

# Prayerful Reflections

*An Advent & Christmas Devotional for 2022*



Edited by Julia L. Styles

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Cover Art: “Hawaiian Mother and Child” by Charles W. Bartlett, ca. 1920<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, Charles W., 1860-1940. Hawaiian Mother and Child, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57170> [retrieved November 17, 2022]. Original source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles\\_W.\\_Bartlett\\_-\\_%27Hawaiian\\_Mother\\_and\\_Child%27,\\_watercolor\\_and\\_pastel\\_on\\_art\\_board,\\_c.\\_1920.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_W._Bartlett_-_%27Hawaiian_Mother_and_Child%27,_watercolor_and_pastel_on_art_board,_c._1920.jpg).

## A note from the editor

*This fall was a blur!*

After more than two years of dealing with pandemic social distancing and a stifling Georgia summer, the cool air of fall beckoned me and my family outside to pumpkin patches and apple orchards, birthday parties and nights out on the town. Fall was my season of YES, and I would not be deterred from checking everything off my fall bucket list.

Post-Halloween, it became evident that we had overdone Fall. I was exhausted, my husband was exhausted, and my children were still running around high on candy. The NO in November was speaking to us loud and clear. We said “no” to Thanksgiving with family and “no” to weekend social obligations. Just knowing we had weekends with no agendas gave me space to breathe.

I realized my fear of missing out on the fun events of Fall had driven me to such a speed of activity that I had missed out on the everyday activities that make life meaningful. Saying “no” gave me space to play with my kids and relax with my spouse. Saying “no” gave me time to reconnect with God and with myself.

With December just a few days away, holiday fun is calling to us. I have no doubt that invitations for school pageants, holiday house warmings, and Christmas bucket lists have already inundated your calendar, but in the spirit of NO-vember, I invite you to take this opportunity to *pause* and consider where responding “no” to an invitation can create space for things that matter—time with God, time for rest, and time with those you love the most.

*During this holiday season, have you created space for what matters most to you?  
If your schedule seems too full, where could a “no” create room for a “yes” that matters?*

This Advent, I pray that we make space for God, our refuge and redeemer, who took on flesh and walked amongst us, and who empowers us with the spirit of truth and light.

My hope is that ***Prayerful Reflections***, written by 32 diverse Christian women leaders, pastors and teachers, would be a daily encouragement to connect with God through scripture and prayer. Each day of Advent will offer you an opportunity to **Read** scripture, **Reflect** on its meaning, **Respond** to the Holy Spirit and **Rest** in God’s love. We encourage you to share this free devotional with your friends, family and fellow Christians.

Sincerely,

Rev. Julia L. Styles

# Table of Contents

## **First Week of Advent**

<a href="#">A Reflection for Sunday, November 27 by Julia Styles</a>	7
<a href="#">A Reflection for Monday, November 28 by Eileen Lundy</a>	10
<a href="#">A Reflection for Tuesday, November 29 by Rebekah Bolin</a>	12
<a href="#">A Reflection for Wednesday, November 30 by Gillie Abdiraxman-Issa</a>	15
<a href="#">A Reflection for Thursday, December 1 by Jessie Best Chambers</a>	18
<a href="#">A Reflection for Friday, December 2 by Leisha Hawley</a>	20
<a href="#">A Reflection for Saturday, December 3 by Oreon Trickey</a>	23

## **Second Week of Advent**

<a href="#">A Reflection for Sunday, December 4 by Meztli Doles</a>	26
<a href="#">A Reflection for Monday, December 5 by Melanie Myatt</a>	29
<a href="#">A Reflection for Tuesday, December 6 by Jillian Evans</a>	31
<a href="#">A Reflection for Wednesday, December 7 by Anna Murphy</a>	33
<a href="#">A Reflection for Thursday, December 8 by Emily Wickstrom</a>	36
<a href="#">A Reflection for Friday, December 9 by Julie Raffety</a>	39
<a href="#">A Reflection for Saturday, December 10 by Pamela Hogewoning</a>	42

## **Third Week of Advent**

<a href="#">A Reflection for Sunday, December 11 by Dawn Holt Lauber</a>	46
<a href="#">A Reflection for Monday, December 12 by Elizabeth McColl</a>	49
<a href="#">A Reflection for Tuesday, December 13, by Kendall Smith</a>	51
<a href="#">A Reflection for Wednesday, December 14 by Denise McKinney</a>	54
<a href="#">A Reflection for Thursday, December 15 by Ramona Bamgbose</a>	57

[A Reflection for Friday, December 16 by Julie Capel-Burch](#) 59

[A Reflection for Saturday, December 17 by Jenny Hoskins](#) 62

#### **Fourth Week of Advent**

[A Reflection for Sunday, December 18 by Y. Tori Mack](#) 65

[A Reflection for Monday, December 19 by Ruth Zschoche](#) 67

[A Reflection for Tuesday, December 20 by Liz Mosbo VerHage](#) 71

[A Reflection for Wednesday, December 21 by Ellie VerGowe](#) 74

[A Reflection for Thursday, December 22 by Sheli Sloterbeek](#) 78

[A Reflection for Friday, December 23 by Katie Castro](#) 81

#### **Christmas**

[A Reflection for Christmas Eve by Amanda Svejda](#) 85

[A Reflection for Christmas Day by Alicia Vela Anderson](#) 88

[A Reflection for the last day of 2022 by Leannette Sunsum](#) 90

[A Reflection for New Year's Day 2023 by Corenna Hoyt](#) 93

[A Reflection for January 3rd-Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus by Sally Carlson](#) 96

#### **Epiphany**

[A Reflection for Epiphany by Eugena Wright](#) 99

# The First Week of Advent



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<sup>2</sup> Swords into Ploughshares by Soichi Watanabe of Koshigaya City, Japan. ca. 2016  
<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/65/e3/2e/65e32e004171eef0970175829b0379a3.jpg>

# A Reflection for Sunday, November 27

By Rev. Julia L. Styles

Lectionary reading for 11/27/2022: [Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 2:4-5

## Read

### Isaiah 2:4-5 *New Living Translation*

4 The Lord will mediate between nations  
and will settle international disputes.  
They will hammer their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will no longer fight against nation,  
nor train for war anymore.  
5 Come, descendants of Jacob,  
let us walk in the light of the Lord

## Reflect

I yearn for the day of peace that Isaiah envisioned in today's scripture reading, where weapons are turned into gardening tools, and countries are no longer at war.

It seems almost impossible to live in a world free of violence. In 2022, Russia and Ukraine are engaged in a conflict that has killed more than 10,000 people on each side. Myanmar is fighting a civil war that has already taken 10,000 lives. Civil wars, drug wars and terrorist insurgencies plague 29 countries, ending the lives of tens of thousands of people combined<sup>3</sup>. In the United States, where more than 37,000 people have died of gun violence this year<sup>4</sup>, many of us continue our days as normal, without knowing or mourning the loss of so many. *Lord, have mercy.*

In today's passage, we are called to walk in the light of the Lord, but what can we do when the problem of violence looms so large?

It is tempting to fall into despair or complacency. As we look at history, it would be easy to throw up our hands in defeat. The advent of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, did not bring the political peace his contemporaries longed for. The proliferation of Christianity, democracy and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-currently-at-war>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

capitalism have not brought the peace that our ancestors anticipated. Even the presence of churches in our neighborhoods has not stopped the gun violence that plague our streets. What more can I, a single person, do to bring light into the darkness?

For hundreds of years, the season of Advent has been a sacred time to bring the church together to acknowledge the darkness of the world and anticipate the light of Christ. In other words, Advent is the time of year that we practice hope, *as a community*.

What does it mean to practice hope? I am not referring to a wishful hope, where we sit passively waiting for God to return and make everything right. I am encouraging us to practice an active hope, where we live into the future that Isaiah envisioned and Jesus promised. When we live with hope, each action we take towards peace becomes part of the larger work of God's Shalom here on Earth.

What are some examples of living into the hope we profess as Christ followers, especially with regards to a more peaceful and less violent world?

- [RAWtools](#), an organization that turns guns into gardening tools and teaches communities how to face fear and conflict without violence.
- [Everytown for Gun Safety](#), a network of over 10 million mayors, moms, teachers, survivors, gun owners, students, and everyday Americans who have come together to make their own communities safer by advocating for common sense gun legislation.
- [International Fellowship of Reconciliation \(IFOR\)](#), founded by Christian pacifists over a century ago to advocate for nonviolent conflict resolution, and dismantle systems that foster fear and hatred.
- On an individual level, try practicing mindfulness so that you learn to respond to a situation with empathy and compassion rather than reacting out of anger or fear. Two Christian practices that foster mindfulness are [Centering Prayer](#) and [Welcoming Prayer](#).

## **Respond**

As a response to Isaiah's call to "walk in the light of the Lord," consider where God might be leading you to actively practice hope. Research and consider getting involved with an organization like those listed above and sharing with others how we can actively join with God to bring light to dark spaces.

## **Rest**

*God, we thank you for Advent, for an opportunity to join together in spirit with other saints around the world and throughout the centuries to acknowledge our need for a savior, and our need for hope in dark times. Help us to walk in the light of the Lord today and every day.*

*In the words of St. Francis of Assisi<sup>5</sup>,*

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

*Amen*

## **About the Author**



Rev. Julia L. Styles is a Spiritual Director and ordained minister. She is passionate about women in ministry and believes the church needs to hear their voices—in the pulpit, on the page, in the classroom, and in positions of leadership both within and outside the church. To contact Julia for a free spiritual direction session visit [www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com](http://www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com).

Julia resides in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband Derek and two littles, Jakob and Zoe.

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<https://www.archspm.org/faith-and-discipleship/prayer/catholic-prayers/st-francis-of-assisi-make-me-an-instrument-of-your-peace/>

# A Reflection for Monday, November 28

By Eileen Lundy

Daily lectionary reading: [Psalm 124: Genesis 8:1-19: Romans 6:1-11](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 124

## Read

### Psalm 124 *The Message*

If God hadn't been for us  
—all together now, Israel, sing out!—  
If God hadn't been for us  
when everyone went against us,  
We would have been swallowed alive  
by their violent anger,  
Swept away by the flood of rage,  
drowned in the torrent;  
We would have lost our lives  
in the wild, raging water.  
Oh, blessed be God!  
He didn't go off and leave us.

He didn't abandon us defenseless,  
helpless as a rabbit in a pack of snarling  
dogs.  
We've flown free from their fangs,  
free of their traps, free as a bird.  
Their grip is broken;  
we're free as a bird in flight.  
God's strong name is our help,  
the same God who made heaven and  
earth.

## Reflect

Psalm 124 is one of a series of Psalms referred to as Psalms of Ascent. These were Psalms that were sung or chanted by the people of Israel as they drew near to Jerusalem and began to ascend to the city.

This Psalm or song begins with a repeated cry of praise “if God hadn't been for us”. If not for God we would have been overcome and swept away by our enemies, by those who seek us harm. If not for God, who didn't leave us defenseless and helpless. If not for God, who is our help in times of trouble. This is trouble that comes from the hand of our enemies or from the circumstances of living in a broken world. In these times of trouble when we are overwhelmed or feel trapped and afraid for our very life the psalmist proclaims that God's strong name is our help.

This past year, I have experienced several unexpected surprises. None of them were good surprises and all left me afraid and anxious. The most recent was my husband awakening me in

the middle of night asking me to drive him to the hospital because he was having chest pain. He was having a heart attack, but because he arrived at the hospital, at just the right time, not too early and not too late, a stent was placed and there was no damage to his heart. If not for God. The words of Psalm 124 call me to remember this experience of God's faithfulness and deliverance. Remembering this "if not for God" moment helps me to trust God's faithfulness and goodness in situations that remain unresolved and that still bring fear and anxiety. In my fear I can remember and find hope as I cling to the truth of Psalm 124, God is for us.

This Psalm of Ascent fits well with the beginning of Advent as we begin our journey toward the manger. Here at the start of Advent let us find hope in remembering God's faithfulness and deliverance in the past. During our journey may we remember that God is not only for us, but in the birth of Jesus, also God with us, Immanuel.

## **Respond**

Spend some time with Psalm 124, placing yourself in the Psalm. Is there a "if God hadn't been for us" moment you remember? Where might you need to experience God's defense today? How might God's strong name give you help and hope today?

## **Rest**

*Almighty God, thank you for not leaving us alone, for not abandoning us. As we begin our journey of Advent, give us hope in places that seem hopeless as we remember your faithfulness and goodness in times past. May we find hope in knowing that you are for us. Amen*

## **About the Author**



Eileen Lundy lives in Omaha, Nebraska. She is a nurse, a bi-vocational pastor and a spiritual director. Eileen is married to Steve, her best friend, and they have 3 adult children. She loves a good story in any form, spoken, written or video.

# A Reflection for Tuesday, November 29

By Rebekah Bolin

Daily Lectionary Reading: [Psalm 124](#); [Genesis 9:1-17](#); [Hebrews 11:32-40](#)

Selected Passage: Hebrews 11:32-40

## Read

### Hebrews 11:32-40 *NRSVUE*

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two;<sup>[a]</sup> they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

## Reflect

This passage can be summarized in three statements: those whose faith produced amazing results, those who suffered immensely yet kept their faith, and how ultimately our faith is grounded in a hope so much bigger than any of us could ever imagine.

Not gonna lie, sometimes I feel like a faith-failure after reading passages like this. The faith of the people listed seems so large, so dedicated, and so unshakable, that I sometimes feel guilty for my lack of faith, or at times, what seems like lost faith. I have doubted several things I have been taught in the church, I have questioned God many times, and I have been suspicious of religious talk. So on one hand, this passage seems so far-fetched and unattainable that I want to dismiss it, but yet, on the other hand, I cannot reject its reality. Because in actuality, in the depths of my soul, I know that God is real and God is faithful. And even though my faith at times has been as small as a mustard seed, the greatness of God's handiwork is undeniable.

For example...

I have called on God in crazy events and then have seen miraculous outcomes. I have witnessed demons and the work of evil, only to see the divine show up. I have seen the purpose behind the faith-filled decisions I have made in life and how the Lord honored such faith. I have also suffered to great lengths with grief, loss, health, and more, only to discover that sometimes immense faith simply means getting out of bed to face the day. With all this in mind, I know that even when my faith waivers, there is something deep inside which knows the life-giving truth of this passage.

However, what I love most about this passage is the reminder that we have an even greater hope. The passage ends with a reference to the promise of a savior. The birth of Jesus. The One who will make everything perfect. With the knowledge of scripture as a whole, this perfection will come in heaven. Although I do not have the space to go into detail here, I am 100% confident in the reality of heaven. What a wonderful thing for us to look forward to—even if our faith is small, wavering, or holding on by a string. Whatever we are going through, better things are to come!

## **Respond**

Take a moment to reflect on situations in your life where you knew God was at work—whether it was something miraculous or a time of deep suffering, but you somehow felt the Lord's presence. As you remember these times, reflect on how they can impact your faith for your current situation. Ask God to renew your faith, to restore your faith, and to grow your faith.

## **Rest**

*Dear God, thank you for the models of faith listed in Scripture. However, may I realize more and more how you work in my personal life as well. Thank you for your presence throughout my life and how you have worked in faithful ways. I ask for a renewed faith, one that reflects an unshakable hope in how you are working in my life and what is to come. Thank you, Lord.*

## **About the Author**



Rebekah grew up in the wonderful, but way too cold, state of Wisconsin. Although she is still loyal to her WI sports teams, she was wise and moved to a warmer climate. She lived in Los Angeles for 15 years and now finds herself living in the magnificently beautiful state of Hawaii. While in LA, she started and pastored a church in Downtown LA. The church is currently on hold, but the vision is still alive and well and she hopes to eventually make it back to the city. Until then, she is living it up on the Big Island—exploring and enjoying the scenery and working for a major U.S. airline. In her free time, she loves to travel, hike, play soccer, puzzle, read, host game nights, try new food, laugh around the dinner table with family and friends, and enjoy the adventures of life the Lord takes her on.

# A Reflection for Wednesday, November 30

By Gillie D. Abdiraxman-Issa

Daily Lectionary Reading: [Psalm 124](#); [Isaiah 54:1-10](#); [Matthew 24:23-35](#)

Selected Passage: Isaiah 54:1-10

## Read

### Isaiah 54:1-10 NIV

1 “Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband,” says the LORD.

2 “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.

3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.

4 “Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.

5 For your Maker is your husband— the LORD Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.

6 The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit— a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God.

7 “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.

8 In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,” says the LORD your Redeemer.

9 “To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.

10 Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

## Reflect

At first glance, the prophet Isaiah points us to a difficult scripture, but if we know the context and premise, it is easier to understand the comparative nature of our lives. For instance, in v.1, Jesus' suffering is the reason for our singing, yet it was hard for them at that time to believe in freedom since they were married to the Old Covenant/The Law of Moses. Moreover, we also see in Galatians 4:27, Paul compares Israel to an old woman. Israel was compared to an old woman convinced to follow the do's and don'ts — the old rituals. Yet, the new covenant emphasizes Jesus and not us.

In v.7, The Lord tells us he has a promise.

The promise has always been to take her (his bride) back to cleanse and restore her.

*7 "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.*

However, when we think of being abandoned, we never feel as if there will be hope. Many of us have felt abandoned for many reasons naturally and spiritually, and the pain that accompanied the hurt was felt for years and even to date, but God is saying just as he prophesied to Isaiah in this message; I am coming back to clean you and I have compassion or as it is defined: *concern for the sufferings of you, the care for you, the tenderness and mercy of you.*

*I will restore you.* I'd like to think this passage is a reminder that we need to not be concerned about doing everything right and excluding the grace and mercy given to us and living as the people in Israel were described as doing which resulted in God leaving them.

This reflection makes me wonder how God is inviting us to be cleansed in the renewing of our minds while asking us to cleanse our hearts.

## **Respond**

The Advent season is a time of preparation that directs our hearts and minds to Christ's second coming at the end of time. One way to respond in your preparation for this season is to remember the grace that has been afforded to all of us who believe. God reminds us to partner with Jesus, who paid for all the sins of the world.

Tips to respond differently:

- Read stories of grace and renewal.
- If you are feeling abandoned in this season, or your motives and heart posture are seemingly very legalistic, ask God to create in you a clean heart and renew in you a right spirit.
- Forgive others so you can be forgiven.

## **Rest**

*Oh Lord, we thank you for rest. We give you all our love and heartache, turmoil, and joy for the coming days. Our hearts may be troubled, but we know you have compassion for us. We know you see us and know us. Thank you for coming back to rescue us. Thank you for showing us the way through Christ Jesus. Teach us how to love and care in this season authentically. Teach us how to forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into the temptation of evil thinking or evil doing but guide us in the way we should go so that you will get the glory out of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **About the Author**



Gillie is a lover of people and creative outlets. In her spare time, she enjoys quiet moments with God, imagining her next beautiful trip or preparing tasty meals for loved ones while listening to worship music; her new favorite is Victoria Orenze. Hearing and listening with clarity is a desire she seeks after often. She is a wife, a #Boymom of four, a Spiritual Director, and a budding author who helps entrepreneurs that are trainers and coaches establish stronger brands. Connect on IG: @Gillielssa and ask to be on her mailing list for her upcoming book by sending an email to [gillieissa@gmail.com](mailto:gillieissa@gmail.com)

# A Reflection for Thursday, December 1

By Jessie Best Chambers

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 1:12-17, 21-26](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 4:2-6

## Read

***Isaiah 4:2-6 (New International Version)***

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

## Reflect

Reading this passage reminds me that we have a reason to hope, and that our hope will not disappoint.

If I'm being honest, I need more hope and less fear in my life. There is just so much that seems broken and impossible to fix. It's really easy for me to let doom scrolling, scary headlines, and the loud voices of internet trolls cast a heavy shadow over my view of the world. There are a lot of things that I'm worried about - like climate change, divisive politics, racism, hateful speech, oppression, whether or not I'll have the energy to cook dinner tonight, and to top it all off I'm still worried about the pandemic. Frankly, it's exhausting and it's way too easy to feel completely overwhelmed by it all.

Do you know the song, "We Need A Little Christmas?" (*For we need a little Christmas, right this very minute . . .*) If we were to rewrite it as A song, I'd change the words to "because we need a little hope, right this very minute." What I love most about Advent is that it a season that reminds us of the power of hope. Advent proclaims that no matter how dark things may be, the light is coming. And hope is one of the most important tools we have. Hope makes us better people. It enables us to love others even when it's hard. It helps us to forgive others and ourselves. Hope empowers us to be the change that we want to see in the world. Hope also gives us the

confidence to rest when we need to because we can trust that things will be ok even if we take a break from our striving.

This passage from Isaiah describes the new creation that is to come. It's a time when we will do more than survive; we will be restored and made whole. All the wounds that we carry - those caused by the things that have been done to us and the things that we've done - will all be healed. Relationships will be restored and we will live in safety. The earth will be fruitful and healthy because this is a promise for all of creation. We hope for a time when *all* things will be made new. Ultimately, this is what we mean when we talk about the hope of resurrection or new life, and it is no small thing.

## **Respond**

I'd like to invite you to join me in practicing hope this Advent. For me, that will look like taking intentional breaks from social media, participating in worship services where we proclaim our hope in community, listening to music that makes me feel good (as I write this, "Survivor" by Destiny's Child is playing on repeat in my head), and reminding myself that we have been promised a future full of hope, restoration, and healing.

## **Rest**

*Almighty and everlasting God, you have promised to restore all things through your Son Jesus. Help us to cast off our fears and dwell in your promise. Give us the strength to embody the hope that we have in you today and every day. Grant that our words and actions would be shaped not by the world around us, but by the fruits of your spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And help us to share our hope with others by loving our neighbors well. Amen.*



## **About the Author**

Jessie Best Chambers lives and works in Richmond, Virginia. Originally from North Carolina, she did her undergraduate work at Appalachian State University before obtaining a master's in Theological Studies from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. In her free time, you can usually find her taking a walk or reading a murder mystery. Jessie loves the outdoors, the Old Testament, and puns.

## A Reflection for Friday, December 2

By Pastor leisha Hawley

Daily Lectionary Reading: [Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25](#)

Selected Passage: Isaiah 30:19-26

### Read

#### Isaiah 30:18-26 NRSV

##### God's Promise to Zion

<sup>18</sup> Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.

For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

<sup>19</sup> Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. <sup>20</sup> Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. <sup>21</sup> And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' <sup>22</sup> Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, 'Away with you!'

<sup>23</sup> He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; <sup>24</sup> and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. <sup>25</sup> On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. <sup>26</sup> Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the LORD binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

### Reflect

*<sup>21</sup> And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' v21*

While I am waiting on Him, it is the confidence in quietness that gives me strength to reflect and rebound. 2021 was a challenging year for me on many fronts. However, I learned that quieting my soul and being still physically, mentally, and spiritually allowed the Holy Spirit to recoup my strength and help me move forward to an amazing season that I am in RIGHT NOW.

There were days that my eyes were so full of tears that I couldn't see. My body ached with grief. My head always felt like it was exploding. Then the Comforter came in and rescued my total being so I could stand up in this very season. In the voice of William Murphy "This is my season for grace, for favor. This is my season of favor to reap what I have sown. Everythin' is workin' together for my good."

I am here to testify that going back to the basics in every area of your life invites G\_D's presence to surround you, in every season—good, bad, or indifferent. Angels will help you to praise your way through.

Beloved, His mercy endures forever!

## **Respond**

### **"How good it is to center down!**

To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!  
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;  
Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,  
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.  
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;  
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.  
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment — the kinds of people we are.  
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? — what are the motives that order our days?  
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?  
Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?  
For what end do we make sacrifices? Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?  
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?  
Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.  
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind —  
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.  
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,  
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round  
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.  
How good it is to center down!"

— Howard Thurman in *Meditations of the Heart*

## **Rest**

*Lord Jehovah, you said in your word to be still and know that you are G\_D. As we draw in our wandering minds, we enter your presence knowing that all things work together for our good. We thank you for the grace you have given to us to be effective in serving others. Your blessed assurance completes our strength. We will continue to trust each and everyday your power that resides in us. Amen*

## **About the Author**



Pastor Leisha Hawley is an ordained Covenant Lead Pastor at Arlington United Church, Arlington, Washington, and a Religious Coordinator at Washington State Monroe Correctional Facility. A 2015 Masters of Divinity graduate of Howard University School of Divinity, Pastor Leisha is an anointed, vibrant, and powerful woman of God, called to be hands and feet in the earth. Connect sat [www.ieishahawley.com](http://www.ieishahawley.com).

# A Reflection for Saturday, December 3

by Rev. Oreon K. Trickey

Daily Lectionary Reading: [Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 40:1-11; John 1:19-28](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 40:1-2, 10-11

## Read

**Isaiah 40:1-2, 10-11** *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 Comfort, O comfort my people,<br>says your God.<br>2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,<br>and cry to her<br>that she has served her term,<br>that her penalty is paid,<br>that she has received from the Lord's hand<br>double for all her sins. | 10 See, the Lord God comes with might,<br>and his arm rules for him;<br>his reward is with him<br>and his recompense before him.<br>11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;<br>he will gather the lambs in his arms<br>and carry them in his bosom<br>and gently lead the mother sheep. |
|---|--|

## Reflect

Isaiah 40 begins with words that are familiar to many of us: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Everytime I read this chapter, my mind turns to that song from Handel's Messiah, often Quincy Jones' rendition in his *Soulful Celebration* album (so good!).

As a double declaration, a strong command rather than an invitation, the prophet says the word "comfort" twice. To me that says that we're not messing around here, this comfort that God desires for us is real and very important.

What is this comfort that we are to receive? The consolation and care that comes from knowing that God sees all that we are, all we are going through and have gone through, and in it all, God is with us. My elevator version of this passage is: "God's got this and God's got you."

In verse 10 it gets personal. God's comfort comes both as power and might to forgive our sins, to wash our hearts clean, to heal our broken souls AND as the loving, personal, up close care of a shepherd holding a lamb close to his heart.

I love that!

Look at the verbs in verse 11: God feeds us, gathers us, carries us, and leads us. Very up close and personal.

That's one of my favorite pictures of Jesus. He's the shepherd and I'm the lamb in his flock. In the midst of all the chaos of the external landscape around me, the pressing issues of my life, and the questions and fears in my heart, He picks me up and holds me gently against his chest.

He holds me so close, lightly yet securely, that He can hear my heart beat.  
And I can hear His too! The best comfort ever!

## **Respond**

Imagination Prayer invites us to visualize and experience scripture as our own. I invite you to sit quietly for a few moments, take a couple of deep inhales and exhales, and settle into this scene: Jesus reaching down to pick you up and hold you. Notice your initial response to this very intentional and physical act of comfort on His part. Let yourself settle into that place with Jesus and rest in his care. You are safe. You are loved. You are held.

## **Rest**

*Dear Jesus, help me to receive your care and comfort. To be your lamb.  
To let you hold me. To rest in your love, now and in the days to come.  
Amen.*

## **About the Author**



A long-time resident of Chicago, Oreon is a seasoned urban ministry practitioner, spiritual director, retreat facilitator, and Enneagram consultant. She currently lives and serves with the Jesus People community in the city's Uptown neighborhood. Oreon plays a mean blues guitar, loves to laugh deeply, and appreciates a serious cup of coffee. @oreont

# The Second Week of Advent



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<sup>6</sup> Latimore, Kelly. *Trinity*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57123> [retrieved November 18, 2022]. Original source: Kelly Latimore Icons, <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/>.

# A Reflection for Sunday, December 4

by Meztli Doles

Daily Lectionary Reading: [Isaiah 11:1-1; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

## Read

**Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19** *The Voice*

### **A song of Solomon.**

- <sup>1</sup> True God, bestow Your *honest* judgments upon the king  
and *anoint* the king's son with Your righteousness.
- <sup>2</sup> May he be honest and fair in his judgments over Your people  
and offer justice to the burdened and suffering.
- <sup>3</sup> *Under his reign*, may *this land of* mountains and hills know peace  
and experience justice for all the people.
- <sup>4</sup> May the king offer justice to the burdened *and suffering*,  
rescue the *poor and* needy,  
and demolish the oppressor!
- <sup>5</sup> [May the people fear You]<sup>[a]</sup> for as long as the sun shines,  
as long as the moon rises *in the night sky*, throughout the generations.
- <sup>6</sup> May the king be like the *refreshing* rains, which fall upon *fields of freshly* mown grass—  
like showers that *cool and* nourish the earth.
- <sup>7</sup> May good and honest people flourish for as long as he reigns,  
and may peace fill the land until the moon no longer rises.
- <sup>18</sup> May the Eternal God, the God of Israel, be blessed,  
for He alone works *miracles and* wonders!
- <sup>19</sup> May His glorious name be blessed forever  
and the whole earth be filled with His *eternal* glory!
- Amen. Amen.

## Reflect

Psalms 72 begins with a plea from Solomon, *True God, bestow...* as I was reading this passage out loud this plea was all too familiar. In this passage Solomon is asking God to bless him; because his intention is to rule with righteousness and justice, even for the poor who are often denied justice. On November 8<sup>th</sup> many US citizens went out to vote; with the hope that those officials they elected would govern with righteousness and justice. There is hope in this plea, Solomon understands that he is in a unique position, and he also understands that he needs the

spirit of God to guide him. His plea is that when he is weak God is strong and that he will not be forsaken.<sup>7</sup>

In my current role as Care Management in the public healthcare system, I work with patients by resourcing them so that they can overcome challenges related to medical issues, extreme poverty, chronic homelessness, and behavioral health conditions. My prayer is just like Solomon Lord bring justice to the burdened *and suffering*, rescue the *poor and* needy. The holidays are a time of joy, to be around family; in my line of work the holidays are a busy season. I am on the phone trying to find beds for families, calling different organizations to provide families clothing, resourcing patients with churches that will have a thanksgiving dinner to ensure they will have a meal. For many, the holidays can be a time of loneliness and hopelessness. When I can connect my patients with resources that gives me a sigh of relief. *May peace fill the land until the moon no longer rises.*

When I experience a moment like that, I want to thank and bless God. May God, the God of Israel, be blessed, for He alone works *miracles and* wonders! May His glorious name be blessed forever and the whole earth be filled with His *eternal* glory!

## **Respond**

I would like to invite you to read this passage and be still for a few minutes. I would like to invite you to reflect on the community that you serve or live in. What are ways that you can be an agent of hope? Perhaps your church can start a diaper pantry, perhaps your community is in need of a food pantry, legal resources, blankets, a coat drive. We pray that those officials we elected govern with righteousness and justice. I would like to invite you to research and consider getting involved so that we may know peace and experience justice for all the people in our community.

## **Rest**

*Padre Santo que estás en los cielos, thank you for the opportunity that you give us every day to be agents of peace and hope. Allow us to be good stewards of our time and resources; bendito sea por siempre su glorioso nombre; ¡que toda la tierra se llene de su gloria! Amen.*

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:10

## **About the Author**



Meztli Doles was born in El Distrito Federal, Mexico her parents immigrated to the United States when she was 6 months old. Meztli grew up in the North Side of Chicago. Meztli is a graduate of North Park Theological Seminary where she got her M.Div and MBA. She is bi-vocational working as a Care Manager and as a Director of Justice Initiatives for Covenant Youth Collision Meztli is passionate about work surrounding justice and immigration. When she is not working with DACA students you can find Meztli in the park with her husband Jordan and daughter Natalia. During baseball season you can find them enjoying a nacho helmet at Wrigley watching the Cubs play!

# A Reflection for Monday, December 5

By Melanie Myatt

Lectionary reading for 12/5/2022: [Psalm 21; Isaiah 24:1-16a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 24.4-6; 14-16

## Read

### Isaiah 24.4-6; 14-16 NIV

The earth suffers for the sins of its people,  
for they have twisted God's instructions,  
violated his laws,  
and broken his everlasting covenant.

Therefore, a curse consumes the earth.  
Its people must pay the price for their sin.  
They are destroyed by fire,  
and only a few are left alive.

Throughout the earth the story is the same—  
only a remnant is left,  
like the stray olives left on the tree  
or the few grapes left on the vine after  
harvest.

But all who are left shout and sing for joy.  
Those in the west praise the Lord's  
majesty.

In eastern lands, give glory to the Lord.  
In the lands beyond the sea, praise the  
name of the Lord, the God of Israel.  
We hear songs of praise from the ends of  
the earth,  
songs that give glory to the Righteous  
One!

But my heart is heavy with grief.  
Weep for me, for I wither away.  
Deceit still prevails,  
and treachery is everywhere.

## Reflection

I recently started a new job in a retirement village. In many ways, going to work is like entering another world. People are cheerful, friendly, and welcoming. They happily partake of various planned activities and visit over meals. My job feels like a dream.

The more I hear their stories, however, the more I learn more about the incredible hardships, difficulties, and losses that they have endured. While they make the best of things, many of them are more than looking forward to the time they can "shuffle off this mortal coil."

In some ways, this is similar to the "now" and "not yet" aspect of the kingdom of God. We know that Jesus has conquered death. Jesus is the victorious king. And we cheerfully work to bring the kingdom of God here on earth, knowing that God empowers us as Jesus has enabled us to do so.

Even so, this passage reminds us (and not all of us need reminding), that the earth is still consumed by the curse of sin. We still all suffer the consequences of sin that cause heartbreak, turmoil, and devastation. Like the people of Isaiah's day, we can celebrate God's glory. When we sing the joyful Christmas carols, we celebrate all that Jesus did when he came to earth on our behalf.

For some of us, we feel more like Isaiah. Our hearts are loaded down with grief. We don't just wait for Christmas, we wait for freedom from the heavy burden of sorrow we carry. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other - things that are really of no consequence - the door is shut, and can be opened *only from the outside*" (*Letters and Papers from a Prison Cell*).

While we can take comfort from the fact that the door will in *fact*, for *certain*, in *reality*, be opened, we still live with the knowledge that we are indeed waiting for our true freedom. The question is: how will we wait well?

## Respond

Take some time to listen to a version of the hymn, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. (I like [this version](#).) First, listen to it as an expression of any sorrow, loss, or grief you are experiencing during this season. Then, listen to it again. In what way does this song express the hope, joy, and promise of this season?

## Rest

*God, we know that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Even so, that rest can feel elusive. Sometimes we see the curse more than the blessings. You are the God of Comfort. Let us watch and discover glimpses of your joy and comfort throughout this season as we wait and wait, with longing and hope, for you. Amen.*

## About the Author



Melanie is a Spiritual Director and, now, a chaplain. She is learning each day how to hold both grief and joy, curses and blessings for herself and for those with whom she works. If you would like to explore the Bible with her in daily Bible Study, you can [sign up here](#). When she isn't working, she loves her life in Chicago with her four kids.

# A Reflection for Tuesday, December 6

By Jillian Evans

Lectionary reading for 12/06/2022: [Psalm 21; Isaiah 41:14-20; Romans 15:14-21](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Romans 15:14-21

## Read

### **Romans 15:14-21 NIV**

14 I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. 15 Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

17 Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. 18 I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done— 19 by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. 20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. 21 Rather, as it is written:

“Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.”<sup>[a]</sup>

## Reflect

Have you ever heard the phrase, “when you know better, you do better?” It’s something my husband likes to say to our kids to remind them of the lessons they have learned when their actions don’t reflect what they have learned. In this passage, Paul is writing to the Romans and begins his letter by saying “when you know better, you do better.” In the same way that our own children need to be redirected, we as children of God need to be reminded of God’s teachings and be redirected in our actions. This is why we form the habits that we do. Going to church allows us to hear from the Lord weekly and fellowship with others who are followers of Christ. Reading the bible at home gives us unscheduled opportunities to feast on the word of God. It is during these solo times with God that He can reveal His word in new ways. Having an active prayer life is crucial to a good relationship with God. We can go to Him in prayer to do a

self-check on our direction in life. God is faithful. If we seek Him, He will be there. He will help us “do better.”

As followers of Christ, we study the Bible which means our walk should reflect what we know. However, as flawed human beings, we sometimes go astray. But with the right habits in place, we give God ample opportunity to redirect our paths. No matter how many times, we stray, God does not give up on us, so don't give up on Him! Now that you know better, do better!

## **Respond**

Try a new spiritual practice. Here are some suggestions: daily devotions, lectio divina, journaling, daily examen. Pick something that speaks to your heart and spend regular time with God.

## **Rest**

*Dear God,*

*I thank you for never giving up on me. I am forever grateful for You walking beside me in this life. Help me to live a life that is pleasing to You. Please lovingly correct me when I have gone astray for it is my desire to live a life modeled after Christ Jesus. Thank you for being my rock. In Jesus name, Amen*

## **About the Author**



Jillian Evans is a Spiritual Director in Chicago, Illinois. She is passionate about children's ministry and has spent over half her life in ministry to children and their families. She and her husband are recent empty nesters with two children in college and one child who just graduated from college.

# A Reflection for Wednesday, December 7

By Anna Murphy

Lectionary reading for 12/07/2022: [Psalm 21](#); [Genesis 15:1-18](#); [Matthew 12:33-37](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Matthew 12:33-37

## Read

### **Matthew 12:33-37** *Message Version*

**33** “If you grow a healthy tree, you’ll pick healthy fruit. If you grow a diseased tree, you’ll pick worm-eaten fruit. The fruit tells you about the tree.

**34-37** “You have minds like a snake pit! How do you suppose what you say is worth anything when you are so foul-minded? It’s your heart, not the dictionary, that gives meaning to your words. A good person produces good deeds and words season after season. An evil person is a blight on the orchard. Let me tell you something: Every one of these careless words is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation.”

## Reflect

In this digital age, where we observe life in tiny sound bytes and highlight reels, the polarizing power of words and outward appearances has become increasingly influential.

With filters and photoshop, it’s maybe easier than ever to project a pretty picture with the perfect caption.

And yet, this is not a new concept. I remember even as a child every year my mom would dress the family in coordinating outfits for the church directory, receiving our very own Olan Mills frameable copy. Whether it was my mom instructing my brother to “stop gritting his teeth and smile naturally,” or me melting down because one of my brothers had hit me (read: inadvertently bumped into me), these family photos typically involved some choice words and scuffling about that was conveniently not listed in the description.

Although these church pictures represented only a moment in time, the extent to which we use and view social media has developed into essentially streaming a curated version of our lives moment by moment.

This is the philosophy I believe Jesus is addressing here in Matthew's gospel. His frustration and harsh words are to the Pharisees, a group of religious leaders at the time who were known for their strict observance of and adherence to the law. Essentially they're insta profiles are flawless. They were posting all the right captions on their pictures that were edited to show the "holiest" moments – but Jesus is not satisfied with their performative hashtags or even their scripture memorizations... He knows what's going on behind the screen.

"It's your heart, not the dictionary that gives meaning to your words." In other words, put your phone down and take a look around at the life you are *actually living*. What is going on behind what you are neatly displaying for the world to see? How is your heart? God doesn't want some edited down facade of closeness– God wants a real, intimate relationship.

## **Respond**

As a response to the reading today, I encourage you to take a break from whatever space you feel a need to present anything other than the truest version of yourself. Maybe that's social media, a relationship, a hobby... I don't know what it is for you, but I do know that you are worthy, capable, and loved from the inside out- not the other way around. In this season of preparation, maybe we can use the next few weeks, one week, or even a few days to examine our raw, unedited hearts and the fruit it is producing.

## **Rest**

*Join me in a prayer of daily examen*

- 1. Breath deeply. Know that you are in God's presence. God has been with you in every detail of your day. As we prepare to reflect on the day, let us ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us what they would have us see. Inhale. Exhale.*
- 2. Give thanks. Every good thing is a gift from God. Even the small things in our day like seeing the clear blue sky or a kind smile from a stranger. Allow gratitude to draw you in to your day.*
- 3. Review the day. Think back over your day- who you were with, where you were, what you did. Even the smallest details. Recall the sites, sounds, and conversations. What enlivened you in your day? What discouraged you? Give your attention to those moments and offer them to God.*
- 4. Face the places where we fell short. Reflect on the moments you felt disconnected. Do you need to offer or ask for forgiveness? Look to God for guidance.*
- 5. Look ahead to tomorrow. What are you looking forward to? What concerns you? Ask God to open your eyes, ears, and heart to where God might be working. Remember that God, again, will be present in all tomorrow's moments– big and small, guiding you in your life.*

## **About the Author**



Anna Murphy calls Richmond, VA home - although she has a passion for people and experiences from all over the globe. Her mission is to participate in the resurrection of dead things coming back to life and has the privilege to take part in that daily as the manager of a substance use recovery program. Although she has a deep love for running and the spiritual parallels it provides, most nights Anna can be found getting her miles in running around the house after her spirited cat, Lucy.

# A Reflection for Thursday, December 8

By Emily Wickstrom

Lectionary reading for 12/08/2022: [Thursday, December 8, 2022: Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 1:6-18; 2 Peter 3:1-10](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 146:5-10

## Read

**Psalm 146:5-10**, New Living Translation (NLT)

5 But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God.

6 He made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and everything in them.  
He keeps every promise forever.

7 He gives justice to the oppressed  
and food to the hungry.

The Lord frees the prisoners.

8 The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are weighed  
down.

The Lord loves the godly.

9 The Lord protects the foreigners among  
us.

He cares for the orphans and widows,  
but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.

10 The Lord will reign forever.

He will be your God, O Jerusalem,  
throughout the generations.

Praise the Lord!

## Reflect

It seems like the world shifts on November 1 each year, and this year is not unlike others. The stores had already put out much, if not all, of their holiday gear. You can smell the cinnamon and pine all around! The holiday season is in full swing... or at least commercially it is! So the question remains: "Do you embrace the holiday season before or after Thanksgiving?" Personally, I'm team #post-thanksgiving, but I found myself needing a little Christmas even before November 25th this year.

One of my favorite markers of the season is holiday music. I love how the different seasons can engage our various senses, and I find that music helps me remain centered during the holiday season. While I can really only listen to Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You" a handful of times before it loses its magic, there are songs that stay on repeat for me, even after Christmas. One song that I never grow tired of hearing is "O Holy Night." The song is so calming to me, and the lyrics are like balm to my soul,

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,*

*It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
'Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;  
Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.  
O night, O holy night, O night divine.*

These lyrics came to mind as I sat with today's passage in Psalm 146. The word **hope** in both the passage and the song caught my attention,

"But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose **hope** is in the Lord their God,"

"A thrill of **hope** the weary world rejoices."

As both the Psalm and the song allude, our world is filled with things that can cause us to lose hope. Oppression, hunger, and imprisonment continue to disproportionately affect our Black and Brown siblings. We are all held captive by things that imprison us - illness, pain, suffering, grief, systemic injustice... the list could go on and on.

The Psalm and the song offer us a framework to help us endure these times of hardship: **to hope in the Lord**. I appreciate that the psalmist doesn't ignore or gloss over the injustices, but names them and shows what God does in the midst of them. For when we hope in the Lord, we can be reminded that:

God is the Creator over all things and is a promise keeper (v. 6);  
God gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry (v. 7);  
God gives sight to the blind and lifts up those who are weighed down (v. 8);  
God protects the foreigners and cares for the orphans and widows (v. 9).

What a thrill of **hope** - and the weary world rejoices!

## **Respond**

What are some things that are making you weary or are weighing you down? Where do you feel that heaviness in your body? Reflect on these in a way that is meaningful to you (i.e. journaling, creating something, processing outloud, etc.).

After you have reflected on these areas, invite God to sit in that space with you. How does it feel to have God in that space? Where can you see God at work in the midst of that weariness and heaviness? Where do you find your *thrill of hope*?

## **Rest**

*God, thank you for being true to Your Word - a promise keeper. We try to hold fast to that, especially in a weary world that is filled with so much darkness, so much injustice. Help us carry and lift up the things that are weighing us down. We praise You, for we know that we can put our hope in the one who brings light and life, who is a defender and a protector of the oppressed and most vulnerable. Help us to cling to the hope only You can offer - one that brings love, joy, peace, and everlasting life. Amen.*

## **About the Author**



Emily, a born-and-raised Midwesterner, now serves in a co-vocational role in Sacramento, CA, both as an associate pastor at Common Ground Church and as a hospital chaplain student at Sutter Roseville Medical Center. Emily is passionate about work surrounding justice and equity, believing they are integral parts of the Gospel. Some of her favorite things include: listening to people's stories, being with her husband Ben and their dog Rocky, and spending time in and around water (always missing Lake Michigan). You can follow along with her life, ministry, and everything in between on her Instagram (@emily.wickstrom).

## A Reflection for Friday, December 9

By Rev. Julie Raffety

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 4:13-17; 2 Peter 3:11-18](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Ruth 4:13-17

### **Read**

**Ruth 4:13-17** *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

### **Reflect**

As a woman, this passage can be a bit problematic if we confuse God's blessing with the misconstrued Biblical narrative of a woman redeemed or valued only through childbirth. In contrast, both Naomi and Ruth are blessed here by God, because of their faithfulness. In this case, the additional blessing is a child, famously part of the lineage of King David which is extended all the way out to Joseph, Jesus' earthly father and as such, to Jesus our Savior.

But faithfulness is loving God, following Jesus, and extending Spirit-filled grace to others within our circumstances, not because of them. A female pastor friend of mine recently met for lunch with a Lead Pastor about an open Associate Pastor position. The Lead Pastor explained that the position would entail some travel for mission trips and was concerned whether that would work for this female once she and her partner started having kids. I'm sure he meant well, but none of us can truly predict the circumstances of life. We can do our best to plan and vision and know ourselves and those close to us, but so many times we make the best decision we can with God's help and everything still gets "blown" up a few years later. All of this to say, faithfulness does not equivocate with predicting the future or remaining stagnant over time. Faithfulness is saying yes to God within our circumstances. I think it is accurate to say that it would have been a faithful decision for Naomi and Ruth to journey together to Bethlehem even if Ruth had never met Boaz there. It is so hard for us in a culture of achievement and success, but faithfulness is not dependent on results, but rather on commitment to God (and to loving others) throughout.

Rather than redemption through childbirth, I believe the faithfulness of the story of Ruth is the love extending beyond bloodlines between Naomi and Ruth to leave a known place and journey in search of God and God's provision into the unknown. And perhaps this is the faithfulness we so resonate with and are inspired by in the birth story of Christ. We love that God made a way for Christ in unusual and imperfect circumstances. We love that an inhospitable stable could welcome the King of the World. We love that God showed up in odd circumstances and at a seemingly inopportune time.

It is much harder to receive God's blessing upon our faithfulness in unusual, imperfect, odd, and inopportune circumstances in our own lives. It seems crazed to sing "Joy to the World!" when our dream job changes into being laid off. It seems wrong to whisper "thanks be to God" when we fail at something for the final time. And it often seems inauthentic to truly "rejoice always," (1Th 5:16), especially in times when most of the people we care about are sad. But the most authentic piece about the story of Naomi and Ruth is not that God *finally* blessed them, but that God *continually* blessed them. God blessed them with each other, giving them the courage to remain faithful to God in life's many circumstances.

Emmanuel means "God with us." God gave Naomi and Ruth one another as they struggled to remain faithful within all circumstances. It is easy to identify some of the blessings that came later on in the story - food and shelter, the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, and of course, the birth of a child to continue the line of David. But perhaps the greatest blessing was the commitment of Naomi and Ruth to struggle to follow God together, no matter what. Naomi and Ruth were faithful to God and to one another and therein lies God's true blessing.

## **Respond**

I invite you to ponder the following questions:

- How am I remaining faithful to God and to others around me right now?
- How is God blessing me in my current circumstances? What blessings surround me even in imperfect circumstances?
- Am I confusing faithfulness with achievement? What does faithfulness look like given an unknown future?

## **Rest**

*Ever-faithful God,*

*Thank you for your faithfulness to me in all circumstances. Thank you for blessing me continually. May you make clear to me how I am called to remain faithful to you today and in this moment. Help me to do so without expectations and future demands. Give me the faith to be joyful and thankful for your continued faithfulness whatever my life's circumstances may be. Amen.*



## **About the Author**

Rev. Julie Raffety is the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, NJ and an Associate Mathematics Teacher at Sage Alliance High School, working with kids with social and emotional diagnoses. Julie writes a monthly blog for the Presbyterian Outlook, and personal blog ([revraff.wordpress.com](http://revraff.wordpress.com)) and enjoys running, hiking, cheering for the Green Bay Packers, and eating popcorn. She is the proud aunt to three nieces and one nephew. Reading and praying through Advent devotionals is one of her most favorite pieces of the Advent/Christmas season.

# A Reflection for Saturday, December 10

By Rev. Pamela Hogewoning

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 146:5-10; 1 Samuel 2:1-8; Luke 3:1-18](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 3:1-18

## Read

### Luke 3.1-18 NLT

It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene. <sup>2</sup> Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. <sup>4</sup> Isaiah had spoken of John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!

Clear the road for him!

<sup>5</sup> The valleys will be filled,  
and the mountains and hills made level.

The curves will be straightened,  
and the rough places made smooth.

<sup>6</sup> And then all people will see  
the salvation sent from God.”

<sup>7</sup> When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.” <sup>10</sup> The crowds asked, “What should we do?” <sup>11</sup> John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” <sup>12</sup> Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” <sup>14</sup> “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.” <sup>15</sup> Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. <sup>16</sup> John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup> He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the

threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”<sup>18</sup> John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

## **Reflect**

For me Advent has become an opportunity to audit the expenditure of my mental, physical, and emotional energy. What is taking up space in my head and in my heart? What is taking up space on my calendar? This is a sobering process. Often this examination reveals that what and who I say are my priorities are not getting the corresponding amount of my attention and energy. I am confronted with the inconsistency between my intentions or desires with my actions. I do not think I am alone in this experience. Many of us go from day to day not considering if the way in which I lived out my day lines up with my priorities and responsibilities. We are consistently inundated with opportunities—good and bad—that sway us from our priorities or take over our time and focus. Even spending the time to consider what to say *yes* and *no* eats up this precious resource of space in our lives. This is why I take Advent as an opportunity to ask myself some hard questions. In whom or in what am I investing my time? How does this line up with my faith, my family, myself, my work? After this point of examination, I can ask, where do I go from here?

The answer to this question is on display in the life of John the Baptist. I am challenged by his message and his life. He lived in a way that prioritized the message he was given to preach and lived in a way pointed toward the coming of the Messiah. He called people to repentance, to turn away from distraction and to turn to the Messiah who is to come. John preached it and he lived it. His life was void of certain comforts and niceties that I would deem essentials. The man wore camels' hair and ate locusts. As I sit in my nice warm home, I am not suggesting eating locusts. However, I am honest with myself and need to repent from all the excess that is taking up space on my calendar, time in my thoughts, and room in my heart. This time of repentance looks like actively saying no to the excess in my life so that I can put the fullest amount of my time and energy into what counts. When I do this, I can enter the season of Advent with a keen awareness of what God is doing in my life and in the world. There's room and awareness.

In her book, *Anonymous*, Alicia Brett Chole presents the idea of *alert availability* as a posture during seasons of waiting. Advent is a season of waiting. John the Baptist embodies the posture of alert availability in a season of waiting for Jesus to come to earth. We have the same calling, to be alertly available to the continual coming of Jesus Christ. Alert and available to participate in his coming into our lives, the lives of our families, into our communities, into our work places, and into this world.

## **Respond**

This scripture passage explicitly warns us that Jesus' coming brings with it a “cleaning house” dynamic. Are you willing to do that work now in your own life? What are the excesses in your life

that draw your time, attention, and resources away from Jesus? What is he inviting you to let go of and what to grab on to?

## **Rest**

*Lord, forgive me for allowing (name the specific things that have been identified) to take up space and distract me from you. Reset my focus so that I am alertly available to you and your coming in my day to day activities as well as my long term goals and desires. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



## **About the Author**

Pamela Carlson Hogewoning lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband and three kids. As an ordained minister, she served in pastoral ministry for ten years. Recently, Pamela started her role as Chaplain of a Provincial Correctional Centre where she cares for the spiritual needs of inmates. Pamela enjoys the beauty of northern Ontario and for fun, she and a friend host the [Hogs and Rope](#) podcast.

# The Third Week of Advent



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<sup>8</sup> Pittman, Lauren Wright. Marys Song, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57074> [retrieved November 18, 2022]. Original source: Lauren Wright Pittman, <http://www.lewpstudio.com/>.

# A Reflection for Sunday, December 11

By Rev. Dawn Holt Lauber

Daily Lectionary reading: [Isaiah 35:1-10](#), [Psalm 146:5-10](#), [Luke 1:46b-55](#), [James 5:7-10](#),  
[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 35:1-10

## Read

**Isaiah 35:1-10 (NIV)**

### *Joy of the Redeemed*

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

## Reflect

The formidable jazz pianist and composer, Dave Brubeck, has a lovely setting of Isaiah 35. When I sang his song for the first time, I truly began to understand the depth of this passage. Brubeck's musical conception of Isaiah's words exquisitely captures the state of the Israelites traveling home from exile. They have felt the weight, despair, and vulnerability of their captivity in their very bones.

In Brubeck's composition, for soprano and piano, the opening phrase is haunting, mostly mournful, with glimpses of hope. We immediately recognize that the singer has returned from a weary, broken place and is experiencing her first vision of the change in landscape - once dry and barren, now green and flourishing. At first, the vocal line descends or remains in mid-range.

*“The desert and the parched land will exult. The step will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with a joyful song.”* As I learned this song, I imagined the singer responding to her first view of the promised land with restraint and awe. The years of oppression have worn her down and she only barely lifts her eyes to the horizon. Then the soprano line begins to ascend, *“They will see”* (higher) *the glory of the Lord* (higher) *the splendor of our God!*” Her singing soars over her as she rejoices in the Lord’s faithfulness. Then the melody makes an even more pronounced turn, from a minor to a major tonality. *“Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak.”* Back to the haunting plea of the opening phrase - *“Say to those whose hearts are frightened”* – and then ascending again: *“Fear not”* (higher). *“Be strong”* (higher). *“Here is your God.”*

I serve as a chaplain in a senior living community so the images in these verses of physical weakness and loss are especially poignant. On a daily basis, the chaplains help their residents find spiritual hope even as they confront feeble hands and unsteady knees, eyes and ears that no longer function as well as they once did, fearful hearts and anxious thoughts. *“God is with us. We are not alone.”* This is the theme of just about everything I preach in my chaplain ministry. Any glimpse of hope resonates with our residents. They desperately need to hear the promise of streams in the desert. And I need to hear them. These are words that have seen me through weary, barren lands too – where sorrows and sighs flee in the face of gushing waters and bubbling springs.

Brubeck ends his song by returning again to that glorious ascending and affirming line: *“We shall sing with joy ere lasting. Fear not* (higher). *Be strong* (higher). *Here is your God!”*

## **Respond**

Reflect on the goodness and faithfulness of God in your life story. Take some time this Advent season to reflect on the barren and weary places, and the places where water gushed forth in the wilderness and the burning sand of life became a calming pool.

## **Rest**

*Holy God - Give us ears to hear your promises of hope. Give us eyes to rejoice in the wonders of your beauty. Lead us by your Holy Spirit in the Way of Holiness and welcome the love and mercy of Jesus Christ into our lives. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

## **About the Author**



Rev. Dawn Holt Lauber is an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church. She has served in several pastoral positions, most recently as Lead Chaplain for Independent Residents at Covenant Living of Windsor Park (Carol Stream, IL) and Worship Pastor for the Northbrook Covenant Church. A professional musician, Dawn enjoys leading jazz vespers services, including the sacred music of Dave Brubeck.

# A Reflection for Monday, December 12

By Rev. Elizabeth McColl

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 42; Isaiah 29:17-24; Acts 5:12-16](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 29: 17-24

## Read

**Isaiah 29:17-24** *New Living Translation*

New Living Translation

**17** Soon—and it will not be very long—the forests of Lebanon will become a fertile field, and the fertile field will yield bountiful crops. **18** In that day the deaf will hear words read from a book, and the blind will see through the gloom and darkness. **19** The humble will be filled with fresh joy from the Lord. The poor will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. **20** The scoffer will be gone, the arrogant will disappear, and those who plot evil will be killed. **21** Those who convict the innocent by their false testimony will disappear. A similar fate awaits those who use trickery to pervert justice and who tell lies to destroy the innocent. **22** That is why the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, says to the people of Israel, “My people will no longer be ashamed or turn pale with fear. **23** For when they see their many children and all the blessings I have given them, they will recognize the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob. They will stand in awe of the God of Israel. **24** Then the wayward will gain understanding, and complainers will accept instruction.

## Reflect

When asked to write about one of the scripture passages for this day, I chose this one because of the first few words in verse 17: “...soon, and it will not be very long...” I wonder how many of us have heard or read words similar to these, and thought, how soon is, “soon?” The prophet, Isaiah, says these things will come to pass, but how soon? Or is that what matters? There have been so many challenges for most of us, especially in the past few years. And now, in this time, with global calamities of war and climate crises, poverty and deprivation, and neighborhoods in chaos with escalating cost of living struggles and food banks resources taking care of people who would never have thought they would have need of one, where are the possibilities of fertile fields?

And yet, here we are; another Advent. Another reminder to hope even in the darkness, to remember even in the gloomiest of places, the universal Christ is in our midst. In the human who sits next to us on the train to work, in the small act of kindness seen being done so gently, in the friend who sends us a thoughtful message in the midst of a scrambled day, in the last of

the autumn flowers composting into next year's growth. There are many "fertile" fields even in the midst of a seemingly despairing world. Maybe at this time of year, when the days are so short, they are harder to find, but they are there. Perhaps we need to take a longer look at what at first seems lost or not coming soon enough.

## **Respond**

As I was writing this, the words of an old hymn kept circling in my mind.

*"For lo! the days are hastening on,  
by prophet seen of old,  
when with the ever-circling years  
shall come the time foretold  
when peace shall over all the earth  
its ancient splendors fling,  
and the whole world send back the song  
which now the angels sing."*

What blessings do you see on this day? There will come a time when peace shall be over all the earth. Can we even think that time might be soon? Can you see something of the universal Christ in everything, especially in those things which seem so far from what they ought to be?

## **Rest**

*God, grant us peace in this one day, this day we call "today." We are all too aware of each day's passing and we sometimes long for time to slow down so we can catch our breath and know you are in our midst. Even in darkness; even in gloom, even when it seems soon is not soon enough. And whatever our day brings, may we be able to stand in awe of you, the Holy One of Israel.*



### **About the Author**

Rev. Elizabeth McColl is an ordained minister and a professional musician, currently residing in Edinburgh, Scotland, the city to which she returned after studying and working in the USA.

# A Reflection for Tuesday, December 13, 2022

By Kendall Smith

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 42: Ezekiel 47:1-12: Jude 1:17-25](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Ezekiel 47:1-12

## Read

### **Ezekiel 47:1-12**

“In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway.

Measuring as he went, he took me along the stream for 1,750 feet and then led me across. The water was up to my ankles. He measured off another 1,750 feet and led me across again. This time the water was up to my knees. After another 1,750 feet, it was up to my waist. Then he measured another 1,750 feet, and the river was too deep to walk across. It was deep enough to swim in, but too deep to walk through.

He asked me, “Have you been watching, son of man?” Then he led me back along the riverbank. When I returned, I was surprised by the sight of many trees growing on both sides of the river. Then he said to me, “This river flows east through the desert into the valley of the Dead Sea. The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows. Fishermen will stand along the shores of the Dead Sea. All the way from En-gedi to En-eglaim, the shores will be covered with nets drying in the sun. Fish of every kind will fill the Dead Sea, just as they fill the Mediterranean. But the marshes and swamps will not be purified; they will still be salty. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.”

## **Reflect**

We are familiar with the advent themes of light and darkness—and many familiar passages draw attention to that. We put up Christmas trees to signify the light that is coming. We light candles to remind us of God’s Spirit among us, and of the coming Messiah. But this passage introduces some new imagery for us to ponder this Advent season: water. At the time of my writing this, I am gazing out my window and seeing brown and crispy lawns. In some spots, it is just dirt, cracked and dry. Nothing has grown here for several months. We have lived through the driest season in over a century and are in desperate need of rain. The area farmers gave up and turned their barren crops into straw. Many of my flowers simply went dormant long before they normally do. I am watering a handful of plants still, but it isn’t in hopes of their blooming any longer. It’s simply to keep them alive for next season. Hopefully, next year we’ll get some rain.

Reading Ezekiel’s vision this fall was refreshment for my soul. And I would imagine it would have been for its first hearers: water that makes salt water fresh, water that is teeming with fish, water that makes trees produce fruit in abundance! Rather than the barrenness that I see out my window, this is a picture of non-stop *life!*

We anticipate Christ’s coming as a baby at Christmas. But this passage reminds us that Jesus, as an adult, embodied these things, too. His body was the Temple he promised to rebuild. He was the source of Living Water for the woman at the well. He was the One whose voice alone caused his disciples’ nets to be overflowing with fish. He was the One who could command the fig tree to dry up or bear fruit. He was the One who, rather than be made unclean by the presence of those suffering and dying, would make those around him clean—purifying them with simply a word or a touch.

In this passage, the prophet is asked, *Have you been watching?* And as he looks up from the waters, he realizes the bounty that this river has created. This is no ordinary water flowing from the temple. It has the power to make dead things come alive!

## **Respond**

As we purposefully *wait* this Advent season, preparing our hearts for the coming of our Lord, may we also lift our gaze from the waters in which we’re swimming. *Have we been watching?* Allow this season to be a time of purposeful *noticing*. Where is new life growing? Where are dead things being made alive? Where is the Living Water of Christ’s Presence transforming you?

In addition to the lights and candles we use as symbols to remind us of the coming Hope, is there a way you could include a jar of water?

## **Rest**

*Living Water,  
flow through my life today.  
Make those things that are dead come alive.  
Lift my gaze from these turbulent waters  
and allow me to see what is springing to life around me.  
I wait in hope for your Living Water to transform my world completely!*

## **About the Author**



Kendall Smith is an elementary science teacher, and is currently a seminary student through North Park Theological Seminary. She loves reading, writing, thunderstorms, and long walks outside. She and her brother write a blog called *Not All Who Wonder Are Lost* ([www.invitationtowonder.com/wonderings](http://www.invitationtowonder.com/wonderings)) where they write about science, faith, doubt and the goodness of God.

# A Reflection for Wednesday, December 14

By Pastor Denise McKinney

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Jude 1:17-25](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 42

## Read

or listen to [Satisfied in You \(Psalm 42\)](#) by The Sing Team

### Psalm 42 NRSVUE

**1** As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.

**2** My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?

**3** My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”

**4** These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng[a]  
and led them in procession to the  
house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of  
thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.

**5** Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,  
my help

**6** and my God.  
My soul is cast down within me;

therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.

**7** Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your torrents;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.

**8** By day the Lord commands his  
steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.

**9** I say to God, my rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?”

**10** As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”

**11** Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

## Reflect

I am not a true fan of roller coasters. I certainly enjoy a medium intensity one with a few dips and curves that move a delightful tickle from my stomach up to my lungs. But I have an entire list of the kind of roller coasters I will not ride. Wooden—too jerky. No loops—my insides are

turned upside down for a day after. No long steep climbs and deep vertical dives that make me feel a most certain death awaits me. Nothing that goes forward then slingshots me backwards to the original start. All these have a few things in common. They are full of unknowns and strip me of any sense of safety or control. As I rode in the roller coaster car climbing the first high rise incline of the Texas Giant wooden coaster twenty years ago, I remember thinking “when will this be over?” The last time I accidentally got on a ride with multiple loops, all I could think was “where are the places I am going to be hanging on by my toes?” And every time I step on a roller coaster that I should know better, but go anyway, I ask myself, “Why did I do this?” And on every ride I wish I’d avoided, my family will tell you I pour out my soul in screaming these questions throughout the ride.

This Psalmist seems to be on a spiritual roller coaster that is jerking him between devastating loss and momentary glimmers of hope. He is thirsting to know, “When is God actually going to show up in all this?” His friends taunt with “Where is your God now?” And looking inwardly, he longs to know why his soul is so burdened and discouraged. When? Where? Why? All he holds onto is a thread of sacred connection that is only described as deep calling to deep.

The push and pull of our faith journeys often feels very much like this and unlike roller coasters, we usually don’t have a choice to avoid the ride. One day belief is simple and comes as easily as the light tickle of a gentle roller coaster. The next we are filled with the when, where and why questions of an unexpected and discouraging uphill struggle. But like the psalmist, we are invited to pour out our longings and ask the honest questions that surface with each plunge into trouble. And when every day is filled with unknowns we long to avoid and we feel stripped of any control for our destiny, there remains an invitation to a hope deeply embedded in our souls. It’s the spiritual memory, the impalpable song, the pulse of a hidden love finding our deepest selves sometimes at the very moment our mouths are uttering the hardest questions and our eyes are heavy with sleep.

## **Respond**

Take a few minutes to be still while listening to the song, [Asleep](#) by *Sleeping at Last*.

Start by considering what is pushing and pulling your life in ways you feel stripped of any ability to control or even understand the unknowns. Acknowledge the deep dives and uphill climbs you are facing.

Then be still and allow your soul to connect your deep self to the deep presence of God. Allow the pulse of hidden love to meet you even in weariness and uncertainty.

## **Rest**

*Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your torrents; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. Why are you cast down, O my soul and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

Amen.

## **About the Author**



Denise McKinney lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she leads The Well, a dinner church planted in 2020. She also writes, sings, runs and bakes. She is married to Gary and mom to Lanie and Garrison who have taught her more on the faith journey than anyone or anything. You can find more of Denise's storytelling and music at [denisemckinney.com](http://denisemckinney.com), and learn about The Well's sacred life around shared meals at [thewelltulsa.org](http://thewelltulsa.org).

# A Reflection for Thursday, December 15

By Ramona Bamgbose

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Galatians 3:23-29](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Galatians 3:23-29

## Read

### Galatians 3:23-29

**23** Before the coming of this faith,[a] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. **24** So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. **25** Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

**26** So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, **27** for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **28** There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

## Reflect

Do you remember you... before you were you in Christ? I have been a Christian since I was 13 and to be perfectly honest with you - it was a transformational experience. Up until that point, I had already experienced beyond my share of suffering so having a faith to lean on, that was my own yet grounded in a historical faith tradition of folks who were use to enduring, was transformational. Today, I identify as many things. I show up in the world as a cisgender Black woman who is a wife, mother, daughter, friend and spiritual care professional yet perhaps the most important identity that I have ever claimed was my identity in Christ.

I am a Christian. I am a Christian. I am a Christian. I say this more for me than for you... I am a Christian.

Nowadays, I struggle with my identity as a Christian. This passage claims that we are all children of God through our faith and yet, the children of God seem as divided as our current political landscape. It feels like we have to be either this or that, and there is no grace for the mystery or in-between. Being Christian was suppose to disrupt the nonsense that so easily divides us by taking a stance and saying, We are different, yes!, and yet this faith reconciles us. Being Christian was suppose to unite us as brethren in faith when the law would seek to divide us or keep us bound to its rigidity and inflexibility to allow all to partake in the goodness of the God of all creation. Being Christian is something to rejoice and be glad about because it is for all

people, and yet somehow we find ourselves like the Galatians beholden to the law that Christ abolished. In this passage we are reminded that we are all one in Christ Jesus which feels both like a rebuke and an invitation these days. Why are we treating our kinfolk in the faith as strangers?

I am a sibling, and one of the things that I grew up hearing from my mom is this, “I love each of my children differently because each of you are different. I have parented each of you differently because each of you needs different things from me.” Isn’t it true unto this body? God knows us intimately, and I do not believe that we are co-laborers with a God who is looking for uniformity as much as God desires for us to walk in unity.

## **Respond**

As we enter into this advent season, I invite you to sit with the first principle of Kwanzaa - a seven day festival (with seven principles for each day) that celebrates African and African American culture and history beginning the day after Christmas until January 1.

Question: Habari Gani? (*What’s the news?*)

1st principle Response: Umoja (*Unity*) to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.

## **Rest**

*“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

*Thanks be to God.*



## **About the Author**

Ramona Bamgbose (she/her/ella) is a Chaplain at Loyola University Health Science Campus in Maywood, IL for medical, nursing and healthcare students. She resides in Woodlawn, Chicago with her husband and three children. She loves being a mother, wife and spiritual care professional. She’s passionate about her identity as a Christian Black woman, and delights in supporting others as they discern their vocation and gain greater self-awareness as integrated and holistic beings.

# A Reflection for Friday, December 16

By Rev. Julie Jane Capel-Burch

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:18-22; Galatians 4:1-7](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

## Read

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19** New International Translation

Please listen, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph's descendants like  
a flock.  
O God, enthroned above the cherubim,  
display your radiant glory  
to Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.  
Show us your mighty power.  
Come to rescue us!  
Turn us again to yourself, O God.  
Make your face shine down upon us.  
Only then will we be saved.  
O LORD God of Heaven's Armies,  
how long will you be angry with our  
prayers?  
You have fed us with sorrow  
and made us drink tears by the bucketful.

You have made us the scorn of neighboring  
nations.

Our enemies treat us as a joke.  
Turn us again to yourself, O God of  
Heaven's Armies.  
Make your face shine down upon us.  
Only then will we be saved.

Strengthen the man you love,  
the son of your choice.  
Then we will never abandon you again.  
Revive us so we can call on your name  
once more.  
Turn us again to yourself, O LORD God of  
Heaven's Armies.  
Make your face shine down upon us.  
Only then will we be saved.

## Reflect

As a school girl, my mom would put the warm palm of her hand on her children's heads and pray "The Blessing" over us as we waited for the bus out in the cold. "*May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; may the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace,*" reciting the words given to Moses, to give to Aaron, recorded in Numbers 6:22-26. Similarly, Psalm 80 echoes the priestly blessing each time the refrain concludes with: *Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved.*

In response to public devastation we find this lament.<sup>9</sup> A Psalm that asks God to grant life even in the midst of a circumstance of dark nights of the soul, suffering and death. A Psalm that tentatively anticipates a time of restored well-being. To individuals and to the community.

Where blessings do not feel so far off.

Where The Lord keeping seems continuous.

Where God's graciousness is no longer begged for and collective peace passes understanding.

I imagine the shared gloom of fourteen days of gray tundra – the type of cold that makes your eyelashes frozen – being shattered by a beam of warm sunshine. The cries of chattering teeth and numb limbs begging for something to change: *Show us your mighty power. Come to rescue us!* When the temperature increases just enough to grant hope that there will be a thaw and life will continue.

Waiting for the school bus, I did not understand the power in the words my mom prayed. I was just grateful for the kind touch and warm breath. However, this September when she prayed "The Blessing" over my new family and our larger community, I was acutely aware of the chutzpah it takes to beseech God to shine into our lives and save us. To claim the promise of blessing in the midst of hot days and frozen days; in the midst of sunshine and gray clouds, in the midst of spiritual highs and dark nights of the soul.

No matter where you are on that continuum today may you feel both comforted and convicted to call upon the Lord and request: *Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved.*

## **Respond**

Tip your head up towards the sky – like you were standing in the sun – and beseech the life-giving presence of the Triune God to shine upon you and lift you up into their hand.

## **Rest**

*Thank you, Lord, for blessing me.*

*Thank you for keeping me.*

*Thank you, Lord, for shining upon me.*

*Thank you for being gracious to me.*

*Thank you, Lord, for turning your face towards me.*

*Thank you for giving me peace.*

*Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> Psalms by Walter Bruggemann & William H. Bellinger, Jr.

## **About the Author**



Rev. Julie Jane Capel-Burch earned her MDiv in 2014 and ordination in 2018. She served as Lead Pastor, Transitional Pastor, Trauma Chaplain, Spiritual Formation Coordinator, Census Enumerator and a Congressional Field Director. She is an impressionist painter, loves travel, and working with youths. She also married in September 2022!

# A Reflection for Saturday, December 17

By Jenny Hoskins

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:23-29; John 3:31-36](#)

Selected passage for reflection:

## Read

### **Book John 3:31-36 NRSV**

**31** The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. **32** He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. **33** Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. **34** He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. **35** The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. **36** Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

## Reflect

Last week I was invited to participate in an exercise where we were asked to draw our perception of our image of God at different stages of our life of faith. It was fascinating to me to sit with this question for a bit and discover what emerged for me as I reflected over different stages of my life and how my image of God has grown, expanded, shifted, and changed over the years and different life circumstances.

As I thought about how I experience God presently in my life, I was drawn to the fact that the mystery of God has felt close to me in this season. Growing up, I had the sense that life with God was all about having the right answers, making sure I knew right from wrong, and being ready with a polished argument to "defend" my faith. It was an exhausting way to engage with the Creator. On my journey through life as black and white have faded into gray, as nuance has made its way into my vocabulary and easy answers are nowhere to be found, the mystery of God has been a comfort. As a recovering perfectionist with a Type-A personality, space to wonder and marvel, space to question and learn from the mystics has been pure gift.

I am one from the earth. There is so much I don't understand. But I know deeply the love of God and can testify that I have seen God show up as true. As I walk through this Advent season, awaiting the coming of our Savior through a narrative that is filled with mystery, I want to continue to take my lead from Jesus. Jesus who asked far more questions during his time on earth than he answered. And may my questions and wondering lead me again and again to the One who comes from above. May my questions lead me to see life.

## **Respond**

As you walk through this Advent season, what would it look like for you to make more space to wonder? What questions do you have? Have you seen God show up as true in this season of life for you?

## **Rest**

*God, help me to embrace your mystery. May I draw close to you in the questions and make space to find comfort in the unknown.*

## **About the Author**



Jenny and her family recently relocated to Nashville, TN after about a decade of living and serving in Ecuador. She is a mother to two, wife to one and still trying to figure out what she wants to be when she grows up. She is happiest when she can spend time outdoors or when she is gathered around a table with good friends and rich conversation. She continues to partner with Serve Globally of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

# The Fourth Week of Advent



10

<sup>10</sup> Duccio, di Buoninsegna, -1319?. Birth of Christ, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=49174> [retrieved November 18, 2022]. Original source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duccio\\_di\\_Buoninsegna\\_058.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duccio_di_Buoninsegna_058.jpg).

# A Reflection for Sunday, December 18

By Tori Mack

Daily Lectionary reading: [Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

## Read

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19** *New Revised Standard Version*

**1** Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the  
cherubim, shine forth  
**2** before Ephraim and Benjamin and  
Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
**3** Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be  
saved.  
**4** O Lord God of hosts,

how long will you be angry with your  
people's prayers?  
**5** You have fed them with the bread of  
tears  
and given them tears to drink in full  
measure.  
**6** You make us the scorn[a] of our  
neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
**7** Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be  
saved.

## Reflect

My mom and I used to live in the same city, but now we are a day trip away from each other. Thankfully technology keeps us connected, so the distance doesn't usually hit me, and most days I live my life per usual without incident. But when challenges arise, I realize my help is so far away.

When parenting gets challenging, I call my mom and say, "Come get your grandchildren!" She knows it's my SOS, my cry for help. I find comfort knowing she understands before hearing details. We laugh, she encourages me, I regain my confidence, we exchange I love you's and hang up.

Until the next time.

As I watch the news, I find myself saying, "Lord, Come get Your children!" Except, I'm not referring to my children, I'm referring to humanity and our lack of care for one another. I join the psalmist saying,

Restore us O, Lord God.

One Sunday I was reminded that the world continues to struggle with being as Jesus taught. Jesus came against the status quo to establish a new order, a new way of living that meant lowering ourselves, rather than chasing earthly wealth or status. We should be quick to forgive, listen and care for one another. Jesus calls for us to be one unified body in Him. We should be known for our love for one another, but instead, we struggle with divisions. And access to resources. And privilege. All of this moves us further from God. Again, I join the psalmist,

Restore us O Lord God.

This psalmist is crying out for Israel, asking God to revive the Vine of Israel. They are not the people they desire; they are suffering from the consequences of their sins. They are being mocked by other nations. Life is looking dismal as a nation. They need God. They need His leadership and restoration in Him. Just like us today.

Come and restore us, O Lord God.

## **Respond**

The distance between you and God may feel great but He remains aware. I invite you to enjoy a moment of stillness.

As you sit, notice the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Tell God your needs. Give Him thanks.

Notice where you are experiencing joy. Give Him thanks.

## **Rest**

*O Lord, some of us have forgotten what You told us; to love one another. Please come.*

*Selah.*

*Some of us are not treating our neighbor as ourselves. Please come.*

*Selah.*

*We've mishandled Your creation. Please come.*

*Selah.*

*We need you. Please come.*

*Selah.*

*Encourage us while we wait.*

*Selah.*



### **About the Author**

Tori Mack is currently a student at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. She co-pastored a church plant in her hometown, Louisville, KY. She is on mission to be ordained and teach northerners the proper way to enjoy sweet tea. She loves her loud and crazy family deeply. If you're looking for her, you'll find her getting lost on a train in search of her next museum adventure.

# A Reflection for Monday, December 19

By Ruth Jensen Zschoche

Daily Lectionary reading: [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#), [Genesis 17:15-22](#), [Galatians 4:8-20](#)

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NLT)

## Read

2:1 Then Hannah prayed:

“My heart rejoices in the Lord!

The Lord has made me strong.[a]

Now I have an answer for my enemies;

I rejoice because you rescued me.

2 No one is holy like the Lord!

There is no one besides you;

there is no Rock like our God.

3 “Stop acting so proud and haughty!

Don’t speak with such arrogance!

For the Lord is a God who knows what you have done;

he will judge your actions.

4 The bow of the mighty is now broken,  
and those who stumbled are now strong.

5 Those who were well fed are now starving,  
and those who were starving are now full.

The childless woman now has seven children,  
and the woman with many children wastes away.

6 The Lord gives both death and life;  
he brings some down to the grave[b]  
but raises others up.

7 The Lord makes some poor and others rich;  
he brings some down and lifts others up.

8 He lifts the poor from the dust  
and the needy from the garbage dump.  
He sets them among princes,  
placing them in seats of honor.  
For all the earth is the Lord’s,  
and he has set the world in order.

9 “He will protect his faithful ones,  
but the wicked will disappear in darkness.

No one will succeed by strength alone.

10 Those who fight against the Lord  
will be shattered.

He thunders against them from heaven;  
the Lord judges throughout the earth.  
He gives power to his king;  
he increases the strength[c] of his anointed one.”

## Reflect

This passage begins with Hannah’s Prayer of Praise. However, if we read chapter one, we understand that Hannah was barren, had prayed for many years for a child and now God finally answered her prayer with a son named Samuel. When Samuel was weaned, (some say around three years old), Hannah gave Samuel back to the Lord. In the last 2 verses of chapter 1,

Hannah tells Eli, the Temple High Priest, "I asked the Lord to give me this boy, and he has granted my request. Now I am giving him to the Lord, and he will belong to the Lord his whole life."

The first ten verses of chapter 2 are known as "Hannah's Prayer of Praise." God has finally answered Hannah's prayers. She sings about her heart rejoicing in the Lord, for He has made her strong. She is rejoicing because God has rescued her. Her song tells everyone that there is no one who is holy like the Lord. She knows He is her rock and has been faithful to her. But wait? She is singing this song of praise as she is leaving her 3 year old son at the temple with Eli. Can you imagine after waiting and praying for many years for a son, having God finally answer your prayer, then taking your precious 3 year old son to the temple to leave him with the priest to train him? It's hard for me to imagine. But not only did Hannah leave him, she sang this beautiful song of praise to God. She starts by saying "My heart rejoices in the Lord! The Lord has made me strong!"

A few years ago I learned that Hannah's song of praise is connected to Psalm 113 and is also connected to Mary's song found in Luke 1:47-55, which is known as the Magnificat. Each of these are focused on praising God. What does it mean to praise God? In Psalm 119:164 King David says, "I will praise you seven times a day...." After reading this from King David, I asked myself if I praise the Lord in this way. Did I know what it meant to praise the Lord? I am quick to thank the Lord daily, but thankfulness and praise aren't the same thing. I often hear people say "Praise the Lord" and I wonder if the response is more about thanking Him than praising Him.

Praising God shares with others His goodness to us. Praising God helps us remember what He has done for us and others. We should praise Him for His mercy, His grace and His judgments. When we praise Him, we remember His faithfulness, His promises to us and His everlasting love.

How do we praise God seven times a day like David encouraged? When I reflected on praising God daily, I decided to memorize Psalm 113 so that praise would be on my lips. I will admit that even though I memorized this Psalm, I still struggle with daily praise. What about you? What does daily praise of God look like in your life?

## **Respond**

As you begin to think about what praising God might look like in your life, read again 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Then read Psalm 113 and also Luke 1:47-55. How might you incorporate daily praise to the One who is full of goodness, mercy, grace, faithfulness and everlasting love?

## **Rest**

Lord put words of praise in our mouths so that we can lift them up to you daily as Hannah and Mary sang and King David wrote in Psalm 113.

*Praise the Lord!  
Praise, O servants of the Lord,  
praise the name of the Lord!  
Blessed be the name of the Lord  
from this time forth and forevermore!  
From the rising of the sun to its setting,  
the name of the Lord is to be praised!*

*Amen and Amen!*



## **About the Author**

Ruth is grateful for retirement from church ministry but continues as a Spiritual Director as well as Enneagram Coach. She delights in holding space and walking alongside women who are listening for God's movement in their lives. She is Mom to one son, a daughter-in-love and Omi to two beautiful granddaughters. She enjoys running, biking, swimming, reading and praising God in the beautiful Colorado mountains.

# A Reflection for Tuesday, December 20

By Rev. Liz Mosbo VerHage

Daily Lectionary reading: [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#); [Genesis 21:1-21](#); [Galatians 4:21-5:1](#)

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NLT)

## Read

2:1 Hannah prayed:

I'm bursting with God-news! I'm walking on air.

I'm laughing at my rivals. I'm dancing my salvation.

2-5

Nothing and no one is holy like God, no rock mountain like our God.

Don't dare talk pretentiously— not a word of boasting, ever!

For God knows what's going on.

He takes the measure of everything that happens.

The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces, while the weak are infused with fresh strength.

The well-fed are out begging in the streets for crusts, while the hungry are getting second helpings.

The barren woman has a houseful of children, while the mother of many is bereft.

6-10

God brings death and God brings life, brings down to the grave and raises up.

God brings poverty and God brings wealth; he lowers, he also lifts up.

He puts poor people on their feet again; he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,

Restoring dignity and respect to their lives— a place in the sun!

For the very structures of earth are God's; he has laid out his operations on a firm foundation.

He protectively cares for his faithful friends, step by step, but leaves the wicked to stumble in the dark.

No one makes it in this life by sheer muscle! God's enemies will be blasted out of the sky, crashed in a heap and burned.

God will set things right all over the earth, he'll give strength to his king,

he'll set his anointed on top of the world!

## Reflect

This is the second day of reading Hannah's Song, found in 1 Samuel. Today's translation shows off different features of this passage, and invites us to look again at the power that is found

within a woman giving birth, a woman waiting and trusting God for her future, a woman whose “yes” helped bring about liberation and life for so many others.

Hannah’s song of praise reflects both her answered prayer from God for a child, but also magnifies the ways that Jehovah Jireh God provides for all those who cry out, for all those who find themselves with unanswered prayers. Whether the poor, the oppressed, those without a family or community that looks as they had hoped, Hannah is declaring that God sees, God provides, God reverses the way of things to liberate all those in need. And God didn’t provide for just one individual in this story - Hannah’s Song reminds us that God is a God of all those who call on His name. Hannah’s personal faithfulness is also what makes a way for the gift of Samuel, the first prophet for the whole people of God - through one woman’s yes to God, and her faith in a God who will provide, a leader that will impact a whole people is born.

This translation also reminds us that God works in all things - not just the easy, the good, or in the times of provision. This Advent season, notice where God is reminding you that in the waiting, the wondering, in our questions and in our doubts, in seasons of plenty and of lack, that whenever we cry out for more from God and whenever we trust the future that God is birthing, we find life! It is so often here, in the everyday places of real life and real struggle, the trust in what we can’t yet see, a “yes” even while our voice might be quivering - that God shows up.

## **Respond**

There are many ways that God invites us to help birth new life, trust, and liberation into the world - both women or men, those who are biological parents and those who parent in many other ways, and all those who faithfully give their “yes” when God wants to conceive a new thing through us. What comes to mind that God might be asking you to help birth - for you? For your community or church? How do you trust God in the everyday for what might be birthed?

## **Rest**

*Gracious God, thank you for the record of faithful leaders in Your story that point us back to the truth of who You are. We declare with Hannah, You are a providing, protecting, way-making God who births new life and new liberation into this world! Help us trust in you, rest in you, remember our past with you God, even in seasons when we can’t see you working, when we are waiting in the dark. Thank you that you are a God who hears, responds, and moves for those who most need You, for those on the margins, for us as individuals, and for the whole world. Through Advent God, help us trust you are working in us, birthing life, hope, peace, joy, and love. Amen.*

## About the Author



Liz is a pastor, preacher, adjunct professor, and ministry coach who is passionate about building healthy leaders and systems to equip the church to do better. She enjoys empowering women and women of color through coaching, and facilitating Anti-Racism discipleship within the ECC and beyond. She and her husband Peter live in the Seattle area with their tween, teenager, and goldendoodle, and enjoy PNW beaches, mountains, and Thai food together.

# A Reflection for Wednesday, December 21

By Rev. Ellie VerGowe

Daily Lectionary reading: [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#); [Genesis 37:2-11](#); [Matthew 1:1-17](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Matthew 1:1-17, NRSV

## Read

### **Matthew 1:1-17, NRSV**

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

## **Reflect**

As I read through the names of Jesus' ancestors, I am struck by how many generations waited for God to show up for them in their own stories and in the story of their people.

Kings and humble people in this family tree began telling stories to help them hope as they waited for companionship and safety, for babies to be born, and for grief to let them catch a breath. They began to tell stories of peace and freedom as they waited for wars to stop, for food to become less scarce and to be able to go back home again. They remembered God's rescue of their people in the past as they waited for the pain to end in the present. They began telling lore of an awaited messiah who would make things right.

And I imagine that each and every ancestor of Jesus (those included in this list and those left out), had trouble holding on to hope through generations of waiting. I bet they wondered if the waiting would ever end.

I have certainly wondered this myself. What if I never see what I have longed for? What if the diagnosis I am waiting for is bad news? What if school shootings continue? What if the womanly body I inhabit is never valued and given autonomy? What if war continues in Ukraine? What if our world continues to hurtle towards irreversible climate change and the poorest in the global South continue to suffer because of it? What if pandemics never cease? What if everything I have believed ends up being a lie?

We know that God does not cause every personal or collective circumstance and that human beings tend to be the ones hurting one another and the earth. We know that God grieves with us as we grieve and that the movement of the Divine is often a mystery to us. But while we wait, we still question God's good intentions and wonder if we are alone. Oh God, have you forgotten us? How long will we wait?

All of these questions and more, shouted in my heart, feel fitting on this, the longest night of the year. It is hard to hold hope in the darkness. What if night never ends?

But in the many years of waiting, Jesus' ancestors unknowingly prepared the way for Christ. So I also wonder: what might be happening in the darkness?

I wrote this poem years ago to gather hope like Jesus' ancestors while I sit through long nights:

### **Waiting Winter**

My soul resonates with winter this year.  
It has been a long and cold year  
With temperatures that close school  
And winds that cut through down coats and  
wool scarves over faces,  
Coating eyelashes with frost.

And as soon as I feel ok again,  
As soon as I see that little glimpse of green  
grass under the ice,  
Another storm moves in  
And wipes out any trace of new life coming  
through.

*How long, Oh Lord?  
Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?*  
It has been so long since I have felt the  
warmth of sunshine  
Or been able to be free of coats and boots.  
And now it is the longest night  
And while I know goodness always begins  
In the rich, velvet darkness of the ground  
Of the womb  
Of my heart,  
It feels impossible to wait.

I long to rejoice,  
Free of all that weighs me down and hinders  
progress  
Forward!  
With no more of this waiting and aching and  
bundling up  
To avoid the shivers that take a hold of me.  
I long to be *happy*, for once  
And know  
That you  
That you love me.

But,  
I guess,  
This is what it means to be human...  
To wait and to long for what is coming  
slowly and surely,  
To be at least somewhat sure of what we  
hope for  
And at times certain of what we do not see.  
And as I ask you doubtfully if spring will ever  
come  
And as I cry my hurt and my anger,  
I think you renew and grow afresh  
Something  
Embodying strength and beauty  
Under all of that snow.

### **Respond**

On this longest night and in all waiting seasons, take a moment and remember the sprouts of early spring. What did those sprouts look like in their miniature, fragile forms? If you can, say aloud your waiting feelings to God. What is God telling you about what is happening within you and around you even though you cannot see it? What goodness is sprouting up within the rich, velvet dark?

## **Rest**

*God of the longest night, please hold us close in our doubt, hurt and anger, and show us that you are faithfully tending the gardens of our hearts and lives. In this season of winter, remind us that there are sprouts being nurtured in the dark beneath the cold ground. Remind us that darkness is just as holy as light, and that it holds rich possibility in its depths. Hide your face from us no more, show us visions of you as the humble gardener, and please give us courageous hope. Amen.*

## **About the Author**



Ellie VerGowe is staff chaplain for the Intensive Care units and the Bone Marrow Transplant unit at the Seattle VA Puget Sound Hospital and is ordained with the Progressive Christian Alliance. Ellie feels honored to hear people's stories and meet with them in moments of crisis. She is studying grief, emerging trauma and long term trauma from a spiritual care perspective. She lives in West Seattle on the traditional lands of the Duwamish people with her partner Aaron and their Australian shepherd, Fiona. She loves hiking in the mountains, singing, painting and writing, eating good food with good people and reading a well written book on a rainy day with a cup of tea (Ellie is a grandmother at heart!).

# A Reflection for Thursday, December 22

By Sheli Sloterbeek

Daily Lectionary reading: [Luke 1:46b-55; Isaiah 33:17-22; Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:46b-55

## Read

**Luke 1:46-55 NLT**

*The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise*

46 Mary responded,

“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,  
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

49 For the Mighty One is holy,  
and he has done great things for me.

50 He shows mercy from generation to generation  
to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm has done tremendous things!  
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

52 He has brought down princes from their thrones  
and exalted the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 He has helped his servant Israel  
and remembered to be merciful.

55 For he made this promise to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and his children forever.”

## Reflect

*Pondering Mary - God Within Us*

Due to my conservative evangelical upbringing, Mary was talked about, but not a lot. *God forbid we worship her like the Catholics did.* But, over the years, I've allowed myself to wonder and question more - Jesus is okay with questions, God's not threatened by my curiosity.

This year as I read Mary's song or magnificat, I was taken by her presence, her faith, her openness to God. At such a young age she was noticing God. She knew from the old scripture that God spoke to people, prompted individuals to tasks whether they felt ready for them or not. She knew the voice of God and was present to it.



She sought a Spirit-filled friend. Her cousin Elizabeth, who acknowledges the baby within Mary as Lord. Without judgment. No condemnation. But full acceptance and love with her. And Mary offers a song in this private space of two friends. They acknowledge this is the God who will bring down rulers and bring peace. And in this safe space she can say that future generations will call her blessed.

Oh yes, how blessed you are Mary! To have the blossoming Divine trinity within you.

As I contemplated further I came to a place, a crossroad, where I could rely on my brain and knowledge of theology and doctrine and try to comprehend how a virgin gives birth to a part of the Divine Trinity or hold my hands and heart open to the Mystery. For there really is no way to know the ways of God.

Consider pausing here in wonder of the Divine Mystery.

In my wondering the Holy Spirit revealed to me a connection. I too, hold the Divine within me. The Spirit - part of the Trinity moves with me, in and through my days. Jesus is Emmanuel which means God with us. God within us as an inextricable and mysterious working of the Trinity.

I hold the fullness of God within. You do as well. Emmanuel, God is with you. Emmanuel, God is within you.

## **Respond**

The fullness of the Divine Trinity longs to be acknowledged with and within you.  
What does this truth open up within you?

## **Rest**

*Emmanuel as an infant*

*Emmanuel as you're dying*

*Emmanuel in your suffering*

*Emmanuel in your rejoicing*

*Emmanuel in the prison*

*Emmanuel in your workplace*

*Emmanuel in your sickness*

*Emmanuel in your hunger*

*Emmanuel in grief*

*Emmanuel in love*

*Emmanuel in broken relationships*

*Emmanuel in uncertainty*

*Emmanuel in your loneliness*

*Emmanuel when you're overwhelmed*

*Emmanuel in deep sadness*

*Emmanuel in turmoil*

*Emmanuel in your learning*

*Emmanuel in your unraveling*

*Emmanuel in your trusting*

*Emmanuel in your doubts.*

*God is with you.*

*God is within you.*

## **About the Author**



Sheli Sloterbeek is a mom, wife, daughter, sister, friend, spiritual director, yoga instructor, retreat leader and most especially, beloved child of God. She is honored to be a companion of others as they discover God in their everyday life through the ministry of spiritual direction, either one-on-one, in a group, or holding space through workshops and retreats. Sheli's passion is for the "whole" person – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically – to be alive and live fully with God.  
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# A Reflection for Friday, December 23

By Katie Castro

Daily Lectionary reading: [Luke 1:46b-55; 2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29; Galatians 3:6-14](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:46b-55

## Read

### **Luke 1:46b-55** *The Message*

46-55 And Mary said,  
I'm bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened-  
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
The callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It's exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

## Reflect

"I'm bursting with God-news."

That's a sentence I can barely get past. The Message translation does us a serious favor with the word choice here. When I read this sentence, I'm filled with bubbling optimism and, instantly, I relate to Mary.

Mary's Magnificat is what this passage is known as, but "Magnificat" seems far too formal and sterile for what's actually happening in this passage. Mary, upon learning that she has been

chosen to carry the Messiah in her womb, responds with a song that is as much resistance as it is remembrance.

In a time that was heavy and bleak and in which the people of Israel had been living under Roman occupation for far too long, the Good News has showed up. And, in keeping with the tradition of Scripture, where it has shown up again is in the margins... from the unexpected.... in the faith of a simple, unwed teenage soon-to-be-mom.

And just like that, Mary gets the first glimpse of the Messiah's ministry:

It will look nothing like we expected, and it will be so much better than we expected.

This is paradigm-breaking optimism.

Mary opens, "I'm bursting with God-news" and the "God-news" that she goes on to narrate is the rescue of the oppressed. This God-news is such good news that Mary cannot contain herself and she bursts forward in optimism and resistance, that looks like dancing, and sounds like a song, and is recorded formally in so many places as a "Magnificat."

And I can relate to that. Maybe you can too.

Sure, we're not living under Roman occupation, but times are tough. Our context as 2022 closes out is looking quite dire: illnesses abound, inflation is rising, climate change is accelerating, politics are dividing, and our common ground as humanity seems to be even more elusive than it was just a year ago at this time.

And no, we're not carrying baby Jesus within our wombs, like Mary did, but as Gospel people, we always carry the good news, the God-news within our DNA.

And here's what it calls us to,  
what it beckons us to,  
in the midst of circumstances that seem bleak and dire,  
it calls us to...

Paradigm-breaking optimism.

To call out yet again: that God's rescue looks nothing like we expect it to, and it is so much better than we could ever anticipate.

This is the confession of an oppressed imagination: I cannot see the way forward, but I trust in the One who has always made one, to way-make again.

And this confession is my resistance: to despair, control, power, and anger.

I surrender to the Promise of New Beginnings and Better Endings and No-Last-Places that grows within me.

The posture of Mary's Magnificat, of our Magnificat, colors our living by bursting through us with God-news, good news, so that every one of our actions become sacraments through which God breaks-through into history.

And I'm here for that. How about you?

## Respond

David Augsburger has highlighted the holy role of humor in our resistance and remembrance. He says,

*"Humorous humility for those in desperate times is the voice of faith, the courageous laughter of hope that breaks out of sadness and suffering. It is an irrepressible, radical, unreasonable hope that sustains our sanity in insane situations. Through humor, hope has the last word"<sup>11</sup>.*

Consider ways that you might weave humor and laughter into your celebrations this holiday as a practical surrender to the One whose rescue looks nothing like we expect, and is better than we could ever anticipate.

## Rest

[Pray this Breath Prayer from Bette Dickinson's "Making Room in Advent"](#)<sup>12</sup>:

*Inhale for 4 seconds: **You lift the humble***

*Hold breath for 7 seconds.*

*Exhale for 8 seconds: **So today I bend low***



### About the Author

Katie Castro is a speaker, strategist, and serial entrepreneur who is committed to the catalyzation of Kingdom movements through innovation, collaboration, and social impact. She and her husband Javier make their home in the hills of Western New York with their three children. To learn more about Katie, visit [www.katiecastro.org](http://www.katiecastro.org).

<sup>11</sup> Augsburger, David. (2006, June 1). Dissident discipleship: A spirituality of self-surrender, love of God, and love of neighbor.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckqtj3xPDwU/>

# Christmas



13

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, Frank, 1923-2002. Nativity with Women Attending, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59184> [retrieved November 18, 2022]. Original source: Estate of Frank Wesley, [http://www.frankwesleyart.com/main\\_page.htm](http://www.frankwesleyart.com/main_page.htm).

# A Reflection for Christmas Eve

By Amanda M. Svejda

Daily Lectionary reading: [Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 \(15-20\)](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 2:6-20

## Read

### Luke 2:6-20, *New International Version*

<sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

## Reflect

On a dark night, out in the fields near Bethlehem, a group of shepherds went about their ordinary duties. As their known world was hushed with the rest of slumber, they navigated the stillness between dusk and dawn in the isolation of an open field. There, the sheep barely stirring, they watched carefully, scanning for threats of danger—poised to fight predators lurking in the cover of darkness.

Perhaps they could barely see a few feet ahead of them because of the thick blackness, with scarcely a hint of light from the stars above and only a faint glow from the town nearby. Maybe they rubbed their eyes, tired and struggling to stay alert, or shivered and pulled their garments close as the evening chill passed over them. Perhaps they huddled together and chatted idly, sometimes joking, enjoying the company of fellow herdsmen, well-familiar with each other and their common work.

While regular men tended flocks in the doldrums of their third shift routines, *a young woman named Mary was giving birth to our Savior.*

And so God visited shepherds in a field nearby and lit up the entire night sky—with an angel as messenger and the glory of God as brilliantly stunning light. The whole scene was so full of holiness and blinding light and extraordinary magnificence, that the shepherds were *terrified*. But then, in an instant—the comfort of an angel’s voice with a defining message that would give hope for all humanity—*Don’t be afraid: This is good news! Good news that will bring great joy for all people. In the town of David a Savior has been born – He is Christ the Lord!*

This is it. This is all we have ever dreamed of, needed, and hoped for! God has done it and we are filled with joy!

## **Respond**

Spend some time in the quiet of your living room, phone off/silenced and lights off. Perhaps lit with only the glow of Christmas tree lights or a single candle. Allow yourself to close your eyes, get quiet, and be present to the Holy Spirit. Travel into the story as a shepherd in the field. Invite God into the dark and lonely places of your life. Believe and wait for the long-awaited hope. He is coming. The Lord is near. The Lord loves you. The Lord is breaking every yoke or rod of oppression upon you. Spend some time basking in the presence of the Lord of Love and Grace, who breaks into our darkness with inextinguishable light.

Spend time in the arms of the amazing, loving God who breaks into the routine, humble and low places to accomplish the indescribable.

Listen to songs like Josh Groban’s [“Angels We Have Heard on High”](#) (featuring Brian McKnight) and praise the Lord!

## **Rest**

*Lord, thank you for the immeasurably wonderful gift of your Son Jesus Christ. Tonight, today, and always, may we still ourselves to know, meditate upon, and experience the surpassing greatness of your love and grace. Help us, in our ordinary days, to never miss the wonder of who You are. To give you all the honor and glory and praise, as we celebrate Christmas, and remember that You truly are the Light in our darkness. May the words of Isaiah be our prayer and our praise:*

Isaiah 9:2-7

*New Living Translation*

<sup>2</sup> The people who walk in darkness  
will see a great light.

For those who live in a land of deep  
darkness,  
a light will shine.

<sup>3</sup>  
You will enlarge the nation of Israel,  
and its people will rejoice.

They will rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest  
and like warriors dividing the plunder.

<sup>4</sup>  
For you will break the yoke of their slavery  
and lift the heavy burden from their  
shoulders.

You will break the oppressor's rod,  
just as you did when you destroyed the  
army of Midian.

<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,

will be fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup>

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his  
shoulders.

And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>

Of the greatness of his government and  
peace

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.

## About the Author



Amanda Svejda lives just north of Chicago and is married to her best friend and favorite humorist, Joey. She is also a dog mom to sweet Kona, who teaches her about unconditional love and the power of a good treat at an opportune time. She is a daughter of God who is seeking to deepen her understanding of and to embrace this generous gift. In recent years, she has focused on learning to go back to the basics that seem so straightforward - quiet prayer; gratitude; and ultimately, to love the Lord with all her heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love her neighbor as herself. Her greatest hope is for all people to know and reclaim the true image of God in their lives, both in how they experience God and God's love, how they view themselves, and how they relate to others.

# A Reflection for Christmas Day

By Rev. Alicia Vela

Daily Lectionary reading: [Isaiah 62:6-12](#), [Psalm 97](#), [Titus 3:4-7](#), [Luke 2:\(1-7\), 8-20](#)

Selected passage for reflection: : Luke 2:8-20

## Read

Luke 2:8-20 (CEB)

*Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.*

*The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."*

*When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.*

## Reflect

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. Even in years when I have had to travel from one city to another on Christmas day, there was something magical about celebrating Christmas Eve with my church family and still making it to Christmas dinner with my family. For many years I have been a long distant aunt to three amazing girls and a godmother to one. Not having any children of my own, I've loved seeing Christmas through their eyes. The anticipation of the presents, the smiles and disbelief when they open a present they weren't expecting but hoping for. I know that Christmas isn't meant to be about presents, but there is a deep joy that comes from a child receiving a gift they had long hoped for but weren't sure it would be under the tree.

I wonder if God was watching the shepherds with a swell of joy when they heard the news of Jesus's arrival. The shepherds felt this immediate praise and relief bubble up upon hearing that

their long awaited savior had been born. They knew the prophecies, they knew what a baby born in the city of David meant - the promised prince of peace, wonderful counselor, and the one who would reign forever was finally here.

I often wonder also what the walk back to the fields had been like, after they told everyone they saw. As they wound down for the night, the sky returned to the normal darkness, were they wondering what was coming in the future? The result wouldn't be immediate, after all, the savior was still a baby - he would have to grow up before getting down to the work of bringing the justice and righteousness that had been promised. Were they going to sleep that night discussing what the world may look like in a couple of generations?

Even if their day to day wouldn't change completely, the birth of the Messiah was God delivering on a promise made long ago to the people of God. The hope that was taking root in the hearts of the Shepherds. Everything had changed, new life brought hope and promise, but life didn't look that different yet.

## **Respond**

Where in your life is hope starting to take root? Is there something you've been waiting on, hoping for, anticipating that doesn't feel fully realized yet? I encourage you to take some time with God to remember that changes sometimes don't happen all at once. Sometimes there's a small sprout that's waiting to be noticed, a reminder that God is indeed with you and fulfilling all the promises God has made.

## **Rest**

*Thank you, Lord, for the small reminders of your promises. Thank you that your glory can come in rushes of water and slight breezes. Reveal yourself to us today, in the quiet moments of our celebrations, may we remember that you came to earth as a baby, swaddled and sleeping - giving hope and reminders of your presence with us.*



### **About the Author**

Alicia is a Colorado native who found her heart home in MN. She's passionate about helping young people see God at work in their lives and in the world around them. She spends her days teaching Middle School Bible in the Twin Cities. You can find her on social media as @aliciavelanderson

# A Reflection for the last day of 2022

By Leanette Sansum

Daily Lectionary reading: [Psalm 20: 1 Kings 3:5-14; John 8:12-19](#)

Selected passage for reflection: John 8:12-19

## Read

### **John 8:12-19** *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." 13 Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by human standards;[a] I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid, for it is not I alone who judge but I and the Father[b] who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. 18 I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." 19 Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

## Reflect

As we reflect on the birth of Jesus, at the brink of a new year, we discover a different kind of birth in our waiting. A hope for greater light in the world. Mary, who mediated God incarnate through the birth of Jesus. Advent makes it a point and challenge for us to reexamine the meaning of God's incarnation and what we wait for; in the coming year.

John's Gospel reads as a theological manifesto about who God is as it relates to Jesus John's community of early Jesus followers. John's community interprets Jesus as God, Logos. Like much of what this Gospel communicates, here in this passage are motifs riddled with tension that is behind the scenes between this new religious community and the Jewish community. This tension is expressed in words like Pharisees vs. Jesus, dark vs. light, and evil vs. good. Egos are walls built that isolate and separate us from each other, having drastic consequences of discrimination and oppression, as seen in years of antisemitism using scriptures like these to assert our superiority.

But what if, in the story of God's incarnation, we don't see how we are separate or superior from the other communities but see it as God diving into humanity and into our day-to-day life experience? What if, as God enters our raw reality, lived first through Mary birthing Jesus? And

in that first encounter touched what it was like to be human, a young woman, oppressed and bound by laws that left most women with no voice or power. What if in this first incarnation encounter, God identifies with Mary, finding her to be the first glimpse into how the "Light of the World" would become incarnate disrupting these "us vs them" mentalities as seen in the Gospel of John and in our world today.

Mercy Oduyoye, an African feminist theologian, names this well "Together, they rejoiced at God's salvation, which comes through women. As unborn speaks to unborn, God's future as discerned by women is made ready by women to be communicated among and by women to the whole community" As Jesus matures and begins his ministry continues to relate to, connect, and identify with the suffering of others, especially God's most marginalized. An uncommon practice, and yet found ways to light the world with new ways of being human and being in relationship with each other. After all, Jesus was a brown and poor Jewish man who spent most of his time with those who had been outcasts.

Oduyoye adds: "God the Christ is the one who takes on the conditions of African women: conditions of weakness, misery, injustice, and oppression." This "Light of the World" shines for us to see that in Jesus's disruption of oppression in our systems and interpersonal relationship, God touches our pain, meets us in our misery, identifies with our weaknesses, and is in solidarity with us as we fight against injustice and oppression. God, through Jesus, expresses this kind of radical Love.

In this Advent season and inching toward "a new year," could we be challenged into some "Theological Vulnerability" as theologian John J. Thatamanil shares that allows for the Light of the World to birth a new kind of humanity that sees how we each are part of the Beloved Community, interconnected, held together by Love. A love that disrupts our hyperindividualism, separation, and superiority that perpetuates oppression and instead sees the imago Dei in all of us. To find the likeness of God in all of us and to know that I cannot understand and be in whole relationship with God without my neighbor. Especially those who have been outcasted as we see today in our divisive Church and secular politics, where all "isms" of homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, xenophobia, and ableism are more alive today than ever.

We need this "Light of the World" to be God, "Love in the World."

## **Respond**

As we respond to John J. Thatamanil's challenge of "Theological Vulnerability": How can we birth a new kind of humanity that sees our neighbor as a part of Imago Dei and thus part of how we understand and fully participate in God's Love and Light?

## **Rest**

*God, in this Advent season, we both eagerly wait and also participate in the beauty of your incarnation, Light, and Love. May we become more humble, vulnerable, open to listening and learning from our neighbor who give us a glimpse of God and of Love, to see ourselves. May this be what stir our hearts to love more courageously and to actualize the Beloved Community into this world.*



### **About the Author**

Leanette Pokuwaah is a Chicago native but is a first generation Ghanaian-American. She is passionate about curating communal healing spaces through faith, social justice initiatives, and community building. She is a writer, teacher, coach and musician who is pursuing her Masters of Divinity and Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She hopes to continue to bridge spirituality, mental health, and the Enneagram within LGBTQ communities and communities of color. To learn more check her out at [www.enneastories.com](http://www.enneastories.com).

# A Reflection for New Year's Day 2023

By Corenna Boucher Hoyt

Daily Lectionary reading: [Ecclesiastes 3:1-13](#); [Psalm 8](#); [Revelation 21:1-6a](#); [Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

## Read

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 10-11 NRSV**

There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,

a time to plant and a time to uproot,

a time to kill and a time to heal,

a time to tear down and a time to build,

a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

a time to search and a time to give up,

a time to keep and a time to throw away,

a time to tear and a time to mend,

a time to be silent and a time to speak,

a time to love and a time to hate,

a time for war and a time for peace.

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

## Reflect

Winter is not my favorite season. I live in New England where winter is so cold that my toes hurt almost constantly; the days are short; everything looks dead, and it's hard to get around on the icy streets and sidewalks, not to mention the cardiac episode I have every time my teenage son drives away on slick roads.

It can also be beautiful, with ice on tree branches that sparkle in the sun. These branches empty of leaves allow me to see farther and perceive things I cannot see in other seasons. Everything appears dead, but deep underground important work is happening as seeds die and go dormant. While snow fertilizes the soil, they silently prepare to sprout in Spring, and when that snowfall comes, the noises are quieted. In fact, winter storms have created some of my favorite memories of reading with my children by lantern light in the quiet of power loss with the world blanketed in white.

The writer of Ecclesiastes starts his book with the words, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" He has experienced incredible ups and devastating downs, and he has questions! *Why is there so much suffering? Where is God in the midst of life? Where is comfort for the oppressed? What is the purpose in the mundane days? Toil? Wisdom? Anything we do?* I've pondered these same questions with friends as we achieved the accomplishment, completed the work, obtained the degree or found the relationship that promised satisfaction then left us feeling sold short. We have asked these questions as we witness injustice and when, just like the cold winter trees in my yard, it seems like our lives have been stripped away of all warmth and life.

Then here, in chapter 3, the author begins to make sense of things, "for everything there is a season." God will meet us IN our daily lives, toils and losses as well as the joys. God will not waste our pain. NO EXPERIENCE IS WASTED.

When the figurative icy winds of winter blow in my life, I want to run away even more than I want to run from New England winters, but if we don't allow God to work within us in the seasons of loss and emptiness, we will not experience the fruits of spring or the fullness of summer. We must learn to mourn, creating space to sit with sorrow. We must allow room for the emptiness to cut deeply so seeds of hope we cannot yet perceive will become fertile. We must find spaces to weep and examine what the emptiness allows us to see that we could not before. We must lament, as we learn to LIVE INTO AND OUT OF THE PAIN.

God can turn our mourning into dancing, but we cannot avoid the mourning. We need to embrace the mourning AND the dancing, the joy AND the sorrow.

The short days and colder weather of winter is inviting us to slow down and examine what it is time for in our lives.

## **Respond**

Use Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 to reflect on your life in this season. What needs to be healed? Torn down? Built up? Gathered? Embraced? A boundary set? Kept? Thrown away? Sought? Set free? Where might you need to be silent? Speak up? What do you need to mourn? Is it time to dance? You might want to take some time to write your own paraphrase of this passage that reflects your life.

Lament is an honest, never white-washed complaint, and it is so much more. Lament points to what God has done and is doing. When we learn to lament, it leads us to hope. To learn more and write our own lament click [here](#).

## **Rest**

*LORD God, as winter weather and shorter days invite us to slow down, may we make space for whatever spiritual season you are inviting us to. May we have the courage to allow the deep work you will do in us through the sorrows, without building a monument to the past where we are tempted to worship. May we instead live into AND out of the pain. We trust your promise to restore, confirm, strengthen and establish us in Christ and by your Spirit for you have overcome the world. Amen*

*“Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut you deeper. Let it ferment and season you as few humans and even divine ingredients can. Something missing in my heart tonight has made my eyes so soft, my voice so tender, my need for God absolutely clear.” Hafiz*

## **About the Author**



Coreenna has a lifetime passion for ministries of reconciliation and healing. She enjoys speaking and preaching for various ministries. Coreenna is an Evangelical Covenant Church pastor, sent as a missionary to Young Life in Rhode Island, where she lives with her two sons who enjoy church, martial arts, music and outdoor activities together.  
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## A Reflection for January 3rd-The Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

By Rev. Sally Carlson

Daily Lectionary reading: [Numbers 6:22-27, Psalm 8, Galatians 4:4-7, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 2:15-21](#)  
Selected passage for reflection:

### Read

#### Luke 2:15-21 The Message

**15-18** As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed.

**19-20** Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

**21** When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived.

### Reflect

I love the shepherds. The shepherds have become some of my favourite characters in the story of Jesus' birth. I think I like them so much because they are just normal, everyday guys out at work. They are just who they seem. On my first visit to Palestine, I was able to see many shepherds with their flocks throughout the Bethlehem area - both in the country the city. Nothing like walking around Bethlehem and having to move to the side for a shepherd guiding his animals around cars and trucks! Now when I read this passage I can see the Shepherd's Field and imagine these folks out with their sheep and goats. In my mind's eye I can see them surprised by an angel choir that appears to them in the quiet of their field.

I am struck by the amount of enthusiasm the shepherds have from hearing the news. It's not every day that one hears an angel choir, and the action that follows is immediate. They talked it over, and said "Let's go!" and *they left, running!* They didn't sleep on it or check in with others first, they just ran to see Jesus. I am an Enneagram 9 who hardly ever reacts immediately to anything. I ponder things from all sides, get insight from about a million different people, and even then have a hard time making a decision. I like to think that seeing an angel choir would move me to immediate action, but I am not so sure!

What they encountered in that manger was indeed what the angels had proclaimed. Their enthusiasm didn't wane, but instead was boosted by their encounter with Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. They told everyone they met about what they had seen. God had, indeed, entered our world as a weak, tiny human - he had put on skin and moved into the neighbourhood! Again, the shepherds didn't discuss it to death. They didn't look to the experts for their advice or confirmation - they believed what they had seen with their own eyes. They had encountered Jesus in a very real way and couldn't keep it to themselves! This is just the beginning of the unfolding story of ordinary lives being transformed by encounters with Jesus. Ordinary people without power, privilege, or prestige, hearing about this Jesus, running to him, and worshiping him with excitement and abandon. Our world doesn't always understand this irrational, seemingly unbelievable faith that we have - this trust we have in Jesus who lived long ago and is alive today. Can we be as confident in what has been proclaimed to us as the shepherds were about what was proclaimed to them? Can I drop everything and run to Jesus, even when there isn't an angel choir announcing his presence? What does it mean for us, today, to see and hear the revelation of Christ in our midst and lean in to what our world finds unbelievable?

## **Respond**

The shepherds experienced the miraculous in their encounters with the angel choir and with Jesus Himself. Think back on the last month... Did you have any miraculous encounters with Jesus? Did you encounter him in any ways that were unexpected? What was your reaction when they happened? What emotions or feelings did you experience? Take a few moments to think on or journal about your experience, and maybe think about sharing it with someone else as the shepherds did.

## **Rest**

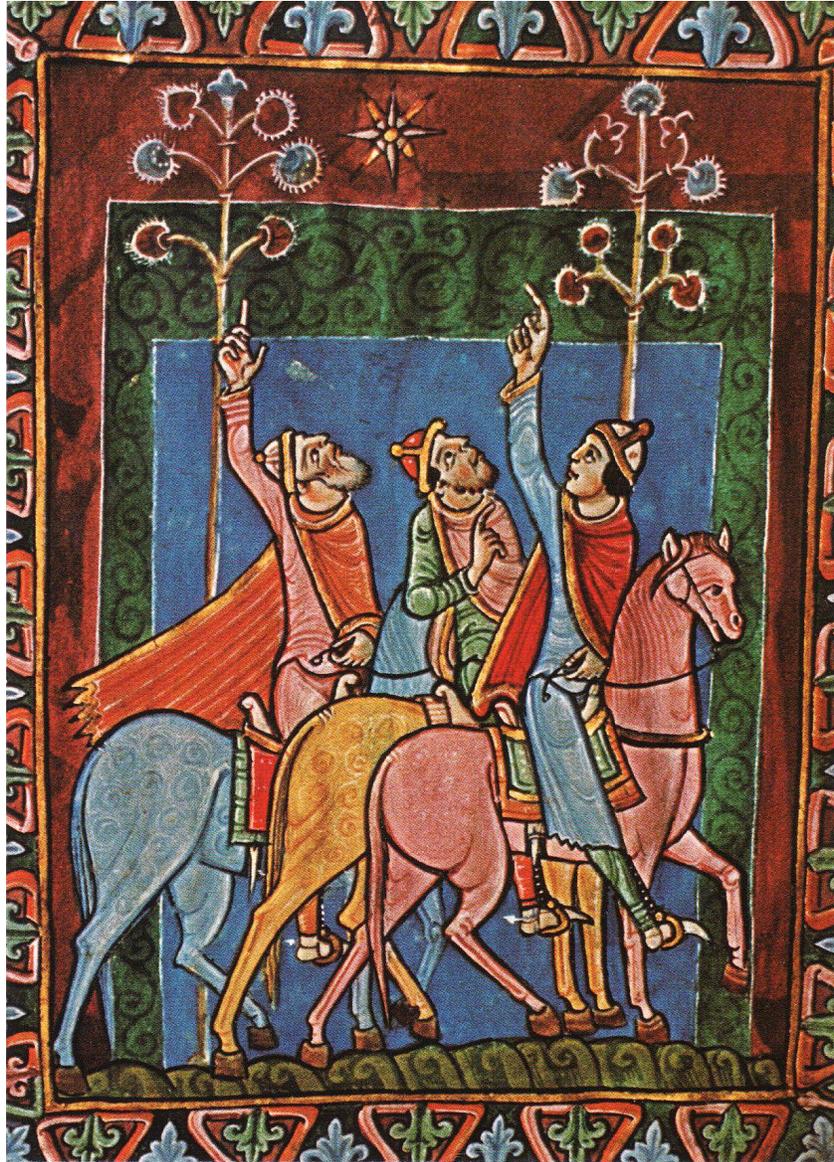
*Jesus, Immanuel, name above all names, like the shepherds long ago, we praise you for who you are and all that you have done and will do. Open our eyes to the miracles around us and remind us of your constant presence with us. By the power of your Holy Spirit may we encounter you in the everyday moments and see you at work in our lives and in the world around us. Empower us to proclaim the hope that we have in you and fill us with joy as we follow you. We praise you, Immanuel! Amen*



## **About the Author**

Sally Carlson serves as associate pastor at Shoreline Covenant Church in Shoreline, WA. She loves reading, the outdoors, hotdish (she's from MN!) and a good cup of coffee! Sally especially loves walking with people as they walk with Jesus. Sally lives in Shoreline, WA with her husband, Daniel.

# Epiphany



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Journey of the Magi, Manuscript illumination ca 1120-1145, Germany. From *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56279> [retrieved November 18, 2022]. Original source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albanipsalter\\_DreiKoenige.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albanipsalter_DreiKoenige.jpg).

# A Reflection for Epiphany

By Eugena Wright

Lectionary reading for 01/06/2023: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#); [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#); [Ephesians 3:1-12](#); [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 60:1-6

## Read

### Isaiah 60:1-6 *New Revised Standard Version*

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

## Reflect

As I read Isaiah 60:1-6, particularly verses 1-3, I recalled a vivid memory when I was in primary/elementary school of my mother singing the refrain of a song titled "Arky, Arky"\* which goes "*Arise and shine and give God the glory, glory...*". My mother used this chorus as a clarion call to wake me up along with the flicking of the light switch to illuminate my dark bedroom.

As a child and even now, I am not a morning person. While in the warmth of my bed I laid there, jolted out of the depth of my comfortable slumber. I was disoriented, as the decibels of sound increased in my bedroom. Quickly, there was an internal dialogue questioning 'why would I leave here?' 'Can today get better than this?'. As my mother was not privy to this dialogue (and even if she was, it was not going to be a deterrent to her mission), the chorus continued filling the air with persistent repetition but now with the addition of illumination. The once dark, silent room was now bright and full of song for the determined goal of my exit from the bed.

As a child, I thought my mother was just using outlandish actions to wake me up but looking back, it was greater than that. In waking me up by sound and light, she also was proclaiming

this melody as an encouraging invitation. On this new day, this new morning of the rising sun, there was an acknowledgement and declaration to be had. An acknowledgement of the Sovereign God with faithful identification to praise; one could consider it like a Psalm 118:24-esque type of posture. There is something wonderful to encounter, something important to look forward to.

At the end of Isaiah 59, after a long and weary oppression, the Israelites return from an extensive exile back to Jerusalem to find destruction and desertion. In the midst of being in their own jarring disorientation (clearly a more severe and serious experience than a 10 year old not wanting to get out of bed), I imagine that a similar question came to mind to the Israelites - 'Can/will this get better?'. In both circumstances, one could see an opportunity for a perspective shift towards hope.

As uncertainty awaits, in verse 2 we see 'But the LORD..'. God lovingly speaks to them about his faithful commitment to his covenant noting the presence of his Spirit on them and His words being in them both now and forever. Throughout this pericope, we see God's promise of His presence.

He continues to encourage the Israelites in Isaiah 60, charging them to Arise! for there is hope and a promise of a new day, coming in light and glory.

This hope and promise is in the glory of the Lord, the Light of the world, the Redeemer, the Son of Man - Jesus Christ.

By His glory, He illuminates the darkness of understanding, and shifts paradigms. As Redeemer, he is ever reconciling us to our Heavenly Creator as sinners who continuously sin because of his love. And praises to God as the Son of Man who walks with us now and forever. May we be encouraged by the Encourager who sends His glory to His people!

## **Respond**

As you read this passage and reflection,  
How has God been faithful to you?  
How has he shown His glory (presence) during seasons of uncertainty?  
How have you glorified him (in word/thought/action)?

In this season of Advent, let us be encouraged with joyful anticipation as God promised to the Israelites in the past and to us today, the great Light of the world, Jesus Christ - The One who is, and was, and is to come. The One of the Old Testament (who was to come), the One of the New Testament (who did come), and the One of the New Jerusalem (who is to come again).

## **Rest**

Loving and Wonderful God, thank you for your relentless dedication for a reconciled relationship with me. I praise and worship you Jesus, Great Redeemer and coming King; grateful for the opportunity to be wrapped in your glorious light whether in times of hope or feelings of distress. As I arise each day, may I recall your goodness and glory. May your glory rest upon me and transform me for your will and purpose. Be glorified now and always. Amen.

\*Arr. © 2006, Faith Alive Christian Resources, arranger: Joyce Berger

## **About the Author**



Eugena Wright is a disciple of Jesus Christ and continuous learner about the Kingdom of God. Born and raised in Bronx, New York, she is currently acquiring a Masters of Divinity at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. Outside of her studies and ministry, Eugena is a self-identified foodie who enjoys nature, hiking, and has a faithful appreciation of Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars.