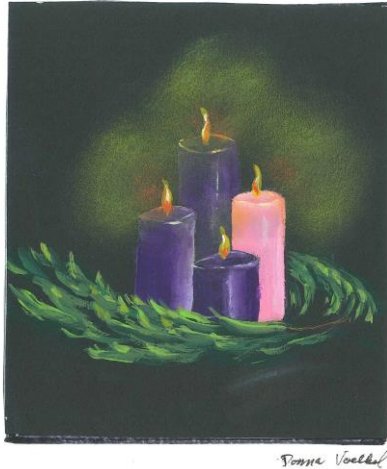


2021 Advent Devotions



Written by members of
Redeemer Lutheran Church



While the world rushes by outside, bringing into our lives both new and painfully familiar challenges, we hurtle toward Christmas in a blur of red and green. It is easy to lose our center. That is why Christians choose to pause, and make time for an Advent spirit to fill us. Making time for these devotions slows our steps, calms our hearts, and wakes us to the presence of the God we often don't realize is holding us in love. Together we wait ... we reflect ... we prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child who is coming to us, and the Christ who is already with us.

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READ:

Jeremiah
33:14-16

Luke
21:25-26

The Lord said, "The time is coming when I will fulfill the promise that I made to the people of Israel and Judah. . . . The people of Judah and of Jerusalem will be rescued and will live in safety. The city will be called 'The Lord Our Salvation.'" (GNT). Jeremiah 33:14, 16

PRAYER:

Lord, help us prepare our hearts to welcome anew the Christ Child, who is our hope for the salvation of the world. Amen.

Hope for the World

Right on the heels of Thanksgiving and Black Friday, Christians observe the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the church year. I chose this day because the "stars aligned": today is my mother's birthday, and the scripture passage is from Jeremiah, after whom my older son was named.

The Old Testament prophet lived in a troubled time for the Jewish people. He had warned the people that their idolatry and sin would lead to a catastrophe: Jerusalem—including the temple, the center of their religion—was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon.

Yet, as our scripture points out, Jeremiah proclaimed God's words: "The time is coming when I will fulfill the promise that I made . . . the people . . . will be rescued and will live in safety." And yes, the people did eventually return to Israel and rebuild the temple. Jeremiah's hope was fulfilled. Thus, when our first child was born, he was named Jeremy as a sign of our hope for the future.

Centuries later a star appeared when a child was born to an unwed mother in a stable in Bethlehem, a child who was to become the savior of the world. But even during Christ's life on earth, there were dire predictions, as Luke writes: "Nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea." We might be reminded of this past year, with the hurricanes and torrential rains that devastated so many areas. In addition, the world is still being devastated by COVID-19. Most likely, disasters will continue to occur on our planet. We need to do what we can to preserve the world God gave us.

Let us use this time of Advent to remember the promises God made through the prophets.

Monday, November 29

Connie Criswell

Reason to Hope

By the time 2 Peter was written, the first generation of Christians had passed away, and many wondered whether the promise of the Second Coming was false because it was taking so long. The author assures his readers that this promise is true but will happen in God's time, not man's time. Even though the world is expected to be destroyed in the end, the author offers a word of hope: God does not want any to perish, but to turn away from sin.

How does our society treat those who are considered to be obvious sinners, such as prostitutes? If caught, they are usually arrested and fined or sentenced to jail. However, in Columbus there has been an alternative available for a number of years. About a decade ago I was summoned for jury duty. During a lull when there were no trials, we in the jury pool were allowed to go visit proceedings in other courtrooms in the building. I wandered into the room where Judge Paul Herbert was conducting a session of CATCH Court for women who had been arrested multiple times for prostitution. CATCH (changing actions to change habits) regards these women as exploited victims of human trafficking, not criminals. Participation in the programs that are offered helps break the cycle of abuse they are in, which usually involves drug addiction, and provides the women with resources and support to enable them to leave "the life of the streets."

The day I observed Judge Herbert's courtroom, the CATCH graduates present told everybody there about their successes in getting clean, finding a paying job, and being able to rent an apartment. Some even went to college. Everyone who testified was greeted with cheers and applause. Some said this was the first time they had been treated like a member of a family. The CATCH Court helped them turn away from their old life and gave them hope for a better future. It felt so good to see our justice system doing something right.

READ:

*Numbers
17:1-11*

*2 Peter
3:1-18*

*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.
2 Peter 3:9*

PRAYER:

*O God, be patient with us when we sin, and forgive us when we repent. Teach us to be patient with one another.
Amen.*

Tuesday, November 30

Becky Trover

READ:

2 Samuel
7:18-29

Revelation
22:12-16

*"I am the root
and the
descendant of
David, the
bright morning
star."*

Revelation 22:16b

PRAYER:

*Lord Jesus, grant
that we may stay
deeply connected
to you, our root,
and through you to
all the many
branches of your
family and ours.
Amen.*

Finding Our Root

I enjoy watching the genealogy program "Finding Your Roots." It's both entertaining and instructive to see people learn of ancestors they didn't know about previously, hear the stories of their family, and trace their personality traits and quirks to the experiences of generations that came before. Often they say something along the lines of, "Well, now I know why I am the way I am. My ancestors instilled that in me."

We think of Jesus as the Son of David, born in royal David's city to descendants of David's house. But Jesus declares in Revelation that he is both the root and the descendant of David. Jesus is always one with God, always part of the creative Spirit, always a part of the dance of the Trinity. Jesus's story did not begin in Bethlehem, but before the very beginning.

Jesus is also our root and lives in us and in all creation. Through this immense and many-branched root we are eternally connected to people of every time and every place, as well as to all the earth. It is only when we recognize the Christ in all people and in the world around us that we can understand the blessing we have inherited from this primal ancestor, which makes us what we are. And it is only when we share this blessing with others that we take part in the great family story, that we clearly see the bright morning star bring light and life to our world.

Thanks be to God for the great family he makes us a part of.



Wednesday, December 1

Emily Kent

This Is the “Good News”?

There is a group of people who sometimes frequent a busy intersection near my home. They come with cardboard signs, Bibles, a Christian flag, and bullhorns to shout at all passersby about needing to get right with the Lord. They say that Jesus saves, the end is near, and woe to you unbelievers, etc., etc. Miles saw this a while back and asked me about it because he thought the behavior was odd. Even a 9-year-old child understands the basic principle of catching more flies with honey than with vinegar.

I explained that some churches focus on Jesus coming back and want everyone to know about it. Some churches believe that if you don't have their preferred relationship with the divine, then something bad will happen to you. And even though it is scary, they genuinely believe your soul is in mortal peril, and they're trying to help.

For many reasons, that kind of theology doesn't sit well with us. Yelling at people has never been an effective way of communication. Promising a reward for (or threatening a punishment for) a certain behavior isn't about salvation. It's about obedience and control.

Jesus said he would come back, but he also said NO ONE would know when. So we take him at his word and go about our business, trying to live in his example. In our church we choose loving people instead of trying to convert them. Rather than worrying about any future gloom and doom, we focus on lessening very real problems in the here and now, trying to actively bring Christ's love to our neighbors.

So don't let phrases like those found in today's reading worry you too much. Further, don't let the sensationalism of the news worry you either. This is the season of Advent, and like always, we are focusing on the love and hope that Christ brings into the world. It's our job to share that love with all—no shouting, shaming, or fear required.

READ:

Isaiah
1:24-31

Luke
11:29-32

*But rebels and
sinners will both
be broken, and
those who
forsake the Lord
will perish.
(NIV)
Isaiah 1:28*

PRAYER:

*Heavenly
Comforter, help us
to keep calm
heads and hearts
in fearful situations
and to remember
that your love is
stronger than any
fear.
Amen.*

Thursday, December 2

Judith Bird

READ:

Malachi 3:5-12

*Philippians
1:12-18a*

*I the Lord do
not change.
(NIV)*

Malachi 3:6a

PRAYER:

*"Still through the
cloven skies they
come with
peaceful wings
unfurled,

and still their
heav'nly music
floats o'er all the
weary world.*

*Above its sad
and lowly plains
they bend on
hov'ring wing;*

*and ever o'er its
babel sounds the
blessed angels
sing."*

Amen.

The Blessed Angels Sing

One of the most endearing memories I have from growing up in Dayton is leaving my home church, St. Paul's, after the late Christmas Eve service, only to be greeted with the crispest, clearest night. Echoing in my mind were the words to one of the hymns we had sung that evening:

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heav'n's all-gracious king."
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

It seemed to me that this was just such a night, thousands of years ago.

In the intervening years, my parents, as would be expected, are now gone.

So is the congregation.

And the home we returned to that night is also gone.

But what remains is the memory and the exhortation from Malachi:
I the Lord do not change.

Amen.



Friday, December 3

Judith Bird

Moving Beyond Fear . . . Because We Can

I have a confession. I added a couple of verses to the Philippians reading for the day. The original assigned passage has Paul reflecting on his time in prison and, though he declares that "what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance," he goes on to note that "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. . . . I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." That just seemed a bit heavy for an Advent devotional. Ergo, the addition of verses encompassing 1:27-28a.

I was particularly drawn to the concept . . . promise? . . . of not "being frightened in any way by those who oppose you" in this standing firm in one spirit, contending for the gospel. It seems to me that much of today's public discourse is driven by fear. "Nancy Pelosi" . . . critical race theory . . . Black Lives Matter . . . defund police . . . abortion . . . anti-abortion . . . stand your ground . . . —these are all catch phrases intended to induce fear.

But what is the message beneath each phrase? Of course, there is neither time nor space for me to write what I think, but it is a discussion to be had, which we do here at Redeemer, and one in which we don't need to be "frightened in any way" by those who disagree. We can be "joyful revolutionaries," knowing we are on solid ground in the love God showed us all when he sent his son to earth.



READ:

Malachi
3:13-18

Philippians
1:18b-26

*Whatever happens,
conduct yourselves in
a manner worthy of
the gospel of Christ.
Then . . . I will know
that you stand firm
in one spirit,
contending as one
[person] for the faith
of the gospel without
being frightened in
any way by those
who oppose you.*

(NIV)

Philippians 1:27-28a

PRAYER:

*Dear Lord, may the
certainty of your love, as
shown in your sending
your son, ground us as
we live our lives, engage
in our community, and
reach out to your world.
Amen.*

READ:

Malachi
4:1-6

Luke
9:1-6

*They departed
and went
through the
villages,
bringing the
good news and
curing diseases
everywhere.*

Luke 9:6

PRAYER:

*Loving Lord, help
us to be open to
your healing
presence,
wherever we
encounter it. Send
your comforting
angels, and help
us to receive them
warmly.
Amen.*

Healing

This passage was difficult for me. I understood the words, but the message was not clear. Then I suddenly remembered I Remember Mama, a paperback book I loved and read and reread until the book fell apart. The stories were those of an immigrant Norwegian family in the early 1900s and detailed many of their difficulties with medical care. The father suffered a concussion on the job, the youngest child had a life-threatening ear infection, and then there was Uncle Chris.

Uncle Chris was the head of the extended family. He was loud and bombastic and walked with a limp from an earlier accident. He was always buying farms, bullying them back into production, and then selling them for a good profit. But he never shared this wealth with the rest of the family. After he died, the family found that Uncle Chris had no money left, just a book. In the book were the names of the children whose knee and leg surgeries he had paid for so they would not have to live their lives with the difficulties he had endured.

Remembering this book triggered memories of the many days and nights I have spent at Children's Hospital. The medical field is where the actions of God are most noticeable and where people are brought closer to God. It is where a lot of prayers are said and a lot of comfort is given by angels, both human and spirit. Once, when Jon was in the hospital, I went downstairs to the multidenominational chapel. It is a room with chairs set up for worship and the symbols of all major religions by an altar. The room was empty, but I sat at the chair furthest from the altar because I was uncomfortable and didn't feel worthy enough to be closer. After a few minutes I moved to another chair that was closer. I kept moving closer to the altar bit by bit until I sat in the chair right in front of it. Finally, I walked up to and around the altar and touched it. I looked at the details of each symbol displayed there, each beautifully done.

I found such comfort there even though I spoke no word and didn't do what I would consider to be praying. But maybe my moving from chair to chair was the prayer itself. I was invited up to the altar and was warmly received.

Sunday, December 5

Brad Binau

Keep Calm and Carry On

Advent without angels? Perish the thought! No pre-Christmas Advent pageantry would be complete without a gaggle of angels decked out with cardboard wings and foil-covered halos. And that's as it should be. Angels played leading roles in the drama leading up to the nativity. They made separate house calls on Joseph and Mary to prepare the way for each of them to accept what was going to happen. And it was an angel who told frightened shepherds to chill out and warm up to the best news they would ever receive. (Perhaps it was angels, not the British government, who coined the phrase, "Keep calm and carry on.")

But where are the angels in today's verses from the prophet Malachi and the evangelist Luke, you might wonder. The literal meaning of the word *angel* is "messenger." So wherever, whenever, we encounter messengers of God's good news, we have been touched by an angel. Malachi, whose very name means "my messenger," delivers the awesome news that a decisive encounter with the Lord of creation is in the offing. And though he would certainly be voted Least Likely to Be Persuasive as a Christmas Pageant Angel, it's John the wild and wooly Baptist who gets the messenger's part in Luke's account.

I have never seen any angels—at least not ones that looked like anything I've ever seen on a Christmas card. But I have been blessed with messengers who brought me good news at key moments in my life: friends who told me they thought I would make a good pastor, faculty mentors who prepared the way for me to become a theologian, counselors and spiritual directors who calmed my troubled soul and blessed me with the acceptance I had trouble offering to myself. If you think about it, I'm guessing you will remember these kinds of messengers who helped you keep calm and carry on.

Let's keep our ears open this season. Somewhere, someone is trying to tell us that we're going to be lifted up when life gets us down, and the seemingly insurmountable will become navigable. Good news: we are free to keep calm and carry on!

READ:

Malachi
3:1-4

Luke
3:1-6

*See, I am sending
my messenger to
prepare the way*

...

Malachi 3.1a

*"The voice of one
crying out in the
wilderness:
'Prepare the way
of the Lord. . .'"*

Luke 3.4b

PRAYER:

*Give us grateful
hearts for the
messengers of
good news who
have blessed our
lives. In the name of
the one who never
breaks a promise.
Amen.*

Monday, December 6

Connie Criswell

READ:

Isaiah
40:1-11

Romans
8:22-25

*Comfort ye,
comfort ye my
people, saith your
God. Speak ye
comfortably to
Jerusalem, and
cry unto her, that
her warfare is
accomplished, that
her iniquity is
pardoned: for she
hath received of
the Lord's hand
double for all her
sins. (KJV)*
Isaiah 40:1-2

PRAYER:

*O God, comfort us in
our times of need
and sorrow. Imbue us
with the love and
caring spirit of St.
Nicholas.
Amen.*

Comfort in Hard Times

Whenever I hear this passage from Isaiah, it stirs warm memories of singing Handel's *Messiah* over the years in various choirs. Much of the lyrics for Part 1 of this magnificent oratorio was drawn from Isaiah 40. When this passage was written, the Israelites were in dire need of comforting, as they were in exile in Babylon. For many years they had been beset on all sides by the invading armies of powerful empires: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and finally the forces of Babylon.

Today we are beset by invading armies consisting not of soldiers, but of microscopic viruses. Over 750,000 of our fellow Americans have died from variants of COVID-19, and our war with this disease is far from over. Most of us know someone who has contracted it, and many have lost a friend or family member. We can take comfort from each other's compassion, the hard work of scientists developing effective vaccines, and knowing that sensible precautions can lessen or prevent infection. We eagerly await the day that our warfare with these viruses will be accomplished.

Today is the feast day of St. Nicholas, the fourth-century bishop of Myra. Redeemer's own interpreter of St. Nicholas, Larry Trover, has taught us how Nicholas brought comfort and forgiveness to people of his time, such as by helping to free three men wrongly accused and by giving gifts to those in need. Perhaps the front-line doctors and nurses in our hospital ICU's are modern embodiments of the comforting and generous spirit of St. Nicholas, treating the very ill at risk to their own lives. Instead of a bishop's cloak, they wear voluminous personal protective equipment as they walk between the rows of patients struggling to breathe on their own or hooked up to mechanical ventilators.

Tuesday, December 7

Brad Binau

Grace and Peace: What's the Difference?

Many New Testament epistles begin with salutations framed around the words “grace and peace.” For centuries pastors have begun sermons with a greeting of “grace and peace.” Just hearing the words “Grace be to you and peace . . .” transports me immediately to my childhood, when every sermon I heard from my home pastor began with those words.

My high school Latin teacher instilled in me the importance of grammatical and syntactical precision to the point that I admittedly became something of a grammar nerd. (I have a coffee mug that I sometimes carry into my classes at the seminary that says, “I am silently correcting your grammar.”) So I am surprised that I didn’t think of it sooner, but eventually I puzzled over the fact that grace and peace seemed redundant. Why did biblical authors use both words in their greetings? Aren’t they basically the same—descriptions of a good feeling we get as a gift from God?

The more thought I gave to the matter, the more I realized that grace does not always bring peace. Grace is a gift that means, by definition, “it cannot be earned.” We can’t buy it, bargain for it, or win it in a poker game. It’s free. Which makes it scary. Gifts make us realize that we are not in control of everything in our lives, and that our own efforts can take us only so far.

Jesus is God’s grace-filled gift, a love letter with our name on it that says, “You are accepted. Before you could even lift a finger to prove your worth, and especially *after* you made *many* efforts to prove your worth, you are accepted—just the way you are.” Peace, which is also a gift, is the ability to live comfortably with the knowledge that we do not have to live anxious lives trying to prove ourselves worthy. Once again Advent is preparing us to take to heart the message our world so desperately needs: You are graced, so be at peace.

READ:

Isaiah
19:18-25

2 Peter
1:2-15

*May grace and
peace be yours in
abundance in the
knowledge of God
and of Jesus our
Lord.*

2 Peter 1.2

PRAYER:

*Gracious God, as
we wait for a new
experience of the
gift given so long
ago, make us
instruments of
peace in our
hurting world.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
35:3-7

Luke
7:18-30

*Tell fearful souls,
“Courage! Take
heart! God is here,
right here, on his
way to put things
right and redress
all wrongs. He’s on
his way! He’ll save
you!” (MSG).*

Isaiah 35:4

PRAYER:

*God, our protector
and guide, as we
place our fears in
your hands, open our
eyes and ears to
understand the little
steps we can take to
make a difference in
the world, trusting
that you are walking
with us and nudging
us in the right
direction.
Amen.*

Fear: A Cause to Pause, Pray, and Trust

When I read through the Bible verses assigned for today, I was immediately drawn to the words in Isaiah, including the verse right before this passage, which reads, “Energize the limp hands, strengthen the rubbery knees.” Those words jumped out at me because I can certainly relate, with arthritis settling into my hands and hips. My joints ache after a few hours of gardening. Sadly, I must admit I’m getting old. But Isaiah encourages us not to fear but rather to trust that God will make things right.

The verses in Isaiah describe things that God will do, like opening the eyes of the blind, helping the lame walk again, and providing water for the deserts and barren grasslands. Even today, people are crying out with the same prayers. In addition, there are many people fearful of COVID, climate change, the violence in our world, and the divisiveness in our country. Anxiety is high, fear is rampant, and a sense of hopelessness has kept many people from living as God had hoped for us. How do we move forward with fears consuming us? Isaiah reminds us to place our fears in God’s hands and trust that God will make things right.

What does that mean, though? Do we expect God to miraculously fix us and the world? It’s hard for me to wrap my head around how God will make things right. As I sat and pondered this, I was reminded of an article by Amy Crompton, an author and counselor. She writes that fear is good. “It’s a cause for a pause, a prayer, a humbling of hearts, and a seeking of God’s will. Here’s to being afraid sometimes; may God use it to make us awesome!” Perhaps those sentiments are a bit too fluffy for our serious struggles, but I think she understands Isaiah. We don’t have all the answers and fixes to our problems in the world. But rather than becoming immobilized in fear, we can pause, pray, and listen. God may show us how to move forward as followers of Jesus, trusting that God is with us every step of this journey!

Thursday, December 9

Emily Kent

It's Not About Money

What is the automatic reaction when a child gives an adult a dandelion? Typically, a smile and a big "For me? Thank you!" The adult is filled with warmth, and the child grins and runs away. It is the most innocent of gifts, given from the purest of hearts. It's a simple gesture to say, "I saw this, thought it was pretty, and wanted you to have it." Kids don't know that a dandelion is considered a weed. They don't know it will die soon after they pluck it from the earth. They are living in the moment, experiencing a joy, and wanting to share it with someone.

All gifts should be given with a similar intention. Too often we get caught up in the flashy stuff, the pricey stuff, and it causes stress. Gifts shouldn't be about what is considered "good enough." They should be about joy and sharing that joy with someone else. "It's the thought that counts" is a cliché because it's true.

The news has been focusing on supply shortages and making sure we do our shopping early for Christmas to get what we want in time. But is that really necessary? Many people are struggling to make ends meet because of the pandemic, so this is a perfect time to remember that gifts don't have to be monetary in nature. But if they are, the money doesn't need to be spent on things that will just collect dust. A bill can be paid or a grocery gift card given. Nonmonetary gifts can include a visit, a meal delivered, a book shared, a letter written, errands run, or a driveway shoveled. Let's use what we have, without focusing on what we don't have. The gift will be acceptable if it comes from the heart—and we all have one of those.



READ:

Amos
6:1-8

2 Corinthians
8:1-15

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. (NIV)
2 Corinthians 8:12

PRAYER:

Great Gift Giver,
help us to recognize our own talents and gifts and to look for opportunities to share them joyfully.
Amen.

Friday, December 10

Michelle Clemence

READ:

*Amos
8:4-12*

*2 Corinthians
9:1-15*

*As it is written,
"He scatters
abroad, he gives to
the poor; his
righteousness
endures forever."
2 Corinthians 9:9*

PRAYER:

*Lord, help us to sow
bountifully.
Amen.*

Riches

Well, these two passages provide a stark contrast: on the one hand, if you cheat people in money and goods, then the Word of God will not be available to you; and on the other, if you are cheerfully generous with giving to the needs of others, then you will be blessed in your righteousness and thanksgivings to God.

What, here, is the Advent message? How does this prepare us for the incarnation of our God? These passages clearly link the physical and the spiritual. The relationship between God and humans is not solely on the spiritual plane. It is also connected to our daily, physical life. And so, God enters the physical world in Jesus (as if all of creation was not physical enough).

I am reminded of Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." This is not so much a threat (God will punish you), as a warning (you will lose out). You will forgo the richness of knowing God's surpassing love and peace, which grows with sharing and prayer.



Saturday, December 11

Julianne Johnson

What's in a Name?

I am struck by the inclusion in this story of the neighborhood bickering about the naming of John. Elizabeth insists that his name will be John, and yet the neighbors have to make sure Dad is OK with this. The problem is that Dad can't speak!

I've never had a child, so I never had to choose a name, but this clearly isn't a family name. So what did it mean to people at that time? The name *John* meant "the Lord is gracious." And certainly, the Lord had been gracious to Elizabeth, to give her a child at her advanced age. Dad doesn't equivocate—the name is John. And the Lord is then gracious to Dad as well, as his mouth is immediately opened and his tongue freed. How appropriate is the name John!

But it is more than that. The Lord's graciousness is public—these acts are miracles, both for Elizabeth and for Zechariah. It is fitting that the people ask, "What then will this child become?" And we know the answer to the question.

But if we let this be a story just about John, I think we miss the more important lesson. Each of us is uniquely gifted. We may not see miracles in our lives, but God is with us, whether we feel God's presence or not. We are no more out of God's reach than old Elizabeth or mute Zechariah was. And that is true of every human being we encounter. What will each child become? As we prepare for love to come to us in the form of a baby, we have much to learn.



READ:

*Amos
9:8-15*

*Luke
1:57-66*

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." . . . All who heard [these things] pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Luke 1: 59, 66

PRAYER:

*Your hand is with each of us, Lord. Let us ask anew what we might become, to show your love to the weary world.
Amen.*

READ:

Zephaniah
3:14-20

Luke
3:7-8

*And I will . . .
gather the
outcast, and I will
change their
shame. . . . At
that time I will
bring you home.*

*Zephaniah 3:19b-
20a*

PRAYER:

*God of deliverance,
hasten the day
when there is no
need for shame and
all your children
have a place they
can call home.
Amen.*

Home for Christmas

The prophet Zephaniah ministered to God's people in exceedingly troubled times (about 600 years before the birth of Jesus), times to which we can relate without having to stretch our imaginations too strenuously. When they were not being religiously indifferent altogether, people in Zephaniah's day were worshipping gods who told them what they wanted to hear (perhaps the ancestral roots of today's social media?). Merchants and money changers (the original 1 percent?) profited at the expense of the have-nots. Religious leaders "profaned what is sacred" (abusive clergy?). Public officials were "roaring lions," and violence and fraud were rampant (is insurrection really that old?). Things were bleak and would get worse before they got better. Shame on the whole lot of them.

Yes, shame would be their fate in the short run. Shame is the experience of being abandoned and ignored. The classic image of the young pupil, seated on a stool, facing the corner, wearing a dunce cap, pretty much says it all. The linguistic roots of shame can be traced back to words that meant being "out of place." This was the greatest fear of ancient tribal people: to be cut off from community, to lose their homeland. This was precisely what Zephaniah said was on the horizon. The fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were just a few decades off.

Nonetheless, Zephaniah confidently announced that things were going to change. God is gracious and not spiteful. The people will experience what modern psychologists call "healthy shame." It's rare (most of what we hear about is "toxic shame") but real. Shame will function like a mirror to help the people see who, and whose, they really are. The day is surely coming, says Zephaniah, when respect will replace reproach, right-mindedness will replace wrongdoing, and the people will come home from exile.

Across the centuries Zephaniah reminds us that as we all yearn to be home for Christmas, if only in our dreams, the Lord our God is already in our midst. And that's for real!

Monday, December 13

Connie Criswell

Sharing Joyfully

The theme of sharing what we have is repeated over and over again in the Bible. In Luke 3, John the Baptizer exhorts those who have two coats to give one to someone who has none, and to do likewise with food. The miraculous feeding stories attributed to Jesus continue this idea, wherein a young boy contributes his lunch of fish and barley loaves, which is ultimately stretched to feed thousands. The story of the poor man Lazarus who lay outside the gate of the rich man is told to point out the evil of not sharing with the needy.

The upcoming holidays are a good time to consider sharing with those in need, as hunger for food as well as companionship is more keenly felt when so many of us are celebrating. When I was a child, my parents used to call up the local women's college to invite a foreign student to our home for Thanksgiving. My father would go get the student and bring her to our house. We enjoyed the conversations with students from different cultures and backgrounds as we feasted on turkey and all the trimmings.

The shoe was on the other foot when I was a graduate student in Iowa one year at Christmas. I was alone then and couldn't afford a plane ticket home to New York. Things seemed very bleak until a chemistry professor invited me to his home along with a couple other students on Christmas Day for dinner. One of the students was Alfred Amah, who was from Nigeria and brought his wife and baby son with him. I had seen Alfred around the chemistry department but had not had the opportunity to get to know him before that day. Having the baby there made our gathering feel all the more special. I will be forever grateful to that professor for his kindness.

READ:

*Numbers
16:1-19*

*Hebrews
13:7-17*

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.
Hebrews 13:16*

PRAYER:

*O God, uplift and bless those who share what they have, whether food, clothing, or a listening ear when it is most needed. Teach us to be like them as members of your Beloved Community.
Amen.*

Tuesday, December 14

Nancy Magargal

READ:

Numbers
16:20-35

Acts
28:23-31

“O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?”
Numbers 16:22b

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, remind us that we are never alone. We thank you for sending your son, who is with us even in our darkest hours. Strengthen our faith so that we might live in your eternal light.
Amen.

The Gift of Redemption

The God of anger in Numbers does not lead us to celebrate the joy of Christmas. Rather these words remind us, in a less than positive way, that God looks at us as members of a congregation, a congregation like the one we are part of at Redeemer. This reading reminds us that each of us as an individual is a sinner, and that all of us as a congregation are responsible for that sin.

How would it be if we were all held fully accountable for the sins of one member? If I am unreasonably violent and publicly and purposely hurt others with vicious actions and words, would my sisters and brothers at Redeemer share my rage and guilt? Would they take my sin into themselves and share the darkness that I experience because I am an unrepentant sinner? Doesn't that thought sit uncomfortably with you?

We rarely embrace and share the sins of the individuals who make up a congregation. Yet as Christians, we do honestly know that each of us is, most definitely, a sinner. We admit our sin publicly and privately through the words we recite during worship and through our own inner thoughts, feelings, and prayerful reflections.

This knowledge definitely doesn't fill us with the joy of the Christ Child's birth! And yet, knowing that each of us is a sinner as well as a representative of Christ's unfailing love means that we are joined together in sin AND in redemption. The Christ Child is the living proof that we can be redeemed from our sins, both as individuals and as a congregation. How blessed are we, all of us sinners, to be able to sing out, "Christ is born, alleluia!"

Through him, with him, and in him we are redeemed through love and forgiven through faith. How fortunate we are to be a congregation of sinners who are secure in God's unfailing grace and eternal love. So let's celebrate with joy the birth of the Christ, who is OUR Redeemer!

Wednesday, December 15

Michele Disbro

No Technology Needed!

Every time the story of John the Baptist is read in church, I find myself thinking about how I would have reacted if I were living in Jesus's day. Would I have believed the stories from John the Baptist? Would I have questioned whether Jesus was the savior everyone was looking for?

In today's age of technology, we are quick to learn about events happening throughout the world. We can read first-hand accounts, see pictures and videos, and experience events almost as they happen. Yet we have also learned to be skeptics of what is posted on the internet. So we question, research, and try to make informed judgments. If I were to see videos of Jesus healing people, listen to him preach, and research the accuracy of events happening throughout Judea and Samaria, would it help me answer John the Baptist's question with greater confidence? When John the Baptist's followers ask Jesus this probing question about whether or not he is the savior they are waiting for, Jesus responds, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard," and he refers to the blind seeing, the lame walking, and so on. But then he ends with "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (v. 23). Really? Maybe Luke could have done a better job of explaining what Jesus meant! (Sure wish we had the video of the interaction!)

Biblical experts believe Luke was a physician who was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus but nonetheless took great care to gather information and write about Jesus as a divine human whose compassion and tenderness extended to all who were needy. If I were Luke, I would have wanted to add to Jesus's response: "Don't be upset by what I am doing. I am showing you how to live in the world by caring for others. You can do this, too! I am showing you how to bring the reign of God to earth. Let it be so. Amen!" Maybe that would help us understand that it's not all about the facts and eyewitness accounts. It's about an understanding of who God calls us to be. We don't need technology for that!

READ:

*Micah
4:8-13*

*Luke
7:31-35*

*"Are you the
one who is to
come, or are we
to wait for
another?"*

Luke 7:18

PRAYER:

*Savior Lord, fill our
hearts with
confidence to trust
in your mission to
love and care for
all of creation.
Inspire us to stand
up for the
marginalized, care
for the needy, and
respect all of your
creation. Let it be
so!
Amen.*

Thursday, December 16

Michelle Clemence

READ:

*Jeremiah
31:31-34*

*Hebrews
10:10-18*

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” he also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Hebrews 10:16-17

PRAYER:

*Lord, help us to let others in on the good news of your love and forgiveness.
Amen.*

Hearts

While I believe God has kept God’s end of this covenant, I don’t think people have accepted either the law or the gospel written on their hearts and minds. We still need to teach one another, “Know the Lord.” God indeed forgives our sins and lawless deeds, but we need each other to teach, to encourage, to pronounce forgiveness, to hold hands.

There’s a Sven and Olie joke along these lines:

Sven: Do you give Lena flowers on your anniversary?

Olie: Whatever for?

Sven: To tell her that you love her.

Olie: Why? I already told her once, when we got married.

So, sure, God said we and everyone else are beloved; that should be enough. But we are still human and need to hear it over and over. And we need to hear about the blessings and promises within the law: how the community works better, lives more happily, if everyone is respected. Let’s join together to “know the Lord” in worship, Sunday school, Bible study, Sister Act, Brewing Faith, Coffee & Conversation, food giveaways, and many other small groups and activities.



Friday, December 17

Heidi Sherer

A Voice in the Darkness

In the midst of dark times, the prophet Isaiah mentions several vocal actions—singing, shouting, crying, gasping—and even invokes a laboring woman to paint a vivid image. Isaiah cannot keep silent. Something is being born. Birth is both a beginning and an ending, a passage from one dark place of comfort to a new, unknown, yet brighter place.

What is coming to birth for you in these days of waning sunlight? What is enlightening you in the darkness? What voices can you hear if you stop to listen?

Today, December 17, begins what Catholics call the second phase of Advent. During the next seven days, special guides—including Old Testament prophets and Mary, the mother of Jesus—speak to us through seven short prayers called the “O Antiphons,” which are often sung.

The first is “O Wisdom”—in Latin *O Sapientia* and in Greek *O Sophia*. Wisdom is understood to be the Holy Spirit by some, even some Christians, and is also revered by Jews. She has been pictured with wings, a spirit dove, and a pregnant belly, among other images. Maybe you’ve even sung a verse similar to this one:

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in its way to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

The “O Antiphons” can give us another opportunity to lift our voices in the darkness of Advent and sing of the wise guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What is this season giving voice to in your corner of the darkening world? As the earth gradually goes to sleep, preparing for the upcoming winter, what is awakening in you?

READ:

Isaiah
42:10-18

Hebrews
10:32-39

*Sing . . . a new song
. . . shout from the
tops of the mountains
. . . now I will cry out
like a woman in
labor, I will gasp and
pant. I will turn the
darkness before them
into light. . . .*

Isaiah 42:10a-14b, 16b

PRAYER:

*Wise Holy Spirit, prepare
our ears to hear the
voices of those laboring
and experiencing
transitions. Help us to
give voice to those not
heard as often or as
readily in our
communities. Awaken us
to receive your messages
of rebirth. Open our eyes
to see the light on our
path. Open our minds to
seek your wisdom in
every situation.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
66:7-11

Luke
13:31-35

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance. [NTV].
Isaiah 66:10-11

PRAYER:

O God, we thank you for granting us the opportunity to create new lives and a community of overflowing abundance, as you promised so long ago to create a new heaven and a new earth for your people. Amen.

Creating a New Life

In this last chapter of Isaiah, God speaks to the faithless of their ultimate destruction but offers comfort and overflowing abundance to the humble Israelite souls who tremble at God's word. For those who love Jerusalem, this is nothing less than promising the creation of a new heaven and a new earth—that is, a new life.

Many of us had ancestors who came to America seeking to create a new life for themselves and a better life for their children. My great-grandparents, Ole and Guri Engene, came to southeastern Minnesota from Norway, seeking a new life. Ole worked for a year as an indentured servant for a cousin, removing tree stumps from forest land cleared for farming. It was hard manual labor called "grubbing"; it involved digging around and cutting the tree roots with hand tools, then chaining the stump to an ox to pull it out of the ground. Eventually, Ole was able to buy his own farm. He and his wife had eleven children, who all worked on the farm before leaving home to start their own families. The farm prospered, as the soil was very deep and rich, unlike the stony mountainsides of their native land. In addition to the crops, the forests and streams nearby teemed with wild game, berries, and fish. The family rejoiced in the overflowing abundance of their new home.

How can we create new lives as a Beloved Community that gives comfort and abundance to those around us? Redeemer's congregation has made a good start, with different food giveaways throughout the year, classes that invite the neighborhood to have conversations with us to help us understand and celebrate our diversity, and membership in a grass-roots justice initiative. The Member Care Team provides wonderful connectivity and comfort to church members who are unable to attend services very often or who have needs of various sorts. Can we do more? Undoubtedly, and with the depth of talent, kindness, empathy, and inventiveness our congregation has, we will certainly seek new ways to fulfil the vision of community that Jesus modeled for us so long ago. Let it be so.

Sunday, December 19

Scott Steiner

I Have a Few Questions

These passages in Micah and Luke seem to talk about the importance of following God without question and with unwavering faith. I did a little research on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and I found a common thread among biblical scholars: Mary emphatically cared about other people. I do strive to love and respect people unconditionally when I encounter them every day, but following God without question and/or accepting the word of God without question—I am not sure I can buy into that way of thinking.

Why are questions toward God or about God bad? If you question God, do you fall out of favor with God and become lost in the wilderness? How do we learn if we don't question? Wouldn't we be lost if we DIDN'T ask questions? Before we had GPS, we had to read maps when traveling in cars, bikes, planes, etc. The running joke before GPS was that real men never stop to ask for directions. But I couldn't stand to be lost, so I would stop to ask for directions all the time. Was I a lesser man because I asked for directions? I just wanted to get to my destination with as little stress as possible. And getting to my destination on time with less stress meant caring about the people I was going to meet.

If Mary cared about people the way God cares about people, maybe love is the definition of unwavering faith. Love is the way. Love is truth. Love is life. Love helps us travel to our destinations, and love is there when we arrive. If we get lost in life, it is love that motivates us to ask questions, so that we have a better understanding of God, of who we are, of how to get where we are going, and of what is waiting for us when we arrive.

Thank you, Mary, for showing us God's love, but I have a question: Did Joseph stop to ask for directions on the way to Jerusalem, or did he just meander around like a real man? Just wondering—I am sure I would love your answer.

READ:

Micah
5:2-5a

Luke
1:39-45

“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”
Luke 1:45

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for the wisdom of love and for our inquisitive nature to follow you with an open heart and open mind. May you continue to be patient with us as we learn to grow into all the blessings you have already given us.
Amen.

Monday, December 20

Julianne Johnson

READ:

Genesis
25:19-28

Colossians
1:15-20

The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."
(NIV)

Genesis 25: 23

PRAYER:

*As we prepare for your coming among us, Lord, guide us in our faith. Be with us in our struggles, that we may see what you see in us and lead lives that reflect your love.
Amen.*

Shaped by Struggle

Today's devotion is about twins that are very different. I took this date without checking the reading, so I was amazed that this was mine. You see, I am a twin, and our birthday is Christmas Eve. I'd usually say we couldn't be more different, but I have to admit Paul and I don't come close to Esau and Jacob! As different as Paul and I are, there is a special bond that exists between us. It has been sorely tested, but it remains.

This story of twins has perhaps a greater meaning for me. What would it be like to be told that your twins would be separated—not just from each other, but into two separate nations? Didn't Esau and Jacob have some inkling of that special bond? How could Jacob later cheat Esau of his birthright if he had even a smidgen of that bond? And how could God bless the cheater?

Spoiler alert—I don't know the answers to any of these questions. They have bothered me for years, but I think I've gotten hung up on the details (that they were twins) and missed the bigger picture. As I reflect on the story, I see that it doesn't truly matter how your life starts. In biblical times the eldest son stood to inherit, yet God chose Jacob. And Jacob starts badly, it seems, by cheating Esau. But given time, and a literal fight with an angel, Jacob learns what God wants for him and what pleases God. Jacob struggles.

I believe that faith is a struggle for each of us. The more we struggle—with justice, with loving others, with what we are to do with our own blessings (that often are as undeserved as Jacob's), with tragedy, with loss—the deeper our faith can grow. I know it's been the struggles that have shaped me the most.



Tuesday, December 21

Becky Trover

Children of God

Wait a minute. “Children of God”? Not “Son of God”? What’s going on here? Is creation waiting for the revealing of . . . us? Are we the ones who will set creation free from bondage? Will we obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God?

Well, that’s a fine how-do-you-do. I thought all of that was up to Jesus to take care of. I’m certainly not equipped to set anything free from bondage. And as for obtaining any kind of freedom, let alone any sort of glory—well, not me. It’s all I can do to get my sorry self through the day.

But wait. “The Spirit intercedes for the saints.” Thanks be to God, the Spirit intervenes when I don’t know how to pray as I ought. Sounds like it’s more my job to offer my sighs too deep for words and then listen for guidance before I do something. Then all things (including me) can work together for good. I can be confident that I will be led to take the action that is needed to overcome the bondage that is shown to me. I can believe that whatever small steps I take will be used for God’s glory. I can rely on my family in Christ to add their efforts to mine.

Christ, the firstborn of our siblings, gives us the perfect example of how to follow the path shown to us. Our big brother leads us through sufferings to glory and shows us how to wait in patience for our hopes to be fulfilled. This is indeed Good News!



READ:

*Genesis
30:1-24*

*Romans
8:18-30*

*For the creation
waits with
eager longing
for the
revealing of the
children of
God . . .
Romans 8:19*

PRAYER:

*Holy Spirit, we
thank you for
giving us hope
and a future.
Amen.*

READ:

Micah
4:1-5

Luke
1:46b-55

*. . . they shall beat
their swords into
plowshares, and
their spears into
pruning hooks . . .*

Micah 4: 3b

*He has brought
down the powerful
from their thrones,
and lifted up the
lowly . . .*

Luke 1: 52

PRAYER:

*Loving Lord, keep us
like your prophet
Micah, opposing
violence either with
weapons or words.
Keep us like your
servant Mary,
treasuring your
promises, loving all
your children, and
singing praises to your
mercy and grace.
Amen.*

PROMISES, PROMISES

While many a Jewish man joined in morning prayer, thanking God for not making him a gentile (or a woman), many a Jewish mother prayed over her newborn daughter, "May you be the mother of the Messiah."

And now, here she is, a young girl of no power or position, in an obscure corner of the kingdom, in Galilee, from which it is said, "Can anything good come?" Yet she receives the astounding message, and she accedes to God's will, knowing how it will change her life.

Mary is often referred to as "mild," but that is just because poets and carol-writers found it a convenient rhyme for *child*. Mary is far more than mild. She sees very quickly that a child born into her family and clan is not the kind of messiah Jews have been anticipating. But she has courage and faith and a sense of wonder.

Early in her pregnancy Mary visits Elizabeth, and in her presence Mary describes, in words we now sing as "The Magnificat," the promises fulfilled and new promises made that this child will bring about. Mary's words speak of justice and mercy, of equality, and of wrongs righted.

Mary seems to be familiar with the words of the prophet Micah, foretelling a time when weapons of war will be forged into tools providing abundance, a time of growth and plenty for all, and security under one's own grapevine.

We continue to sing Mary's song, and we continue, with God's help and guidance, to work toward the fulfillment of promises both Micah and Mary proclaimed.

Thursday, December 23

Michelle Clemence

A Lamp Shining

My favorite theological writer, Robert Farrar Capon, repeatedly highlights that Jesus came for “the last, the lost, the least.” Those scorned by society, both political and religious, are the core of his disciples, his parables, his encounters, and his patients. This was scandalous in first century Palestine, because the sick, the injured, the blemished were seen as unclean. Even today, it makes many people uncomfortable to be around those who are chronically ill or disabled. And “exiles”—people without housing or seeking asylum—cause a lot of controversy.

Now, truthfully, I think Redeemer, as a congregation, does very well recognizing the belovedness of the last, the lost, and the least, but society is always pushing down various groups, and it can be difficult to push back in a firm but loving way—to be joyful revolutionaries. Imagine rejoicing in getting to know a “least” person, not thinking of them as a burden to bear or an obligation to help but as a true gift to you and to others. Perhaps you already do this, and it’s just me struggling.

I’ll put a plug in here for the BREAD (Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity) Organization, which Redeemer recently rejoined after several years’ absence. Their mission is to build the power of people of faith to solve community problems. Community problems usually impact people who have been stepped on or left by the wayside. In seeking to solve issues responsibly, we help to lift up the last, the lost, and the least in equity and dignity.



READ:

Micah
4:6-8

2 Peter
1:16-21

*“In that day,”
declares the
Lord, “I will
gather the lame;
I will assemble
the exiles and
those I have
brought to grief.”
(NIV).*

Micah 4:6

PRAYER:

*Lord, help us to
shine the light of
your love into the
darkest and least-
expected corners.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
9:2-7

Luke
2:1-14

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son.

... (ESV)

Luke 2: 6-7

PRAYER:

Dear God, we thank you for the gift of your son. Help us always to see the evidence of your love, even in the humblest of ways. Amen.

Jesus Had a Belly Button

Ask anyone who has had a baby to tell their birth story, and they will likely regale you with an astonishing tale that includes a roller coaster of emotions and perhaps some very graphic descriptions of the life-altering experience. Each story is as unique to the parents as the baby being born. Yet only one and a half lines is given in today's passage to describe the actual birth of Jesus. And it goes on to say she wrapped him up like a burrito, the end. Nice and clean and sanitary.

I submit that the real version of the story is anything but nice, clean, or sanitary. This extremely condensed version glosses over the fact that being human is messy from the beginning. It's not pretty; it's painful and it's dangerous. Give me a nativity showing an exhausted Mary with sweat dripping everywhere, hair wildly askew, but a soft smile on her lips, her eyes closed, and a still-covered-in-muck Jesus resting on her bare chest with his umbilical cord still intact. O Holy Night indeed!

Lots of Jesus's body parts are mentioned in the Bible: his hands, feet, head, arms, even his sacred heart. But most of these relate to Jesus's divinity. The one that flat out proves his humanity is never mentioned. Whether an "outie" or an "innie," Jesus had a belly button just like the rest of us. And he got it as part of the very real, very messy part of being born, just like the rest of us.

Baby Jesus goes on to be a toddler, an adolescent, a teenager, and a grown man—with all the challenges and messes that each of those life stages brings. That's why there is NOTHING we can bring to him that is too shocking, or too dirty, or too emotional. That's the whole point: Jesus knows all about it—the proof is in the belly button.



Saturday, December 25

Pastor Dave

BEING PEACE

In this season, more than any other in the year, we sing it, hear it, write it, pray it, whisper it, long for it, wonder if it's possible, fear it isn't, and then dream it still could be. *Peace. Peace.*

In the midst of whatever else is going on this Christmas Day, carve out half an hour. Find a place inside or outside that's quiet(er). Grab a favorite beverage or snack. And when you're comfortable in your chair, on your walk, or wherever, breathe in this word *Peace*. Let it fill every nook and cranny in you. *Peace*. Make yourself at home in it. Let it be a stream, a breeze, a boat, or a magic carpet that carries you. *Let* it carry you. You're not in charge. *Peace* is. It controls the horizontal; it controls the vertical! Your job is to let go, and pay attention to what you notice.

Where is *Peace* taking you? To a place? To a song, a poem, or another piece of writing? To a photo, a painting, or a sculpture? To the touch, voice, smell, laughter, or presence of a life you love? To an activity, a feeling, a meal, or a memory?

As you let *Peace* carry you, what do you notice? What changes? What opens up? What seems possible?

Those who pay attention to such things say that over the past 3,400 years, there have been 268 years of peace. That means for 92 percent of this time, some conflict has been going on that was big enough for historians to notice. Into such a world that rarely makes itself at home in peace, the beautiful feet of the messenger who announces peace come running toward us again. Into such a world, the Word comes to live with us and comes with a huge invitation: "Let every heart prepare me room! Let me not only fill you with peace, but *make* you peace—so you might truly *be* peace."

Merry Christmas!

READ:

Isaiah
52:7-10

John
1:1-14

*How beautiful
upon the
mountains are
the feet of the
messenger who
announces peace.*

Isaiah 52:7

*The Word
became a human
being and lived
here with us. . . .*

(CEV)

John 1:14

PRAYER:

*Open me to
welcome your
messenger, whose
beautiful feet bring
peace.
Amen.*



Holden Evening Prayer

7:00 pm

December 1, 8, 15, 22



Christmas Eve Worship

7:00 pm

December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am

December 25



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or call the church office for information on
worship services, meetings, classes, and Bible study.