding permeating the culture into which He came but recognizes the great gift we receive at Christmastime, which is the right to become children of God. Our proper spiritual birth actually can make each of us a child, not a great, ... great grandchild, but directly a child of God. May your Christmas include your acceptance of this very special gift, made available to all!

– Wynn Battig