



Reflect

Reveal

Rejoice

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021



PLYMOUTH CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

A blessed Advent to you all! We come to the annual church season of waiting and longing. It seems that in this pandemic season, waiting and longing have been constant companions. This year's devotional reflects our Advent theme of Reflect, Reveal, Rejoice. Many wrote about what has been revealed to them in this pandemic time, while others submitted pictures reflecting the theme. Interspersed with these entries are submissions from Advent devotionals in years past as well as poetry and prose from well-known poets and theologians. Reading these entries will surely bless your spirit as they have blessed mine. I am grateful for the work of Robert Turner in putting this devotional together.

As you enter this Advent season, I encourage you to be intentional with your daily devotional time. Light a candle and spend a few minutes in silence before reading the devotional offering for that day. Take some time for reflection, interpreting what you've read for your own life.

I pray that you draw nearer to God and to one another this season as you engage this spiritual practice.

Blessings, *Rev. Jennifer Castle*



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28

First Sunday of Advent

THE EVERYTHING OF A DAY



Photo by Jan Aura

"And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and they separated the light from the darkness."

—*Genesis 1:3-4*

"One is commanded to look on each day as though it were the first day, to draw each breath in freedom, and to know that everything that lives is holy."

—*James Baldwin*

For this advent season of reflection, revelation, and rejoicing, I bring with me James Baldwin whose writing has challenged me throughout this time of Covid.

It seems to me that before Covid, days were lost. There were so many more important things happening than a day. Obligations, engagements, boxes to check off, things to do, to prove. Then Covid brought this human constructed life to a halt. Or near halt anyway.

I was left with the day itself. No trappings. Just me and the day as created by God. God saw that the day was good. If I am created in God's image, am I not to see the day as good also? James Baldwin claims a commandment that the day be looked upon. To draw in freedom and know holiness.

James uses the word, "one" in this incredibly concise, encompassing command. He does not say "you" are commanded, or "we" are commanded or even, "I" am commanded. But One is commanded. If you look up the definition of this word, you will be amazed at its complexity. The scope of its meaning and its implications. Echoing our understanding of the one God.

It is this singularity that seems important for me to hang onto within the enormity of what the world is witnessing during Covid. That at the end of it there will still be one God. And one day in which to live faithfully.

—*Melony Joyce*

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” —*Romans 13: 11-12*

It's the beginning of Advent. In this passage Paul is writing to Christians in Rome. Now those folk would know about armor: men clad in metal jackets, helmets with swords at the ready. So when Paul references armor, the Roman Christians would hardly think of light. And what would armor of light look like? Would folks glow? Would they emit warmth? Would they shed light on a situation? WOW! We could use folks in the armor of light now. Perhaps that's our task this Advent Season when the world is in shadow both figuratively and literally.

May you have an Advent of light. May you be an Advent light to others. —*Phyllis Daniels, originally published 2010*

“The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before. So stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running.” —Jan Richardson



Photo by Suzanne Sanderson

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30



I'm writing this as the jury is deliberating the Kyle Rittenhouse case. There's been much in the news about how the jury is almost all white, how the white judge's words have indicated sympathy for the defense, and how white people statistically give other white people the benefit of the doubt in comparison to giving their BIPOC siblings the benefit of the doubt. Instead of judging other white people on this dark day prior to Advent, I'm really sitting with how I am the biased white person who gives other white people the benefit of the doubt and really questioning if I do the same with my BIPOC siblings.

I'm thinking about when I served as moderator last year when the Council was examining the collaborative ministry model and why it wasn't working and viewing our white minister's shortcomings as just that, shortcomings and not job performance concerns. Everyone has shortcomings, but did I and do I view our Black minister's shortcomings as shortcomings and not job performance concerns? And are they really shortcomings or just a different way of leading than I am not accustomed to?

I'm thinking about BIPOC people I've been in working relationships with outside of Plymouth and how I've asked or wished these colleagues to change instead of changing myself or insisting that the system we worked in change. Did I and do I ask my white colleagues to change, or do I more easily accept their differences?

If this sounds like a confessional, it is. I need the light in the world, I need the birth of Jesus to help me see truth clearly and to see how I and we can do better in loving each other. In speaking loving truth to each other. In giving appropriate grace and forgiveness to each other. In moving towards the Beloved Community and not away from it.

Jesus, rest in my heart, and show me the way. —*Sue Maul*

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1



Photo by Suzanne Sanderson

“In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”

—Isaiah 2:1-5

Dear God: The prophet, Isaiah, tells us to climb Your mountain. So, what keeps me down in the valley? What keeps me from taking that first step? I don’t know. Whatever the barriers are, Lord, please help me sense your spirit and turn them into plowshares and pruning hooks, so that I can start up that mountain to fullness of life. Amen —Cindy Anderson, originally published 2010

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass.
It’s about learning to dance in the rain.



Anonymous quote submitted by Barb Laski

On the dining room table in our house, a bundle of sage sits next to the Advent wreath....this is the way of walking two worlds with one spirit, one spirit that sees the path of Christ to be the path of native culture, as well.

People ask me all the time if it's hard to be a Native American and a Christian, and I always tell them, "No, it isn't. It's hard to be a Native American in a country seeped in colonized Christianity."

For native peoples, and specifically for my Potawatomi culture, seeing and experiencing God in this world happens through all the senses, through ceremony, through experience and prayer. In those things, Jesus is always present, the Holy Spirit breathing on us like the wind that blows outside. But it's difficult for many American Christians to understand that, to grasp that tribes that have been called savages for so long could actually have the presence of God in their own culture's values and norms, even at Christmas time.

If you look at our consumer Christmas history, you'll see the tension between the values of indigenous peoples and the values of corporate America. Instead of Advent as a time to be still, to listen and to wait; it's a time to shop, to stress, to add to the noise. And if you're not a part of majority American culture, it feels strained and odd to find your place during this season.

But there is a thread within Christianity that calls us back to the silence, to the quiet, to the patient waiting. I find comfort in the writing of Richard Rohr and the ideas of Franciscan theology, which is very similar to Native spirituality. In those spaces of contemplation, care for the Earth and constant work toward being present, we find the true gifts of Advent despite consumerism and colonization....

So, I lean into the frustration and beauty of Advent that allows me to take up space as a Potawatomi woman. Advent allows me to burn sage and pray while I watch the Advent candles burn on my dining room table. Advent allows me to learn the creation story of the Zuni people, to know what it means to see Christ in a culture that has been dismissed by America in every way.

And this year at the Christmas table, I'm adding a wild rice dish, native to the Great Lakes region of America where my tribe originally dwelled. And we'll talk about it, my husband's German family and me. We'll talk about why culture and Advent must go together.

The more I share my experiences of being an indigenous Christian, the more I hear other people say the same—that we are participants in a world we don't quite belong to—which is the very experience of Jesus, from the day he was born.

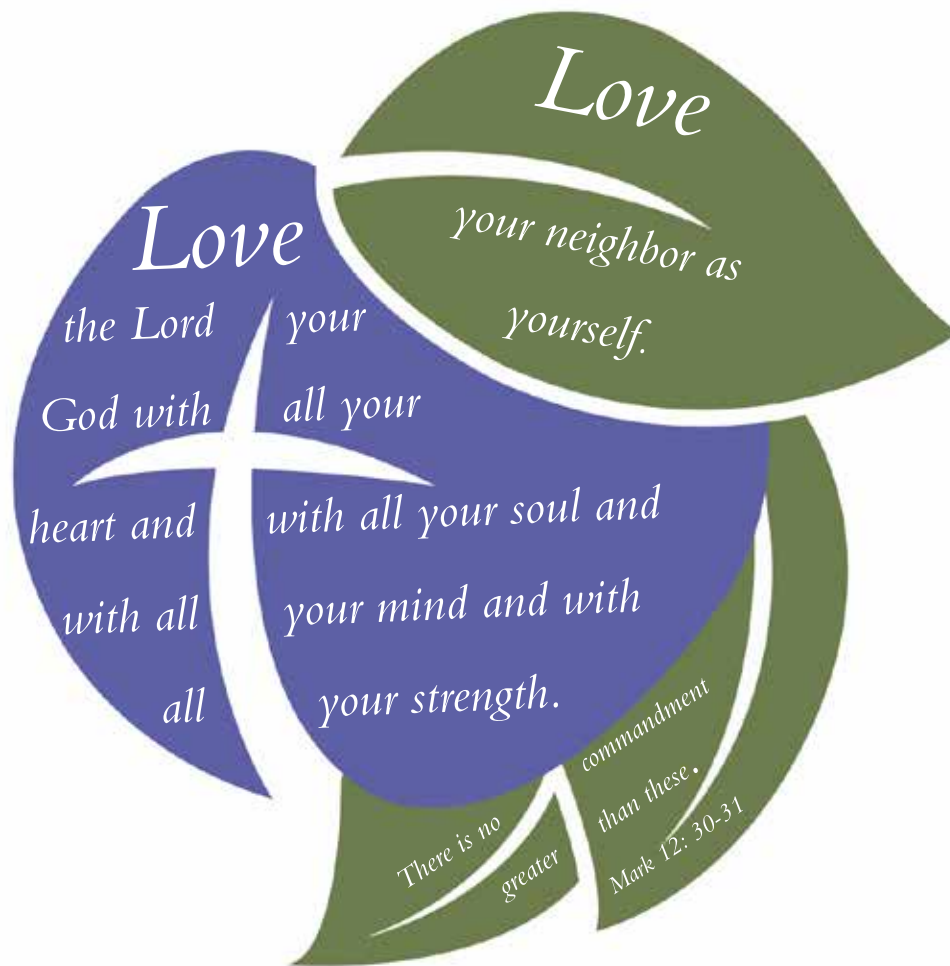
So, what does an indigenous Advent give me?

It may just be the thing that shows me how I belong to the good news of the Gospel and not how I'm left out of it. Maybe it will show me, when I burn that sage and light those candles of joy, hope, love and peace, that I belong to those who wait, who sit in the tension, who do not always know the way except to ask the created world to show them. —Kaitlin Curtice, excerpts from *"The Radical Inclusiveness of Advent"*



Photo by Suzanne Sanderson





Mark 12:30-31, submitted by Diane Jacobsen

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5

Second Sunday of Advent

STORY

And so a donkey carries a god.
The god is powerless, not even breathing,
hidden in the body of a woman
who holds her breath
and travels with a man
through occupied land
not far
from Bethlehem
past soldiers, past olive trees —
all standing, we say, for peace —
waiting for harvest
any night now
when oil burns
when skies ignite, struck
by the fullness of time.

—Muriel Nelson, originally published 2019

MINE TO CHOOSE

“Say to them, ‘Surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn!’” —*Ezekiel 33:11*

“Salvation is not flight from the wrath of God. Salvation is not separation. It is the beginning of a union with all that is or has been or will ever be.”

—*James Baldwin*

When Covid first hit, it was a foot on the brakes. No threat to my eventually arriving at my destination but first a quick stop at the light up ahead. But then it was, “Pull over and apply the emergency brake.” And then the reality that I’m going to be sitting here for a while.

Is that not amazing? My privileged world became one where moving forward as I pleased was not an option. It was then that I realized that Covid had dropped me into the Bible. And not the New Testament, but the Old Testament where God’s wrath is felt.

Privilege makes it difficult to imagine a wrathful God but for those who have experienced the human version of it, you must be more open to the possibility as James Baldwin is in the quote above. So if you do, I too must embrace that possibility.

To avoid that wrath, God has a simple commandment. Turn. Stop during what I am doing and turn towards God.

So while I grieve the loss of the choices I had before Covid, God offers me the choice of life. A deeper connection with life that includes and then goes beyond what Covid took away. James Baldwin describes the possibility of a union “with all that is or has been or will be.” And with that the truth of the present, the wisdom of the past and a vision of the future. —*Melony Joyce*



Photo by Suzanne Sanderson

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7



Photo by Suzanne Sanderson

I was working as the Middle School Director of a Seattle private school when the pandemic hit and was still in the role during the 2020–2021 school year. What a challenging time for schools. What was revealed to me in this time of pandemic and pandemic schooling was that there were foundational ways of being that we could draw on as we were trying to create a new way of being an educational institution. We could draw on past experience and institutional values as we created something new.

One example of this was continuing to teach and remind our students of the golden rule and the platinum rule and the importance of utilizing and living into both. As a refresher, the golden rule is treating others the way that you want to be treated, and the platinum rule is treating others the way that they want to be treated. Both need to be held lightly and with curiosity if the goal is care and belonging for all community members.

Drawing on institutional values helped guide the work, but it also presented a challenge when values were in conflict with each other or when it was unclear what actions truly represented our values. We could keep students more physically safe by teaching remotely, but we risked their mental safety by doing so or doing so for too long of a time. What was revealed to me was that every decision disappointed someone and that no decision is without negative consequences. Making peace with that is like making peace with being a sinner in the world. As Christians, we recognize that we are flawed and that our words and actions are flawed and because of this, we are in need of grace. When judgement starts to rise in me about institutional responses or lack of responses, I try and remember that institutions are made up of humans, who like me are flawed and in need of grace.

My prayer continues to be, “Eternal God, Living Light in the world and in me, continue to walk with me illuminating the path ahead.” —*Sue Maul*

WHEN A MOTHER CONSIDERS PEACE



Peace twice has come to me as such a feeling of fullness and quiet joy, my skin barely could contain it. I am laboring upstairs in my second-floor study, ears cocked toward the four young children's voices from the sun-scorched, yellowed lawn below. Their silence draws me to the window. There below, cross-legged on an old bedspread, they all sit — the ebullient child; the bossy leader; the shy, sly-humored one; and the mooney, but-so-observant one. All bend to the same effort, beading friendship bracelets, a skill newly learned in day camp. Their good-humored harmony, their helping of one another with quiet, content voices reminds me how we are held in the Savior's constant willing of peace for us all. I am smitten with the moment's example and breathe deeply, but softly, for it is rare for the four below, from far-distant origins, to resonate as one plucked string, but there it is and I behold.

Peace inscribes itself again on my heart late one December evening when the same four, newly arrived home for Christmas from far-off colleges or jobs, are all upstairs asleep. I am the last one in the house still awake, restless with joy over the children's presence. I go out to the back porch into the brisk night air and say to the Holy One, "Thank you for this night at least, when all my chicks are gathered again under one roof."

I picture the image from the Gospel of Luke: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings!"

I am years older now, alone, the entire family too far scattered in distance and from, alas, their former sense of mutuality to gather under one roof, despite the friendship bracelets which once held us. Yet in this season of waiting to celebrate the wonder of Jesus' birth and the promise of peace, I feel held again by the fierce peace of knowing how I, too, all these past years, have been a chick sheltered under its mother's wings, just as Jerusalem holds her own in the face of danger.

This, then, is that promised peace the Child is coming to bring us, that peace so sheltering, so safe, so sweet; that peace of quiet, quivering joy, which wraps its very wings about us. —*Vivian Bowden, originally published 2010*

"Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited." —Thomas Merton

I TREASURE DEEP QUIET

The quarantine phase of the coronavirus pandemic ushered us into an introvert's dream come true, as such people tend to thrive on solitude and quiet spaces. I am an introvert and the pandemic has changed my relationship with what I considered a disturbing silence that comes in the middle of night. I have learned to treasure this type of quietness which once caused me distress.

As the pandemic weeks passed, I eventually found sleeping through the night becoming increasingly difficult. I am a night owl, but I still need my rest. Sometimes I had trouble falling asleep at the end of the day. Other times, I would suddenly awaken in the middle of the night, unable to nod off again. The latter tends to occur around 3:00 am, which I have experienced on rare occasion in the past. As my very dear and now departed grandmother explained to me, "That makes you a member of the 3 O'Clock Club". Grandma, her siblings, and many of her friends were members of that club.

Unable to sleep, I would wander through my home feeling mesmerized by the intensely hushed environment that blanketed me. No noise from neighbors. No noise from traffic outside. No crickets chirping and no frogs croaking. Aside from the constant low-pitch buzzing emitted from the computers and the humming of the refrigerator, there was only the noise that I generated while moving around... quietly. This kind of soundlessness I often found dreadful, frequently to the point of causing anxiety. It just felt like something was wrong. It was beyond the degree of quietude in which this introvert finds comfort.



My family lost four dear family members since the onset of the pandemic, one of them lost to COVID-19. Dealing with grief has been difficult. Not just my own grief, but also witnessing grief among my family, friends, co-workers, and church family has been heartbreaking. That amount of grief coupled with the uneasiness of the ultraquiet has been challenging to my soul. Yet, I soldier on knowing that God loves me.

In the months since my grandmother passed earlier this year, I would lay awake during the silent nights fighting back anxiety. I came to hear my grandmother's voice say, "Don't worry. If you're in the 3 O'Clock Club, it's because God wants to have a conversation with you." I have taken her words to heart and it's caused a shift in me. Now when I wrestle with sleep, I relax into the stillness of the night listening for God's voice. I am no longer dismayed by the deeply muted nighttime.

I believe that God appears to us in the form that we need; male, female, non-binary, etc. For me, God is my Father ubiquitous. In the tranquility of the 3 O'Clock Club I tell God my worries and my troubles. God comforts me with the warmth of His love. He lifts me up and carries me through each day that He grants to me. I still pray at morning and at bedtime daily. However, I have learned that I feel more strongly connected to God's love for me when I pray in the deep quiet of night, which has become a treasure to me. —*Toni Arthur*

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10

REVEALING REJOICE



Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice[c] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.[d]

c & d *NRSV footnote* — "or Farewell"

Webster's New World College Dictionary

Farewell — [fare (imperative) + well]

Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus

Fare - (intransitive verb, i.e. verb which does not need a direct object) 1.GET ALONG, SUCCEED 2: GO, TRAVEL

Synonyms: cope, do, get along, get by, get on, make out, manage, shift (Take your pick, but to me it sounds like "live.")

Philippians 4:4-9 (*My proposed translation*):

4 Live well[c] in the Lord always; again I will say, Live well.[d] 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved,[e] whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about[f] these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. —*Kathy Rood*

(*Kudos to Dr. Tracy Simpson for her comments on Toxic Positivity in Plymouth worship on Sunday, October 31, 2021!*)



For me, one of the blessings of the pandemic has been to notice myself and others becoming more observant. As we slowed down our pace of life, we began to look around us. We noticed small things we may have missed before. Here is a sweet story about noticing.

My daughter handed me her school progress report. Although it displayed a steady stream of positive check marks, there was one check mark standing dejectedly alone from the rest.

“How am I doing, Mom?” my child asked with a level of maturity that did not match the small disheveled person gazing up at me with smudged eyeglasses that teetered on the tip of her nose. With her small finger, she pointed to her teacher’s neatly printed words next to the lone check mark. It read: “Distracted in large groups.” But I already

knew this. I knew this long before it was written on an official report card. Since she was a toddler, this child has offered astute observations of the world around her.

After pointing out all the positives on the progress report, I told her what was written. Upon hearing the news, she gave a tiny, uncertain smile and shyly admitted, “I do look around a lot.”

But before my child could feel one ounce of shame, one iota of failure, I came down on bended knee and looked her straight in the eye. I didn’t want her to just hear these words, I wanted her to feel them. This is what I said:

“Yes. You do look around a lot. You noticed Sam sitting off by himself with a skinned knee on the field trip, and you comforted him.”

“You noticed Banjo had a running nose, and the vet said it was a good thing we brought him in when we did.”

“You noticed our waitress was working really hard and suggested we leave an extra good tip.

“You noticed Grandpa was walking slower than the rest of us so you waited for him.”

“You notice the beautiful view every time we cross the bridge to go to swim practice.”

“And you know what? I don’t ever want you to stop noticing because that is your gift. It is your gift that you give to the world.”

As I watched my daughter beam with the glow of acceptance, I realized her approach to life had the power to change the world. You see, we are all just waiting for someone to notice—notice our pain, notice our scars, notice our fear, notice our joy, notice our triumphs, notice our courage.

And the one who notices is a rare and beautiful gift.

—Submitted by Rev. Donene Blair, from Rachel Macy Stafford, author of “Hands Free Life.” Her author page is @TheHandsFreeRevolution on Facebook.

“I am not alone at all, I thought. I was never alone at all. And that, of course, is the message of Christmas. We are never alone. Not when the night is darkest, the wind coldest, the world seemingly most indifferent. For this is still the time God chooses.” — Taylor Caldwell (American novelist)

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12

Third Sunday of Advent

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."
—Romans 15:4-13



"Farolillos," George Tooker, tempura on board.

The world is broken in many places. It is easy to slip into despair at the enormity and the intractability of the problems facing us. But Paul reminds us that, as Christians, we have a powerful antidote to despair. We believe in a God of hope and joy. We have scripture and the Holy Spirit to bolster our flagging spirits. They are telling us that we who are waiting, we who are in this Advent time, can actively wait in hope, knowing God's steadfast love will see us through the dark days. We can move forward with the knowledge that while we are waiting, while we continue to do God's work for God's people, spreading the Good News and welcoming the "other" into our lives, that all things are possible with God. The vision of a whole and healed world, shalom, where peace and justice reign, is worth waiting and working for, and the God of hope and joy is there with us, waiting to surprise us once again.

Dear God, help me to hold fast to hope in this waiting time and work to further your vision of joy and peace for all people. Amen —Beverly DeCook, originally published 2010

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13

GIVING THE UNSEEN ITS DUE

"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." —Revelation 22:17

"For I do not for an instant doubt, and I will go to my grave believing, that we can build Jerusalem, if we will."
—James Baldwin

Of course, the Covid virus can be seen with a microscope and yes, this image has been blown up and plastered all over everything, but the fact is we can't see it with our own eyes or feel it with our own hands. And yet, Covid brought the world to its knees. With all our progress, are we any less ruled by the unseen than our ancestors?

One of my biggest revelations from Covid was this. I could no longer ignore the power of the unseen. Just as I was learning that race was not the color of my skin — what I could see — but a concept, unseen except for its power to secure privilege for a few and misery for many, I knew it was time for me to pick up my Bible and give the unseen its due.

And there within it, I found the true source of the power of the unseen.

The beauty of anticipation in the time of Advent, the vision of invitation quoted above from Revelation, and also quoted above, James Baldwin's earth-shattering testimony to faith and hope in a new Jerusalem brings me to my knees. Who am I to doubt the power of love, the power of God to transform the world. —Melony Joyce

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14

So much light was extinguished from our COVID-stricken world—
Five million souls and counting ushered out by a tiny killer virus.
In the dimming that followed, these illusions died:
That I am indestructible
That the American health care system is invincible
That I have control over Outcomes, as a patient, as a caregiver, as a parent, as a spouse, as a social worker, as a writer, as a fragile human being
That genocide couldn't possibly be government policy in today's world
That "every day in every way things are getting better and better..."
And these truths were revealed:
That joy can surface in grief
That human beings are the world's worst invasive species, yet they can also be conductors of God's light and energy
That black and brown lives are so very crucial
That diversity ensures survival of all species
That technology does great harm but can also be a wonderful tool
That the only decision that matters is choosing love over fear
In the stillness and emptiness of Pandemic, I observed God's natural world and saw:
That dawn always follows night
Spring always follows winter
Sprouts grow from decay
Stars shine even in daylight
Babies are born
Water cycles
Storms pass
And a mere fraction of the universe is visible to the naked eye
—Kate Emerson Forrester

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15



My wife, Alicia, and I bought a house when she was 24 weeks pregnant with our son, Luke. We spent the next few weeks painting the new house, cleaning carpets, moving boxes, and then we moved into our new house when Alicia was 27 weeks pregnant. Over the final trimester of Alicia's pregnancy, we set up Luke's crib, organized his room, hung items on the walls, and amidst all this we attended appointments and classes to prepare for Luke's arrival. When Alicia was 37 weeks pregnant, I quit my job at the bike shop I was working at because I was going to be a full time stay-at-home dad. In the final two weeks, I washed clothing, folded clothing, did odd jobs around the house and basically anything else I could think of to prepare for Luke's arrival.

I tell you this not because there is anything special about the things Alicia and I did, but rather to illustrate that when we are expecting something, there is a lot of planning and work that goes into preparing for something. As we are awaiting the day of Christ's arrival, what are the things that each of us does? Perhaps you will be hanging lights. Perhaps you will be baking cookies. Perhaps you will be thinking about the special present for a loved one. Perhaps you take more time in silence to be aware of and present to yourself. How do you prepare and what work do you do during the season of advent? During this season of advent, my hope is that as you prepare in ways that are meaningful and help you to greet the birth of Jesus in the ways that are most life giving to you.

—Rev. Kevin Bechtold, originally published 2019

Holy one, you come to us in so many ways including the life of Jesus Christ. Thank you for your presence in our lives as we prepare to welcome the one who came from you to share in our common lives. Bless us in this season and beyond as we do the work to further your kingdom. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16



Photo by Debbie Baden

Advent should admonish us to discover
in each brother or sister that we greet,
in each friend whose hand we shake,
in each beggar who asks for bread,
in each worker who wants to use the right to join a union,
in each peasant who looks for work in the coffee groves,
the face of Christ.

Then it would not be possible to rob them,
to cheat them,
to deny them their rights.

They are Christ,
and whatever is done to them
Christ will take as done to himself.
This is what Advent is:
Christ living among us.

— Archbishop Oscar Romero, December 3, 1978

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17

ISAIAH 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God. He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense. He will come and save you'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

HOLY ROAD



The prophet of Isaiah describes a striking transformation — a barren desert becomes a blossoming, lush landscape. Blind see; deaf hear; lame leap. It speaks of the power God can bring to bear in making change. I pray in Advent that God delivers this kind of transformation to me — that Christ's birth delivers strength and courage, and creates a garden from a desert.

And most years I feel it in small, fleeting ways; a moment of music, an act of charity. But even if I felt it as though I were seeing it, real, literal, and magical before my eyes like a great time-lapse movie: the hand of God moving through the desert of Isaiah, painting new streams on the parched canvas, coaxing springs to

life to quench the earth — even if I saw where there was burning sand moments before, a pool, gurgling, clear; and bounding through it like a stag, a fellow who only moments ago was slouching, crippled since birth, in the dust — even then I wonder about the permanence of that transformation.

Would I not forget, like I do each year about all the other trappings of the season? Would I not just be here, again next year, going through the ritual, transforming the decor with boughs of holly? But I also see that God understands this — God knows that transformation is not enough. In Isaiah, God provides transformation first, and then, in the midst of this new landscape, God provides transportation. “A Highway shall be there...it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”

So we are not to be content in the newly watered garden — we have places to go. We are a pilgrim people, journeying in faith. With the birth of Christ we see the transformation, but the road from that birth is marked by the lessons of Christ's life, death and resurrection. And now I pray that if I study that road, and journey it with courage, next year I'll be just a few steps ahead. —*Robert Neer, originally published 2010*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18

THINGS WE DON'T NEED

There are a lot of things we don't need. In fact, the list is almost endless: war, famine, pestilence, annoying people, mosquitos.... What about the over-commercialization of Christmas? Shopping malls full of harried people spending more money than they can afford on more things than any one child (or adult) can appreciate. Last year, we didn't shop 'til we dropped. Of course, we still shopped (mostly online), but some people used the extra time that staying home brought with it to make presents – to knit, hammer, paint, sew, bake. Some people wrote letters and sent cards, decorated the houses that had become havens of peace and safety. They realized there were things they didn't need, and that all the hustle and bustle of the season obscures the real meaning of Christmas.

There were other people, though, who had unmet needs. They grieved that they could not be with family and other loved ones; that they could not travel to the place that would always be home. This year, with proper precautions, may they have a Christmas with the people who matter the most to them. May we all have a Christmas with the people who matter the most to us. May we decide that we do not need to be with people who are unkind and argumentative. May we decide that we don't need to compete with others to see who can give the biggest and best gifts or the fanciest parties or put up the most extravagant light displays. May we focus on the true spirit of Christmas. —*Suzanne Sanderson*

PLACING MY STONE

“...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.” —*Luke 1:26-27*

“But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand – and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”

—*James Baldwin*

God loves creating. What James Baldwin names in human history as “the perpetual achievement of the impossible.” I like that. It may be the very definition of God. Making possible the impossible. To begin from nothing very promising, the ordinary, the humble, to accomplish the impossible or what some call a miracle. When the impossible happens, look for the hand of God. But it is not all good news. Not explicitly stated by James, but implicit in the need for “the perpetual achievement of the impossible,” is that there will be times when the absence of God is felt.

It didn’t take me, or anyone else for that matter, much time in reflection during Covid to feel anger at the absence of God. But I think there are times, and this is one of them, when we need to carve out time to celebrate those people who answer the call of God. Who put down their stone into the ground and make it holy. To marvel that God chooses us to partner in bringing forth love where before there was fear.

And this is the greatest gift that Covid brought me. That I will be tried and found wanting. That I am called to be present and to witness. That I want to journey towards Jerusalem, placing a stone into holy ground.

As Christmas approaches, take a minute to read aloud the quote above. Luke’s description of the advent of Jesus’s life. I am guilty of skipping over the details. But God does not. There is a profundity in these two sentences describing a simple, impossible beginning that needs my humble attentiveness as an adult. Everything is named by God. The messenger, the place and those who accepted God’s call to change human history. And their ancestors are also present. Here then will be found holiness. All I need to witness to the impossible that is coming. Now let us rejoice! —*Melony Joyce*



“Annunciation,” Patricia Brintle

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20



“Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those with whom we walk the way.” This has been a go-to benediction for me for years. A handwritten copy of the benediction is on my refrigerator, I have shared the words at a memorial service of a young man who died too young, and I am fully present to the call to “be swift to love” whenever the benediction is read at the end of a church service. One thing that has been revealed to me in this time of pandemic is that I do not have much time to gladden my own heart in addition to the hearts of those I love, like, or simply walk the way with. A synonym for “Gladden” is “hearten” and synonyms

for “hearten” are “strengthen” and “encourage”. I’ve needed (and still need!) strength and encouragement. Not the kind of strength and encouragement that removes the challenges in front of me, but the kind of strength and encouragement that helps me face the challenges while continuing to grow and change.

Betty B. shared a prayer with me years ago that I continue to use: “Walk with me, Jesus.” —*Sue Maul*



“Holy Family of the Streets,” by Kelly Latimore

“As we near the end of this Advent Season and turn our hearts and minds toward Christmas, I am mindful of the circumstances of Christ’s birth and the relevance of that birth today. I am mindful of Jesus being born on the wrong side of the tracks in Bethlehem of Judea, an area we now know as Palestine. I am mindful that the birth of Jesus was not met with the elaborate grandeur of our celebrations today, but rather, Jesus was born as the son of a young woman whose pregnancy was unplanned and whose birth was so ethnically profiled by the governing forces of his day that his parents were forced to seek political asylum.

I am mindful that the very birth of Jesus was an act of resistance for which there was no room.

I have always been intrigued by the lack of space made for God’s gift of Grace. Most of us have grown up hearing accounts that the “inn” in Bethlehem was full, with no “room” available. We

perform Christmas plays and construct narratives depicting a pregnant Mary traveling with Joseph from inn to inn in search of a room.

Yet a closer look at the biblical text reveals quite a different story!

The Greek word translated “inn” in Luke 2 is *kataluma*, it literally means a guest room.

In fact, the writer uses this very word later in Luke 22:11, where Jesus said to His disciples, “Then you shall say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “‘Where is the guest room (*kataluma*) where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’” The only other time this word is used in scripture is Mark 14:14, which also refers to the inquiry about the use of the guest room for Passover.

Linguistically, the text shows that the writer of Luke used the term *kataluma* to mean not an inn, but the guest room, literally “*the*” guest room of a particular house. What Luke is telling us is there was not enough space for God’s Grace.

Making space for Grace is a disruptive process. We struggle to make room in our houses for the unplanned, and often unwelcomed, inbreaking of Christ.

There is no room in our legislative houses to welcome those in need of refuge today.

There is no room in our houses of worship to welcome those whose beliefs may differ.

There is no room in our cities to offer shelter to the homeless.

There is no room in our hospitals to care for the mentally ill.

There is no room in our political policies to welcome the immigrant.

There is no room on our agenda to respect the environment.

There is no room in our hearts to comfort the poor, the vulnerable, or the profiled among us.

There is no room in our inn.

And yet, Christ comes anyway, challenging us, always, to make room.

And this is the HOPE of this season. This is the peace that Christ brings. That, as Jurgen Moltmann said, “*Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.*”

—Rev. Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister of Justice and Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, published on the UCC website, 12/21/2016



THE ART OF SURRENDER

When I Surrender
the Holy whispers
behold those who come to me
all growth calls for movement
away from the place I have known
to dance on the edges
of Mystery and the Beyond
that still small voice
implores me to say yes
to trust in this moment
and step into the unknown
where my heartbeat and God's are one
in perfect rhythm with life itself
when I surrender, beauty unfolds
like the soft petals of a beach rose

—Barb Laski

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23



“When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it.’ It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker creek and thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time to see, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power. Gradually the lights went

out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells un-flamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam.” —Annie Dillard (submitted by Robert Turner)

AMAZING PEACE: A Christmas Poem

by Maya Angelou

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.
Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.
We question ourselves.
What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God.
Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?
Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.
It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly
in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.
Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their
sunsets.
Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.
In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now. It is louder.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
It is what we have hungered for.
Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.
We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.
We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.
Peace.
Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.
We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,
Implore you, to stay a while with us.
So we may learn by your shimmering light
How to look beyond complexion and see community.
It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.
On this platform of peace, we can create a language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.
At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ
Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.
We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Non-Believers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.
Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul.





Photo by Suzanne Sanderson

Growing up, one of my favorite times in church was during “the devotionals.” It was before worship began, a time to testify about what God had done in one’s life. A deacon would lead a song, and even if you didn’t know the words, you could hum along, fall in, harmonizing your way into a human orchestra of the heart. There was always a place for you. Some would dare to grace along the top of the melody with a spontaneous improvised descant, sharing with the community through singing that they had endured some unknown pain and suffering.

Yet, here they stand. Different, perhaps. Sometimes with scars. There is the cultivated space of love, we all we invited to share our heart-space with one another, encouraging and commiserating with grace.

And in between the songs, spoken testimonies were offered. Some would share that they had been sick, but on that day, God had blessed them to stand among the living, with blood running warm through their veins and breath through their bodies. Others would lift up that they were still on the journey. Things were not as they wished, but they would offer thanksgiving to the God who was

carrying them through. There was appreciation for the bed that was not their “cooling board”, for blankets that were not their “winding sheets.” That somehow, no matter the circumstances, if they were still on this side of life, still with sacred breath in them, with God, there is hope.

One song that captures the spirit of devotionals is “*How I Got Over*.” It was made famous by Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin. The chorus is as follows:

*How I got over
How I got over
You know my soul looks back and wonder
How I got over*

And here we are, on the other side of through. We have waited, watched, prayed. And Christmas has come with the hope and joy of all it represents. I say, you should testify.

Testify about how you’ve found yourself. Testify about the holiness of being a part of community. Testify about the grief, and how the pain marked you, changed you, and made you more human. Talk about your despair, and I’ll talk about mine. And let us be witnesses to the fact that we have been delivered to the birthing place, the container where transformation happens in the hope of Christmas.

Friends, we’ve made it over. We’ve made our peace with the dark, honoring that it is not the antithesis of the light, but preparation so that we might recognize its glow in a new way. May this day bring you great joy, sweetness for your longing, and vision to see God’s great faithfulness to us all. Merry Christmas! —Rev. Dr. Kelle Brown

THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

—Howard Thurman, from “*The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*”



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