

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2023

Sing A New Song!



Dear Reader,

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

This year, we meditate on these scriptures with the theme *Sing a New Song!* This collection of writings is offered as a framework for your own Advent ponderings. The writers are a diverse group of people, though all are from this congregation.

We invite you to join us in any of 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

First Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 3

Mark 13:24-31

The season of Advent is about waiting in expectation for the coming of Jesus as a meek and humble child. One of the most wonderful gifts of God is the gift of anticipation which transforms our waiting into a wonder filled experience. The reason we celebrate is the birth of Jesus. God loves us so much that He sent his Son to be a light in the darkness for the world.

Mark's faith community is facing persecution because they are Christians. They live in a world of fear and violence and their only hope is with the Second Coming of Jesus which Mark explains will be different from the First Coming in Bethlehem. This will be a time of great change in the universe unlike anything that has happened and it will be according to God's plan. The Christians are to always watch, wait and be ready for His return at any unexpected moment. The time of the Second Coming and Final Judgment is known to God alone.

In our time suffering, injustice and persecution remain. Our personal relationship with God is important. He is always there for us, and we should be there for Him through prayer, service to others and love for our neighbor. All our lives can be worship of God through the actions we do and the words we say to lift up others. What does God require of us? Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. What matters is that we know Jesus is returning to gather His followers who will be brought to live with Him for all eternity. How will we live until He does?

Sing to God a new song...Shout for joy. For the word of the Lord is right and true. God's words are more enduring than creation. Praise God for who He is. He is faithful in all He does. His promises last forever.

– Rose Marie Kujawa

DECEMBER 4

Mark 13:32-37

I'm a trial attorney. My life is controlled by my calendar. I know the time and date for everything concerning my caseload for the next year. And if there is a calendar conflict with a deposition, meeting or trial, or I'm not ready for something, I just email or call the other attorneys, prepare a stipulation and voila, problem solved. Plus, I get to bill for all that!

But, I'm not sure Jesus had such concerns in mind with his observations in this passage from Mark. My interpretation of these verses is that it is only God who knows when we will die. When our time comes, and we are standing at those pearly gates, about to answer THE question about who we are and are we worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven, what will our answer be?

Be on guard! Be Alert! Watch! If our journey is to follow God, with the hope of joining that great cloud of saints who have gone before us, will we be ready at that moment to give an answer worth of entry? Have we followed God's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves? Have we been Good Samaritans? Have we turned the other cheek?

What I glean from this is the importance of faithful living. To follow the Lord and travel on the road to heaven, the song in our heart to open heaven's gate must be about love, charity, faith, patience, acceptance and hope. And love! You can't calendar learning that song six months from today. You must learn it and sing it now and daily. And by doing so, when our time comes, we'll be ready!

– **Michael V. Lamb**

DECEMBER 5

Psalm 80:1-7

The Psalms, as many of us know, were written to music, and Psalm 80 was, a little internet research reveals, perhaps meant to be sung along with an obscure trumpet-like instrument, or perhaps a stringed, guitar-like device. Scholars are unsure it seems.

Unlike the many hymns of praise sung in a typical church service, however, Psalm 80 is a song of angst. It expresses frustration with God, suspicious that prayers are inspiring ire in the Divine. It is a song of doubt, of resentment. It's the Morrissey song of ancient Israel.

As songwriting goes, angst, doubt, and resentment are natural and intense topics to construct a song, or Psalm, around. These are natural emotions that even the most assured churchgoers encounter in bleaker moments. Has there ever been doubt in the world? Lord knows, it wouldn't be the first time.

There is assurance in that doubt, however (to offer a strange oxymoron). It can come as a comfort to those in bleaker moments that even the ancient people sang for relief. Just like today, thousands of years ago, people wrote pleas they may sing out.

Which of course, is also a plea for a new song. Not a song of doubt, but a song of joy, of release, of blessing. In the time of Advent, we pivot to songs of anticipation. Sing to the Lord a new song, because the old ones are a bummer.

– **Witney Seibold**

DECEMBER 6

Psalm 80:8-19

In this Psalm, the singer talks about how God built something great, how it is desinegrating under attack and if God will but return it whole, the singer promises to worship Him again.

In other words:

*Oh Lord, won't you buy me
A Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches
I must make amends*

*Worked hard all my life
No help from my friends
Oh Lord, won't you buy me
A Mercedes Benz?*

(And if You do this, I will worship You.)

Food for thought: Do we worship God because of the physical things we expect to get? Are we asking for the right things?

I would suggest that the most valuable things are already before us.

God is LOVE. Holding the hand of God despite not getting that “Mercedes Benz” is stepping into and accepting that LOVE unconditionally. And, it is that LOVE that makes all truly valuable things possible.

Prayer:

Dear God, help me to bask in your ever-present LOVE without demanding more in return, for truly there IS nothing greater.

– **Dorothy Nichols**

DECEMBER 7

Isaiah 64:1-9

Potter - 17 Words (Not in a Haiku)



Find the word in the puzzle. Words can go in any direction.

Words do not share letters.

Angry

Boil

Clay

Deeds

Face

Fade

Fire

Hand

Heard

Name

Quake

Rend

Save

Seen

Sin

Wind

Works

- Art Dodd, Jr.

(answer key at back of book)

DECEMBER 8

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

As Paul opens this first letter to the nascent church at Corinth in Greece, we move from a blessing of the church (v3)—an opening he used in most of his letters, and which is often repeated today by many sermonizers—into a thanksgiving for the church. While these are literary and rhetorical conventions, they also serve to remind us that our commonality as disciples of Christ places a unique constraint and demand upon how we live together.

We, like the Corinthian church and like human beings everywhere, will inevitably fall short in our spiritual aspirations. What Paul is reminding us of is that we live with the overwhelming abundance of God's grace which, in turn, requires us as believers to live out and to share that grace and peace with everyone we encounter. Paul is also reassuring us that God's gifts provide us with the strength to do so.

You may know the old and somewhat hackneyed but nonetheless metaphorically compelling story of the becalmed ship in the age of sail. Becalmed in the Atlantic Ocean but within the sight of land, and lacking any smaller boat to take them to shore, the crew faced death for lack of drinking water. As they were about to give up hope a canoe paddled out to them. The sailors cried out begging the canoe to bring them water. The answer came back "Cast your buckets overboard and fill them and drink. You are in the mouth of the Amazon River...in fresh water."

Regardless of informed accuracy concerning potable liquids, the metaphor underscores and animates Paul's thanksgiving that God's spiritual gifts to humanity constitute the living water of life...which is always ours for the asking; to drink of and to share.

– David Bremer

DECEMBER 9

2 Peter 3:8-15a

We spend so much time waiting – to be seated in a restaurant, to see the doctor, to board an airplane, to get on an amusement park ride, or simply to speak with someone on the telephone. Waiting tests our patience. It consumes time we could spend on better things.

What do we do to occupy wait time? Look at a magazine, fiddle with our phones, make small talk, fidget, shift our weight, pace, and/or feed our gathering impatience. We grumble: “I haven’t got all day” or “why is it taking so long.” Waiting is a waste of our time.

Peter contrasts mortals’ finite view of time with God’s infinite time – “all day” to God may be like a thousand years and a thousand years like a single day. So, no, we don’t have “all day” and we don’t know “why is it taking so long” because we cannot know when God’s promise of a day of the righteousness of “new heavens and a new earth” will be fulfilled.

It is a part of our human condition to be impatient with others who make us wait by being slow to complete a project, to satisfy a debt, or to be ready to go on a trip or outing. But it is folly to apply this artificial construct to our relationship with God: God is in charge and God’s is the operative timetable.

Peter posits that God has forestalled bringing about the day of righteousness to give us plenty of time to repent, to lead lives of holiness and godliness, and to be at peace. We are to make ourselves ready to receive the goodness that God has prepared for us. It is what we are to do with God’s time while we’re waiting for the coming of God’s new heaven and new earth.

- **Linda Diane Anderson**

Second Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 10

Mark 1:1-8

How important are Beginnings! The gospels of Matthew and Luke start with the story of Jesus' birth, albeit from different perspectives. John's Gospel starts from the Creation, whereas Mark begins with "a voice crying in the wilderness."

Wildernesses play an important role in the Bible – often denoting forlorn places of isolation. Sometimes this is meant to give one a place for deep contemplation, and other times a place truly cut off from others. For John the Baptist it seems to be a place where he lives regardless of society's norms, a place for him to meditate and seek a soulful relation with God and nature.

And it is in this wilderness that he preaches the Good News of Jesus' coming: the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah that a messenger is coming who will embody God's word for people. For John, this coming Messiah will bring people hope for a real connection with God. People can begin to live with the assurance of forgiveness of sins and thus, bring hope and a belief that they are leading lives as God meant them to be.

I suppose the people of the time knew of this bizarre wilderness man and his strange manner of dress and living. And they must have known he spoke prophetically about repentance. It seems to have broken through to the Judean people who likely lived hard scrabble lives and welcomed John's New Song that a new messenger was coming who not only baptized, but also brought the promise of redemption and love.

Prayer: Holy God, listening to your messenger, may we begin to understand and live out the promises of forgiveness and love. Amen.

– **Bee Campbell**

DECEMBER 11

John 1:6-8

Today's gospel may be short, but it carries a powerful message for us in this time of Advent.

There are key words that should draw our attention to the message that is before us. "Sent" and "witness." God sent John. John had a task to perform that had purpose. He was not sent by God to be the baptizer or a prophet. God sent John to be a witness to what he experienced while he was in the presence of Jesus, who is the Light. God sent John to be the witness to what all Jesus said, His acts, and His miracles so that all who came upon John would come to know Jesus, the Light, through John.

We are called upon (*sent*) to be the *witness* of what Jesus has done for us in our lives. Take time today to reflect on those gifts from our Savior. Make a commitment that those around us will see and learn of Jesus through our words and actions.

We are indeed sent. We are indeed a witness for Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Dear Heavenly Father,

On this day, renew my energy and commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Renew my efforts to "sing a new song" to make disciples for Jesus.

Amen

– Ron Theile

DECEMBER 12

Psalm 85:1-7

Driving around town I often toggle back and forth between the news and SiriusXM's the Bridge, listening intermittently to the world of the present and the memories of my past. The nostalgia invoked by the songs of my youth remind me of my passion back then and the overwhelming intensity of my feelings that drove me to both successes and failures. Over the years, I have struggled to master those feelings and their intensity. Anger has been the most difficult to wrestle into submission.

Even as I toggle from news to song and back again, I marvel at the relevance of the song and its juxtaposition to what's happening in the world, a lyric with an eerie answer of sorts to the struggle and strife of the world the newscaster has just conveyed. Oddly, I hear the song differently now than I remember. Back then, the drumbeat and passion within the lyrics emboldened me and drove me to feel justified in my experience of the moment, fueling my passion and righteous indignation, and justifying my anger. Today, the very same lyrics seem to sing a different song, one of patience, of compassion, of the need for love and acceptance as an antidote. Fear and anger become only a fuel for pain and suffering.

As a young man I naively saw the former as weakness and cowardice, now I see those virtues as intrinsic to sustainability and to the future of our species. When counseling those around me, those wanting change to come from their partners, children, and friends, I encourage them to take the fastest and most powerful route they can to that desired change; start with you. That desired love, that desired kindness and respect; the forgiveness, in the absence of anger, is now immediately present in the relationship, whatever the dynamic, be it friend, loved one or foe.

So, when I ask God for forgiveness, when I ask God for success, a break from struggle, for peace, let me first forgive others, help others to their successes, give my child respect and a break, and extend generosity and peace to all those in my thoughts and in my path.

– **Bill Bumiller**

DECEMBER 13

Psalm 85:8-13

The way is clear and forthcoming. The psalmist in this passage speaks of someone greater than us who will pave the way, will live among us and feel what we feel. But first we must wait for the birth of this Christ child and be the witnesses of a new age. For now, we are quietly waiting and when that day comes, we will sing a new song.

The psalmist is saying to us is to walk with me as I walk with you as I tell you for what I see. When reading this passage a choral refrain of a hymn comes to mind.

Walk with me, I will walk with you and build the land that God has planned where love shines through.

Jesus is the love that shines through in the darkness, the little light that shines in the dead of night. Jesus is the life and the light out of the darkness who will give what is good. Our land will yield its increase as we follow in His future footsteps.

*And when you share your faith with me and work for life made new,
the witness of your faithfulness calls me to walk with you. (v.4)
Walk with me, and I will walk with you and build the land that God has
planned where love shines through.**

– **Chris Reagh**

*The Faith We Sing, “Walk With Me” TFWS 2242 Refrain and v. 4.

DECEMBER 14

Isaiah 40:1-5

Upon reading this passage, the song "Life is a Highway" by Rascal Flatts started playing in my head. I encourage all to go give it a listen, and pay attention to the lyrics. While the song may not have biblical connections, it certainly parallels this passage from Isaiah 40:1-5 in many ways. The song discusses the journey of life, including challenges, successes and the resiliency and relationships that help us overcome tough times. Some lyrics that stand out in particular to me are:

There's a world outside every darkened door
Where blues won't haunt you anymore
Where the brave are free and lovers soar
Come ride with me to the distant shore

I love you now like I loved you then
This is the road, and these are the hands

Knock me down and back up again
You're in my blood, I'm not a lonely man

There's no load I can't hold
A road so rough, this I know
I'll be there when the light comes in
Just tell 'em we're survivors

These lyrics could be interpreted as akin to Isaiah's messages that God is always with us, He is there to show us the way, save us from our sins and reveal His glory, if we make room in our lives for Him to do His work. We are not lonely in life because God is leading us through to His gift of eternal life, if we are so keen to make room.

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3).

- Lindsay Dewald

DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 40:6-11

I am struck by the parallels between our own time and the time of Isaiah's writing to a people in despair. Isaiah was addressing a people with little hope for their future, lacking resolve, and feeling God had abandoned them. This was likely a low point of their time in captivity in Babylon. The prophet can only describe them as "grass" that has no staying power and little capacity to hold on to their former faith in God's caring for them. In the face of this, Isaiah proclaims God's promises "stand forever" and God will empower the people to a brighter future.

Today we find abundant cause to question our own future, both as a nation and as a world community. "Grass" often seems an appropriate descriptor for human thinking and human resolve around us; and it is easy to question whether a caring God is still in evidence. Which is why the message of Advent is so important for us. Advent points to the coming of a Savior who reminds us God has not given up on us. Jesus bears witness to a God who cares very much for us and wills that we might find our way to a future that brings blessing to all people. Our "keeping the faith" is essential if this future is to have a chance.

May this Advent encourage us to sing anew the song of faith in God's promises and God's caring.

– **Rev. Larry Young**

DECEMBER 16

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

What an uplifting passage Paul has given us for this Christmas season. From what we've been taught we know that this time in history was just as perplexing and challenging as the one that we are now living. And, yet, he shares these directives to "rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ."

I have been a member of First UMC since I was very young and blessed that I have been taught the joy of sharing spiritually as well as materially.

Being a person who tends to worry more than necessary I need to remind myself that praying is something to be done any time of the day or night. When I hear disturbing news, I need to set aside time to remember that God is there to protect and shield us.

As things seem to me to be whirling out of control, giving thanks and the knowledge that God is there all ways will help me calm down and put it into a better perspective.

As the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child nears, let us remember Paul's words: May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

– **Claudia Flanders**

Third Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 17

Luke 1:47-55

What a beautiful song Mary sings.

Luke 1:47-55 contains Mary's song of praise and thanksgiving, commonly known as the Magnificat. In this passage, Mary expresses deep gratitude and joy to God, acknowledging Him as her Savior. She emphasizes her humility, describing herself as a humble servant of the Lord. The Magnificat also highlights Mary's prophetic vision of social justice, envisioning a world where the hungry are filled, the rich are sent away empty, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary's words resonate with themes of faith, humility, and God's concern for the marginalized. The passage serves as a powerful reflection on the transformative impact of God's presence in our lives.

Dear God, as you watch us tear our world apart instill in every human being the love, hope and acceptance that somehow we are missing. Teach us how to love each other and take care of each other. We have forgotten. It is a big ask. We need you more than ever. Our prayers to you are gratitude for giving us our heart, mind, and body to do your work. Teach us to be the light of love in the world always, all the time, everywhere.

Amen.

– Sandra Jones

DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 61:1-4

These verses in Isaiah were written centuries before Christ, but could describe Israel as it is today. They speak of captives, mourners, those who grieve and crave vengeance, living in “the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.” The writer speaks to people desperate to emerge from a crushing period of despair.

The term “oaks of righteousness” stands out. It signals hope and transformation. I imagine a righteous oak being sturdy, ageless, holy. Not unlike the tree described by the devout Catholic poet, Joyce Kilmer, a few years before his death in World War I: “A tree that looks at God all day,/ And lifts her leafy arms to pray.”

Kilmer was popular in his time, but not well-respected by critics. Too sentimental, too rhyme-y. But I have always liked sentimental rhyming poems. Easy on the brain. The kind of poems my grandmother liked, and she was a righteous oak herself. Here is the first stanza of *The Acorn and the Oak*, by a long-forgotten sentimental rhymers named Ella Maxwell Haddox.

*Within the damp and clinging earth,
Where darkness spans a world unseen,
An acorn dreamed; and, dreaming, saw
Blue skies and forests green.*

We are that acorn, dreaming of something better, singing a new song. But oaks require patience. By the time this year’s acorns have grown, my grandchildren will be old and gray. And when these same oaks are barely middle aged, my grandchildren’s grandchildren will have come and gone. If we want oaks of righteousness to build a better world, we have to plant acorns now. And we have to keep planting them forever.

– Sam Johnson

DECEMBER 19

Isaiah 61:8-11

This is such beautiful scripture! It begins with God promising a new covenant and ends with the response of His people. I am often reminded of music when I read scripture. The word “justice” instantly brought to mind *We Are Called*. So, I looked it up and there in the lyrics was also our theme: *Sing a New Song!* A song is an appropriate response from us as it was from Mary when she was called to deliver the Savior into the world.

Come, live in the light
Shine with the joy and the love of the Lord
We are called to be light for the kingdom
To live in the freedom of the city of God

Come, open your heart
Show your mercy to all those in fear
We are called to be hope for the hopeless
So all hatred and blindness will be no more

Sing, sing a new song
Sing of that great day when all will be one
God will reign and we'll walk with each other
As sisters and brothers united in love

We are called to act with justice
We are called to love tenderly
We are called to serve one another
To walk humbly with God

May the hope of Advent and the promise of Christmas inspire you to
Sing a New Song to all who will hear!

– Holly Pitrago

DECEMBER 20

Psalm 126

Today's scripture, Psalm 126 is one of the 15 Songs of Ascent, thought to be songs to be sung by pilgrims ascending the road to Jerusalem or chanted as they climbed up the Temple steps.

For me though, the ascent is the poetic structure of the psalm, literally carrying us through the ebbs and flows of jubilation, despair and back up to hope. As it opens, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion" it recalls a joy so great it was like a dream and a restoration of life so boundless all nations had to take notice. It recognizes that the tears of disappointments can revitalize seeds that have been sowed and transform them into sheaves. It acknowledges that the past deliverances of God can again be realized in a future of hope and optimism.

Many people struggle to fully embrace the holiday season. It can be a time when people more acutely feel loss and the absence of loved ones. We can feel isolated, disconnected and alone. We need to break the cycles of despair and sing a new song of hope. We need to remember the joyful times of the past and believe that they can once again be achieved, taking us to new heights, if we just open our hearts. As we anticipate this season of The Nativity we should reflect on the blessings of the past and know that God will deliver us to even better times and greater joys than we can imagine in the future. It is the coming of the Christ child that will fulfill the promises that God has in store for us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, in the past you have brought us to triumphs so great our tongues and hearts were filled with joy and laughter. As the cycles of common life have distracted us and disengaged us from you, please help us to embrace the coming of the Christ child so that we may sing a new song of hope and happiness, in honor of blessings you have bestowed upon us as well as those that the future holds.

- Ben Ing

DECEMBER 21

Psalm 89:1-4

The Psalmist begins with words praising God for God's steadfast love and faithfulness "to all generations." In light of what follows in the Psalm, it seems the writer has his own agenda for currying favor with God, which becomes evident as he switches to speaking of God's covenant with David. (The back story for establishing David's kingship is found in II Samuel 7:8-16). In the Psalmist's mind the kingship was meant to last "for all generations." But it hasn't. The Psalmist seems to be writing at a time when Israel was facing serious attack and the kingship was no more. Later in the Psalm the writer says straight out that God has rejected His covenant promise to uphold David's ongoing kingship, and strongly appeals to God to reconsider.

This is an important back-story for the coming of Jesus several hundred years later. His coming was not the restoration of David's kingship as many Jews hoped. But it was a clear sign of God's keeping covenant with the Jewish people, and for that matter the whole human family. I believe Jesus was pointing to the kind of kingship we all need, even now. So, Advent is a time for celebrating God's love and faithfulness even to our generation.

–Jean Young

DECEMBER 22

Psalm 89:19-26

When we choose to follow God and believe that Christ is His son, God will always be with us. The Psalms bring us the authors' pleas for mercy and the joy and reassurance of God's promises and love.

Just as God reveals He will give sustaining grace to David because of David's faithfulness, He will give that same sustaining grace to us if we follow Him. Without that grace, we are unable to begin each day with strength to meet any challenge that faces us.

On awakening to God's power each day with gladness in our hearts, we can take inspiration from the old hymns that speak to the power of God that strengthens us in all circumstances such as

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing,"

or

How Great Thou Art, "Oh Lord my God. When I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hands have made. I see the stars. I hear the rolling thunder. Thy power throughout the universe displayed."

How can we not be happy and sing for joy when we think of God's great love for us! Whether we sing the old hymns or sing new words of praise and thanksgiving that come to us as we read His word and pray; opening our hearts to Him and His Son gives us a renewed sense of gratitude for His unfailing love.

- Kathy Hall

DECEMBER 23

Romans 16:25-27

“Tick tock, the game is locked.”

In this time of division and war, I think working toward a sense of inclusion may be just what we need right now. Widen the circle, let others in. Replace the school yard desire to feel special based on exclusiveness. Rather we should feel enriched by knowing, loving, and respecting others.

Romans is a hard book for me to read. I find Paul sometimes narrow-minded and harsh, other times, phenomenally wise. Like when he explains “we also glory in our sufferings because we know that produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope... (Ch. 5, v 3.4) Beautiful!

But the passage in Ch. 16 is somewhat obscure to me. I think Paul is sending a message of belonging to non-Jews who embrace a love of the teachings of Jesus. He seems to assert that they are saved, as surely as are the chosen people. “Olly Olly, in come free!”

Everyone needs to feel safe at home. Let peace begin with me.

- Kendra Fleagle Gurlitsky

Christmas Eve - DECEMBER 24

Luke 2:8-20

I am always in awe when I see, hear or read of instances when and where Great Love breaks into history, when it is witnessed by our selves or by our souls. We see it at the First Incarnation with the Creation of the Universe 13.8 billion years ago. Then we have these break in moments occurring in the Old and New Testaments at various locations and places in Israel. And now we have the Second Incarnation with the birth of Jesus, the Christ, on this blessed Christmas Eve, in the little town of Bethlehem.

Ordinary places ~ on a road to Damascus, at wells in Samaria, on river banks, in dark streets at night. A stable in Bethlehem. Ordinary, simple ~ but maybe not so surprising after all.

Have you had one of the moments in time where you just know...something extra ordinary was going on with you, like a “warming of the heart” episode that John Wesley experienced? Or something else ~ just a glimpse of grace ~ in an ordinary space.

I have had two such experiences ~ one on a sidewalk in Kirkwood, Missouri walking home from middle school, and the second one on 11th Street, between California Street and Wilshire Boulevard on a Sunday morning. I didn't know it was Jesus walking beside me until He disappeared at the corner of Wilshire, but I had no doubt moments later what had transpired. Transformational is the only word that comes to mind. Definitely a New Song in my heart and my psyche. Call it utter Great Love paying a visit.

So stay awake ~ as we've been doing throughout Advent ~ you just never know....

Wishing you a Bethlehem moment and
Christmas blessings

– **Martha Ross**

Christmas Day - DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-14

We like to send out Christmas cards to friends and family, but this year, selecting one to send was difficult. In this time of wars, growing hate between peoples, and division everywhere, the sentiments of Joy, Happiness and Peace on Earth written in the commercial cards seemed tone deaf.

One card quoted lyrics from a favorite family hymn: *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the words on Christmas during the Civil War. (The hymn we know is taken from his poem “Christmas Bells.”) Longfellow’s wife had died from injuries sustained in a fire, and his son had been severely wounded in battle. It’s no wonder that one of the verses says:

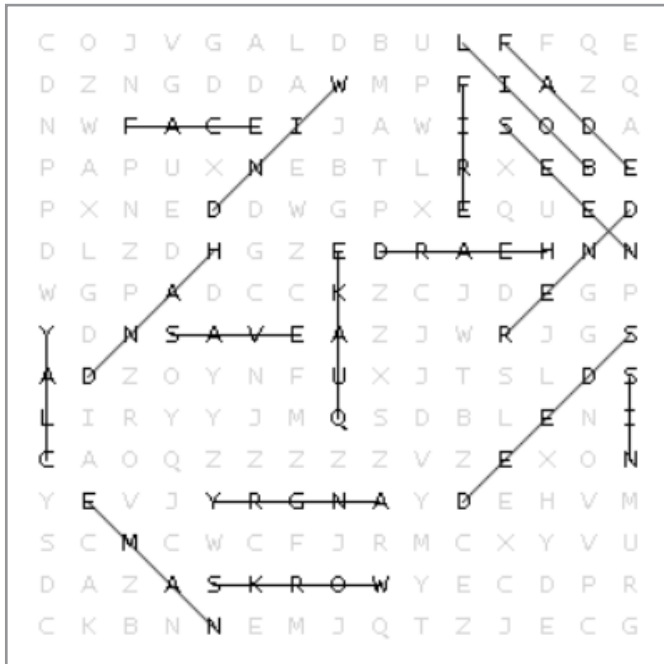
*And in despair, I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

The song of the church bells, though, shook Longfellow out of his despair:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
the wrong shall fail, the right prevail
with peace on earth, good will to men.”*

Yes! Because the Word became flesh, because Christ came into the world, we children of God can Sing a New Song! *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* [John 1:5]. Amen.

– Ann and David Wilson



Answer key to the December 7 devotion