

2025 Advent Devotions



Written by members of Redeemer Lutheran Church
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Artist statement on cover art:

The plants of Palestine have shaded, fed, sheltered, and healed for centuries. Date palms are known for their resilience in harsh climates, providing shade, building, and basket-making materials, as well as being an important food source. Dates are a symbol of prosperity and eaten as a special treat throughout the world. Olive trees are known, of course, for providing olives and olive oil, but they, too, are resilient in hot climates and provide a source of sturdy building material for shelter, furniture, and decoration. Olive trees are symbolic of peace and of rootedness in Palestinian culture. Frankincense is a familiar name we hear each year in the story of the magi's visit to Jesus. The resin from frankincense is used for incense (particularly useful in a barn) and for healing. Some believe frankincense may have been a gift for Mary to aid in postpartum healing. Plants carry properties we can emulate—strength, resilience, healing, shading others from harm, and gifts of food and beauty. In this painting I endeavored to paint them amid candles of Advent that, too, are like us—with light, imperfection, and beauty.

Margie Frazier

Unless otherwise noted, citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

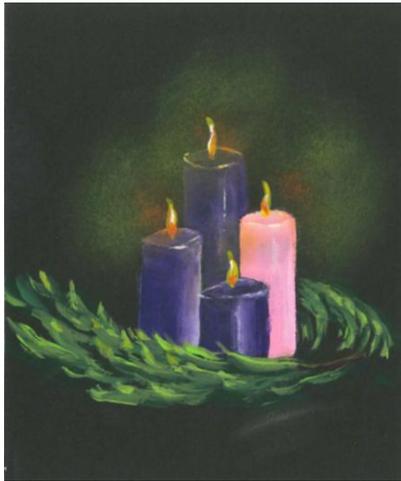
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Redeemer first did an Advent Devotional in 2016 at the behest of our Intentional Interim Pastor, Leslie Fox, and have had many contributors over the years since. The beautiful cover artwork for the first nine years was supplied by Donna Voelkel. We are grateful to offer our tenth anniversary edition.

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. In these unsettled and turbulent times, it is easy to lose our center. That is why Christians choose to pause, and to 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.

The Thrill of Hope: Something's Coming

My favorite Advent hymn, though some might not see it as such, is "Something's Coming" from *West Side Story*. Early in the musical, Tony sings his hope that "something's coming"—something better than the rush he used to get out of being a gang member. He sings:

*Could be! Who knows?
There's something due any day;
Somethin's comin', I don't know what it is
But it is gonna be great.*

The song is about "the thrill of hope" (a line from my favorite Christmas carol), which is the essence of Advent. That's why, on the first Sunday in Advent, the lessons always point to a *second* Advent. The new creation that God announced in the first Advent has not yet arrived in fullness.

We need the hope that the promise of a second Advent brings because when you go to the manger with a little life experience under your belt, things tend to look a little different. You *smell* things by the manger that you didn't smell when you were younger. You *understand* what you couldn't understand when you were a third-grade angel in the Christmas pageant. You understand that you need more than what the late Jane Goodall called "hopium"—a kind of wistful nostalgia—to see you through. It was the thrill of hope, the assurance of things not seen, that allowed Isaiah to promise that one day the nations of the world will beat their swords into plowshares, that people will have the word of the Lord written on their hearts, not bombs strapped to their chests or guns clenched in their fists.

Hope answers questions such as How can there be hunger if there is no food, tiredness if there is no sleep? How can there be loneliness if there is no love, sin if there is no salvation, darkest night if there is no dawn? And how can we yearn for the hills of our lives to be leveled and the low places raised, our crookedness straightened, and our rough edges smoothed if there is not a Power, a Presence, a Person coming to accomplish this work? Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

READ:

*Isaiah
2:1-5*

*Matthew
24:36-44*

*For the Son
of Man is
coming....*

Matthew 24:44

PRAYER:

*God of our
future, as we
launch into this
season of
waiting, free us
from wistfulness
and bless us
with the thrill of
hope that
something's
coming, and "it
is gonna be
great."
Amen.*



The Promise, Noah's Ark, © 2022 Sonia Finch

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Originally from Tonbridge, Kent, England, UK, Sonia is the granddaughter of professional artists and a trained graphic artist and painter, teaching Graphic Design, Art and Music at West Kent College, Ravensbourne and at NESCOL (Northeast Surrey College of Technology), Epsom.

New Year, New Creation

As with many early Genesis stories, scholars suggest Noah's is a parable, like Jesus loved to tell, explaining to pre-literate people how and why things are as they are, connecting God's creative will to the world and to us today. Great story! Everyone loves it.

But I've always scratched my head at its many calendar details before the Jewish people had even developed their first calendar: the date the animals arrived, the dates the rain started and stopped, the date the boat touched ground, the dates when mountains appeared and ravens and doves went flying Why, I wondered?

That was until I did the math and learned the storied critters disembarked on "Nisan 1"—New Year's Day; the same date God started creating the earth; same date that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all died (a coincidence? really??); same date that the Hebrews started packing for their flight from Egypt. It was Creation Day, Redemption Day, a day for new beginnings with hope, expectation, and unfinished dreams still to be realized. A day for the sky to be crossed by a rainbow of promise and grace. If among their many festivals, Jews celebrated an equivalent to Advent, when the Christian year also begins, then "DisembARKing Day" would have to be it.

This painting, by a contemporary British artist, expresses the delight and joy of the season, along with its subtle humor. How like me, that apprehensive elephant, preparing to climb down a rickety ladder into an uncertain future! And how clever of Noah to have found the Tree of Life (Genesis 2) to put in a large pot and take along on his voyage! Welcome to Advent!..

READ:

Genesis
8:1-19

Romans
6:1-11

In the 601st year of Noah's life, on the first day of the first month, the flood dried up. Noah opened the hatch of the ship and saw dry ground God spoke: "Leave the ship, you and your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives. Take all the animals with you, the whole menagerie of birds and mammals and crawling creatures, all that swarming extravagance of life, so they can reproduce and flourish on the Earth." Genesis 8:13, 16-17 [MSG]

PRAYER:

*O Holy One, restore again your new Creation in us, and prepare us anew for the coming of the Christ.
Amen.*

READ:

*Genesis
9:1-17*

*Hebrews
11:32-40*

*I have set
my bow in
the clouds,
and it shall
be a sign of
the
covenant
between me
and the
earth.*

Genesis 9:13

PRAYER:

*Gracious God,
help us to
follow you in
all kinds of
weather.
Amen*

Rainbows

Rainbows. My mind immediately goes to songs like "Rainbow Connection" and "Over the Rainbow;" to legends of pots of gold or at least troubles melting; to escaping one's current circumstance. In this story of Noah and his family, they escaped in the ark, before the rainbow. God places the bow afterwards, as a reminder that God will never deluge the world again. Land and air creatures, including humans, will not need to escape that situation ever again.

I suppose that was a great comfort to people in the ancient Middle East. But humans are so creative, we have come up with multiple ways to decimate the land, air, and seas, killing off whole tribes, flocks, and schools, usually in pursuit of dominion. Nonetheless, the bow stands as a symbol of a one-way covenant between God and the earth. That is, God makes a promise that is not predicated on any action(s) by humans. No "if you make this sacrifice or follow these rules, then I will protect, provide for, or love you."

Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are a new one-way covenant between God and humans, symbolized by Holy Communion. Jesus came to proclaim the Good News of God's freely-given love and grace to all the world: from shepherds to magicians, from lost sheep to lost sons, from lepers to tax collectors, from little girls to old women, from thieves to Roman soldiers. Jesus gave a hard time only to those who tried rules-lawyering or bargaining.

However, there was never a promise of no rain at all, either to Noah or to followers of Jesus. We can follow Jesus, rain or shine, confident in God's love, Jesus' understanding of the trials of human existence, and the Holy Spirit's inspiration

Heidi Sherer

Wednesday, December 3

Labor of Love, Promise of Peace

After hearing labor stories, bursting into song sounds like a fitting response for those who have not experienced that ordeal. But if we who haven't been in labor are these "desolate" women, how will our children be more than those of women who are married? "Enlarge the site of your tent" indeed! If these words are taken literally, we might wonder how this would be accomplished. We're told "your maker is your husband," which sounds like another virgin birth story.

Yet a few verses later Isaiah writes in more figurative language, likening us to "a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit." The NRSV notes that the prophet was reportedly writing about the hope of restoration at the end of exile. If our present exile feels desolate, these passages promise we will be compassionately gathered after our abandonment and given everlasting love. *Compassion* is invoked twice within the next two verses, then again two verses later.

God's promised covenant with us (v.10) is peace and love. What brings peace? Is it the promise of descendants? Maybe for some. How else is God's legacy of love and compassion accomplished through us? What becomes of our life's "labor"? What is our call during any experience of grief? When we break free from our moments of exile, expand our hearts, and create what we were meant to, that truly gives us cause to sing.

READ:

Isaiah
54:1-10

Matthew
24:23-35

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out For your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name
Isaiah 54:1-2a, 5a

PRAYER:

God of compassion, open our hearts to what you are calling us to be and do with our lives' labor. Gather us close during our grieving, and bring us your peace as we share your love with the world.
Amen.

READ:

Isaiah
4:2-6

Acts
1:12-17, 21-26

Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

Isaiah 4:5-6 [NIV]

PRAYER:

*O Lord, compel us to have more appreciation for the gifts we have, and empower us to use those gifts to serve others. Let us be a warm home and a safe space for all who need it.
Amen.*

We Are a Home

A few years ago, when I first started attending Redeemer, I wrote a reflection piece about what home is. Since then, I have come to have a deeper understanding of what that looks like for me and how I can provide it for others. Home has not so much been a location, but rather the people who make me feel safe. Make me feel seen and appreciated, not for what they want me to be, but for the things about me that make me, well, me.

There are so many things that set me apart from others. My learning disability. My sensitivity. My social anxiety that I often cover up with a nervous smile and an awkward laugh. Since I have joined Redeemer, those things that have set me apart have only ever made my bonds with people stronger. I'm able to stand up in front of a crowd and speak to a congregation. I'm able to see the love and the light that fills the room as I'm greeted warmly.

These things that I thought for many years were my greatest weakness are things that I'm finally starting to understand as my strong points. I'm able to advocate for my students and have empathy, compassion, and patience for them. I'm able to relate to others on a deeper level because of my sensitivity. I care very deeply for those who need me, and I have a strong sense of justice. I want to do right by God, but on a deeper level I want to do right for those who have felt less than. Those who may feel out of place. For those who don't see the beauty in themselves yet, I want to shine a light on it, because they are a part of the wonderful creation. That's the home I wish to provide to others.

Julianne Johnson

Friday, December 5

A New GPS

I love this image of God incarnate—"local and on the job." Not just an abstract image or theological idea. I need God to be with me, especially when I feel overwhelmed by the challenges of the day. I need a spiritual GPS. Now I'm not saying that I need to hear a clear voice. What I trust is what I feel is written upon my heart—if I can just quiet the noise and take a moment to focus. God's way for me is love and justice. If what I'm doing doesn't resonate with love, I've wandered off the path.



READ:

*Isaiah
30:19-26*

*Acts
13:16-25*

Cry for help and you'll find it's grace and more grace. The moment he hears, he'll answer. Just as the Master kept you alive during the hard times, he'll keep your teacher alive and present among you. Your teacher will be right there, local and on the job, urging you on whenever you wander left or right: "This is the right road. Walk down this road."

Isaiah 30:19-21 [MSG]

PRAYER:

*Thank you, Lord, for coming to us—in this place and in this time. Guide us along the right path, strewn with love for each of us and for all the world.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
40:1-11

John
1:19-28

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. . . ."

Isaiah 40:3-5 [NIV]

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

John 1:23 [NIV]

PRAYER:

God of the desert, when we get distracted and complacent, turn our attention to you.

Amen.

Straight to God

How do we prepare the way for the Lord? The proclamations of both Isaiah and John the Baptist are seemingly clear and direct: make a straight highway in the desert, raise up valleys, make mountains and hills low, level rough ground, and make rugged places a plain. Let's think about this a little more. The desert is a harsh place with extreme temperatures, little precipitation, coarse soil, and unique geological formations like sand dunes and rock formations. Can you imagine the effort and time it would take a highway crew to create a flat, smooth, paved surface in these conditions?

So, preparing the way for the Lord is not as simple as it might sound. Let's think of this vision of a flat, smooth surface as preparing for and connecting with God in a *new* way, a *different* way, a *more direct* way than before—a straight highway to God, with nothing to get in the way or turn us around. Hearts and minds altered. Things shaken up. People encouraged to pay attention, to let go of fear, and to remember God is present and accessible to all people. We still need this reminder today.

I recently discovered a song by Mavis Staples called *Turn Me Around*. Mavis is an American rhythm and blues and gospel singer and a civil rights activist. In this song she repeats over several verses, "Ain't gonna let . . . nobody, injustice, discrimination, no hatred, oppression, no war, intolerance . . . turn me around. I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin' marchin' up to freedom land."

Perhaps we can apply Mavis's message to our readings for today. Let's keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin', marchin' along on this path to prepare our hearts and minds for a renewed relationship with the Great One. Ain't gonna let nobody (or anything) turn us around.

Why Isn't John the Baptist on Any Christmas Cards?

John the Baptist is arguably as much a part of the Christmas story as angels, shepherds, or magi. He appears in all four gospels preparing the way for the Messiah. But have you ever seen John the Baptist on a Christmas card? Of course not. He's annoying and repetitive. He's an ax-wielding, root-chopping wild man, the original Johnny-one-note with a one-word sermon: REPENT!

Theologian Marcus Borg suggests that the Greek word for *repent* can be faithfully translated as "go beyond the mind that you have." So when this prophet in the camel-hair coat shouts, "Bear fruit that is worthy of repentance," I hear him saying to us, "Live a life that shows you are expanding your understanding of who God is and what God wants." I hear John pleading with us to repent of our notions that we have God all figured out, to repent of our stubbornness that we don't need help, to move beyond what we were taught and open ourselves to what we still need to learn.

On our Advent journey through the lectionary toward Bethlehem's manger, we're forced to travel first to the Jordan and listen to John. Of course he is annoying—people who tell us the truth about ourselves always are. But I have come to the conclusion that this is because I am slow to "go beyond the mind that I have" about what it means to repent. I'm too quick to hear John's call to repent as judgment, when in fact he is preparing the way of the Lord with good news, the best news: Jesus is God's Word that we are loved and accepted. That means I don't *have* to repent to get God to love me. I am *free* to repent, free from fear (just like the angel said to the shepherds), free to risk going beyond the mind that I have.

Hallmark may never put John on a Christmas card, but I want him in my contacts list. He's the kind of friend we all need: one who tells us the truth about ourselves and introduces us to another friend who is the way, the truth, and the life.

READ:

Isaiah
11:1-10

Matthew
3:1-12

*"You brood of
vipers! . . .
Bear fruit
worthy of
repentance."
Matthew 3:7b-8*

PRAYER:

*God of truth,
ignite the
power of the
good news in
our hearts so
that we are free
every day to go
beyond the
minds we have
and open
ourselves to the
possibilities you
offer.
Amen.*

Monday, December 8

Brad Dana

READ:

Isaiah
24:1-16a

1 Thessalonians
4:1-12

Happiness is gone forever; it has been banished from the land. The city is in ruins, and its gates have been broken down. This is what will happen in every nation all over the world.

Isaiah 24:11b-13a [GNT]

There is no need to write you about love for each other. You yourselves have been taught by God how you should love one another.

1 Thessalonians 4:9 [GNT]

PRAYER:

Lord, we see great destruction around (and among) us. Please give us the strength to sustain each other as we work to maintain our communities. Provide us with empowering joy to help our neighbors. In preparation for your love and grace, may we seek mercy, health, wholeness, and justice for all of your people.

Amen.

Destruction, Faith, and Community

In the Old Testament we are told of great destruction over all the world. And for those Jews who lived in the time just before Christ, this rang true. Their nation was destroyed. Their people were scattered. They were not full citizens of the great nation, Rome, in which they lived. And this great nation was only somewhat indulgent of the Jewish faith, for the Romans could not completely relate to these weirdos. The Jews had only one god, whom they couldn't name and of whom they could not create statues or pictures (i.e., idols).

However, Isaiah says, "Those who survive will sing for joy" (v.14). They learned to live lives parallel to the Romans. They kept their faith even though they were an often-misunderstood minority within the great nation. They lived, loved, raised families, and had community within the guidelines of their faith. Sometimes the Jews celebrated with the nation that surrounded them. But often the world around them celebrated as they stayed separate, for they would not worship other gods.

In the New Testament we are admonished to love one another. While we are nominally part of the majority religion of our nation, we recognize that we are called by our faith to be different. Our view of justice. Our need to serve others and not act as or be an elite over our neighbors.

Water

A little secret: I enjoy James Bond movies—with some over-the-top action and the bad guys being defeated. The bad guys are usually comically evil with science-fiction-type weapons, but *Quantum of Solace* (2008) offers an environmentalist and “green” entrepreneur as the bad guy. This guy’s plan is to engineer a regime change (coup) in Bolivia in exchange for a piece of property that will allow him to control/sell all of Bolivia’s fresh water supply. I found this idea horrifying and way too close to plausible for my taste. Ironically, since 2008, Bolivia has begun to struggle with water resources because climate change is affecting the weather and the Andean glaciers.

On All Saints Sunday, Redeemer’s worship service included a Thanksgiving for Baptism, including a few images of water found in scripture:

- fountain of living water
- waters of baptism
- waters before creation, over which the Spirit moved

A few more come from my own recollection:

- Moses parting the Red Sea
- Elisha bidding Namaan to wash in the Jordan River to cure his leprosy
- water gushing from Jesus’ side when pierced by the soldier

Clean, fresh water is necessary for life—literally, physically necessary. It’s why astrophysicists and astrobiologists are always trying to find signs of water on other planets. No water, no life, at least as we know it. And living water, as Jesus tells the woman at the well (John 4:7-15), is necessary for abundant life

READ:

Isaiah
41:14-20

Romans
15:14-21

*I will open
rivers on the
bare heights,
and fountains
in the midst
of the valleys;
I will make
the wilderness
a pool of
water, and
the dry land
springs of
water.*

Isaiah 41:18

PRAYER:

*Gracious God,
help us to use
and conserve
water so that all
your children
may live. And
help us to spread
the news of your
living water,
love, and grace
that all may live
abundantly.
Amen.*

READ:

*Genesis
15:1-18*

*Matthew
12:33-37*

*Then he
[God] said to
him
[Abram], "I
am the Lord
who brought
you from Ur
of the
Chaldeans,
to give you
this land to
possess."
Genesis 15:7*

Migrants and Refugees

People migrate for economic reasons, such as to acquire more land, to find opportunities to work, or to escape a life of dire poverty.

Others leave because their lives are threatened, as in wartime, or because society in their homelands has become too violent.

There are many such stories in the Bible. In Genesis 11 we read that Abram's father, Terah, moved his family from Ur of the Chaldeans (in Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq) with the ultimate goal of reaching Canaan but stopped in Haran (probably in modern-day Turkey), where Terah settled and eventually died. In Genesis 12 God called Abram, aged 75, to leave Haran and move with his family to Canaan. The years-long move from Ur to Canaan anticipates the exodus of Abram's descendants, the Israelites, from Egypt many years later.

In today's reading God tells Abram that he will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. God makes a covenant with Abram that his descendants will possess the land from the "river of Egypt to the . . . river Euphrates," a huge swath indeed. Since Abram and his people had large flocks of sheep and good grazing land was a priority, an economic migration made sense for them.

PRAYER:

*Dear God,
bless the
refugees and
immigrants
who are
seeking a
better life and
the helping
hands that are
reaching out
to them in
your name.
Amen.*

With the conflict zones in today's world and difficulties caused by climate change, we have seen huge migrations of people, from the Sahel in Africa to Europe and from Central and South America to the U.S. Abram arrived in Canaan with his family, herds, and household goods, whereas refugees today often flee with not much more than the clothes on their backs. Getting settled in a new country can be a daunting challenge, especially if there is a language barrier and a less-than-friendly government. Here in Columbus concerned people help refugees and immigrants become self-sufficient and achieve successful integration into their new city. Many of the people being helped are from Haiti, where the country has been overrun by gangs and the weak central government is relatively powerless, a good reason for migration indeed. Some of our newest Redeemer members left Haiti for that reason and are being helped by their church family. They are glad to share their stories and teach us about their culture, as they participate in our Beloved Community..

Do You Listen to Your Head or Your Heart?

Ruth's speech "Where you go, I will go . . . and your God [will be] my God" (v.16-17) is often touted as a masterclass in love and devotion. And while I don't disagree with that assessment, I think there's another level of meaning here, too. Ruth faces a dilemma, and this story is about weighing pros and cons and coming to a decision based on either logic or intuition.

All three women in this story are widows. Without their husbands, their basic safety and security are in jeopardy.

The logical, safer choice for Ruth is to stay in Moab with her sister-in-law, Orpah. They would both find new husbands (because it's just that easy?!) and would let Naomi return to her people in Judah. As widows at this time in history, each would have been safest with her own people in her own homeland.

Ruth's staying in Moab would mean aligning herself with a random dude (a con) so she could have a place to live and food to eat (a pro). However, being from the same geographical area doesn't mean this guy would automatically have Ruth's best interests at heart (a con).

Being with the people you know, trust, and love brings a level of emotional security that goes beyond meeting basic survival needs (a pro). But moving to Judah would mean they may not know where they will stay (a con) or where their next meal will come from (a con).

So pros and cons being fairly equal, how does Ruth choose? Her passionate words suggest her heart/intuition gave the final nudge in Naomi's direction. She and Naomi will travel together, and the rest will sort itself out. How brave, how bold, how terrifying that must have been! Well done, ladies.

This story reminds us that we are empowered to live our lives on our own terms. We make the final decisions about how our lives should go. It doesn't matter if we rely more on logic or intuition for our decision-making. Our path is valid because we chose it. And if we don't like what we chose yesterday, we can choose something different today!

READ:

Ruth
1:6-18

2 Peter
3:1-10

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.
Ruth 1:18 [NIV]

PRAYER:

God of wisdom, please help us be receptive to your guidance as we make decisions today.
Amen.

READ:

Ruth
4:13-17

2 Peter
3:11-18

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who on this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer . . . He will renew your life . . ."
Ruth 4:13-15 [NIV]

PRAYER:

*Thank you, Lord, for giving us the story of Ruth and Naomi—and the unique opportunity to welcome foreigners into our Redeemer family. May we welcome them and their new baby boy as we would welcome you.
Amen.*

Foreigners Become Family

When people emphasize the importance of seeing someone who looks like them, I used to think that shouldn't be so relevant. But then I realized that's exactly how I chose my childhood heroes—Ruth, Esther, and Joan of Arc were all females, just like me.

Although this passage is not the one often quoted when the book of Ruth is mentioned, it is a symbol of hope and new life for the family of Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law. The story of Naomi, her husband, and two sons who moved to a foreign country (Moab) because there was a famine in Israel always intrigued me. The husband died, the sons grew and married Moabite women. Then both sons died, leaving three women on their own, with no male to be the "breadwinner" or protector nor any children to carry on the family name. Naomi, whose name meant "pleasant," asked that her name be changed to Mara, or "bitterness," because of all that she had lost.

When Naomi heard that the famine in Israel was over, she decided to go home to Bethlehem, and Ruth was determined to go with her. There Ruth worked in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's husband, and came to his attention. As required by law, Boaz offered a closer relative the option to buy the land that had belonged to Naomi's husband and to marry Ruth so that, according to Jewish tradition, any future child would inherit the land and carry on the family name. When the offer was refused by the closer relative, Boaz took the responsibility and married Ruth.

Notice how "the Lord *enabled* her to conceive," the one who had been barren for all the years of marriage to Naomi's son, and Ruth bore a child. This son, named Obed, was the restoration of Naomi's family heritage, a symbol of hope and new life turning Naomi's sorrow and bitterness to joy. Naomi, who had been a foreigner in Moab, had welcomed Ruth, now a foreigner in Israel, and gave her a home and family. Ruth then became one of the few women named in the genealogy of Jesus, also born in Bethlehem.

Fiery Transformation

When a fire burns down to ashes, it can sometimes seem destructive, yet wildfires in the wilderness can also regenerate new forests.

Hannah's prayer in the Old Testament passage is one of rejoicing after being given the unexpected gift of a son, following years of childless grief and being severely provoked by her rival. The Holy Spirit has turned her tears to joy, and her prayer describes everything being turned around: the once-hungry are "fat with spoil" while the formerly full "hire themselves out for bread" (v.5). She invokes a fiery transformation brought about by God, who "raises up the poor from the dust" and "lifts the needy from the ash heap" (v.8).

In Luke's gospel, John quotes Isaiah and "the voice of one crying out" in another wilderness, where inequalities were to be "equalized" similarly: with "every valley . . . filled, and every mountain and hill . . . made low, and the crooked . . . made straight, and the rough ways made smooth" (v.4b-5). Those hearing John were told to "transform" themselves: to share when they had excess resources, not to take more than they needed, to be satisfied with what they had.

John spoke of fire repeatedly, warning that "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (v.9), the one who was coming "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," and "the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (v.17).

For those who have more than they need, how would this "good news" John proclaimed be heard? But for those who have waited for transformation and equality, it might feel like the rebirth of a forest after a wildfire.

READ:

*1 Samuel
2:1-8*

*Luke
3:1-18*

"The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts."

1 Samuel 2: 7

"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Luke 3:16

PRAYER:

*Holy Spirit, let the fire of your love transform our hearts. May we burn with your mission to treat all equally, feed the hungry, lift those who need more, share what we don't need, and look for unexpected new life
Amen.*

Sunday, December 14

Julianne Johnson

READ:

*1 Isaiah
35:1-10*

*Matthew
11:2-11*

*Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees.
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!"*

Isaiah 35:3-4 [MSG]

PRAYER:

*God, grant us wisdom, grant us
courage for the living of these days.
Amen.*

Courage

Just two verses later comes the familiar passage, "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped." With these words I hear the music of Handel's *Messiah*, and I once again imagine these miracles. But the earlier passage speaks to me more, in part because I'm aging and because I've experienced more anxiety this year. Perhaps it was written for 2025?

These times that we are living in are the first I have truly had to grapple with the fact that being a follower of Jesus and his radical and persistent love for all truly means that I need courage. Courage to speak up and stand with my immigrant friends. Courage to go to protests where drones film the people attending. Courage when I least expect to need it. These days are an opportunity for me to get a glimpse of—and to practice—God's radical love. So I'll be strengthening my rubbery knees.



*For the Grumblers, Complainers, Whiners
among Us*

There is hope.

Seriously, hope for those who, like me, grumble, complain, and whine.

So often a major, or even a minor, task begins with a “Why me?” “Why now?” “Huh?” It’s as though those questions are the runway for moving forward, but I do admit that once finished with the task, those questions and requisite “stewing” seem more like a waste of time and energy.

But I still do it.

Isaiah tells us that “those who grumble will accept instruction,” while The Message notes “complainers and whiners learn gratitude.” (Now I’m not sure where the gratitude comes in, but I like their characterization as complainers and whiners. No sugarcoating the grumping in The Message.)

It is hopeful that we can learn, and the earlier verses in this Isaiah passage do talk about what it is we have to look forward to: the blind will see; the deaf will hear the words of scripture; the ruthless will vanish, and the mockers will disappear. Even those who seek to deprive the innocent of justice through false testimony “will be cut down” (v.20, NIV).

In many ways all of that seems impossible, but then we move on to Acts, where we read about the “many signs and wonders” (v.12) the apostles performed among the people—these individuals plucked by Jesus from among his neighbors to be his followers and then successors in the performing of miracles. “A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

Since that is the case, then there is hope for us grumblers, complainers, and whiners.

Amen.

READ:

*Isaiah
29:17-24*

*Acts
5:12-16*

*And those who err
in spirit will come
to understanding;
those who grumble
will accept
instruction.*

Isaiah 29:24

*A great number of
people would also
gather from the
towns around
Jerusalem, bringing
the sick and those
tormented by
unclean spirits, and
they were all
cured.*

Acts 5:16

PRAYER:

*Dear Lord, may we
continue to be open to
learning your ways
and, when we see the
work of your hands, to
keeping your name
holy.
Amen.*

READ:

Ezekiel
47:1-12

Jude
17-25

“And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

Ezekiel 47:12

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Jude 20-21

PRAYER:

*Mother/Father of all creation,
guide us as we develop your
gifts.
Amen.*

God's Gifts

The Dead Sea between Jordan and the Palestinian west bank is one of the world's saltiest lakes with an average salinity of about 35 percent, ten times saltier than the oceans. Only minuscule quantities of bacteria and microbial fungi are present. Ezekiel has a vision of water issuing from the temple and becoming a river, “and when it enters the stagnant waters of the [Dead] sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living thing which swarms will live . . .” (v.8b-9a).

As a hydrologist, I understand that Ezekiel has his hydrology wrong. The salinity of the Dead Sea is not due to a lack of fresh water flowing in. The Jordan River and other tributaries enter the north end of the Dead Sea, supplying fresh water. Because the Dead Sea is a closed basin with a surface elevation 1,378 feet below sea level, it is a dead end with no outlet other than evaporation, which leaves behind more and more minerals and salts.

What Ezekiel's vision says to me is that water is the source of life, and water is a gift from God.

The Jordan and its headwater, the Sea of Galilee, have historically supported fisheries and farming. “Arizona grows where water flows” is a truth I learned growing up. Jordan, Israel, and Arizona, like many other governments, prioritize water projects to support economic growth. As stewards of God's gifts, we are responsible for preserving those gifts in developing our projects.

Jude provides guidance for prayerfully, thoughtfully planning our use of God's gifts

He Comes to Heal

*The king of glory comes
The nation rejoices
Open the gates before Him
Lift up your voices.*

I'm sure as folks awaited the coming of God's son, they weren't really sure what to expect—for example, that “conquering king” thing—but in today's passages Matthew details a whole series of miracles performed by Jesus, specifically looking at Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law and his casting out demons into a herd of pigs, following up on the early part of the chapter's recounting of his healing a leper and the Centurion's servant.

But heal he did—one and all who were brought to him, driving out evil spirits and healing all who were sick.

*In all of Galilee
In city or village
He goes among His people
Curing their illness.*

*Sing then of David's son
Our Savior and brother
In all of Galilee
Was never another.*

*He gave His life for us
The pledge of salvation
He took upon Himself
The sins of the nation.*

Zechariah talks about the earlier “healing,” or restoration, of the “remnant” and the city of Jerusalem. Zechariah writes, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, I am going to save my people from the land of the east and from the land of the west; and I will bring them back and they will live in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God in truth and righteousness'” (v.7-8b).

*The king of glory comes
The nation rejoices
Open the gates before Him
Lift up your voices.**

**“The King of Glory” by Randall DeBruyn and Willard F. Jabusch*

READ:

***Zechariah
8:1-17***

***Matthew
8:14-17, 28-34***

*They shall be
my people, and
I will be their
God in truth
and
righteousness.
Zechariah 8:8b*

*That evening
they brought
to him many
who were
possessed with
demons; and
he cast out the
spirits with a
word, and
cured all who
were sick.
Matthew 8:16*

PRAYER:

*Healer of our
every ill, thank
you for sending
your Son to heal
our souls, our
bodies, our
nation.
Amen.*

READ:

Samuel
7:1-17

Galatians
3:23-29

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:28

PRAYER:

O Lord, we thank you for the examples modeled by Jesus of breaking down barriers between people, and for showing us that we are all one in him.
Amen.

Who Is on Your Purity Map?

St. Paul, who wrote these words 2,000 years ago, was a devout Pharisee before his conversion, so he understood Jewish laws very well. The Jewish society of the day was severely stratified, based on the “holiness code” enshrined in Leviticus, which defined *holiness* as ritual purity, and everyone in their society could be placed somewhere on the cultural “purity map.” One’s degree of purity depended on factors such as birth, behavior, health, gender, or being a Jew or Gentile. To be high on the purity scale, one had to be a Jewish man born into a priestly family, be intact bodily, and observe all 613 laws in the Torah. Gentiles were by definition impure, as were the very poor, since they could not pay the temple tax, along with the chronically ill, eunuchs, criminals, tax collectors, and women, among others.

Jesus challenged the purity system in his teachings and his activities. His parables were often pointed attacks on the purity code, such as when he made a hated Samaritan the hero of the story for helping the injured victim of robbers after a priest and a Levite had refused to do so. Jesus and his followers continually challenged the purity system in their daily activities, such as practicing open-table fellowship, free healings, and respectful association with women unrelated to them. They freely ate with social outcasts such as the tax collector Zacchaeus. Jesus also lovingly touched lepers, who were feared outcasts, to heal them, and he openly talked to women such as the Samaritan woman at the well in broad daylight. He modeled compassion, not an artificial holiness.

Who is on our purity map today? There are societal forces that still divide us—rich/poor, black/white, gay/straight, male/female, educated/uneducated, and more. Even after 2,000 years, social outcasts still exist, and for too many Americans these include the homeless, illegal immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and those opposed to one’s own political leanings. Paul’s letter to the Galatians reaffirms the inclusiveness shown by Jesus, viewing all as God’s children, part of a Beloved Community. At Redeemer all are welcome, and we strive to be true followers of Jesus by practicing the welcoming inclusion, compassion, and love he taught

Thank You for the Gifts! Now What?

Today's text is a prayer of thanksgiving. Approaching life from a place of gratitude is a great way to stay grounded, calm, and ready to tackle whatever the day brings. So in that sense, I absolutely can get behind David in giving thanks to God for the wonderful things in our lives.

That being said, I had a difficult time with this passage. I think part of the problem is the repetitiveness of the "Sovereign Lord" title for God. David authored 75 of the psalms, so you'd think he could have been a bit more creative with his honorifics.

But more than just my pedantic griping over nomenclature, I think I struggled with this text because I don't experience God in a hierarchical way. Our relationship isn't that God is up there, ruling over everything, and I'm down here, trying to stay out of the way. I see us as partners. God is in everything and in everyone, including me. So instead of "why me?" it's more like "why NOT me?" I'm a child of God, and we work together. God's the one who gave me my talents in the first place, so God will help me be successful when I use them. And let me tell you, it feels GREAT when that happens.

Does that sound shocking? Good! Many of us were taught to avoid being prideful, lest we appear conceited. As a result, I've seen people be overly modest and end up either hiding/downplaying their gifts and talents or actually turning away from blessings because they didn't think they deserved them. I'm guilty of doing that myself a time or twelve! Listen to me: we all deserve good things simply because we exist. No other condition is required. The best part is, when God blesses us, we can allow ourselves to be blessings to others as well.

There is an abundance of awful things happening in the world right now. If something good is going on, we need to celebrate it. If someone has a gift, they need to be recognized for it so it can be nurtured and developed. Blessings need to be acknowledged so they can be lights in the darkness. Isn't that what this season is about?

READ:

*2 Samuel
7:18-22*

*Galatians
4:1-7*

*"Who am I,
Sovereign
Lord, and
what is my
family, that
you have
brought me
this far?"*

*2 Samuel 7:18
[NIV]*

PRAYER:

*Thank you,
Creator God, for
bringing us this
far, and for
enabling us to
use our gifts
and talents to
bless others.
Amen.*

Saturday, December 20

Becky Trover

READ:

2 Samuel
7:23-29

John
3:31-36

*Whoever has
accepted his
testimony
has certified
this, that God
is true.
John 3:33*

PRAYER:

*Holy Spirit, lead
us always to
share your
truth.
Amen.*

What Is Truth?

John declares that "God is true," echoing not only the author of 2 Samuel, but multiple Bible writers. But what is truth? How do we discern what is true and comes from God?

Since the Garden of Eden, there has been fake news posing as truth. Families are torn apart, lives are devastated, nations crumble, because the truth has been distorted or downright denied. Spouses dissemble to avoid unpleasantness. Parents tell their kids "little white lies" to try to protect them, and kids try to pull the wool over their parents' eyes. Scammers contrive slick narratives to cheat folks. Lies masquerade as politeness in social settings. Religious leaders twist the church's teachings into heresy. Political discourse is replete with lies.

So how do we live in a way that leans into the truth, that can separate what is true from what is false?

We immerse ourselves in the Word, not just cherry-picked snippets that confirm our biases. We engage with others in community, taking part in honest back and forth. We look to trusted leaders and scholars to help us interpret. And most of all we bring ourselves in prayer to the One who is true. We trust the Spirit for guidance.



Trusting Mystery

They have a plan, but life is messy. Mary is pregnant. Joseph considers practical and compassionate action, both to abide by Jewish law and to minimize public disgrace for Mary. It's a good Plan B. And then there comes this dream . . .

Oh, those signs and dreams. Mystery. Joseph must have been afraid and confused. Certainly, there were significant risks and societal consequences of taking the actions being asked of him. And what about his own personal values? Did he know about the Messianic prophecy about the sign? His beliefs must have been shaken, at least a little bit, maybe a lot. And yet, Joseph trusts and takes a leap of faith. He and Mary boldly embark on a faithful journey together and continue to trust Mystery.

I find that the Divine often provides signs and messages. When I am paying attention and slowing down to listen, I gather and reflect on those nudges and what I call "God moments" in a journal or through another practice. I trust understanding will unfold. I recently started a dream journal, recording and reflecting on the dreams I have as well. They often don't make sense, so I must trust that clarity will come. Trusting Mystery may be illogical and full of uncertainty. And yet the sacred text we call the Bible is full of signs and dreams and stories of people doing just that—trusting Mystery.

READ:

Isaiah
7:10-16

Matthew
1:18-25

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

Matthew 1:20-23 [NIV]

PRAYER:

Great Mystery, may we trust the signs and dreams and other ways you speak to us, especially amidst the messiness of life.

Amen.

READ:

2 Isaiah
33:17-22

Luke
1:46b-55

Your mind will think back to this time of terror when the Assyrian officers outside your walls are counting your towers and estimating how much they will get from your fallen city. But soon they will all be gone.

These fierce, violent people, with a strange, jabbering language you can't understand, will disappear. Your eyes will see

Jerusalem at peace, a place where God is worshiped, a city quiet and unmoved.

Isaiah 33:18-20 [TLB]

PRAYER:

Dear God, pour out your blessings on the peacemakers. Turn our hearts away from violence, and instill in us your love for all your children.

Amen.

Rebuilding a City Reduced to Rubble

Advent for many is a time of anticipation, a belief that something good is about to happen. This is especially true for people who are weary of war and destruction. In today's Isaiah passage, Judah is recovering from the Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib and the siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE), several decades after the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel. There are images of fallen towers and demands for tribute that impoverished the people. After the Assyrians withdrew, there were fervent hopes for life to return to normal in a peaceful, quiet Jerusalem. Isn't this world history in a nutshell? One tribe or nation invades another out of greed for plunder, land, or slave labor; they cause incalculable destruction; and eventually the survivors slowly rebuild after hostilities end. During the turmoil, a way out and restoration of peace are eagerly sought.

This Advent, after years of being assaulted with images of high-rise dwellings in various parts of the world being reduced to rubble and untold deaths, there is hopeful talk of peace initiatives. We watch national leaders, who have the power to stop the aggression, as they strut and pose on the world stage. We can only pray that finally these leaders will do something constructive, these conflicts will end, and the exhausted people can rebuild their lives.

For refugees from these war zones, there is an endless sense of loss of all they knew. Here at Redeemer we have Haitian refugees who fled death threats and destruction from the vicious gangs who have overrun their country, leaving family and livelihoods behind. Recent news reports from Haiti of further gang activity and natural disasters, such as the recent hurricane Melissa, add to their frustration. We are providing a welcoming and comforting embrace for our new friends by helping them get on their feet in a strange new country. Let us be for them Isaiah's Jerusalem, "a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up" [v. 20, NRSV].

Blessed to Be a Blessing

As I was growing up, my family's table grace was "Thank you, Jesus, for this food, for today, and for all our blessings. Amen."

We were not big on enumerating our blessings, and maybe Mom and I forgot them sometimes. I don't think Dad ever did, though. I think he was keenly aware of many of his blessings:

- living in a city he chose, in a house he owned
- dining on home-cooked meals, lovingly prepared
- working at a job he loved with people he liked (he retired from that at age 60)
- providing for children and grandchildren
- participating in the life of the church (on council, as an elder, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, working for the district/synod after retirement, etc.)
- studying for and completing a Masters in Ministry
- fishing and traveling

He was confused and angry at the end of his life at 74, though, because he thought God should cure his cancer so he could go on working for the Lord. Dad was not perfect, but I think he lived a life that recognized the importance of passing on your blessings. He chose the church and his family as his primary vehicles for passing them on, but it's certainly possible to use work, school, or community organizations to do the same.

Abraham's promised blessings were land, descendants, and a covenantal relationship with God. Through his descendant, Jesus, the world has been blessed with a greater understanding of God's love, grace, peace, and justice. #blessed.

READ:

Samuel
7:18, 23-29

Galatians
3:6-14

"All the Gentiles [or nations] shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

*[Quoting Genesis 12:3]
Galatians 3:8b-9*

PRAYER:

*Gracious God, help us to be aware of our blessings and attuned to how we might share our bounty with others.
Amen.*

READ:

Isaiah
9:2-7

Luke
2:1-20

“Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. . . .”

Luke 2:10

PRAYER:

Holy Lord, in every fearful moment make us aware of your joyful presence.
Amen.

Great Joy?

“Great joy for all the people.” *All* the people. Are you feeling great joy? How about the people around you? Do you see great joy? Where do we find great joy when times are difficult?

Let’s look at what happens just before this pronouncement. The glory of the Lord shines around the shepherds, and the angel tells them to not be afraid, that there is good news.

We see the glory of the Lord in His presence on earth—in each other. *We* are God’s voice in a troubled world. *We* are God’s feet to bring relief to those in need. *We* are God’s arms to reach out in comfort to a hurting creation. *We* are God’s hands to give what is lacking. *We* are God’s ears to listen to the concerns of the fearful. *We* are God’s face to bring a smile of welcome to all.

If we rest in the Lord and in our mission, we do not need to be afraid. We can look on chaos and yet find the peace that makes a way through the darkness. Knowing that Christ accompanies us brings that peace.

And that is the Good News—Emmanuel dwells within us as individuals and as community. What great joy!



Pastor Dave

Thursday, December 25

Thank You, Life-Light

As I write these words, I am very aware this is my ninth and final devotion for this marvelous booklet. That means this is time to say *thank you*. There's no better way to do that than through these words from John's love song to Christ.

The Apostle Paul tells us Christ chooses to come alive for the world through the Church. He says Christ needs each of us to bring life and light to the world in our unique way, no excuses accepted! Lots of congregations *know* this. But Redeemer, you *live* it. There is no congregation I've ever been part of that takes this call more seriously and joyfully than you. What a place to get to be a pastor!

You are alive. Sunday mornings, every corner of this building rings with music, voices, laughter, anger, tears, kindness, and hands signing joy and justice. Do you realize how naturally you make love real? I see you doing this and say *thank you* for these years together. I say *thank you* for the ways you keep teaching me that a community's membership size has nothing to do with the life it can bring.

And light! You shine. If you doubt that, the next time you're at church, or gathered with two or three Redeemer folks, look around. Light pours through you! And that light brings alive compassion, integrity, and justice. That light brings alive dreams that are so much bigger than you have any right to dream. And it makes them real! Christ couldn't hope for a more faithful Life-Light than you.

And you've let me join you! Thank you. Life-Light at 1555 S. James Road, thank you. It has been a glorious ride together. A Merry, Merry Christmas to you all.

READ:

Isaiah
52:7-10

John
1:1-14

*What came into
existence was Life,
and the Life was Light
to live by.
The Life-Light blazed
out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't
put it out.
John 1:3-5 [MSG]*

PRAYER:

*Hail, the heav'n-born Prince
of Peace,
hail the Sun of
righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
ris'n with healing in his
wings.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead
see!
Hail, incarnate deity!
Pleased as one with us to
dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn king!"
Amen.*



Christmas Eve Worship

7:00 pm

Tuesday, December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am

Wednesday, December 25



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Please check our website

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