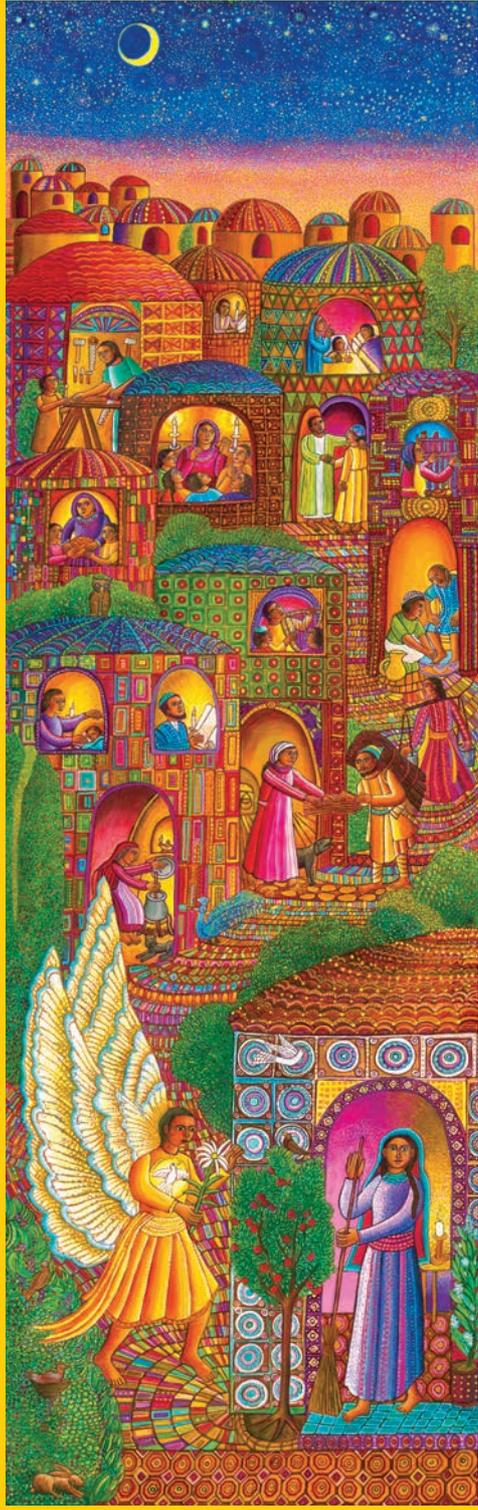


# ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021



Dear Reader,

Welcome to the introspection of Advent. During this season of deep reflection, we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the coming of the Christ, the Incarnate of God.

This year, we meditate on these scriptures with the theme "The Stars Are Brightly Shining." 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](http://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 28

### Jeremiah 33:14-16

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As the season of Advent begins, our hearts yearn for glimpses of the light shining in the darkness. The Magi, then and now, are already searching the heavens for the appearance of the special star that will light the way to the place of the Messiah's birth. They have begun their journey seeking spiritual deepening and new birth. Let's join them, in heart and soul, along the paths of these Advent days.

From the prophet, Jeremiah, we hear unexpected good news. "The days are surely coming," says the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David..." In those days, God had already promised many things. What's startling here is that Jeremiah now includes the house of David into those promises. The circle is made wider and more inclusive. God's good future, the prophet wants to make clear, will be a source of hope far beyond what had been imagined.

The new king will be heralded by justice and righteousness, ensuring that the city and the land will be healed and restored and saved. The new king will act in ways that will make new life possible. "And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness."

As Christians, we place Christ Jesus in this line of new kings and look to him as Messiah. As we await his birth again this year, let's envision anew all that a king embodying justice and righteousness will bring to the city and to the land. Let us pray for healing and restoration. For justice and peace. Let us give thanks, and look up to the night sky to see the stars brightly shining.

Come, Lord Jesus.

– Rev. Patricia Farris

# NOVEMBER 29

Luke 21:25-28

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This passage in Luke tells of distress in the heavens and on earth and the foreboding of what is coming. In our second year of the worldwide pandemic, political and racial strife, and the effects of global warming we can easily feel anxiety or depression. But Luke ends this passage with HOPE. Our savior is coming. All we need to do is “look up” and your “redemption is near.”

There are days when I might feel like rolling over in bed, cocooned in my own safe little world. But when I open my mind and heart to God, I know the better path is to “look up,” to think positive, and to listen to God’s voice. Then I know there is also much good in the world and ways that I can serve to be a part of that good.

We can all focus on gloom and doom, or we can choose the better path, looking up. Physically we will see the sun and rain nurturing our planet and the stars shining brightly. Mentally, emotionally, and spiritually we will be renewed.

For anyone reading this and dealing with anxiety or depression (as I sometimes do) these are helpful words from Philippians 4: verses 6 & 7.

“Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

**LOOK UP!**

– Joyce Landsverk

# NOVEMBER 30

## Luke 21:29-33

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This peaceful little parable of the fig tree sprouting leaves in spring is inserted in the middle of Jesus' fire and brimstone description of the destruction of the temple. But maybe it says something about our faith that we choose to focus on a message of growth and signs of life.

In today's world of headline news and clickbait, it might seem more exciting to write about the violent, destructive time of judgment predicted in the earlier verses of the chapter. But through all of that Jesus gives us a little glimpse of life and tells us to know that the Kingdom of God is near.

So, what are we to do with this message? With the world going faster each day, with violent and upsetting news dominating our news feeds, do we point at the earlier verses and get ready for a cinematic-quality judgment day? Or do we look deep into those pictures to see the helpers, our human brothers and sisters who quietly try to make their corner of the world a little better each day?

One of these responses leads us to proclaim our righteousness loudly in the hope that we will be saved. The other leads us to actively seek opportunities to save others. Either one can be clearly justified by Jesus' words in this chapter, leaving it up to us as individuals to decide which road to travel.

Jesus' rhetorical flourish declaring that the end times would come in his audience's lifetime may not have been a literal prediction, but based on the excitement of his words, one could hardly blame people for dropping what they were doing and declaring their readiness to be judged. How many of them focused instead on the fig tree's growth as a message of love and eternal life?

2000 years later, we have the same choice.

– Matt Crawford

# DECEMBER 1

Luke 21:34-36

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Confusion and turmoil have made us question if we have the strength to continue and bear the pressures that have been thrown at us still. In the past two years we wonder if there is a light at the end of this exceedingly long tunnel.

We ask for answers.

Are there any to give?

We ask for solace,

Are the Stars Brightly Shinning?

Where do we turn?

God wants us to know that the Stars are Brightly Shinning. God knows our hearts are weighed down, and the instinct to leave or hide away is strong. God reminds us of hope. We are still asking...

We ask for answers, we ask for solace.

Are we worthy?

Can we stand before the Son of Man?

Where do we turn?

God says turn to me.

– Chris Reagh

## DECEMBER 2

### Psalm 25:1-10

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In this psalm, the composition is a lament of a person asking God for help and to have mercy. There is longing in his voice as he begs for God to remember him.

Two verbs are important: waiting and remembering. Advent is a time for expecting and looking to the future as we anticipate the coming of the One who brings us God's good news, but it is also a time for remembering. It is a time to contemplate our sins, our broken relationships, in the hope of building a closer relationship with God. The psalmist waits for God when all the evidence suggests the wait maybe long and painful. Yet mere endurance is not the point. A cleansed and contrite heart is what's wanted by God.

May God bless our waiting and remembering at this Advent season as we prepare to receive God's good news for ourselves.

–Jean Young

# DECEMBER 3

## Psalm 17:1-15

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Go ahead: Read this psalm and then explain to me what it has to do with the Advent season. This is a prayer of David who is in deep distress under assault by the forces of King Saul. He is asking God to judge him and his situation with fairness and understanding and to protect him from his adversaries.

Now consider that David is the progenitor of Jesus Christ, who was under threat immediately as a baby by Herod's soldiers with only God and his parents protecting him. He would not yet have been able to pray in a language as David has done but, if he had been able, he might have used similar words.

David is using a form of prayer, really a plea, to God as King and judge, as it would be performed in a royal court of the period as he asks for vindication in what he believes to be his righteous cause. It appears that David is fully aware that if caught, he would probably lose his life but there's something special going on here – David is convinced that God has heard him and can and likely will save him.

It should also be remembered that when David had the chance to slay King Saul twice (1 Samuel 24 & 26) he did not do so. This also anticipates Jesus Christ who told himself and others to love one's enemies.

David asks to be viewed as the apple of God's eye and sheltered in the shadow of God's wings, beautiful descriptions of the caring God we believe in.

So what does any of this have to do with us? We may not feel that we are under the literal life-ending threat that David was but who among us hasn't felt that evil forces have surrounded us in this time? We need to be aware of the promise of God's stars of his universe brightly shining on us.

– Wynn Battig

## DECEMBER 4

### 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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After establishing a small church in Thessalonica, apostle Paul has to leave there. Afterwards he worries that the Thessalonians may not be keeping the faith under the pressure of persecution. However, after Timothy reports back that they are thriving, Paul is overjoyed and writes this letter to the Thessalonians. He praises them for their faith, hope and love. He praises them for reaching out to encourage others and for persevering in the face of suffering. He writes of wanting to return to them and prays that God will make their love increase for each other and for everyone else. He asks that God strengthens their hearts in areas where they need to grow so that they will become blameless and holy when Jesus returns.

How do we help others to keep the faith? Do we use spoken word to tell people how to keep the faith? Do we demonstrate with our behavior how we ourselves keep the faith? Do we help others by performing tangible acts to keep the faith?

One way that I strive to keep my faith is by reading a spiritual devotional each morning that comes from “Jesus Always” by Sarah Young. This sets the tone for my day. Throughout the day I try to remember that God is in control. I often ask God for help and guidance and then I try not to worry about the outcomes of my daily undertakings. I thank God frequently for the many blessings I receive and I find my faith is strengthened when I have private conversations with God.

The challenging part is reaching out to others and growing in our faith by increasing our love for others. Though we are saved by grace, our faith teaches us to follow God’s ways. We should strive to be brightly shining stars to help others to keep the faith.

– Nancy Potter

## DECEMBER 5

### Malachi 3:1-4

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From a young age, we are taught that one way to show others that we are followers of Christ is to let our lives be a shining light reflecting our faith. “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” But as we get older, we may struggle to keep it shining very brightly.

We are pushed and pressed daily by the failings of the world. It can be hard to follow what God directs and wants us to do. Things we never thought we might do may not seem to be so bad after all. Our light dims.

Have you lost or misplaced something and can’t seem to find it? I have many times. I will say to God “You know where it is. Please let me know.” As I continue my search, thoughts come up about where I might look but frequently in places I don’t believe I would have thought of myself. It has to be from God. A small thing that reflects how God talks with us if we open ourselves to listen to Him.

We need to start our day and end our day communicating with God and listen for His voice throughout the day to guide us in all we do. We must open ourselves to being cleansed by the Spirit as we ask God to forgive our sins. Through opening ourselves and communing with God in all we do, our light will remain bright. And only by a bright light can we hope to bring others to Christ.

*Dear Heavenly Father,*

*Thank you for being with me through the trials of this life. May I long for You daily and praise you for all You provide. Help me keep my light shining for You, and give me strength and courage to point others to Christ.*

*Amen.*

**– Kathy Hall**

## DECEMBER 6

Luke 1:68-79

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In this song of Zechariah (also known as the Benedictus), John the Baptist's father prophesied about the strength of the Lord's salvation, and role John the Baptist will play in the Lord's plan of deliverance and peace. These demonstrated acts of salvation connect the old and new testaments, praising a God that fulfills his promises to his people. Following this promising news, Zechariah turns to his son to prophesy John the Baptist's important role in God's plan as a "prophet of the Most High."

While the evangel foretold in this scripture is about John, it is truly challenging each of us to exhibit similar evangelism. We too can "prepare the way" for the Lord this Christmas season, giving "his people the knowledge of salvation." While this may sound like a daunting task, it is in the small acts and moments with our family, friends and strangers that we can share the good news of hope, saving, and peace that comes with faith in Jesus Christ.

Where Zechariah prophesies that the "rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness," I picture the peaceful warmth and calm that can come with watching a brilliant sunrise. Let us be that sunrise for those we come across, preparing the way in small acts this Holy Advent season. Be the star that shines brightly, sharing the strength and hope of salvation through words and actions. Each impact on a person can have a ripple effect, multiplying the number of people preparing the way for the Lord in their hearts, and in turn sharing the peace of a new Holy sunrise with others.

– Lindsay Crossan

# DECEMBER 7

## Psalm 62:1-12

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Did you notice that “rock” is used three times, and “refuge” and “fortress” twice, in these twelve verses? I confess that my faith is at times uncertain, and that bringing God to heart and mind can be difficult. It is at such times that words, and the writers of words, will lead me to places I find hard to go on my own.

Psalm 62 is attributed to King David. Whomever the author, the sense of God and faith being like a rock, a fortress, a refuge allows me to cross a bridge from my own uncertainty to a place of possibility, assurance and connection to the faith of those who have gone before me. Words, and the spirit they inspire, can take me there.

Recently, at the end of October, I was in Maine just past the peak of the autumn (and hence the fall tourist) season, yet I was still awed by the brilliance of our world as painted in red and orange and yellow and, still, much green. Some trees were completely bare of leaves, others had mixed spaces of emptiness and vivid color. Clearly, it was the point of transition to winter, yet fall still had the upper hand if only for a brief while longer.

At many places in the forests and along the roads there were outcroppings of bedrock, some subtle, running along the ground, others gigantic, rising up out of earth. Those rocks were a presence, beyond being a reminder of the foundation of the world. While the surface of the land was in constant change with color and foliage and light, there was the certainty of the rock underneath.

As it is with me. I am but a breath, and, still, steadfast love enfolds me.

– Michael Olsson

# DECEMBER 8

## Luke 3:1-6

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No Haiku for the 2021 Advent devotional. If you choose to read no further, because I have already exceeded the number of syllables in a haiku, I understand.

John the Baptist appears in this Luke passage, as he appeared in my 2021 Lenten Devotional using John 1:6-8.

I enjoy reading the writings that draw upon one's student days. My turn. I submitted this, 10/28/2021. 45 years to the day after a Bible study on this Luke chapter as a freshman in college.

I report my actual writings from the margins of the Harper Study Bible (RSV) from 10/28/1976 (the bi-centennial year). Gathered in Boswell 202 (my room was Boswell 206), our leader, Dave, his roommate, Eric, three others, and me.

Actual writings, are within quotation marks, commenting on these first six verses, from page 1535:

“Preparing/laying framework for Jesus” (Chapter 3, John the Baptist)

“fulfilling prophecy of Isaiah” (v4)

“not an ordinary king” (v4)

“parts of our lives” (v5)

“universal feeling” (v5)

Observations and comments that still hold.

– Art Dodd, Jr.

# DECEMBER 9

## Luke 3:7-14

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As this passage from Luke begins, the Israelites are gathering around John for baptism. From their general attitudes he felt that they were going through the motions of baptism and not the spiritual cleansing he was requiring of them. He had some very harsh words for the crowd suggesting that they were just going through the motions of repentance with no plan to truly change their lives. He called them vipers and just because Abraham was their father it didn't mean they could get away with anything. So, he gave them ways in which to cleanse themselves and repent by thinking of others and sharing with others their riches. Prepare for the coming Messiah by working honestly and living generously.

In the season of Advent, we prepare ourselves, once again, for the coming of the Messiah. Have we repented and cleansed ourselves as John required? Have we shared our possessions with those of lesser means? Are we being grateful for that which we have and not desire more than what we worked for?

As the pandemic eases, we are stepping into a different world. How perfect it is that we are now in the season of Advent. We've had a long time to take measure of our lives and "repent." Time to welcome the Messiah and new beginnings.

– **Claudia Flanders**

# DECEMBER 10

Luke 3:15-18

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I've been thinking a lot about service over the last few years; especially in our government, my union, and my workplaces in Hollywood. I've noticed people seek positions for a variety of reasons but it isn't always to serve. Narcissism seems to be more and more common. Many people seem to get involved in leadership not to be of humble service but rather for self-serving purposes like fame, greed, credit, attention, title. They want to be the winner. They want to be a star.

John was a true servant. He was born to prepare the people for the Messiah and he accepted the call with all of his being. Read his words from today's passage. As people questioned whether or not he was the Messiah he responded, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (NIV)

Jesus himself was the ultimate servant. Though holding the most magnificent title of all, He taught his disciples about service and set the greatest example saying, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45 (NIV). He would later wash his disciples' feet and encourage them to do the same for each other.

We, too, are unworthy to untie the straps of Jesus' sandals. But in our positions in this life — whatever those may be — we can choose to be servants like John. We can share the Good News of the Messiah's coming. We can be stars shining brightly pointing people to the brightest star of all

– Holly Pitrago

## DECEMBER 11

### Philippians 1:3-11

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I have always wondered about the origin of stars. I know they are big balls of burning gas, but the how and why are considerably more complex and unknown. Being a romantic at heart, tales of ancient Gods throwing souls into the sky caught my imagination. I know that stars twinkle due to visual obstruction, but I often imagined each twinkle as a wink from an ancestor past, letting me know they're watching.

When the Hubble Telescope first entered orbit, scientists turned Hubble's camera to the blackness of space. The image revealed hundreds of galaxies, like rainbow glitter on a black canvas, each galaxy a multitude of stars. The scientists, being scientists, thought less about the galaxies they had found, and instead focused on the pitch black spaces in between. They increased the telescopes magnification, and aimed into the darkness again and again. Every time, a myriad of galaxies appeared, each with its own plethora of stars. The universe was truly endless. The darkness is only just obscuring the light.

In this passage, we are given a prayer of love and thanksgiving. While reading this with our Advent theme in mind, I felt it addressed loved ones who have passed; a letter to the heavens, a reminder that we are loved by them and that in return we will think of them with love and hope for our futures together. What if gasses are how the stars burn, but the why is love? What if each star is there as a visual token, a soul filled with love for those they have left behind, burning as a reminder that love is light, love will conquer the darkness, love is endless?

I invite you to look at the sky tonight. Remember that for each star you find, there are infinitely more. Behind each patch of black is a host of galaxies and stars, each one burning as God's reminder that the universe shines by the power of love.

– Molly Smith

## DECEMBER 12

### Luke 1:26-38

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The part of Luke's Christmas story that I find myself returning to is verse 29: "But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (NRSV). Mary's introduction into the Nativity Story is, when looked at from her perspective, something more akin to a particular Charles Dickens ghost story than a tale of a coming savior; the angel appearing to Mary might be compared to the ghost of Marley appearing to Ebenezer Scrooge. Both the Angel and Marley arrive with portentous speech of what is to come, and, for both Scrooge and for Mary, terrifying things are afoot.

Although it is only a brief passage, this may be the part of the Nativity wherein the most is happening in terms of Mary's faith. Mary "pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Is this Angel benevolent or malevolent? What do these strange and sudden predictions about her forthcoming miraculous pregnancy actually mean? This may not necessarily be a good thing that's happening.

Mary, in that brief pondering, is likely full of fear, suspicion, and doubt, as well as Luke's recorded awe and wonder. She was, as the passage is translated, perplexed. She asks questions. She needs clarification. Mary accepts what the Angel says, but will have to confirm what Elizabeth is experiencing before she's 100% on board.

Mary was moved by the Holy Spirit, but was also a practical young woman in this passage. She was filled with the Lord, but also needed to run an errand to double check.

As we prepare for the Christmas season, we can likely all relate to this mixture of being perplexed, of having to run errands to display our faith, all while being filled with the warmth of this holy time. Something amazing is coming. Let's get to work.

– **Witney Seibold**

## DECEMBER 13

### Luke 1:39-45

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This is a story of blessing. Mary, newly and miraculously pregnant, pays a visit to an older distant relative, Elizabeth, who is six months into her own miraculous pregnancy (verse 36). Elizabeth (with some input from the Holy Spirit) immediately recognizes that Mary bears the Messiah in her womb and therefore is blessed, asks her why she has come to visit, and again comments on Mary's blessedness. We are not told of Mary's answer to Elizabeth's question. [Neither are we told of Zechariah's reaction to an uninvited houseguest who ends up staying for three months (verse 56).]

That is, Elizabeth exclaims that God has blessed both Mary and her baby (verse 42) and then explains why Mary is blessed (verse 45): Mary is blessed because she believed that God would actually do what God had promised to do. (There is no need for Elizabeth to explain why Mary's baby is blessed—he is referred to by the divine title *Kyrios*.)

We can glean from the previous paragraphs that Luke's concept of "blessed" means something like "specifically favored by God." We can also glean that it is transactional—Mary is rewarded with God's blessing because she did something: she trusted God to fulfill God's promises. (Recall that in verse 20 Zechariah is punished for not believing that God would do what God promised.)

This blessing is not the same as grace, which is unearned.

In this jaded age, do we actually believe God will do what God has promised to do?

– Dick Crawford

# DECEMBER 14

## Luke 1:47-55

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It's hard to miss what Luke is saying to us in this passage: God is on the side of the underdog! As God has exalted Mary, a lowly woman, by choosing her to birth the Messiah, God's will is always to "fill the hungry with good things." God is sending Jesus into the world to proclaim the message of good news for the poor, the hungry, and those of low status, for those are the ones whom God seeks to bless. Mary herself may not have said these words, but the early church of Luke's time saw them as a core message of what God was affirming in Jesus' coming.

These words can impact us in two ways. For the times when we find ourselves in an underdog situation, they are words of hope. When the values we cherish are not being honored, when we are the recipients of hostility or misunderstanding, when we fear for God's cause in the world, they remind us of which side God is on and so strengthen us in facing life. However God may be working, "nothing will be impossible with God," as Luke's gospel puts it.

But when we are not the underdog, these words offer us another meaning. When we are the top dog, the well-fed, the one with influence, they point us to act on God's side, on behalf of those who lack the goods they need, the justice, the dignity, or the love. Advent is a time that moves us to give this our particular attention as we look forward to the coming of One who came to show us life in all its fullness.

– Larry Young

## DECEMBER 15

### Zephaniah 3:14-20

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Who doesn't want to gather together, to sing, to have fortunes restored while enemies are cleared away, to find personal strength (and shed a few pounds)? Who hasn't recently mourned their favorite cancelled festival?

To be quieted by love sounds wonderful (and a lot better than other ways of being silenced). To change shame into praise seems... heavenly.

We have collectively suffered some loss, no doubt about it. But what have we gained in the past 21 months? Have the stars not continued to shine brightly—maybe even a little brighter for a while, when the smog lifted, before the fires.

Trusting in the eventual 'joy in the morning' allows us to endure the darker nights of isolation, apprehension, and loss.

Night's lessons implore: Slow down, watch where you're going, look up at the heavens.

Ah yes, the stars are *still* brightly shining!

- Kendra Fleagle Gornitsky

# DECEMBER 16

## Isaiah 12:2-6

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The first line of this hymn of praise reads: “Behold God is my salvation, I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lamb God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”

Deep in my heart I know this to be true. But honestly, I have often felt weak, fearful and in need of salvation during the past year or so. My guess is that we’re all a little worn out and tired of waiting for our lives to return to where we were pre-pandemic. We’ve prayed in earnest, helped one another whenever and wherever possible and have patiently lived through very trying times. And yet, sometimes it feels like we’re stuck in some kind of spiritual quicksand.

But maybe that’s the point. Maybe salvation isn’t a “fix” for troubles or a reward for playing by the rules. Turning to God when we’re in need, with the expectation of personal benefit or immediate relief is a recipe for spiritual disaster.

Maybe what this is saying is that it’s our faith in eternal salvation that will bring up peace—regardless of what we’re facing here and now. And perhaps trusting in God and the promise of eternal salvation, is what gives us inner strength. The strength to carry on, stay hopeful and find comfort in knowing that our faith in Him and His divine grace is our ultimate salvation.

Faith and Trust. Two “Brightly Shining Stars” to lift us up and guide us through this Advent season.

– **Anne Premer**

## DECEMBER 17

### Psalm 80:1-7

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We, God's people, like the psalmist's people long ago, aren't feeling good about ourselves. We wonder if God has given up on us. We know God is there, but like them, our predecessors, we feel abandoned, ignored, even forced to drink and eat tears, our own and other peoples'.

We've faced a worldwide plague, fires, floods, wars, disaster after disaster. We've been warned that we're responsible for much of this. Like the psalmist, we beg God to return to us, to make us great again.

But, of course, God, like the brightly shining stars, has always been there. It is up to us to restore our relationship and live in harmony with God, the earth and each other.

– **Jean Stapleton**

## DECEMBER 18

### Philippians 4:4-7

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As David drives home at night on PCH, he looks up at the sky, to God, who gives him guidance to work with youth at his correctional facility. We both work with youth – very different populations of youth, in a youth correctional facility and a public library children and teen’s department – but still, we’re both working with young people and helping shape their futures. It is often difficult to remain professionally detached, because we care about the young people we serve. We often talk together about what particular young person is on our hearts and minds. A youth who is about to be paroled, but who has no home to go to. A youth who wants a career helping others by being a sign language interpreter, but who will face major obstacles getting a job because of his incarceration. A family with an autistic child who relies on the library as a place they will not be judged. A teen needing a safe haven after school. Sometimes we can really help. Sometimes there is not much we are able to do. It can be frustrating, and heartbreaking. And that’s on top of all the other worries life throws at us. It can be overwhelming, and has caused some sleepless nights.

And yet the stars are brightly shining, outside in the night sky. Worry makes us forget that, sometimes. Paul’s words to the Philippians remind us not to succumb to worry, but to pray and present our concerns to God. And God’s peace will guard our hearts and minds.

One of our favorite movies to watch at Christmas time is the 1954 classic, *White Christmas*. There’s a song in that film that begins: “When I’m worried and I can’t sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep, and I fall asleep counting my blessings.” The Lord is near (Philippians 4:5b). Thanks be to God. Amen.

– Ann & David Wilson

# DECEMBER 19

## Micah 5:2-5a

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Despite being a lifelong Methodist, this is my first time writing a devotional. I was intimidated to be assigned a verse from the Old Testament. The people of the Old Testament often seem far away to me, and I struggle to wrap my head around stories like the creation and the flood. But Jesus can always draw me in. Jesus loved in a way that was indiscriminate, bringing in the social pariahs of the day like the foreigners and tax collectors. It was a love so deep he was willing to die on a cross for it. Love like that always inspires me.

The people of the Old Testament had to live in a time before Christ's love and example were known. Prophets like Micah promised them of his coming, but they had to wait for it, enduring times of darkness, hardship, and discrimination. Generations passed, and at times the wait must have felt like eternity.

Reflecting on this verse, I realized that maybe we people of 2021 have more in common with the Old Testament people than I previously thought. Haven't the past two years often felt like an eternity? We knew that things had to get better eventually, but in the meantime, there have been lockdowns, social distancing, canceled gatherings, holidays and milestones missed. In February of 2020, my mother had a stroke. Having to endure the pandemic, worrying about how she was doing on the other side of the country, and unsure of how I could safely visit her, has been a long-lasting heartache. And I realize so many have had it much worse than I.

I pray for us to have the faith and hope of the Old Testament people foretold of Jesus's coming. They knew their patience would ultimately be rewarded, and a new light would come into the world to shine for all time.

*Dear God,*

*When things feel very dark, please help me to remember the coming of your Light, this Christmastime and always.*

*Amen.*

**– Julia Snider**

## DECEMBER 20

### Psalm 131:1-3

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*The Stars are Brightly Shining* just leads me to *It is the Night of the Dear Savior's Birth*.

Years of singing, or hearing the hymn/anthem "O Holy Night", have implanted those phrases in my mind. And what a glorious time Advent is: eagerly anticipating the joy of Jesus' birth and the Light that He brings into the world.

Using Psalm 131 to add to our reflection during Advent, we find words from the great historical king, David, who, despite all the glories of his story and reign, sought a humble relationship with God: foregoing a haughty heart, lofty eyes, and preoccupation with great matters. Instead, he looks for a calmed and quieted soul.

Jesus, born of the house of David, made this humility a hallmark of his life, too. He taught that we should live a life of service, caring for others, rather than puffing ourselves with all we have accomplished. And all this grounded in a close relationship with God. Humbly born in a stable, living an itinerant life of teaching, Jesus does not seek lofty, worldly things.

As we continue our journey through Advent, we pray that the selflessness of David and Jesus become a part of us and show us how to center our hope and desires for ourselves and the world.

*Prayer*

*Dear God, may the stars brightly shine for the coming Holy night and the renewal of our Hope.*

**– Bee Campbell**

# DECEMBER 21

## Isaiah 9:2-7

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This passage contains one of the most familiar Christmas texts of the Bible, even though it was written seven centuries before the birth of Christ. This is Isaiah's prophecy regarding the future of Judah, then under threat from Israel and Assyria. But most of us recognize verse six from George Handel's *Messiah*: "For unto us a child is born/ To us a son is given."

Handel was a German composer working in London in the 18th century. In the summer of 1741, his collaborator Charles Jennens sent Handel the text for "Messiah," almost entirely culled from passages in the King James Bible. Remarkably, Handel wrote the music for the three-hour piece in just 24 days. *Messiah* premiered in Dublin the following spring with a tiny orchestra and a handful of singers from local church choirs. Despite the modest production, demand for tickets was so high that women were encouraged not to wear hoop skirts to make room for more listeners.

The Irish crowd loved it, and its popularity soon spread across Europe. By the 19th century, *Messiah* had become an Advent tradition, sung by large and small choirs, and thousands of listeners inspired to sing along.

That said, can it really be considered Christmas music? Scholars argue the Messiah of Isaiah is not Jesus, as Handel and Jennens have it, but King Cyrus of Persia, who returned the Jews to Israel from their exile in Babylon.

But here is Marc Strachan of the Self-Isolation Choir, which performed a Zoom-style *Messiah* during the height of Covid with a 3,800-voice choir from around the world: "The first words of Messiah are 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.' And there can be no time more poignant than now for the word 'comfort.' In times when our choral singing has been removed by this terrible virus, it is important that we remember that singing is all about friendship, is all about camaraderie, and is all about shared experiences as well as notes on the page."

That sounds like Christmas to me.

- Sam Johnson

## DECEMBER 22

### Isaiah 52:7-10

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*Children of the Wanderers, whether free or fettered  
Wake the echoes of the songs where ye may be scattered.  
Yours the message cheering that the time is nearing  
Which will see all men free and tyrants disappearing.  
Ma'oz Tzur (Rock of Ages)*

God's people had been through the wringer. Enslaved in Egypt and led by Moses out of captivity – through the desert, no less - they suffered the ruin of the Holy City and exile to Babylon. Then more turmoil when Persia threatened to succeed Babylon as the ruling power. The collective spirit of God's people was a churning brew of angst, despondence, and fear (with a dash of hope). Will our woes ever end? Is God really on our side?

And then came the messenger: Jerusalem was redeemed, and God reigned. The joy of God's people was so consuming that even the messenger's feet were beautiful to them. The good news of God's victory was not just for the "desolate places of Jerusalem" but for all the nations. Oh, what the Holy Arm of God had done!

For Christians, these words of Isaiah foreshadow the birth of Jesus. God's people longed for a Messiah, but in the crossfire of clashing nations lead by corrupt, power-lusting demagogues, angst, despondence, and fear returned. Will we ever be able to hope again? Will God stand on his promise to send a Messiah?

And then came the Star. Oh, what the Holy Arm of God has done!

– **Linda Diane Anderson**

# DECEMBER 23

## Luke 2:1-7

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So, Joseph and Mary aren't finishing the baby's room or sending out invitations for a baby shower. Nooooo. They are traveling many long and dusty miles on bumpy roads, in crummy weather to register at the order of those despised Romans in Joseph's hometown. Great! Sure, some Angel told Mary that she is favored above all women, but she's still ready to pop, swollen, uncomfortable, stressed, unsure if she'll go into labor on the highway and has no idea where they will stay in Bethlehem. For a honeymoon, this ain't Niagara Falls – thanks Joseph!

However, some of Broadway's greatest hits had humble opening nights far away from the bright city lights. The stars that twinkled brightly that mystical night above little Bethlehem have only burnished over the past 2021 years. No big production number was needed for the arrival of Jesus Christ. These seven verses mark the beginning of Christianity – it starts here. The message that he conveyed became the ultimate example of a word-of-mouth success story!

It is unnerving to read these simple passages and realize how this one birth changed the world forever in the most profound way. Love truly became the answer to all questions in that lowly stable, lying in a roughly hewn manger amongst a gathering of barnyard animals. The light of the world began to glow that night and has never dimmed. Each of us who tries to live the example of Jesus, by loving our neighbors as ourselves, carries a brightly shining star in our souls. And the collective light from those millions of souls will forever provide strength and hope and vision to the darkest corners of the world.

– **Michael V. Lamb**

# DECEMBER 24 - Christmas Eve

## Luke 2:8-14

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As a child I found this passage to be full of enormous delight and dramatic flair. The willing suspension of a many disbeliefs was abetted by the ubiquitous iconography: shepherds, sheep, angels, great joy, and be sure to check out the manger “For unto you is born...”

As an adult I have come to read something rather different: a scene of 24/7 vigilance, angels and glory fostering terror, together with what I have learned is one of the most frequent phrases in the Bible “...fear not.”

And that “fear not” has become key to the great message of joy for my adult imagination. For my imagination is disconcertingly vigilant, can easily catastrophize, and is all-too-quick to fear. And that was before the vast raft of late-pandemic uncertainties reached my shores of consciousness.

Fear not. Got it? Try it again. Fear not.

Perhaps this too is part of the good news of great joy for all the people; that the birth of the Messiah is inextricably bound up together with the dissolution of fear.

*God With Us, grant us the capacity to apprehend and know great joy as readily as we do supposed threat. Foster in us the understanding and will and courage to practice Fearing Not.*

*Change our hearts as well as our imaginations. Fill them this Christmas Eve with your great joy...great joy for all the people. Keep our hearts and minds and imaginations always thus, as we seek to not fear.*

*Amen.*

– David Bremer

# DECEMBER 25 - Christmas

## John 1:1-14

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*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light (John 1:5)*

God is light that pierces through the darkness. Nothing can stop it or dampen its power.

Lisle Gwynn Garrity is an artist who created a beautiful piece called *Light Pierces Through* as a reflection on this text from John. She says,

“I meditate on the persistence of light. Light can travel endlessly through a vacuum; light waves won't diminish no matter how far they have to travel. Therefore, starlight travels through space for billions of light years to reach us on earth. Can you imagine that? Perhaps that's God's nature and constant posture—endlessly traveling through time and space just to reach us.”

I love this imagery of God's nature as a never-ending stretching out to reach us, to be in relationship and walk beside us. God's light is not about something we deserve or earn or accomplish.

God's light comes into our world when it is most needed. A light in the darkness and a gift of love to our whole world.

Each Christmas, as the days grow shorter and the nights longer, we are reminded of this gift as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God's light come to be with us in the form of a tiny little baby.

In the person of Jesus, we are shown God's light made real. And that light is more powerful than anything else in this world, any amount of darkness we face—because we aren't alone. Love is God's light in the darkness.

Blessings,  
– **Tricia Guerrero**

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