Prayerful Reflections



A Daily Devotional for Advent 2026

Read, Reflect, Respond and Rest in the Love of God

Edited by Rev. Julia Styles

Prayerful Reflections: A Devotional for Advent 2026

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About Prayerful Reflections

Prayerful Reflections is a daily resource for connecting with God and the broader Christian community during Advent and Christmas Day (November 29–December 25, 2026). Each day, a different author will reflect on the daily scripture from the Revised Common Lectionary. Through the spiritual practice of *Lectio Divina*, or sacred listening, each author invites us to **Read** the Bible, **Reflect** on its message, **Respond** to what we hear, and **Rest** in God's love.

Launched in 2021, this online devotional fosters global connection and shares reflections on God's Word, amplified by the voices of women theologians, pastors, chaplains, teachers, and community leaders from diverse backgrounds. We encourage the entire Church, regardless of gender, to read and listen to female theologians and pastors. Reading *Prayerful Reflections* during Advent and Lent is one way to expand your theological influences.

The insights within *Prayerful Reflections* are rooted in faith and Scripture and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Reflections are posted daily at www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com/blog, where you can comment and engage. Feel free to share this free resource with others — you can download the PDF version for free at www.prayerfulreflections.com.

If you enjoy the rhythm of *lectio divina* and are curious about how to create sacred space in your daily life, consider trying a free introduction to Spiritual Direction with Julia Styles at www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com.

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Advent: Learning to Live in the Tension

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, November 29 by Rev. Julia Styles

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37
Selected passage: Isaiah 64:1-9

Read

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSVUE)

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
64:2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
64:3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down; the mountains quaked at your presence.
64:4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.
64:5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.
64:6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
64:7 There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
64:8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.
64:9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Reflect

I hate when people are angry with me. Even worse is when they give me the cold shoulder, leaving me to stew in my imperfections and shortcomings. I beg them to turn their face toward me, to forgive my mistakes. I feel alone and despair. I can't abide the tension, the discomfort, the difficult feelings. Sometimes I lash out, blaming their coldness for my anger. I try to make amends, to prove my apologies have weight. When that fails, I appeal to our relationship: *Remember, you love me. Please forgive me.*

I imagine the people of Judah, living in the shadow of exile, felt similarly about God. Estranged from their land, their temple, and God's presence, they begged God to reveal himself again, as he had on Mount Sinai. They remembered when God seemed near. Now they felt abandoned. They

acknowledged their failures but also blamed God for his distance. Their attempts at repentance fell short. Finally, they appealed to God's character as their Father, potter, and creator.

How did they sustain hope through generations of waiting? As Christians, we believe God answered their plea to "tear open the heavens and come down." John tells us, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

Yet two thousand years have passed since Christ promised to return. Even the early Christians wondered when that day would come. Paul reminded the Corinthians that God had already given them grace and spiritual gifts and would sustain them as they waited. "God is faithful," he wrote (1 Corinthians 1:9).

Today, witnessing the violence, corruption, and greed of our world, I feel that same ache of exile and abandonment. I cry out, *God, stop this! You are powerful. Can't you bring an end to this misery?* Our efforts against injustice seem insignificant beside the power of billionaires, governments, and military strongholds. Throughout history, even Christians have turned their faces from Jesus, choosing violence, greed, racism, and personal comfort over God's kingdom, where the least shall be greatest.

And still we pray with the psalmist, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:7).

But perhaps Isaiah isn't simply reminding God of their relationship. Perhaps the prophet is reminding the people of who they are and whose they are. They are God's handiwork, shaped by the potter's hands. God's faithfulness has sustained them before and can sustain them again. Even in exile, they belong to God.

Advent invites us into this tension between the reality of a broken world and the promise of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. It holds both despair and hope, present suffering and future healing. I don't particularly like this tension. I'd rather rush ahead to Christmas, to celebration and joy, to the reassurance that God has come near.

But Jesus tells his disciples to "keep awake" (Mark 13:37). Perhaps the work of Advent isn't simply learning to tolerate discomfort, but remaining awake, attentive, and faithful in a world that tempts us toward distraction, despair, and complacency.

Staying awake means refusing to look away from suffering, recognizing our participation in broken systems, and continuing to embody God's kingdom even when its fullness feels impossibly distant.

Advent is not simply about waiting for God to turn toward us. It is also about examining where we have turned away from God and from one another.

Respond

This Advent, notice where you are tempted to turn away from discomfort, whether in a strained relationship, an injustice in your community, or suffering that feels too overwhelming to face. Where might God be inviting you to stay present rather than seek an easy escape? Consider one small act of reconciliation, generosity, or courage that could reflect God's love in the world as you wait.

Rest

Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. As you inhale and exhale, allow the words of Psalm 80:19 to become a prayer, inviting God's presence into the tension of waiting.

Breathe in: **Restore us, O Lord.**

Breathe out: **That we may be saved.**

Breathe in: **As we wait in the darkness,**

Breathe out: **Let your face shine.**

About the Author



Julia Styles is an ordained minister, trained spiritual director, and graduate of North Park Theological Seminary. With over 20 years of ministry and church leadership experience, she offers compassionate spiritual companionship, helping others recognize God's presence in everyday life, navigate questions of faith, and deepen their connection with God.

How Long, O Lord?

An Advent Reflection for Monday, November 30 by Jeanne Barnes

Lectionary readings: Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8
Selected passage: Psalm 79 (NRSV)

Read

Psalm 79

1 O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
2 They have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
3 They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
4 We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
of scorn and derision to those around us.

5 How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
6 Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the kingdoms
that do not call on your name;
7 for they have devoured Jacob
and devastated his homeland.

8 Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.
9 Help us, God our Savior,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins
for your name's sake.
10 Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"

Before our eyes, make known among the nations
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.
11 May the groans of the prisoners come before you;
with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.
12 Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.
13 Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will praise you forever;
from generation to generation
we will proclaim your praise.

Reflect

Even though this psalm is a rather difficult one to read during the holiday season, it speaks to our current world. While we'd prefer to be baking cookies and watching Hallmark Christmas movies, it is appropriate that we turn for a few moments from the "merry" to the "weary" side of our lives and that of our country.

This is a Psalm of Asaph, a prominent musician and "seer" serving in the time of Kings David and Solomon. While it begins with lamentation, it ultimately ends with hope. It moves the listener (and reader) from human doubt and confusion to a place of Godly faith and even thankful praise. It was an important message for the people of Asaph's time and it's an important message for our time.

The once prosperous Jerusalem was destroyed, and the holy temple defiled, both unthinkable events to most of the people of that time. The faithful were victims of violence and injustice. The nation was humiliated and despised by those around it. The Israelites were living in a time of a seemingly hopeless and sorrowful world. Their political, economic, social, and religious structures were weakened, and they were left asking how long, O Lord?

How long, O Lord is the same lament we often hear today. Our country is suffering not from the claws of enemies, but from the flaws from within. Our current economic situation means some of our citizens must work two jobs and still suffer the ills of poverty. Some must forgo medication and suffer the loss of life. Our political scene is one of division and hatred strong enough to evoke violence. Socially we are at odds over what to do about immigration and climate change. And religiously we are living in a time when the Bible is used as a sword rather than a plowshare.

Asaph's laments ring loud and clear in our ears. We need you, O God, to hear our pleas. Listen to the groans of the families separated by ICE. Hear the prayers of the victims of generational poverty. Heed the voices of the homeless and the forgotten among us. Protect those unjustly incarcerated.

How long, O Lord? Like the people of Asaph's time, we aren't questioning the why of our circumstances; we know we brought them on ourselves. We just want to know when they will end. And like the people of Asaph's time, we need hope for the future. We need you, O God, not to wreak vengeance on our enemies, but to stir the hearts of all of us who are dwelling in this world. Turn our hateful taunts to words of humility; turn us from our ways to your ways. Save us from ourselves and we "will give thanks to you forever." Change the course of our lives and "from generation to generation we will recount your praise."

Respond

This Advent be bold and speak to others about how we can improve our country. Mention the injustices of our society and pray for God's guidance to reverse them. Make America a country that follows the footsteps of the One we will celebrate this Christmas. We don't need to be great; we just need to be Godly.

Rest

O Lord, we implore you to bless our country. We pray for guidance, that we may walk the path you choose for us. We ask for wisdom, that we may act in a kind and humble way. And we plead for mercy, that you would use this Advent season to bring us closer to one another and to you.

About the Author



Jeanne Barnes is a retired English teacher living in the small coastal town of Gulf Breeze, Florida. There she has been instrumental in organizing a weekly faith-sharing group for over 30 years. She is also co-chair of the Foster Family Support Ministry, an organization that advocates for the safe and loving placement of foster children and provides support and respite care for foster families.

Arise and Wait

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 1 by Tori Mack

Lectionary readings: Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13; Revelation 18:1-10;
Selected passage: Micah 4:6-13

Read

Micah 4:6-13- NRSVUE

6 On that day, says the Lord,
I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away
and those whom I have afflicted.
7 The lame I will make the remnant,
and those who were cast off, a strong nation,
and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion
now and forevermore.

8 And you, O tower of the flock,
hill of daughter Zion,
to you it shall come,
the former dominion shall come,
the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem.

9 Now why do you cry aloud?
Is there no king in you?
Has your counselor perished,
that pangs have seized you like a woman in labor?
10 Writhe and groan,[a] O daughter Zion,
like a woman in labor,
for now you shall go forth from the city
and camp in the open country;
you shall go to Babylon.
There you shall be rescued;
there the Lord will redeem you
from the hands of your enemies.

11 Now many nations
are assembled against you,
saying, "Let her be profaned,
and let our eyes gaze upon Zion."
12 But they do not know
the thoughts of the Lord;
they do not understand his plan,
that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor.
13 Arise and thresh,
O daughter Zion,
for I will make your horn iron
and your hoofs bronze;
you shall beat in pieces many peoples
and shall[b] devote their gain to the Lord,
their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.

Reflect

There's a day we're all waiting for — not just me, but so many of us who've carried the weight of being "other." A day when I won't have to perform, defend, or diminish myself to be seen as worthy. A day when I'm not fighting to make ends meet, when the ache of oppression is finally lifted. A day when disease, violence, and the cruelty of systems and people no longer shape my life. Thankfully, that day isn't just a dream — it's a promise.

The Israelites knew this longing. They were exiled, stripped of their home, ruled by strangers, mocked, and made to suffer. And yet, in the middle of their silence, God speaks. Not with a grand display, but with a whisper that cuts through: *I see you. I know you. And I'm not done.* He doesn't skip over their pain — he names it. And then he offers hope: a remnant will be gathered, not because they're strong, but because he is. They will be restored, not because they've earned it, but because he's faithful.

That's the assurance I'm holding onto this Advent — that God sees me, even when the world looks away. That he knows the parts of me I've learned to hide. That he's not waiting for me to be enough — he's already moving to make me part of something greater.

And so, I come back to the question: Can I wait? Not passively, but with my hands on the plow, resisting the pull of culture, trading it for the hope of Christ's return? Verse 13 says, *"Arise and thresh, Daughter of Zion."* So, I rise. Not because I'm strong, but because he is near. And in the meantime, I'm asking for the Word to wash over me — to purify, to shape, to guide. Because I'm not alone. He is here.

Respond

Where are you longing to meet God this season? And what is the Spirit inviting you to carry in prayer as you wait?

Rest

Inhale: *I am not forgotten*

Exhale: *The Lord is near*

Lord, thank you for being near — near to our weariness, near to our hope. When waiting grows heavy, revive us by your Spirit. And in the quiet, remind us: you're still here. Amen

About the Author



As a spiritual director and pastor, Tori Mack sees the quiet tension so many of us carry — bodies craving rest while life keeps demanding more. Through Selah Community, she offers spiritual direction, small groups, and retreats that invite women into a truer rhythm of rest. Learn more at https://selahcommunity.com/.

Peace to the Ends of the Earth

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 2 by Carole DuBois

Lectionary readings: Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21:34-38;
Selected passage: Micah 5:1-5a

Read

> "And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." – Micah 5:4b-5a, NRSV

Reflect

This summer I visited a neighborhood in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where unarmed protestors were killed during "The Troubles," a period of sectarian violence. The conflict divided those who wanted to remain in the United Kingdom, mostly Protestants, from those who wanted to join the Republic of Ireland, mostly Catholics.

A wall stands at the intersection of two roads where many lives were lost. It was built in 1969 to bring about the kind of false peace that walls provide; and, in many ways, it deepened the ideological divide.

In 1998, leaders from both sides met to try to resolve the conflict. While they deliberated, school children stood outside, playing music and singing folk songs. The musicians used two types of drums; each tied to one community:

- Lambegs, associated with the Protestant community
- Bodhrans, associated with the Catholic community

On April 10, 1998, the politicians signed "The Good Friday Agreement," putting a plan for peace in place.

Christ often described the Kingdom of Heaven as a place free from violence and fear, where predators and prey live together in peace. Looking at the world around me, that kingdom sometimes seems an impossible dream. I suspect that many believed peace would never come to Northern Ireland too.

On Sunday, December 6, churches around the world will light the "Candle of Peace" in the Advent Wreath. In one Protestant denomination, the liturgy for this candle lighting reads, "Because of God's goodness to us in the past, we can imagine a future shaped by God's peace,

and we can cooperate with God and one another to speak peace, build peace, and flourish in peace right here and now."

Gathering in community and trusting in God's goodness is one way to find peace in our lives and to bear witness to the one who is peace.

The wall built to separate factions at the intersection of those Belfast roads is now known as a "Peace Wall." It's one of several in that part of the world, lined with trees planted by peacemakers. Visitors leave messages of hope and unity, love and peace. Transforming that which divides into a place of beauty is another way to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Respond

- Where do you feel under siege?
- What sort of wall(s) have you built to protect yourself from the siege?
- What can you do to build a peace wall instead of one that divides?
- Who, or what, in life helps you feel secure? Is it family, friends, faith, familiarity?
- When you hear this passage, what sort of peace comes to mind?
- What would peace in all aspects of your life look like? Can you imagine peace "to the ends of the earth?"

Rest

Comfort, O comfort your troubled people God. Enable us to hear your heart for peace as clearly as a drum being played. By your Spirit, work among us so that the valleys are lifted up and hills made low. Give us strength to work that all flesh will see God's peaceful kingdom in a world of welcome, belonging and access for all. Amen.

About the Author

Carole duBois is an officiant and retreat leader living in New Bern, NC. She enjoys time near the water and hearing stories of God at work in the world.



Love-Driven Labor

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 3 by Pastor Joy Fishler

Lectionary readings: [To be supplied]
Selected passage: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 (NIV)

Read

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 NIV

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned from idols to God to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Reflect

There are days when I wish I could just shut my heart off. I wake up and hear a professed Christian with a big platform and a big microphone say something very contrary to the teachings of Jesus, and the comment section is filled with thousands of cheerleaders cheering on said message. Those are the days I want to shut my heart off and say "peace out." Peace out of ministry, peace out of peopling and find a secluded home and live out my days. I mean if the first century thinks they had idols, imagine what they would say if they saw ours in the year 2026! How can we read the same Bible and view how to live it out so very differently? Then there are days I hear a similar message and the desire for truth and love to prevail overwhelms me. I roll up my sleeves and get to it, filled and ready. Sound familiar?

Maybe that's exactly why Paul's words about loving deeds are so important. It's easy to love people who think like us, agree with us, and make life easy for us. But love that requires labor is a different kind of love. It's the kind of love that keeps showing up even when we'd rather walk away

I'm drawn to the words, "labor prompted by love," in verse 3. Kopos is the Greek word used for labor. It's not just doing something nice for someone else; it's work that requires significant effort. It's physically or emotionally hard. This love costs us something. Paul is celebrating the Thessalonian believers for their love-driven labor.

John 13:35, Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." I love Jesus. I love people, and if you are reading this, I imagine you do too. I maintain that there is nothing better than Jesus, and he has saved me, rescued me, blessed me, and saturated me with love. Those hard days come, and then I remember who He is and what He has done. If you too have experienced His love-driven labor, say amen.

Respond

Paul goes on to say to be imitators of Christ, to hear this message with Joy and allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through you. To be imitators of Christ. I love that. Let's go do that. Let's go love our neighbor in whatever way that costs us something, whether that is time, physical labor, or finances.

Faith isn't just something we believe. It's something that produces action. Love isn't just something we feel (or hear). It's something that moves us to work. During the Advent Season, let's get closer to Jesus and imitate Him, in as much as we are able. Our world desperately needs to be loved with a love-driven labor.

Rest

Jesus, how patient you are with all your people. Thank you for all the ways in which you love us, challenge us, and care for us. Come, Jesus, and fill your people to overflowing. Help each one of us to be imitators of you, loving who you love and doing what you do. Help us to become a people who love our neighbors with a love-driven kind of love. In Jesus Name.

About the Author



Joy Fishler is an Ordained Minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church. She currently resides with her family in the Sacramento Area and is the Pastor of Adult Ministry at Life Community Church. She loves Jesus, loves people, and absolutely loves raising her teenage girls. She has a passion for preaching and leading people to the heart of the Father. She truly believes that there is nothing better than Jesus and following Him is the only life worth living. @joyfullyunfilteredandstuff

Called Out

An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 4 by Rev. Emily Wickstrom

Lectionary readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26
Selected passage: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Read

Jeremiah 1:4-10 — *NLT*

4 The Lord gave me this message:

5 "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb.
Before you were born I set you apart
and appointed you as my prophet to the nations."

6 "O Sovereign Lord," I said, "I can't speak for you! I'm too young!"

7 The Lord replied, "Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. 8 And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!" 9 Then the Lord reached out and touched my mouth and said,

"Look, I have put my words in your mouth!

10 Today I appoint you to stand up
against nations and kingdoms.
Some you must uproot and tear down,
destroy and overthrow.
Others you must build up
and plant."

Reflect

I have been captivated by this passage for a long time. There's something about the candor and honesty between Jeremiah and God that causes me to "lean in" to this passage. Maybe it's because I see so much of myself in the text. Like Jeremiah, I too have found myself feeling not "enough." I thought I was too young, or too inexperienced, too inadequate, or too caught up in my own limiting framework of what a leader should be. Can you relate?

And yet God is God, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love," as David writes in Psalm 103. God doesn't simply make Jeremiah do something (though God could, if God wanted to) or tell Jeremiah that he needs to "get over it." Instead, God graciously reminds Jeremiah that God *knows* him - even before Jeremiah was "formed in his mother's

womb" (v. 5). Jeremiah was "set apart" even before he was born - what a thought!! And when that wasn't enough for Jeremiah, and he starts doubting himself (like so many of us do), God reassures him again, declaring that Jeremiah isn't too young and that he shouldn't be afraid because God has put God's words on his mouth (vs. 7-10). As the chapter continues, we see that God allows Jeremiah to - quite literally - see for himself. It wasn't going to be enough for God to command Jeremiah to do something. Rather, God helps Jeremiah trust himself and trust God enough to share what he sees.

God drew near to Jeremiah to ensure that he would not just be called, but that he would know the one who called him. God drew near to Jeremiah for a conversation so that he would know who he is and whose he is. This call was as much for Jeremiah as it was for the community he was being called to. It was an invitation to deconstruct the empires and systems of this world and construct God's kingdom. Jeremiah just needed to be faithful and brave enough to speak, and God would do the rest.

Respond

- What is God calling you to?
- Are there areas in your life where you are feeling "not enough?" What does that look like? What does that feel like?
- What is God inviting you to deconstruct?
- What is God inviting you to construct for God's Kingdom and others' flourishing?

Rest

Oh Sovereign Lord, you know me. You know me in ways I cannot even begin to comprehend. Help me to live into the fullness of who you created me. Give me courage to trust myself and trust you enough to live out what you are calling me to. Show me what you want to tear down and build up so that your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

About the Author

Serving as an ordained pastor and hospital chaplain resident in Sacramento, CA, Emily is dedicated to attentive listening and fostering inclusive spaces where individuals are empowered to fully and freely embrace who God created them to be. In her personal time, she treasures hearing others' stories, being by the water, and sharing moments with her husband, Ben, and their two young children.



Take My Heart in Your Hands

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 5 by Jodi Mullen Fondell

Lectionary readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Mark 11:27-33
Selected passage: Ezekiel 36:24-28 (New Living Translation)

Read

Ezekiel 36:24-28 (New Living Translation)

24 For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land.

25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols.

26 And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.

27 And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

28 “And you will live in Israel, the land I gave your ancestors long ago. You will be my people, and I will be your God.

Reflect

I suppose most of us know that we need to take care of our physical cardiac issues, but how often do we neglect our spiritual cardiac health? Having a stony, stubborn heart is not healthy. And yet, there are so many things in this life that cause hard-heartedness. Changes in our lives can make us hard-hearted. Or, for that matter, a lack of change in situations that are painful, hopeless, and unjust. These realities lead to cynicism that hardens us, making us unresponsive to what God wants to be doing in our lives. Just as there are several diagnostic tools for detecting physical heart issues, so too are there signs in our lives that indicate a hardening heart. An early sign of a heart that is hardening is ambivalence. You don’t really celebrate, and you don’t really cry. Nothing feels too bad, but sadly, nothing feels too good either. Everything is sort of meh. Second, you stop genuinely caring. You aren't motivated by concern for those around you, nor are you interested in how you are doing spiritually. You feel disconnected from God, but it doesn't bother you all that much. Third, much of what’s supposed to be meaningful feels mechanical. Prayer, reading the Word, attending church, gathering for worship- all these things are just obligations and duties that you feel compelled to perform out of habit or ritual, but there's no real motivation to engage in these activities. Fourth, you no longer believe the best in people; rather, your life is marked by a critical eye, cynicism, negativity, and jealousy. You tear

others down to make yourself feel better, and rather than rejoicing when something good happens to someone else, you find yourself wishing others would fail. Related to this is that most encouragement feels like criticism in your own life, so relationships basically turn sour. Finally, your concern for the difference between righteousness and sin diminishes. You care less for what the Lord would want you to be about, and you become increasingly concerned with satisfying your own needs and desires, no matter the cost. Sounds like a hard-hearted way to live, right?

Here in Ezekiel, God is saying I want to wash you clean of the things that make you hard. I want to replace your stony, hard heart with a tender, responsive heart. God is essentially offering us a heart transplant!

Author Jill Briscoe makes this astute observation. “But the truth of this matter is this: if you're going to have a transplant, you need a donor. And when God looked down at the human race and saw that only a transplant would do, Jesus Christ said, 'Take my heart and give it to our people.' And God did. On a cross-shaped operating table, God, the Great Physician, lifted out the heart and nature of Jesus Christ and offered them to the world. Jesus offered his heart because he knew that our unchanged hearts could never love God or others with the love that only God can give. For us to become partakers of God's divine nature, we must receive Christ's heart, Christ's nature through which the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit can have full access. Then and only then will we have the possibility of loving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind.”

Respond

Name something in your life that has hardened your heart or created a cynical attitude in your heart. Do you believe that God, through the incarnate Christ, can transform that attitude and soften you once again? What do you need to leave in Christ's hands for this to happen? As you journey toward the incarnation during this Advent season, can you begin each day with this prayer: Lord, allow me to let you soften my heart? If not daily, perhaps on the Sundays of Advent then. Any step you can take to open yourself to God softening your heart will lead to a much healthier spiritual heart.

Rest

Loving and gracious God, thank you for your love that sees us through every hardship. Thank you for your spirit that fills us with hope. As we journey through Advent, when the waiting makes us cynical, angry, or hard, help us understand that your deep desire is for us to feel loved in the midst of whatever is happening in our lives and in our world. Make us soft and pliable that we may be the people you long for us to be. Thank you for the coming of Christ, the hope that his birth brings to our broken world. May we be people of hope because of the hope he

brings to the world. Take my heart in your hands and make it soft. In Christ's name we pray all these things. Amen.

About the Author



Jodi Mullen Fondell is a retired Covenant Pastor. She served as chaplain at North Park University before moving to Europe to serve international churches in Stockholm, Sweden; London, England; Luxembourg, Luxembourg; and Paris, France. She finished her career at the First Congregational Church in Nantucket, MA, and now resides near Palm Springs, CA, where she is married to Doug, loves spending time with her dog Maddie, and enjoys hitting a little white ball around the golf course. She is the author of *I Was a Stranger: Encouraging the Church to Welcome and Embrace the Foreigner*. It is available from wipfandstock.com and amazon.com. She is available for pulpit supply and retreat speaking.

Rounds of Restoration

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 6 by Rosalyn A. Bates

Lectionary readings: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Selected passage: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Read

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 New Living Translation

LORD, you poured out blessings on your land!
You restored the fortunes of Israel.[a]
2 You forgave the guilt of your people—
yes, you covered all their sins.
Interlude

8 I listen carefully to what God the LORD is saying,
for he speaks peace to his faithful people.
But let them not return to their foolish ways.
9 Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
so our land will be filled with his glory.

10 Unfailing love and truth have met together.
Righteousness and peace have kissed!
11 Truth springs up from the earth,
and righteousness smiles down from heaven.
12 Yes, the LORD pours down his blessings.
Our land will yield its bountiful harvest.
13 Righteousness goes as a herald before him,
preparing the way for his steps.

Reflect

Can you hear that sound in the distance? It's the sound of a happy chorus. As a musician and songwriter, I was immediately drawn to this passage because these Psalms identified the sons of Korah as great leaders in the choral and orchestral music featured in God's tabernacle. Their esteemed privilege to serve during the reign of King David sparked my imagination and sense of wonder. What I did not know was that Korah's connection to the priestly lineage traced back to Aaron's son, Levi. I learned that Korah was the great, great-grandson of Aaron. The unique task of the sons of Korah was to carry the holy items of the tabernacle on their shoulders without actually touching them. Korah's descendants, though, also had a stigma that marked their bloodline. They were known for rousing a group, challenging the right of Moses and Aaron to the priesthood, and leading a rebellion against God. For these acts, God destroyed them and their associations by splitting and opening the ground beneath them and causing it to swallow them. They all got consumed by the fire of God.

Generations later, the sons of Korah in Psalms are singing this song of restoration. God blessed the generations that followed the tragic destruction of their ancestors. The prophet Samuel had emerged from the line of Korah. The sons of Korah in this Psalm are still significant, now fulfilling their assignment with dignity, and singing praises from their position. With grateful and humble hearts, they sing that God restored the fortunes of Israel, forgave guilt and covered sins. These realities fostered hope and reminded them that God makes good of whatever falls short of ideal. The story of their lineage did not end in despair. God still had a plan and kept writing their story, bring them from humiliation to honor. The mistakes of their past did not define them. Redemption came forth from pain and sorrow. God gave the sons of Korah the ability to make music of their misery. They became voices of victory instead of victimization. In the season of Advent and in our times, the answer to the question, "Can there any good thing come from Nazareth?" is still "Yes."

Respond

Take some moments to grieve the situations that have caused bruising in your bloodline. Ask the Lord to remove the stigmas, bring deliverance, and heal your generations. Recognize the ways that God is yet working and repairing.

Rest

Lord, Your truth endures to all generations. We revere You with grateful hearts. We ask You to lift us above the labels of negative circumstances. Heal us, Lord, from the bruises of our past so that Your favor, blessings, and purposes will prevail. We celebrate Your redemption and thank You for restoring our fortunes. In Jesus' name, Amen

About the Author



Rosalyn Bates is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, ordained minister, adjunct professor, and associate pastor who serves in Chicago, Illinois. She is the founder of Rosgarden Productions, LLC, an organization that builds the competency of ministry leaders, teams, and educators.

Confidence in the Dark

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 7 by Eileen Lundy

Lectionary readings: Psalm 27; Isaiah 26:7-15; Acts 2:37-42;
Selected passage: Psalm 27:1-14 NIV

Read

Psalm 27

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?
2 When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall.
3 Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. 4 One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.
5 For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.
6 Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me at his sacred tent I will sing and make music to the LORD. 7 Hear my voice when I call, LORD, be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.
9 Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.
10 Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.
11 Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.
12 Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations. 13 I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Reflect

Hard times will evidentially come in our lives, from disappointments to deaths, bringing a darkness into our lives. The psalmist David addresses this reality we all will eventually experience at least once during our lives here on earth. The image of being lost in the dark, alone, unable to find your way forward, trapped in the unknown is a picture of fear that can take over our lives, bringing doubt and questions of God's love and goodness.

In his time of fear, David begins this psalm with a statement of confidence in God's protection and help. It is God who will light the path ahead of him, rescue him from his enemies, and be his place of safety. David puts his trust in God. He directs his thoughts and his eyes to God alone. His desire is not to defeat his enemies; it is to be in God's presence, to worship and gaze upon His beauty in adoration. David's desire is to seek God's face.

In his time of trouble, David turns to the Lord with confidence that God will shelter him and set him "on a rock," a place of stability, a sound foundation in the midst of turmoil. It is from this place of confidence that David then cries out for mercy. He offers an honest prayer to God regarding his circumstances. David cries out, "God, show me what I ought to do, lead me in a straight path. Protect me from my enemies' false accusations and from all that oppresses me."

The season of Advent and Christmas is held up in our current culture to be a wonderful, even a "most wonderful" time of the year. But that is not true; even during the holiday season, life can be hard, especially during times of loss, grieving, and hardship. Holiday celebrations can become painful reminders of what has been lost or broken.

In his psalm, David offers words of hope and wisdom to guide us through those hard times. "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart."

The Hebrew word translated here as "confident" is Mitsvah, which conveys the idea of a place or attitude of safety. Mitsvah is a place of refuge, confidence, and trust. To be confident is to be full of conviction. It is being certain or trusting someone or something in the future because of past actions. This is what Advent is about: a period of remembering a past time of waiting for what had been promised to be fulfilled, culminating in a celebration.

Advent speaks to our current times of waiting and hardship. When the goodness of God seems distant or blurry, we are invited to trust, to place our confidence in God, and to find refuge in Jesus, the one who took on human flesh and blood, dwelt among us, triumphed over sin and death, and now reigns over all. So, we wait, but not as those without hope. So be strong and take heart in your waiting.

David prays for God's protection, for a place of refuge amid turmoil and trouble. In his time of trouble, though, he also holds onto his desire for a close, intimate relationship with God. His deepest desire is to gaze on the beauty of God's face. David's desire is to seek God himself, to live deeply connected to God in the good and hard times of life.

Respond

This Christmas season you may find yourself in a hard place. In a season of loss and grieving or a time of disappointment and discouragement. In the hardness of it all, take some to look for places or images of God's goodness. Take some time to gaze on the beauty of the Lord. Look out at the snow falling, the Christmas trees decorated with glittering ornaments and lights. Delight in the sounds and beauty of children's laughter. Savor the taste of cookies, candy and hot chocolate. Breathe in the aroma of spices, candles and pine branches. Feel the warmth of a fire

in the fireplace, a fuzzy blanket or a hot drink. Take some time to remember moments of God's goodness in the past. Then take heart as put your trust in the one who will never leave you or abandon you in times of trouble. Wait for the Lord be strong and take heart.

Rest

Lord Jesus, during the busyness of this season, help us to slow down and make space to gaze upon your beauty and the wonder of your incarnation. In the hard places of our lives, bring your peace and guidance as we wait for resolutions. Bring your hope into the places that seem hopeless and your peace into our battles. In all circumstances, help us to turn our gaze to you and seek only your face. Amen

About the Author



Eileen Lundy is a pastor, spiritual director, and retired oncology nurse who lives in Omaha, Nebraska. She is a wife to Steve, a mother to three adult children and grandmother to the cutest baby girl ever born. Eileen has a bachelor's in nursing from Clarkson College, a Master's in Spiritual Formation from Spring Arbor University, a Certificate in Spiritual Direction from North Park Seminary and a Certificate in Chaplaincy from International Fellowship of Chaplains. Eileen loves a good story in any form, written, film, or conversation.

The Door God Opens

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 8 by Jennifer Andersson

Lectionary readings: Psalm 27; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18
Selected passage: Acts 11:1-18

Read

Acts 11: 1-18 — The Message

11 1-3 The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish "outsiders" were now "in." When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: "What do you think you're doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?"

4-6 So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: "Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds—you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in.

7-10 "Then I heard a voice: 'Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.' I said, 'Oh, no, Master. I've never so much as tasted food that wasn't kosher.' The voice spoke again: 'If God says it's okay, it's okay.' This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

11-14 "Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, 'Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He'll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.'

15-17 "So I started in, talking. Before I'd spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus' words: 'John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?"

18 Hearing it all laid out like that, they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. "It's really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!"

Reflect

Advent is a season of waiting for a God who arrives in ways we did not plan. In Acts 11, Peter returns to Jerusalem to find his friends unsettled. He has shared a meal with people they don't see eye to eye with, and they want an explanation.

Peter doesn't argue with them. He simply tells them the story: a vision he didn't understand, a knock at the door, the Spirit arriving among strangers just as it had among the first believers. Who was he to stand in God's way? The critics fall silent, then praise God, amazed that God's life-giving love was offered to more people than they could have imagined.

Notice what no one in this story constructed themselves. Peter didn't plan the vision or how it unfolded. The critics didn't plan their change of heart. God breaks through each individual, softening what was once a settled conviction. God breaks through each group, turning suspicion into wonder. And God breaks through our own hearts, opening what effort alone could never unlock. We cannot work ourselves into this kind of freedom. We can only make room.

Advent invites us to do that. The One we await came as a vulnerable child, far from the spaces of power. Ask yourself, *Where am I holding a door half-closed*? *Whom have I assumed God is not already near*?

Respond

Settle into silence for five minutes, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Allow the Spirit to bring to mind a person or group you find hard to welcome. Without fixing or arguing, hold them in your awareness and repeat quietly, *"God is already here."* Notice what stirs in you and stay with it. As you make room, see what the Spirit does within and for you. Close by naming one small gesture of welcome you might offer another this week.

Rest

God of surprises, you come where we least expect you. Loosen my grip on the boundaries I have drawn. Do in me, and among us, what we cannot do alone. Give me ears to hear and a heart wide enough to welcome what you are doing. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

About the Author



In her vocational life, Jennifer finds expression as a spiritual director, retreat leader, pastor, clinical social worker, advocate, and most especially, beloved child of God. She is also Executive Director of Journey Center Great Lakes, a non-profit rooted in the contemplative, meeting people where they are on their spiritual journey, especially for those who don't or can't find expression in traditional settings. Through it all, she loves to discover and expand her understanding and experience of God through relationship, creation, music, nature, and creative expression.

An Unexpected Gift

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 9 by Rev. Cindy Riley

Lectionary readings: Psalm 27, Malachi 2:20-3:1, Luke 1:5-17
Selected passage: Luke 1:5–20

Read

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the
priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them
were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees
blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they
were both very old. 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as
priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go
into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of
incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. 11 Then an angel of the
Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah
saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be
afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and
you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because
of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other
fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will
bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the
Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and
the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the
Lord." 18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife
is well along in years." 19 The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God,
and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be
silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words,
which will come true at their appointed time."

Reflect

Is it just me, or is it almost impossible to find a little quiet these days? Even when everything is calm around me, my mind keeps going. There is so much to be concerned about. I can be sitting in complete silence, and still, there's noise.

I wonder if we've gotten so accustomed to the noise that stillness becomes more like work than a gift.

I've been thinking about Zechariah and those months of not being able to speak. I wonder what that time was like for him.

I went through my own kind of silence after finding myself burned out in the wake of Hurricane Helene, the losses we experienced, and the work of rebuilding our home.

Doctors recommended I take a few months away from work and ministry to recover. I found it challenging to be still. Life kept going on around me, but I didn't have it in me to participate.

I started to notice how much of my life had been spent responding to the needs of others without pausing to consider what was happening within me. This season was teaching me a different way of being still. Simply being, with openness, not expectation, and no agenda.

I began to realize that I didn't have to respond to everything. Sometimes I could simply notice what was happening without needing to figure it out or do something about it.

Zechariah was a priest, accustomed to serving, speaking, and responding to others, who suddenly found himself unable to speak.

I wonder if there were moments of frustration, anger, confusion, or a longing to speak. Maybe he noticed things he might otherwise have missed. Maybe he came to understand himself or God in a different light.

For months, Zechariah lived between promise and fulfillment. Life continued unfolding around him. Elizabeth was carrying their long-awaited child, and God's promise was taking shape even as Zechariah remained silent.

When John was born, Zechariah's voice returned. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he praised God:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because God has come to his people and redeemed them.” (Luke 1:68)

His praise reached beyond the gift of his own child to the greater goodness God was unfolding among his people.

In my own life, returning to ministry took time. As I learned to care for myself, a different way of serving began to take shape. One that allowed me to be present with God, with myself, and with others, to listen and care without losing myself in the process.

Gabriel told Zechariah that John would prepare the way for the Lord by turning hearts toward one another. I wonder if Zechariah's own season of silence helped prepare his heart, too.

Perhaps when we give ourselves room to be quiet, whether for a long season or just a few seconds, something is formed within us. Something that allows us to respond to life from a place truer to who God has shaped us to be.

As children of God, we are each finding our way. We carry our hopes, fears, disappointments, and expectations. Each of us is learning to receive the love and grace of God more deeply.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, let's make room for a little more quiet. Not necessarily to find answers or make sense of everything, but simply to notice what is unfolding within us and around us.

Perhaps stillness can become a gift again.

Sometimes, it is enough simply to be present.

Respond

- How are you entering this Advent season?
- Overwhelmed by life? Praising God for his goodness, or somewhere in between?
- There is room for all of it as we each find our way.
- How might God be inviting you to listen more deeply, to yourself, to God, or to someone whose experience differs from your own?

Rest

A breath prayer:

1. Begin by becoming present to yourself, right here, right now, just as you are.
   Inhale: I am.
   Exhale: here.
2. Now acknowledge the presence of the great I AM with you in this moment.
   Inhale: I AM. **Exhale:** here.
   (Repeat as often as feels right.)
3. Linger for a moment in the presence of God.

Pray: God, may your love and grace fill me and flow through me to others. Amen.

About the Author



Cindy lives in Swannanoa, NC, with her husband, Dennis. She is a mother, grandmother, pastor, chaplain, and friend. Cindy enjoys meeting friends for coffee, browsing bookshops, gardening, and learning crochet. Through Essence Centered Life & Leadership, she accompanies others rediscovering and cultivating the life that is theirs to live.

A Life of Integrity

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 10 by Rev. Charlene Rotvold

Lectionary readings: Psalm 126; Habakkuk 2:1-5; Philippians 3:7-11
Selected passage: Psalm 26 (NLT)

Read

Psalm 26 ***NLT***

1 Declare me innocent, O LORD, for I have acted with integrity; I have trusted in the LORD
without wavering. 2 Put me on trial, LORD, and cross-examine me. Test my motives and my
heart. 3 For I am always aware of your unfailing love, and I have lived according to your truth.
4 I do not spend time with liars or go along with hypocrites. 5 I hate the gatherings of those
who do evil, and I refuse to join in with the wicked. 6 I wash my hands to declare my
innocence. I come to your altar, O LORD, 7 singing a song of thanksgiving and telling of all
your wonders. 8 I love your sanctuary, LORD, the place where your glorious presence dwells.

9 Don't let me suffer the fate of sinners. Don't condemn me along with murderers. 10 Their
hands are dirty with evil schemes, and they constantly take bribes. 11 But I am not like that; I
live with integrity. So redeem me and show me mercy. 12 Now I stand on solid ground, and I
will publicly praise the LORD.

Reflect

The word that jumped off the page as I reread this Psalm appears in verse 11, where David says, "But I am not like that; I live with **integrity**."

Three times this week the word integrity has come to me. In a morning devotional, in a chapter of a book I'm reading *(*Christ-Shaped Character, by Helen Cepero*),* and now in this Psalm.

I'm paying attention, Lord!

Integrity is often noted as a consistency between our public and private lives. True that. But it's *also* a goal we strive for as followers of Jesus, that our life has become so completely hidden in Christ that the words of Galatians 2:20 ring true: *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."*

King David longs for this to be true of his life as well. He longs to live a life of integrity before God, both publicly and privately, and to date he thinks he's done a pretty good job (insert pride, which often precedes a fall). In this Psalm, which is a cry to God for justice, he spends a fair amount of time reminding God of both the condition of his heart and the consistency of his living. Reminding God, as if God doesn't already know! Here David, accused and betrayed and

suffering, pleads with God to remember his pure motives, his innocent and truthful living, and his desire to love and praise and sing and tell and gather in God's sanctuary, at the altar.

These things are true, but they don't tell the whole of David's live, however. We know the fuller story. We know of the great fall he would suffer shortly after penning these words. We know the destruction he would wreak, the life he would end, the suffering he would cause. No, King David did not always live a life of integrity. Neither do I. And neither do you.

The moments will come. For all of us. The word will be spoken, the attitude held, the action taken. Whether in thought, word, or deed, whether public or private, the God who searches our hearts knows. And so do we. Sin is ugly. It steals, kills, and destroys. Always. Integrity is a worthy goal, a lifelong goal, and an impossible goal to achieve while we don these sinful, earthly bodies.

Praise God for His love and kindness that searches our hearts and knows. In the end, both despite and because of his full life story, David is remembered as a man after God's heart. Because he remained intent on living a life of integrity, he humbled himself, repented, and turned his heart, mind, gaze, and life toward God. Again, and again and again.

And in the end, God redeemed David and showed him mercy. And in the end, David stood on the solid ground that had always been under his feet and publicly praised the LORD. May the same be true of us as we offer our ordinary, extraordinary lives to the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.

Respond

Consider your life this week; the ways you live with integrity and the ways you miss the mark. Reflect on what it looks like to say, *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."* Maybe write your own Psalm, reminding God of your love for Him and naming the ways your life glorifies Him and shows love to your neighbor. Celebrate God's good work in your life! And remember that your life is a prayer, a psalm, a testimony.

Rest

Father God, creator and redeemer, we love you. Thank you for the life you have given, the mercy you have shown, and the joy of your salvation. Plant our feet firmly on the solid ground of Your presence, Your word, and Your love. Remind us who we are and whose we are, and take these ordinary, extraordinary lives and use them to publicly praise Your Holy Name. For Your glory and our neighbor's good. Amen.

About the Author



Charlene Rotvold has served as Care & Connect Pastor at Faith Covenant Church in Burnsville, Minnesota, for over 28 years. An ECC coach and spiritual director, she's been married to Kirk for more than 30 years and is mom to two adult children, a daughter-in-law, and a geriatric mini labradoodle. She enjoys running, reading, laughter, wilderness camping, travel, and time with loved ones.

Filled With Laughter and Songs of Joy

An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 11 by Ruth Zschoche

Lectionary readings: Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:2-6; Philippians 3:12-16;
Selected passage: Psalm 126 (New Living Translation)

Read

Psalm 126

1When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem,
it was like a dream!
2We were filled with laughter,
and we sang for joy.
And the other nations said,
"What amazing things the LORD has done for them."
3Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us!
What joy!
4Restore our fortunes, LORD,
as streams renew the desert.
5Those who plant in tears
will harvest with shouts of joy.
6They weep as they go to plant their seed,
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Reflect

In the past month, I have been meditating and reflecting on Jeremiah 29:4-14. Today, you can find Jeremiah 29:11 printed on mugs, bookmarks, and blankets. It is a verse that I believe is quoted without much thought about what the rest of the chapter is telling us. As I meditated on the verses before and after verse eleven, I began to see things that helped me to understand verse eleven better! Looking at Psalm 126, I realized that these two passages connect with one another. The Jeremiah passage is at the start of the exile and Psalm 126 is at the end when the Israelites are coming back to Jerusalem following the exile. While in exile God told them to build homes and plan to stay. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! Work for peace and prosperity in the city where He has sent them into exile! They were in exile for 70 years. Generations were born and died without ever seeing Jerusalem. But, when they returned, they were filled with laughter, they sang songs of joy.

In 2000 my husband, son and I were traveling to Japan. This was not just a vacation to Japan. This was a "going home" trip for me. I was born in Japan and lived there until I was thirteen. We

unexpectedly returned to the United States in 1968. I had fully expected to go back to Japan, my home. But in 1969, my parents decided to remain in the United States. I lived in the US for 32 years before I set foot again in the land of my birth and the place I had called home. As our plane bound for Tokyo took off from Minneapolis, I began to cry. My husband and son looked at me with questioning eyes, wondering why I was crying. I was crying tears of joy because I knew that the next time my feet touched the ground, I would be home!

When I read this Psalm, I imagine the Israelites feeling the same way that I did, as they reached Jerusalem. I have been back to Japan several times since 2000, and each time, I feel my heart sing with joy.

Respond

Sit quietly with the Lord. Reflect on where you might be experiencing or have experienced exile. It may not be a physical location. How has God been with you? When did you experience laughter and joy? Can you see where planted tears have been harvested with joy?

Rest

Lord, you know how hard life can be for each one of us. There are times when it may feel like it has been 70 years of exile. But you never leave us. Like the Israelites who you brought back to Jerusalem, even in the most challenging times, your presence is always with us. One day laughter and songs of joy will fill us. For some, the wait may be until life is over and we see your face. For others, the joy and laughter may come while still on earth. But you never leave us! Thank you for your constant, consistent and loving presence!

About the Author



Ruth loves her calling as a spiritual director. She delights in holding space and walking alongside those who are listening for God's movement in their lives. She is a mom to one son, a daughter-in-love, and Omi to two beautiful granddaughters. She loves traveling with her husband, who recently retired. She enjoys hiking, biking, swimming, reading, playing the piano, and praising God in the beautiful Colorado mountains.

Advent Bowling

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 12 by Rev. Jennifer Friedman

Lectionary readings: Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19; Matthew 21:28-32
Selected passage: Habakkuk 3:13-19

Read

Habakkuk 3:17-18 (NRSVUE)

17 Though the fig tree does not blossom
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Reflect

This passage holds deep sentimental meaning for me, as it may for many of you. I like to call it a "true Advent passage": a weary world, longing for something new. You can hear the longing in these words, even as you hear the acceptance of what is. I think this is where many of us spend our Advent seasons. Sometimes acceptance comes easily. The fig trees are blossoming, and the fields are yielding plenty. Other times acceptance feels out of reach, and it is hard to rejoice in absence.

I have known days like that. This reflection happens to fall on my birthday, and there is one birthday I still remember. I had experienced incredible loss, and my entire vision for what life might look like had imploded through no fault of my own. I had started working with a church only a few months earlier. Even so, this new church family could tell I was struggling, and they decided to throw me a bowling birthday party. It was the most awkward game of bowling I have ever played (and I was on a league as a teenager!). I would have given anything to be sobbing into a cozy bath towel at home instead of using a bowling towel to hide my tears from people who barely knew me.

I felt so alone in those moments, and yet the evidence was all around me: people who cared, and a God who still cared. Sometimes we cannot see a reason to rejoice in the moment. But now, looking back on that birthday from ten years away (and after a lot of prayer and good therapy!), I no longer feel the pain of that day. I see the loving faces of people who didn't yet know me well

but knew I needed them nearby. I can see God's care and provision, even if at the time it looked more like seeds dying in the ground than blossoms.

Even there, I can see the weariness of the life I lost and the thrill of hope in the blooming life I have now.

Respond

Where in your life right now do things feel barren, absent, or missing?
Where in your life right now do you find presence, care, comfort, or hope?
Even if you don't feel like it, what helps you find gratitude? What can you give thanks for today?

Rest

God of our weary world, help us to see the ways you have cared for us before and the ways you care for us now. We see so many places that need your intervention, and so many times your promises seem unfulfilled. Keep our eyes fixed on what is good, what is noble, what is excellent, and what is worthy of praise. Keep our hearts open to care and compassion from unlikely places. Keep our minds open to the thrill of hope still to come. May we know that there is still more love within us, more love around us, and more love yet to come to us. Amen.

About the Author



Rev. Jennifer Friedman is a new resident of Savannah, GA, a chaplain, an enneagram enthusiast before it was cool, and a loud laugher. She is also the outgoing co-vice president of the Southeast region with the Federation of Christian Ministries. You can find her wrangling two senior puppies, traveling with her husband, reading, exploring Savannah, and advocating for the well-being of all her neighbors.

Repairing the Ruins

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 13 by Rev. Jo Anne Taylor

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
Selected passage: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Read

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 — *NRSV*

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Reflect

Isaiah spoke these words to exiles who had returned to Jerusalem after many years in Babylon. The returning exiles had found a temple in ruins, and the walls of the once-great city of Jerusalem were piles of broken stone. As descendants of those who had been taken into captivity centuries before, they had no real memory of the Temple, or of the city itself. All they had to go on were the stories and expectations handed down to them. And those expectations did not match the reality they were forced to face.

I sometimes feel like those returning exiles must have thought the task before them was beyond their capacity and bristled at being expected to repair what they had not broken, to rebuild what

someone else had destroyed. I put myself in their shoes, but then I ask myself: am I really the oppressed? Or would it be more honest for me to identify with the oppressor? Am I sent to preach good news, or do I need to have it preached to me? Am I the prophet, or the one called to repentance and rebuilding? What needs to happen in my soul, so that "my whole being shall exult in my God?"

When Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, he chose this text. The hometown crowd was proud of their boy – that is, until he started *teaching* from this passage. When Jesus called them out for their failure to heed the prophet's voice, his neighbors tried to throw him off a cliff. Their expectations did not match the reality they were forced to face.

While Isaiah offers words of comfort and encouragement, he also reminds the exiles that there is work to do. The walls won't rebuild themselves. Repairing the ruined cities and the devastation of many generations will require a commitment of time and effort. It will be hard work. But God is with them, and God will make right what has been wrong for centuries. The returning Israelites respond to this good news with rejoicing. It is the same rejoicing we hear in Mary's Magnificat and Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians: God will lift up the lowly and bring down the oppressors. What has been wrong, God will make right. Rejoice and be glad! Your God is with you.

Respond

As you ponder Isaiah's words, what encourages you? What challenges you? How do you see God working in your own life to "repair ruined cities" and "cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations?" When faced with daunting circumstances, how do you "greatly rejoice in the LORD?"

Rest

"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

About the Author

Rev. Jo Anne Taylor is a retired pastor living in Kansas City. Ordained to Word and Sacrament in the Evangelical Covenant Church, she pastored United Methodist congregations in Minnesota, mostly as a certified intentional interim/transitional minister. Her sermon archive can be found at pastorsings.com.



Steadfast Hope in the Lord this Advent Season

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 14 by Sara Simonds

Lectionary readings: Psalm 125; 1 Kings 18:1-18; Ephesians 6:10-17
Selected passage: Psalm 125

Read

Psalm 125- *A song of ascents.*

1 Those who trust in the LORD are like
Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures
forever.

2 As the mountains surround
Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.

3 The scepter of the wicked will not
remain
over the land allotted to the
righteous,
for then the righteous might use
their hands to do evil.

4 LORD, do good to those who are good,
to those who are upright in heart.

5 But those who turn to crooked ways
the LORD will banish with the
evildoers.

Peace be on Israel.

Reflect

Let's read that again and pause briefly after each verse. Slow down and breathe. Every year, the Christmas season comes at me with a feeling of do more. Make more memories. Start more traditions. Make more reservations. And every year that pressure starts earlier and earlier. Do I need to make reservations for Santa in July? Do we need perfectly matching family outfits? This year is starting off with that same pressure and in reading this Bible verse I am reminding myself to pause. And to breathe. Use this as a time of excitement and a reminder of the good things to come. Pray to God each morning. Teach my children that Advent is about more than a piece of chocolate each morning.

Psalm 125 is a song of ascent that pilgrims often sang on their ascent to Jerusalem. Isn't this the song that we want to tell for Advent? If you trust in the Lord, the Lord will protect you? Your faith endures forever.

Respond

“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever” Can I be shaken? How have I shown the Lord this year that I trust him? As a mother it is often hard to give over control or to fully trust anyone with your life and your children's lives but this is a reminder of just how much our faith can protect us. Trust in the Lord and your faith endures forever. Let this song serve as a song of steadfast hope and divine protection as we await the coming of Christ.

This advent season, remember you are so deeply loved and protected by the Lord. In this season of darkness waiting for the light of Christ let us remember that as the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

Rest

Dear Lord, show my tired heart the hope that is coming,

In this season of busyness, remind me of the immovable character of God,

The world is heavy and our responsibilities can feel overwhelming at times, but I trust in you, Lord, to guide and protect me in a world we cannot fix on our own.

About the Author

Sara Simonds is a mom of 2 amazing children, wife and dog mom who resides in Brookhaven, GA. Sara is passionate about supporting her community through volunteering at her children’s school and Shallowford Presbyterian Church.



Do Good, Oh Lord

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 15 by Alicia Vela Anderson

Lectionary readings: Psalm 125; 2 Kings 2:9-22; Acts 3:17-4:4;
Selected passage: Psalm 125

Read

Psalm 125 — *NRSVUE*

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved but abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people
from this time on and forevermore.
For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.
Do good, O LORD, to those who are good
and to those who are upright in their hearts.
But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways,
the LORD will lead away with evildoers.
Peace be upon Israel!

Reflect

I can get so bogged down by "the state of the world," finding myself increasingly frustrated at the bad being done by "good" people. I spend so much energy trying desperately to understand the "why, what, when, and who hurt you" that is behind people treating others poorly. It's almost like I think that if I could just understand what got them there, I would know how to make it right. But what is happening is my anger turns into dehumanizing someone who has done wrong.

I think of all the energy I've wasted on letting my brain run wild with judgments and ideal punishments for the people in the world who are doing bad. Or crafting the exact way to tell everyone I know that they should stop following that person, shopping at that store, or correct their thinking about that topic. What if instead of putting my energy into tearing down the brokenness, I put my attention on building up the loveliness?

The last two lines of this Psalm feel like a quiet prayer to return the judgement of good / bad to God - to release myself from the worry by giving it back to God. It's not abdicating my role - I can still name the evil I see and praise the good around me without having to be the one to dole out judgement. I can be a truth teller and justice seeker without having to keep an eye on that person or situation that I disagree with. There can be a freedom in calling a spade a spade and then keep it pushing.

It would require the kind of trust that the Psalmist puts in the first line - a trust in the Divine that makes me immovable. A trust that builds roots so deep down that the common wind cannot uproot me. If we are tuning ourselves to the Spirit's love and heart for others, it will ground us in God's goodness. Let us be unbothered by those who are not upright in their heart by simply building the better thing.

Respond

We are co-creators with God. What are the spaces where you are encouraged to foster connectivity, create beauty, or pursue justice? Next time you are feeling the need to tear something down, recite the end of this Psalm to acknowledge God's control. Then invest in something that is bringing life.

Rest

Creator God, do good to those who do good. Bring justice upon those who distort your name and image. Help us to see our role as co-creators of good in the world. Amen

About the Author



Alicia Vela Anderson works as a Spiritual Formation Coach at a non-profit that builds on the strength, skills, and potential of young moms. She is passionate about guiding others through discovering the beauty of God in their own stories and journeys. She lives in Chicago, IL with her husband where she enjoys exploring, reading, and living locally.

Remembrance

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 16 by Sandy De Jesus

Lectionary readings: Psalm 125; Malachi 3:16-4:6; Mark 9:9-13
Selected passage: Malachi 3:13-18

Read

Malachi 3:13-18 – *Christian Standard Version*

"'Your words against me are harsh,' says the Lord.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we spoken against you?'

"You have said: 'It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping his requirements and walking mournfully before the Lord of Armies? So now we consider the arrogant to be fortunate. Not only do those who commit wickedness prosper, they even test God and escape.'

"At that time those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. The Lord took notice and listened. So a book of remembrance was written before him for those who feared the Lord and had high regard for his name.

"'They will be mine,' says the Lord of Armies, 'my own possession on the day I am preparing. I will have compassion on them as a man has compassion on his son who serves him. So you will again see the difference between one who serves God and one who does not serve him."

Reflect

When a person is admitted to the hospital, whether they have been in a traumatic accident or have received a devastating diagnosis, their time often becomes a line separating their life before, and what comes next.

For some patients it can be an isolating time. When their connection with others runs thin, “Who should I call?” becomes “Who *can* I call?” Estranged children, distant friends. It all takes a toll. They often say that they feel like even God has left them behind.

As a clinical chaplain my job is not to fix anything, but to enter that space as patients process their thoughts and feelings. It becomes an opportunity for me to bear witness to their pain and grief, and to learn about who they are apart from any injury or diagnosis.

I see a lot of hope in this passage of scripture because that remembrance, that ‘bearing witness,’ is an important part of our role as ministers. We learn about the anchor points in people’s lives, those moments they can look back on that remind them that God has not left them, but is

continually present, continually compassionate and loving. We reflect back those stories of who they are, and who God is.

Today as people seem more isolated than ever, my hope is that we continue to inhabit that space with hope and compassion. That we can remind them that they are seen and loved.

Respond

Consider a time when you were a listener and a 'witness bearer' to someone's story. What did God show you through that experience? In what ways have others been present for you?

Rest

God of compassion, we thank you for the moments we can look back and remember how you have shaped our lives. We thank you for your constant presence and your guidance for the future.

Amen.

About the Author

Sandy De Jesus is a hospital chaplain in Phoenix, Arizona.



From Before Time to Bethlehem

An Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 17 by Rev. Elizabeth Jones, MDiv, CADC

Lectionary readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4
Selected passage: Hebrews 1:1-4

Read

Hebrews 1:1-4 – Good News Translation

1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets,
2 but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end.
3 He reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with his powerful word. After achieving forgiveness for the sins of all human beings, he sat down in heaven at the right side of God, the Supreme Power.
4 The Son was made greater than the angels, just as the name that God gave him is greater than theirs.

Reflect

First, we need to take a closer look at our Scripture reading for today. The letter to the scattered Hebrews was a circulating letter, traveling from place to place, copied and sent from one small group of believers, one congregation to the next.

"God spoke to our ancestors in many times/ways through the prophets, but now God speaks through the Son" – in the same way, we can view the older Hebrew Scriptures as God speaking through the prophets (and writers of narrative and poetry), but now (as in the New Testament), God speaks through the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ – especially in the Gospels.

Before the beginning – there was the Son long before His incarnation, the second person of the Trinity. Before the universe, before the Big Bang and all things were created. Jesus sustains/continues/upholds the universe with His powerful Word. The Word that had the creative force in the beginning of time!

Let's think about that creative force for a moment. In chapters 8 and 9 in The Magician's Nephew, one of the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis has the Great Lion Aslan walking around on a brand-new world. The Lion is singing, and the sheer creative force is magnificent, as shown by the reaction of all creation, land, water and sky to the sounds and the notes of Aslan's

powerful, creative voice.[1]

Yet, that is not all! We can see the writer of the letter to the Hebrews goes on to tell us more about what Jesus did. After Jesus finished His work on earth and achieved forgiveness for all sins for all human beings (for all time), the resurrected, ascended Jesus SAT DOWN in heaven. This goes along with what Paul says in the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, 1:20-22, which sounds quite a lot like Hebrews 1:3 from our reading today.

In the worship in the Temple before the first century CE, even at the time that the Rabbi Jesus was walking around Palestine for three years before His death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jewish priests continually stood up when they did their work in the Temple. That was the way of it. That was how priests went about their priestly duties, continually standing before the Lord, continuing to offer sacrifices for sins, making atonement for the sins of everyone who came to them.

Except – our Lord Jesus was not like the earthly priests. The apostle Paul said Jesus sat down in heaven and no longer had to continually stand and continue to offer sacrifices to the Lord. Here in our reading today, the writer of the letter to the scattered Hebrews (or, Jews) tells them that Jesus "sat down in heaven at the right side/hand of God, the Supreme Power."
We can see how great God's love is for humanity through the incarnation. Yes, God sent God's son to earth to become human, live among us, and die for us. Especially in this Advent time of waiting and reflection, what time is better to give praise and thanksgiving to our God for the gift of the Baby born in Bethlehem. Alleluia, Emmanuel, God with us.

Respond

As we reflect on our Lord Jesus, God's Son before the beginning of time and after the end of time, we can respond. We can praise our Lord Jesus. We can thank God for the gift of God's Son. And, we can be astounded by the creative power of our God, who created heaven and earth.

Rest

Gracious God, as we rest in our praise, our thanksgiving, and our astonishment, we can be silent. We can reflect and rest in the knowledge that You – the astonishing God – came down from heaven to be with us. Emmanuel. God with us. Amen.

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[1] 1 Lewis, C.S., The Magician's Nephew (Macmillan Publishing Co., New York NY, Collier Books edition: 1970), 101, 104-07.

About the Author



The Rev. Elizabeth Jones is a full-time hospice chaplain in Chicago, a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor (IAODAPCA), and is working on a DMin in spiritual direction. Elizabeth has a loving husband who is a senior editor, four curious and strong-minded adult children, and two adorable grandchildren. Elizabeth enjoys reading, photography, powerwalking, making music, and doing yoga.

Unending Love

An Advent Reflection for Friday, December 18 by Rev. Madison Jones McAleese

Lectionary readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:12-19; Hebrews 1:5-14
Selected passage: Psalm 89:1-4

Read

Psalm 89:1-4

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
2 I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.
3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
4 'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"[c]

Reflect

Have you ever made a promise you couldn't keep? Or, conversely, has anybody ever made a promise to you that they failed to uphold? As humans, we often make promises to others with the purest and best of intentions. But we are human. We make mistakes. And quite often, we make promises we can't keep.

This is not true of our God. I love this psalm because it's a song of praise, a reminder that God's love is never-ending. God's promises are true. It is so easy to look around the world and see how the promises of others have failed us. From politicians to religious leaders, to celebrities, to friends and even family, we are often promised things that do not come to fruition.

But God.

This psalm reminds us that God's love lasts through *every* generation. God's love is never-ending. God's faithfulness will never cease.

When reading scripture through a narrative lens, we can see that the entire story of the bible is centered around how God relates to God's people through a covenant of love, faithfulness, and endurance.

God liberates people from oppression; God heals the sick; God promises a future with no pain and no tears.

When human promises fail us, God's promises endure forever. What a beautiful reminder! We can rest easy knowing the Creator of the Universe intends to protect and care for us forever.

Thanks be to God, indeed.

Respond

Think about the times in your life where God has shown up faithfully. Perhaps there are moments you thought you couldn't endure; seasons you did not think you would heal from. Where was God? Can you see how God has shown up in your life? This week, take some time to pay attention to where God may be trying to speak to you, to remind you of God's promises. Make a list you can refer to when you are feeling lost or disconnected from God's presence.

Rest

Holy Creator, you are a God of faithfulness. When people fail us, remind us of your love. When humans make mistakes, remind us of your steadfastness. Let the psalms be reminders of your unending love, your everlasting covenant, your eternal promises. Amen.

About the Author



Rev. Madison Jones McAleese is a priest, social impact leader, and nonprofit executive director. She is an ordained priest through the Catholic Apostolic Church in North America and presides at her local Dignity Chapter. She has a Master's in Christian Studies and is completing her dissertation for her Doctorate in Social Transformation. Rev. Madison is also the Executive Director of FCM (Federation of Christian Ministries). She lives with her wife and dog, Bubbles, in Burbank, CA.

The Word Became Flesh

An Advent Reflection for Saturday, December 19 by Melanie Myatt

Lectionary readings: Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Judges 13:2-24; John 7:40-52
Selected passage: John 7.40-52

Read

John 7.40-52 — *NTFE*

40 When they heard these words, some people in the crowd said, "This man really is 'the Prophet'!"
41 "He's the Messiah!" said some others.
But some of them replied, "The Messiah doesn't come from Galilee, does he? 42 Doesn't the Bible say that the Messiah is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the city where David was?"
43 So there was a division in the crowd because of him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but nobody laid hands on him.
45 So the servants went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees.
"Why didn't you get him?" they asked.
46 "No man ever spoke like this!" the servants replied.
47 "You don't mean to say you've been taken in too?" answered the Pharisees. 48 "None of the rulers or the Pharisees have believed in him, have they? 49 But this rabble that doesn't know the law—a curse on them!"
50 Nicodemus, who went to Jesus earlier, and who was one of their own number, spoke up.
51 "Our law doesn't condemn a man, does it, unless first you hear his side of the story and find out what he's doing?"
52 "Oh, so you're from Galilee too, are you?" they answered him. "Check it out and see! No prophet ever rises up from Galilee!"

Reflect

How do you describe your faith to other people? Do you say you are "a person of faith"? Someone who is "spiritual"? An evangelical? A Christian? What word(s) do you feel comfortable using to refer to yourself?

The people in this passage are trying to figure out just who Jesus is. We see four different responses to Jesus. The people have heard Jesus' teachings and are starting to believe he just might be the Messiah after all. He doesn't meet up with their preconceived ideas about the Messiah, but it is hard to ignore the significance and power of his teaching.

The guards have been sent to arrest him. They don't believe he is the Messiah, but they don't feel good about arresting him. They would rather face the wrath of the religious leaders than arrest a man who speaks like this.

The religious leaders have no desire to listen to Jesus' words or to consider who he might be. They are threatened by the new ideas and concepts that Jesus is teaching. Rather than examine them more closely, they reject Jesus and his teachings out of hand. Their anger resulting from fear will escalate until they bring Jesus to Pontius Pilate to be crucified.

There is one more response to Jesus that John includes in his account. Nicodemus challenges the religious leaders. He suggests that one should at least listen to Jesus and consider his teachings before deciding about him. While the religious leaders scoff at Nicodemus, we will see Nicodemus participating in the care of Jesus' body after the cross. (And maybe we can presume that Nicodemus was the one who himself told John about this conversation after the fact.)

The guards express what is true for everyone: "we have never heard anyone speak like this." Everyone has the same opportunity to hear Jesus' words; everyone makes a choice how they will respond to those words.

However you identify yourself in relation to your faith, you have the same opportunity to hear and receive Jesus' words and then make a choice how to respond to them.

Respond

As you consider the Word-made-flesh this Advent season, what is Jesus asking of you? Don't let your heart remain unchanged. The Word-made-flesh is the gift to us. How will you respond to that gift? Sit in silence for a short time and listen carefully for Jesus' words just for you today. Commit yourself to respond appropriately.

Rest

God, thank you for the incredible gift of the God-made-flesh, our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend. Open our hearts to receive the gift of your Word today. Show us how to respond in a way that pleases and honors you. You are the glorious Gift-giver. We love you. Amen

About the Author

Melanie is a chaplain, spiritual director, and mom of four. She loves helping people find meaning in the everyday moments of life. Give her a good book, good conversation, laughter, and a little extra sleep, and she will be a happy girl.



The Annunciation: A Midrash

An Advent Reflection for Sunday, December 20 by Susan Schaefer, DMin

Lectionary readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38 (The Annunciation); Luke 1:46b-55 (Song of Mary/Magnificat); Romans 16:25-27
Selected passage: The Annunciation

Read

Luke 1:26-38 ***NRSVUE***

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

Reflect

A Letter from Miryam

Dear Elisheva: Ima told me about your miracle. She said that you are too old to have a baby but that you are great with child by the grace of Elohim. That's awesome. Can I visit you and stay a while to help you out?

I have some wonderful news too. I'm going to have a baby- so our babies will be cousins. It's miraculous because I've never lain with Yosef, even though we are betrothed. Ima and Abba didn't believe me at first. It's true that I sometimes imagine stories. But this is real. I no longer get my menstrual flow, and I am sick every morning. Do you still get sick?

Yosef was going to quietly break our betrothal when he learned I am with child. But guess what, Elisheva, an angel visited him in a dream! He told Ima and Abba that Adonai will be the father and now they believe me.

I'm relieved he didn't publicly shame me, but- don't tell Ima- I'm not so sure about being married, especially to Yosef. He's older than I am and he's a widower.

Yet it will be wonderful to have a baby. I love babies, especially the snuggly ones. I like to sniff their downy hair and smooch their silky cheeks. When they look at me with their bright, curious eyes, it's only the baby and me.

Anyway, you probably want the details. I'm still stunned. I was sitting on the hot sand near the well with my leather bucket by my side. My face and clothing were dripping wet because it was sweltering in the sun, but I needed time alone to think. You understand, don't you, Elisheva? My home is so busy and noisy, and my brother teases me until it hurts.

I was wool-gathering, as Ima says, and suddenly felt chilled. I looked up. A brightly lit figure was towering over me. I scooted backwards so fast that the gritty, stingy sand swept around me. I quickly covered my face with both hands. Then I felt music, like I hear in the temple, swelling within me and I heard a deep voice. "Greetings, Miryam, you who are beloved by God." I gasped and peeked through my fingers. How did he know my name?

"Don't be afraid, Miryam." That didn't help. I was quivering with fear. Yet I dropped my hands and listened to him. Did a messenger come to you, Elisheva? Were you scared?

This is what he said: "El has a surprise for you; you will conceive and give birth to a son and call him Jesus. He will be great and be called the 'Son of Adonai.'"

I shook my head 'no.' "How is that possible?" I asked. The angel answered, "Nothing is impossible for El. The Spirit will come upon you." I was dazed and confused but I told him I was willing to be a mother.

I'm still confused. How can I be the mother of the SON of Adonai? I don't even know what that means. Do you think you can explain it to me when I see you? Love, Miryam

Respond

A midrash is a classical Jewish method of biblical interpretation that fills in narrative gaps in the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. The word comes from a Hebrew root word that means to seek or to inquire. Midrash goes beneath the surface of the biblical text to explore unanswered questions. My midrash addresses how Mary might have reacted to the Angel Gabriel's announcement in Luke 1:26-38 that she would become the mother of the Son of God.

You might create (write or dictate) your own midrash of the Annunciation. Imagine you are Mary or Joseph in their ancient Hebrew culture, or yourself in your own time and place. Or you could imagine it as you are falling asleep. Maybe you will even dream about an angel.

Rest

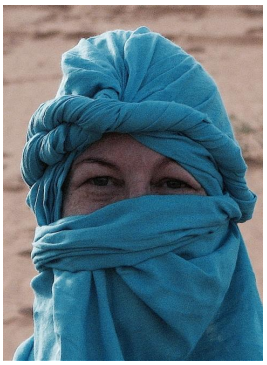


Prepare for tomorrow's meditation on the Magnificat, a hymn that Mary sings when she first greets her relative Elizabeth:

-Watch a 3-minute video from The Chosen of Mary and Elizabeth's greeting. The young Mary is played by Sara Anne Burciaga. Elizabeth is played by K Callan.

-Listen to part of an 8-minute audio of the The Magnificat in both English and Aramaic

About the Author



When Susan is not glamping in a desert tent in Morocco, she enjoys meeting in a small 20+ year group with LaSalle Street Church girlfriends, donating from Out of the Box Foundation, advocating for LGBTQ2+ issues, singing with the Sounds Good choirs, coloring mandalas while watching cozy mysteries, lifting weights at A Women's Gym, attending Zoom recovery group meetings, and writing run-on sentences in the writing group Haven. (Deep breath) Certified by the Federation of Christian Ministries, Susan is the mother of a 34-year-old son and the dog-mom of a 13-year-old Labradoodle, all of whom live in Chicago.

Mary Invites Us to Respond

An Advent Reflection for Monday, December 21 by Sheli Sloterbeek

Lectionary readings: Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 1:1-18; Hebrews 9:1-14;
Selected passage: Luke 1:46b-55

Read

Luke 1:46b-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

As I read through Mary's Magnificat, her song of praise to God, for probably the 50 or 60th time in my life, I first thought about all she has taught me through her prayer. Things like her joy, faith and trust in God and the promises God has made to her and her people for justice.

However, this time, the first two words captured my attention - "Mary responded". This was her prayer. Powerful and flowing. And I wondered, had I encountered God in this way, what might my response have been?

So today I'd like to invite you pause and ponder each line with me to create your own prayer.

Respond

Find a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Take a few nice deep breaths - settling in to let your prayer flow. Write down what comes to mind first. Try not to judge what comes up and try not to erase or edit as you go.

Your Name Here responds:

"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

Take a sentence or two to praise the Lord. What do you imagine your spirit looks like as it rejoices in God?

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

How do you see God noticing you today, this week or at some point in your life?

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

Name at least three things you know God has done for you.

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

Where have you seen God's mercy in your life?

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.

Where have you seen God at work in the life of others?

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

When has God supplied your needs with good things?

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

Where have you seen God's help and mercy in the lives of others?

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

What is a promise of God that you hold on to today?

Rest

Pray your own prayer by reading the words you've written down on the paper. Hold all this in gratitude with God today.

About the Author



Sheli is a Spiritual Director (aslowjourney.com), and she works with the Spiritual Formation Society - a network of communities holding space for ministry leaders, spiritual directors and those longing for a deeper spiritual life. She enjoys writing poetry, Celtic spirituality, yoga, and being outside. She lives in Lancaster, PA, with her husband, John, and her daughter, Claire.

Mary's Politics of Mercy

An Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 22 by Rev. Alka Lyall

Lectionary readings: Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 1:19-28; Hebrews 8:1-13
Selected passage: Luke 1:46-55 (Common English BIble)

Read

Luke 1:46-55 (Common English Bible)

46 Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! 47 In the depths of who I am I
rejoice in God my savior. 48 He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored 49 because the mighty
one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. 50 He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next, who honors him as God.
51 He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant
thoughts and proud inclinations. 52 He has pulled the powerful down from their
thrones and lifted up the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things and
sent the rich away empty-handed. 54 He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy, 55 just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and
to Abraham's descendants forever."

Reflect

I recently came across a meme about a Latina woman, a Native American woman, a Black woman, and a Jewish woman walking into a restaurant and being greeted with, "What can I get you, Governors?" My heart was still rejoicing after the midterm election results, but this meme had my heart singing with joy, perhaps the same way Mary rejoices in this hymn. She proclaims a new political structure in which "those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations" are scattered. (Luke 1:51)

Mary's world must have felt a lot like our world today. She lived under the Roman empire that was oppressive; much like our country where racism is rampant, survival seems like an everyday challenge, and fear of the other dictates our actions. Into this reality, Mary sings of "God's mercy" (Luke 1:50) that is shown to everyone equally. She announces a world where people from all walks of life can live together in harmony, where women of all races can be governors, where racial supremacy is abolished, and oppressive practices are rejected.

Mary gives us the courage to reject the unjust messages our society imposes on us and reminds us that God's mercy is not just for a select few but for everyone. I hear a message of hope in Mary's song, and I sing it with Mary, once again, to celebrate the 'new thing' God is doing among us this Advent season.

Respond

- What challenges are you facing in life today?
- What injustices do you see around you?
- How can we be bold enough to sing the song of Hope for our world?
- Think about these questions, pray, and discern how you might proclaim the message of God's grace with the world.

Rest

God, we thank you for Mary who quietly followed your will and boldly proclaimed of a different world. Give us the courage to be like Mary and sing a song of praise and proclamation. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN

About the Author

I am a mother to 2 handsome men, a sister to 3 siblings, a daughter, an immigrant, a pastor, a friend, and above all a beloved child of God who loves to cook, crochet, and craft. I grew up in India and have lived in Chicagoland for 30 years.



A Song of Resistance

An Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 23 by Grace Bala

Lectionary readings: Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 11:1-11
Selected passage: Luke 1:46–55 | The Magnificat

Read

Luke 1:46–47 — New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE)

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Reflect

Many of us are familiar with the story of Mary, chosen by the Divine to become a source of life in the shadow of death. She is young, pregnant, and surviving under the weight of an oppressive empire that has chosen control over care. Mary's existence is political. Her song is one of resistance.

Mary's Magnificat is not simply a prayer of gratitude. It is a radical declaration of what the Divine intends for the world: the powerful brought down, the hungry filled, and the overlooked lifted up. Mary recognizes that God's justice is not abstract. It is embodied in the lives of those who have been pushed to the margins.

And still, Mary's song invites all of us. It calls us to recognize the sacred wisdom, resilience, and agency of women whose voices have historically been silenced. It reminds us that liberation is not something we passively wait for. Liberation is something we participate in through our care for one another, our resistance to injustice, and our insistence that every person deserves dignity.

My daughter, Meryem, is almost three years old and is named for this very woman. Watching her discover her voice, assert her independence, and move through the world with curiosity and determination is inspiration incarnate. In Meryem, I find the legacy of the woman whose name she carries.

Mary's song also challenges me. It is not enough to teach our daughters to be strong. We must work to create a world where their strength is not constantly demanded for survival.

The Magnificat calls us beyond admiration and into action. It asks us to confront the systems that perpetuate poverty, racism, sexism, and exclusion. It asks us to listen to women whose experiences have been dismissed, to redistribute power rather than simply celebrate resilience, and to recognize that collective liberation requires more than individual acts of kindness.

Mary did not merely imagine a different world. She proclaimed it as though its transformation had already begun.

Perhaps that is our invitation, too: to raise our voices, to challenge what is unjust, and to participate in building the world we hope our daughters will inherit.

Respond

As we approach Christmas, consider whose voices are missing from the conversations that shape our communities. Where are we being invited to move beyond compassion and into solidarity?

Today, find one tangible way to participate in Mary's vision of justice. Listen to someone whose experience has been overlooked, challenge a practice that perpetuates exclusion, or use your influence to create space for someone else's voice.

May we remember that the work of liberation is not separate from our faith. It is one way our faith becomes visible in the world.

Rest

God of Mary and Meryem,

Give us the courage to sing when silence is expected.

Give us the wisdom to recognize injustice
and the conviction to confront it.

Teach us to honor the voices of women,
especially those the world has tried to silence.

May we raise our daughters not simply to endure this world,
but to know they are worthy of transforming it.

And may our faith be measured not only by what we proclaim,
but by the liberation we help make possible.

Amen.

About the Author

Grace Bala is an interfaith hospital chaplain in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley and a Master of Public Health student. Her work centers on spiritual care, healthcare ethics, and advocacy for marginalized communities. She is a mother to Meryem, whose name and spirit continue to inspire her reflections on faith, justice, and liberation.



Song of the Night

A Reflection for Christmas Eve by Corenna Rae

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)
Selected passage: Luke 2:1-19

Read

Read this passage slowly, considering what feelings these moments might have held for this young family and shepherds.

Luke 2:1-19— *CEB*
2 In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be
enrolled in the tax lists. **2** This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. **3**
Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. **4** Since Joseph belonged to David's house
and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called
Bethlehem, in Judea. **5** He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him
in marriage and who was pregnant. **6** While they were there, the time came for Mary to have
her baby. **7** She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a
manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

8 Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. **9** The Lord's angel
stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news
for all people. **11** Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. **12** This is a
sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." **13**
Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said,
14 "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

15 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." **16**
They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. **17** When
they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. **18** Everyone who heard
it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. **19** Mary committed these things to memory
and considered them carefully.

Reflect



This picture was taken at the birth of a homeless teenage friend's first child. When I read today's passage, my chest tightens as I recall the uncertainty, doubt, and fear of the days leading up to the moment pictured here. Our passage also opens with a pregnant, unmarried teenager and her betrothed. They are on their own, doing what needs to be done. They navigate a long, uncertain, and treacherous journey. They are, no doubt, judged and rejected.

Even in today's culture, as I have walked with teenage friends through unplanned pregnancies, feelings of uncertainty, fear, rejection, loneliness, grief at the loss of relationships or anticipated futures, and overwhelm about how to provide for their new little families are prominent. At the same time, they hold a budding joy in the miracle of life growing within them. I count it a privilege to celebrate these babies' arrivals, sometimes holding a young momma's hand as she labors through delivery, and to witness the vibrant lives of these families two, ten, and twenty years later. God's steadfast love, so difficult to trust in those early days, is evident in their stories.

This Christmas Eve, as we come to the moment of Jesus' birth, can you imagine how Mary and Joseph felt as they made their way to Bethlehem? Two young people with few resources, traveling dangerous roads during the final weeks of pregnancy to obey the demands of an oppressive government? There is no mention of extended family with them. We presume this is because this premarital pregnancy has put them outside the family system. So alone, with no one to take them in, Joseph goes out into the night to find a midwife as it becomes evident that they are going to navigate the uncertainty of labor and delivery in a dark barn, far from anything or anyone they know.

But God breaks into this uncertainty. Angels split the heavens, not over the manger where the Christ child lay, but to shepherds in the fields. The sky rings with choruses of good news: "Peace on earth! Glory to God in the highest!" The angels come in the middle of the night to shepherds who are fighting sleep and nocturnal predators. They have witnessed a glimpse of God at work, so, without waiting for daylight, the shepherds abandon their post and immediately go in search of more! And, by doing so, they bring hope and encouragement.

They want to see, need to see, where God is at work. The shepherds are familiar with fragility and uncertainty, but they do not allow these to stop them from looking for God at work and responding in praise. I get the sense they can't help it. The praise comes pouring out of them. So they become the ones who minister to the heart of this young mother: "Peace on Earth and Glory to God in the highest! Wonderful, joyous news… a savior is born." At the shepherds' testimony, this tune rings in Mary's heart.

Respond

Night is often a time when defenses are up, fear creeps in, and worry unravels us. This holy family and the shepherds had every reason for it to be their story, but Jesus comes to this family amid literal and figurative darkness, as angels break into the shepherds' long night. If we choose, night can be a time for us to seek and sense the nearness of God, practice trust even in the face of uncertainty, and allow our praise to pour out amid whatever night we are in. By nurturing the bud of joy and seeking where God is at work, our movement, like the shepherds', becomes a testimony that can't help but pour out of our lives to those around us.

Do you hear it? Are you listening for the song your heart longs to sing? Are you willing to listen for the angels' praise and join in their song?

When has God been present with you in the (literal or metaphorical) night?

It says the shepherds went quickly. How long do you imagine it took to find the right barn? How did they know where to start looking? How will you be inspired to go and keep looking for glimpses of good news?

Rest

Breathe deeply as you rest in the presence of the God of mystery, hope, and joy.

God of good news and angel choirs, we have been hustling all month to come to this moment. Our lives have been full of card writing, baking, journeys to see family, gift wrapping, and long work hours or long lonely hours.

Lord, we long to be still. Calm our busy minds and busier spirits. Help us to focus on the joy and wonder of this night, and to seek out glimpses of good news where You are at work in our lives and world. We trust there are always messages of hope and good news; help us to listen for those tonight and in the days to come.

We pause now in gratitude for the gifts in our lives: faith communities, Christmas music, holiday greetings in our inboxes or mailboxes, and precious meals together. We pray for those near and far who strain to hear your melodies in the darkness of war-torn neighborhoods, family conflicts, or negative voices in their heads. Savior, be with them and be with us. Quiet the hurt, fear, and uncertainty as we learn to open our hearts to the good news of this night.

About the Author



Corenna Rae is the lead pastor at Riverside Covenant Church, Rhode Island. Having served in a variety of vocational ministries, she specializes in speaking, writing, building community and teams, coaching, and equipping ministries. Her passion for justice, reconciliation, and healing inspires her to empower people to become confident, vulnerable, generous leaders.

The Son is Here!

A Reflection for Christmas Day by Gillie D. Abdiraxman-Issa

Lectionary readings for 12/25/2026: Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14
Selected passage: John 1:9-14

Read

John 1:9-14 AMP

There it was—the true Light [the genuine, perfect, steadfast Light] which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone.

He (Christ) was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.

He came to that which was His own [that which belonged to Him—His world, His creation, His possession], and those who were His own [people—the Jewish nation] did not receive and welcome Him.

But to as many as did receive and welcome Him, He gave the right [the authority, the privilege] to become children of God, that is, to those who believe in (adhere to, trust in, and rely on) His name—who were born, not of blood [natural conception], nor of the will of the flesh [physical impulse], nor of the will of man [that of a natural father], but of God [that is, a divine and supernatural birth—they are born of God—spiritually transformed, renewed, sanctified].

And the Word (Christ) became flesh and lived among us; and we [actually] saw His glory, glory as belongs to the [One and] only begotten Son of the Father, [the Son who is truly unique, the only One of His kind, who is] full of grace and truth (absolutely free of deception). And the Word (Christ) became flesh and lived among us; and we [actually] saw His glory, glory as belongs to the [One and] only begotten Son of the Father, [the Son who is truly unique, the only One of His kind, who is] full of grace and truth (absolutely free of deception).

Reflect

As one author put it, Christmas begins all the way back at the beginning itself.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. Scripture tells us John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

Let us be like John the Baptist, whose main role was simply to glorify Jesus. This scripture passage in John points us to the true light of the world. As we light candles and sing hymns and carols, or as we hang decorations illuminating our neighborhoods, let us be reminded of the truest light of the world: Emmanuel.

I sometimes feel I am not bright enough, or that my color is too glaring or not favored by the beholder. I must remind myself that, like John the Baptist, I, too, am uniquely gifted to be a light in the world, and it's okay if people don't prefer my brightness. I must remember the One who gave his life so that I might give him glory, so I shine, and so will you.

Sing with me: "This Little Light of Mine." Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Respond

How would you invite the intention of the Christmas lights and being a light in the world, just like Jesus was the Light of the world?

As you sing, can you worship the Lord Jesus Christ by being honest and truthful this season, letting go of the unnecessary weight that is no longer yours because our Savior was born, and because of him, we have a life that is full of grace and power.

Can you remember to slow down and remember a child was born to save us, heal us, and be a guide to us, so that we may rest in knowing his glory fills us?

Rest

The Lord is our Shepherd and our strong tower. He abides in us as we abide in Him. He is the Light of the world, and every good and perfect gift comes from Him. We love to see his face shining on us, even in our darkest of days.

May this season of our lives be illuminated by His glory shining through us, and may His peace be with us all the days of our lives—for we will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever and ever. Amen!

About the Author



Gillie D. Abdiraxman-Issa is a Trained Spiritual Director, businesswoman, and Mental Health Therapist specializing in trauma-informed care. Gillie lives in Chicago with her husband and four children. She enjoys quiet and karaoke, cooking, and long walks with a good podcast, laughing at comedy specials, or eating freshly popped popcorn the old-school way.