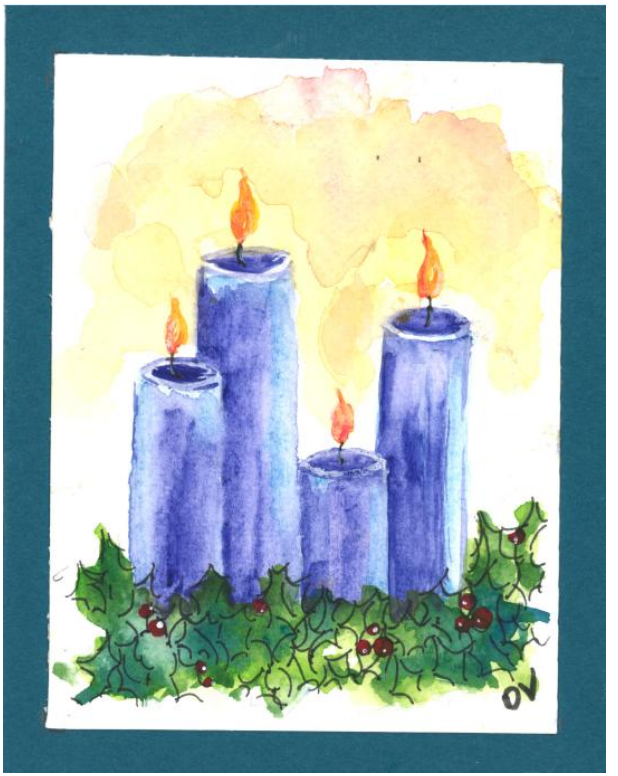
2026 Advent Devotions



Written by members of Redeemer Lutheran Church
Cover Artwork by Donna Voelkel
Other artwork by Margie Frazier



Holden Evening Prayer

7:00 pm

Wednesdays December 2, 9, 16

Dessert at 6:30 pm

Redeemer first did an Advent Devotional in 2016 at the behest of our Intentional Interim Pastor, Leslie Fox, and we continued the tradition during the years Pastor Dave Shull was with us. Now, Redeemer has begun a new chapter with Pastor Kayla Hopgood, and we look forward to many good years with her. This is our eleventh devotional booklet, with the beautiful cover art painted by Donna Voelkel. The authors of these devotions come from a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and ages, and offer many different perspectives on the Biblical texts listed in the Lectionary for this year.

How do you observe Advent? 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.



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Connie Criswell *Sunday, November 29*

Watching for Jesus

Today's passage from Mark 13 is part of a discourse by Jesus on future events and signs of the end times, written during a period of social upheaval in the Jewish-Roman war in which the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. There are hopeful notes, such as this verse, which could signify the in-breaking of God's kingdom on earth, and exhortations to be watchful, for we know neither the day nor the hour when Jesus will return.

How will we recognize Jesus? He tells us in Matthew 25, when he commands us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, and visit prisoners, for whatever we do to the "least of these" we do to him. There are so many people in need in this country and the world that we should have no trouble finding ones to help. The Redeemer community has fed the hungry for many years, with food grown in the church garden, meals provided for dinners at First English, and generous donations to the CROP Walk for alleviating world hunger. Participation in the Good Neighbors Picnic also provides warm clothes for those who are unhoused.

Redeemer members give warm welcomes to strangers, too. In the past two years we have embraced a couple refugee families who fled for their lives from Haiti, where much of the country has been overrun by vicious gangs. These families have been folded into the congregation as beloved members and have built lives for themselves here with our help.

Advent is a time of anticipation, of watchful waiting, in preparation for celebrating Christmas, the birth of Jesus over 2000 years ago. This Advent let us look for hopeful signs that Jesus is truly among us and walks with us now, as we reach out to the lost and lonely, feed the hungry, and welcome the stranger.

READ:

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near."
Mark 13:28

PRAYER:

O God, help us to see the face of Jesus in the hungry, the unhoused, and the strangers among us Amen.

Monday, November 30 *Al Rider*

READ:

Micah
4:1-5

Revelation
15:1-8

. . . "Let's go to the Temple of Jacob's God. He will teach us how to live." . . . He'll establish justice in the . . . nations and settle disputes in faraway places. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will quit fighting each other, quit learning how to kill one another
Micah 4:2a, 3
[NRSV and MSG]

PRAYER:

Come to teach us the gentle and countercultural ways of peace, Advent Lord. Amen

Come, Advent Lord, Establish Justice



Today's Advent text from the prophet Micah (quoted also in Isaiah) inspired Russian sculptor Yevgeny Vuchetich to create this monumental bronze for the garden of United Nations headquarters in New York in 1959. He'd fought on the front lines against the Nazis at Stalingrad during World War II and had a prophetic message to portray.

Prophets, artists, writers, and musicians—as diverse as Michael Jackson and Presidents Reagan, Eisenhower, and Carter, as well as the chorus in *Les Misérables* and, of all people, the ancient Chinese moral philosopher Confucious (who was a contemporary of the Hebrew prophets)—all drew on this same image to contrast the tools of peace with the tools of conflict. The universal vision is the reign of God, when land is no longer littered with human blood and corpses, but is cultivated to bring forth food to nurture life and hope.

In his famous 1967 "Beyond Vietnam" speech, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Our greatest defense . . . is to take action in behalf of justice. We must seek to remove conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice, which are the fertile soil in which the seeds of conflict grow and develop."

The well-known African-American spiritual "Down by the Riverside" sings, "I'm gonna' beat my sword into a plow," followed by the refrain, "Ain't gonna study war no more!"

Michelle Clemence *Tuesday, December 1*

Lame Together

I began writing this devotion the week after I had my left knee replaced, and the word lame caught my attention. Now, three weeks later, I have been back to Redeemer to worship in person, and I was really struck by the number of my sisters and brothers using canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. What a beautiful sight to see!

In my understanding, the old Jewish laws did not allow anyone with a physical defect (which made one "unclean") to enter the temple in Jerusalem. One could have gone into an outer courtyard, but no further. Fortunately for us, Jesus washes away our lameness of body, mind, and spirit. I am grateful that our God, in Jesus, has shown us a love and a desire to gather us together to be a strong nation/family, leaning on the Lord and each other, never to be excluded again.

While researching temple access, I came across a question from a Reddit user—Can I love Jesus and reject the institutional church? I didn't read any of the answers posted by other Redditors, but I thought, "Yes, but it's very difficult." We were made to be in community: learning with, worshipping with, and helping each other. As Senator-elect James Talarico said in his victory speech, "There is no love of God without love of neighbor." Hopefully, that questioner can find a non-institutional faith community to be a part of.



READ:

Micah 4:6-13

Revelation 18:1-10

The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation . . .
Micah 4:7a

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to embrace our weaknesses so that we may rely on you for our strength. Amen.

Wednesday, December 2 *Kathleen Zwanziger*

READ:

Micah
5:1-5a

Luke
21:34-38

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel . . . And he will be our peace . . .
Micah 5:2a, 5a
[NIV]

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with . . . the anxieties of life . . ."
Luke 21:34
[NIV]

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for being our peace. May we extend it to others.
Amen.

Jesus Is Our Peace

How many cities or towns in Israel can you name? I imagine you are familiar with Jerusalem, one of the larger cities, but you also are familiar with one of the smaller towns, Bethlehem. God chose this small town, whose name means "House of Bread," to be the birthplace of a king who would deliver his people. (Intriguing how often in the New Testament Jesus is referred to as the Bread of Life.)

When God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, he promised Moses and later Joshua that he would assist them in conquering the territory that belonged to the Canaanites, *provided the people obeyed the laws that Yahweh had given them*. Sometimes tremendous victories were won, but when the laws were broken, great losses occurred. Israel was abandoned by God for long periods of time, until the Messiah would be born—in a tiny town. The baby Jesus would become the ideal king to deliver the people and bring them peace, which in Hebrew also connotes prosperity.

Do you sometimes feel you are the "least" among people (the term that I remember from childhood referring to Bethlehem)? Do you feel insignificant and weighed down with the anxieties of life? We must realize that God can use each of us to help our neighbors. It might seem trivial to pick up someone for a ride, help out at the LSS Food Pantry, bring in a filled Thanksgiving bag, provide snacks at Bible Study or meals to a shut-in, or help out in a myriad of other ways as the Redeemer community does, but to the recipients of that help it might seem like a gift from heaven

Nancy Magargal *Thursday, December 3*

Gifts from God on Christmas Day and Every Day

The birth of Jesus is a positive and joyful event. Our savior's birth is a wonderful story for all Christians. But we too often get overwhelmed by Christmas frivolity instead of being wrapped in Christmas solemnity. God sent us our savior to relieve us of the burden of our sins. We must keep in mind that sins that are unconfessed and unforgiven will bring us into torture and punishment. But Jesus's birth shows us the "light" God sent us, showing us we are not hopeless sinners, but beloved, redeemed, and saved sinners. God's gift of his son saves us from the darkness and shines on us all and into our troubled world. Christ is born! Alleluia!

I've heard these words from Thessalonians nearly every Sunday of my church-going life. As Lutherans we are especially aware of the power of God's grace in our lives. Grace calms panic, relieves sin's pain, and helps us look at others with kindness and understanding. We are all sinners. Yet none of us are outside of God's care—we are all his children no matter how far we have strayed. God's grace and peace are always available to us. God our father and Jesus our brother hold us in an unbreakable embrace where we can always feel safe and loved. What a fabulous gift!

READ:

Hosea 6:1-6

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

"Come and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up."
Hosea 6:1 [KJV]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Thessalonians 1:1b [MEV]

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we celebrate your son's birth with joy every December. Keep us mindful of this everlasting gift of grace! Amen.

Friday, December 4 *Julianne Johnson*

READ:

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Acts 11:19-26

God reached out, touched my mouth, and said, "Look! I've put my words in your mouth—hand delivered! See what I've done? I've given you a job to do among nations and governments—a red-letter day! Your job is to pull up and tear down, take apart and demolish, and then start over, building and planting.
Jeremiah 1:9-10
[MSG, emphasis added]

PRAYER:

Help us, Lord, to build and plant with a spirit of justice and love.
Amen.

Work to Do

I'm writing this devotion days after the midterm elections, and this passage from Jeremiah just speaks to me. Often the words of the prophets seem to be full of woe and judgment. Here, too, Jeremiah is given a hard job to do among the nations and governments. He is given the words to "pull up and tear down . . . take apart and demolish." I think this election has given similar instructions to our nation—our government. But God doesn't stop there, and this is the part that truly speaks to me—and hopefully to you as well. "And then start over, building and planting." So be it!



Becky Trover *Saturday, December 5*

New Every Morning

As I write this, it is a gorgeous fall day. The sun is shining, the air is crisp, the sun is warm. I always get energized this time of year. The summer heat and humidity no longer sap my strength, driving me into the air-conditioned indoors. I want to enjoy the colorful leaves, the deep blue skies, the fall flowers.

Of course, every season has its charms, if I stop to appreciate them. One of the blessings of living in this latitude is the cycle of changes, the ability to look forward to something "new every morning." Winter is a cozy time for hunkering down with family. Spring brings the experience of new life. Summer is a lush time of growth.

We live in an abundant world of great beauty. Our Lord promises that if we follow his ordinances to care for and share our resources, we will be his people. May the Lord give us the will to do so.



READ:

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Mark 11:27-33

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you . . .
Ezekiel 36:26a

PRAYER:

Lord, we marvel at the world that surrounds us. Help us to see its beauty and share its abundance to the benefit of all Amen.

Sunday, December 6 *Brad Binau*

READ:

Isaiah
40:1-11

Mark
1:1-8

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare . . ."
Isaiah 40:3

". . . the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare . . .'"
Mark 1:3

PRAYER:

Guiding God, you punctuate our lives in many ways. You signal us when to pause a little or a lot, or even when to stop altogether so we can begin again. Grant us the wisdom and the courage to heed your guidance so that your comfort, peace, and glory can be revealed in our lives.
Amen.

Whither the Colon?

Whither the mark that guides us to pause?
Isaiah and John are oddly at odds.
They agree that the wilderness is certainly where
The action takes place. But to cry? or prepare?

Two dots are the source of my discontent
When seeking to know these prophets' intent.
Should we exclaim? or get ready? Which task was meant
To take place in the wilderness as we prep to repent?

So whither the colon? John seems to suggest
Life's desolate places will serve us the best
To encounter good news of God's Advent embrace
That no mountain or canyon can ever erase.

"Contraire," says Isaiah. It's not about crying.
It's hefting, it's building, it's doing, it's trying.
It's raising, it's leveling. "Rough places, succumb!"
It's paving the way for the Kingdom to come.

Whether with words or with deeds we prepare for what's new,
Whither the colon determines our view.
Is it better to speak or better to do?
It's best to remember: Both can be true!



Connie Criswell *Monday, December 7*

Establishing Peaceful Homes

The word peace can mean many different things, but in one sense it implies that we have stable, secure homes. The same can be said for wild animals, who have their own homes (nests, dens, tunnels), but if these are destroyed, where are the animals to go? With so much development in recent years in central Ohio, deer and coyotes have been displaced and are now seen in our suburban yards and even in the city.

On the island of Borneo in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, large swaths of primeval rainforest have been cleared by logging operations for rubber and palm-oil plantations. This habitat loss has adversely affected the wildlife, especially the critically endangered Bornean orangutans, which are large, orange-furred, arboreal primates. Concerned conservationists have stepped up to help in the last 50 years by establishing sanctuaries for these great apes. In May 1994 I visited the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre in Sarawak Province, Malaysia, in northern Borneo. There, rescued orangutans that had been injured, abandoned, or illegally kept as pets are rehabilitated and taught to live in the wild forest of the sanctuary's reserve. The semi-wild animals are fed twice a day on platforms high up in the trees with bowls of bananas and other fruits and hard-boiled eggs. We were there for the afternoon feeding, and as we looked up into the forest canopy, suddenly the upper leaves began to shiver and shake, and orange human-like creatures appeared on the platforms. The males can be as large as Sumo wrestlers and have very long arms and legs with prehensile feet used for traveling through the trees high up. It was wonderful to see several of these forest giants peacefully dining and then melting back into the forest canopy. I was glad to see online that the Semenggoh Centre is still in operation and currently has twenty resident orangutans.

The rewilding effort is helping to preserve this endangered species and is a wonderful example of accomplishing peace in a small corner of God's creation. Other caring organizations have established similar rehabilitative sanctuaries for other species, such as Elephant Havens in Botswana, which rescues and raises abandoned baby elephants. Somewhere, St. Francis of Assisi is smiling.

READ:

Isaiah 26:7-15

Acts 2:37-42

Lord, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.
Isaiah 26:12 [NIV]

PRAYER:

O God, you made us stewards of your Creation. Please help us establish peace by caring for it wisely. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8 *Michelle Clemence*

READ:

Isaiah 4:2-6

Acts 11:1-8

[Peter said] "But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'"
Acts 11:9

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for doing the work to cleanse us. Help us to set off on the road to do your will. Amen.

Cleansed

I object to where the *Revised Common Lectionary* Committee ended this lesson—at verse 8 instead of 9. (This is an interdenominational body, not a Redeemer committee; we just use their schedule of lessons.) The whole point is: why did Peter eat with the Gentiles in chapter 10? The answer: God does the work. Nothing Peter did made it OK. Nothing the Gentiles did made it OK. God declares the Gentiles clean and brings them into fellowship with the Jewish (i.e., circumcised) believers in Jesus.

It is easy and comforting to think, "I know the rules, and the rules have to stand"—and then to be draconian in enforcing them. But even in the Old Testament, God is credited with mercy: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse . . ." (Psalm 103:8-9a). And now, in the New Testament, God has gone all-in on mercy: "I love all-y'all this ✞ (Jesus's arms stretched wide on the cross) much. You are washed; you are clean."

So, what do we do with our cleansed selves? We share the Good News of God's love—let other folks, inside and outside of the church, know they are cleansed, too. We eat together—physically and spiritually—potlucks and picnics, First English dinners, garden giveaway, Holy Communion, worship, bible study and discussion. We lift each other up, dust each other off, and set about ushering in the reign of God.



Joss Dana *Wednesday, December 9*

Unexpected Blessings

Sometimes, God brings unexpected blessings into our lives that we didn't even know we needed. That's how I felt last November, when I got a phone call from Brad Binau. I was getting ready for work when my phone rang. When I answered, I was surprised to find that the Nominating Committee named me as a possible candidate for the Call Committee. At the time, I didn't even know what a Call Committee was. I had grown up in a nondenominational church, and that wasn't something we had.

I asked a number of questions about it, what the process looked like, what I was getting myself into. The more I learned about it, the more I felt that I needed to do this. The Spirit was definitely giving me a message at that moment, and I couldn't ignore it. Brad made it clear to me that he did not expect or want me to accept or decline the offer during that call, but I already felt it at that point. I knew that this was something I was going to do.

I took my time, waited it out, debated (or tried to), but the Spirit can be a stubborn thing. Pros and cons mean little in my experience when you know something is a necessary part of your journey. I think about a week went by, and I called him back. That's how I became a part of the Call Committee. Through this experience, I was able to use my gift to collaborate with others and help find a pastor for the Redeemer community. I'm forever grateful for the opportunity that was given to me, and I'm so glad I accepted the blessing that God placed into my life. When the Spirit speaks to you, believe it!

READ:

Malachi
2:10-3:1

Luke
1:5-17

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him . . . [and] said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John
Luke 1:11a,13
[NIV]

PRAYER:

O Lord, we thank you for the gifts and blessings you place into our lives, both expected and unexpected. Empower us to use these blessings to make a difference in our community and our world
Amen.

Thursday, December 10 *Julianne Johnson*

READ:

Habakkuk 2:1-5

Philippians 3:7-11

What's God going to say to my questions? I'm braced for the worst. I'll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon. I'll wait to see what God says, how he'll answer my complaint.
Habakkuk 2:1 [MSG]

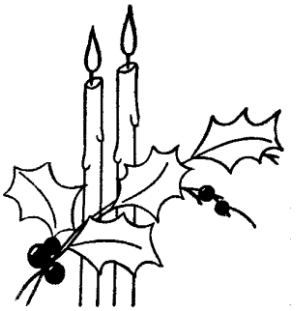
PRAYER:

Lord, I believe in you and in your mercy. Help my unbelief
Amen.

Questioning

There are times in my life when God's will simply doesn't make sense to me—I can't find a way to accept it. Doubt is an important part of my faith life. Why is there so much suffering in the world? How can nations commit genocide and not acknowledge it, let alone stop it? How am I expected to love my enemies—especially ones who seem to delight in cruelty?

Habakkuk also had questions—in fact, questions that are somewhat similar to mine. This book of the Bible—one I must have read before—is worth reading. Habakkuk's discussion with God is not just subtle questions asked in fear. And God's responses bring Habakkuk to joy. (Spoiler alert: you won't find easy answers here, but perhaps a witness to asking questions and expressing doubts.)



A Season of Yearning

Both Habakkuk and Paul in Philippians each in his own way yearns for God, much like the writer of the following poem.

Advent Prayer

By Pastor Stephen Bond

Child of the garbage country,
empty-handed,
bringing nothing,
Son of the walled-off waste land
dependent on strangers' handouts:
gold and myrrh and incense,
Firstborn of the wholly Other
foreigner among us,
baby laid in a trough:

of whom we ask in mockery,
"Can anything good
come from your hometown?"
for whom we made no room,
save for a borrowed shed,
on whom we looked down:

You, branded an enemy
to be defeated,
You, marked for death
at the empire's hand,
You, pierced again
to be sure they had
eliminated the threat:

You knew
what you were getting into with us.
You knew
what we would do.
You, refugee and Refuge,
you came anyway.

Come among us now.

READ:

Habakkuk 3:2-6

Philippians 3:12-16

O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.
Habakkuk 3:2

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:14

PRAYER:

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Amen.

Saturday, December 12 *Brad Dana*

READ:

Habakkuk 3:13-19

Matthew 21:28-32

I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.
Habakkuk 3:16b

"Which of the two did the will of his father?"
Matthew 21:31a

PRAYER:

God, you know our hearts. Help us to recognize your glory and might. Provide for us what is needed to continue. And provide us the grit to grumble but follow through on our promises to do what you want and need us to do. Amen.

Will You Do the Work?

The prophet Habakkuk gives us a study in contrast. The prophet claims to be weak-kneed in the presence of God's works, wondering when calamity will fall upon the prophet's enemies. He knows that God will strike down his enemies, but he then takes a deep breath and acknowledges that God will work on God's own time, not Habakkuk's.

The prophet then describes a grove without fruit, a field with nothing but weeds, a pasture with nothing but death and disappointment. Yet he declares: "I will still be joyful and glad, because the Lord God is my savior." He trusts God to strengthen and keep his people safe. I share this with the prophet. Sometimes God answers my prayers with "Not yet," sometimes with "You are going the wrong way."

We are far more familiar with the parable of the two sons from the New Testament passage. Many of us claim to be the openly defiant son who later does the work anyway. But I know I am not alone in recalling times when I said, "You can count on me!" only to sooner or later let that person down.

If you are anything like me, you can count on one hand the times you told someone to pound sand but then did what was asked anyway. But the number of times you said yes and then did nothing? If I had a nickel for each time I did that, I would have a literal embarrassment of riches.

During this season of renewal let us promise to be honest with each other and say, "I really don't want to." But then let us buckle down and provide the (unwilling) hands to do what is right and needed. Let us pray we find the true path God wants us to go on and then take our place with the "thieves and whores" in doing what we know is right and needed. And let us walk away from what should not be done.

Heidi Sherer *Sunday, December 13*

Prophets and Saints

When I was in later elementary school, my church observed Santa Lucia (aka St. Lucy) Day. The holiday is celebrated in Europe during the darkest part of winter close to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. Lucia was a Christian saint in Sicily who was killed by the Romans in 304 CE because of her religious beliefs. She reportedly took food to persecuted Christians in hiding, wearing candles on her head to light her way so she could have both hands free to serve. Many Scandinavian countries mark this holiday, due to their long, dark winters. In Sweden this tradition is upheld as the start of the Christmas season.

In the celebration, young girls dressed in white wear wreaths of candles on their heads. I was one of those girls in my Minnesota Lutheran congregation. I wasn't sure whether my candles were lit with batteries or fire, although my sister claims she remembers actual candles on our heads! But I do remember the effect of our lights in the dark sanctuary as we walked down the aisle singing, " child of the holy light, banish the dark of night, Santa Lucia." The festival is meant to bring hope and light during the darkest time of the year.

When John the Baptizer arrived, his witness was not accompanied by literal firelight, as Lucia allegedly wore. But like Lucia, John testified to the same Light. Neither saint claimed to be a prophet, or at least not "the" prophet. Yet their actions reflected God's light to those around them. Lucia's free hands brought food to those in hiding while the lights she wore illuminated the way. John's words illuminated the minds of anyone who would listen, that the Light of the world was to come.

None of us are prophets or saints, but we have the gifts to be prophetic and to hold within us both darkness and light. Our opportunity is to discover and rediscover what we may find in ourselves that bears witness, testifies to the Light in the world. It may be by lending our hands to help in circumstances that might put us at risk physically or otherwise, like Lucia or John. Or it might be something simple and risk-free yet needed, like volunteering or bringing words of hope to others. Whether we can be a courageous helper like Lucia or an exceptional speaker like John, we all have within us gifts that can illuminate others who need to see the Light of God in this darkest of seasons.

READ:

Isaiah
61:1-4, 8-11

John
1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
John 1: 6-9

PRAYER:

Light of the World, make us witnesses, using the gifts you've given us to reflect your message of hope and light to others in need this season. Amen.

Monday, December 14 *Al Rider*

READ:

1 Kings
18:1-18

Ephesians
6:10-17

Finally, be strong in the Lord . . . Put on the whole armor of God . . . the belt of truth around your waist . . . the breastplate of righteousness . . . for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace . . . take the shield of faith . . . the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."
Ephesians 6:10-17

PRAYER:

Come in simplicity and truth, Child of Advent, and teach us to live that way ourselves.
Amen.

Covering Up

While serving the church in Eastern Europe, we dragged our young kids on trips, even though they quickly got bored at historic churches and museums. But never when we visited collections of Medieval armor! They loved the swords, spears, helmets, and shields and would play "knights in armor" for weeks afterward.

Then at one privately owned castle (the German noble family still lived upstairs!), the guide asked if they'd like to try some armor on. Wow! After a quick yes, we snapped photos of them showing off. Then later in the car, they groaned about how **HEAVY** those metal costumes were! Not like the cardboard boxes they'd played with at home. They had barely been able to walk.

The so-called armor that we grown-ups improvise for self-defense and self-justification in social situations (at work, school, shopping, sports, and recreation) can get pretty heavy, too, when we're feeling inadequate: feigning expertise we don't have, giving excuses, posturing, faking calmness under pressure when in fact we're intimidated and fearful of being exposed. Keeping up appearances is hard when you're scared to death your "cover story" might be ripped away.

Paul suggests instead that lightweight *spiritual* armor is what we need for daily life: integrity, faith, simplicity, telling the truth, and letting our identity as God's people justify us instead of our own cleverness and stunts. Sounds scary, and it can be at first. But in fact, a non-self-justifying spiritual identity was the only kind of "armor" the Babe of Bethlehem donned as he came to live among us

Michelle Clemence *Tuesday, December 15*

Chariots of Fire

The "chariots of fire" line brought to mind the 1981 movie with that title. I saw it in a theater with my church youth group. I had to do some research now because, my good memory notwithstanding, 45 years is a long time to remember the details of a semi-historical film dramatizing events about which I had never heard.

The film centers on two men on the British track team at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. One is a Scottish Christian, the son of missionaries in China, refusing to race on a Sunday and training for a different race not being held on Sunday. The other man is an English Jew trying to navigate early twentieth century anti-Semitism while training and attending Cambridge.

The director of the 1981 film, Hugh Hudson, also co-produced a stage adaptation that was mounted in London in 2012, in honor of the Summer Olympics being held there. At that time he said, "Issues of faith, of refusal to compromise, standing up for one's beliefs, achieving something for the sake of it, with passion, and not just for fame or financial gain, are even more vital today."

And that statement takes me to the end of the Acts passage where Peter and John are arrested by the temple guards, at the behest of the priests and Sadducees, for preaching about Jesus and the resurrection. They are standing up for their beliefs and refusing to compromise. While most of us will never have to stand up to the government for our faith—although these days there is a greater chance—know that you are in good company if or when you have to draw a faithful line with family, friends, schoolmates, co-workers, or even other Christians.

READ:

2 Kings 2:9-22

Acts 3:14-4:4

As [Elijah and Elisha] continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.
2 Kings 2:11

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to recognize when we can and can't compromise. Give us the words to calmly and lovingly express why Amen.

Wednesday, December 16 *Judith Bird*

READ:

Malachi
3:16-4:6

Mark
9:9-13

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name.
Malachi 3:16

So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.
Mark 9:10

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, thank you for remembering your people and keeping the promises you have made. Help us to remember that Jesus suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation. Strengthen our faith, give us hope for the day of his return, and help us live as your treasured children.
Amen.

The Trick Is Believing

Events don't always turn out as we think they will.

Malachi—the last book in our Old Testament—sees the coming of the Lord in terms of judgment and punishment: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 4:1-3).

But somewhere between Malachi and Mark 9, which recounts the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus came as a baby.

We know what is to come. The trick is believing . . . and believing . . . and believing that Jesus' suffering and death was meant for each of us.

The cross declares that we are loved. The empty tomb declares that we are forgiven and that all things will be made new.

Becky Trover *Thursday, December 17*

Dancing before the Lord

Some time ago, we had a guest pastor leading worship on a Sunday morning. We were using Setting 6, which I really enjoy.

On the way out of the sanctuary, I greeted the pastor and said, "I saw you dancing to the liturgy." He got a brief panicky look on his face, as if thinking, "Oh boy, this old lady is going to give me some Lutheran grief!" But when I said, "This setting makes me dance, too; I'm glad to see that our worship leader was also celebrating it," he broke out in a big grin and chuckled with me.

How blessed we are to be in a space where we can appreciate the deep liturgical traditions that have been passed down for generations, without becoming stodgy. Reverence has space for solemnity and for frivolity, for silence and for shouts of joy, for stillness and for dancing.

Redeemer doesn't always have lyres and harps, but we enjoy our tambourines and castanets and cymbals. We make a joyful noise!



READ:

2 Samuel 6:1-11

Hebrews 1:1-4

David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might . . .
2 Samuel 6:5a

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for the many ways of expressing our love for you and for one another Amen.

Friday, December 18 *Emily Kent*

READ:

2 Samuel 6:12-19

Hebrews 1:5-14

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? ***Hebrews 1:14 [NIV]***

PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for creating angels to assist us in navigating life Amen.

Angels Are Earth's Classroom Helpers

I knew I wanted to talk about angels in this devotion but was having trouble writing it. So, I asked my angels what I should say. Their answer is the title of this piece, and honestly, it makes so much sense. I can't believe I didn't think of this analogy before.

If Earth is the classroom and God and Jesus are the teachers, then angels are the assistants walking around the room during the lessons. They are helping us, the students, with our work: giving tips and encouragement, reminding us to pay attention, and trying to keep us safe when we inevitably make unsafe choices.

We hear a lot about angels during Christmas time. But those are stories of huge messages direct from God. Angels aren't just engaged for the big stuff. And the communication isn't solely in one direction from God to us. Angels are here for our everyday stuff, too. As the verse says, they are "ministering spirits," that is, "serving, caring for, or providing aid to others" (thank you, Merriam-Webster).

It's been my experience that you don't need any fancy words or special gestures to talk to your angels. Just like prayer, whatever feels right to you is what will work for them. How wonderful to know that we've got a spiritual team waiting to help us!



Becky Trover *Saturday, December 19*

Who Do You Trust?

I encourage you to read this whole story about Manoah and his wife. It's kind of comical.

Manoah's unnamed wife is barren until an angel appears to her and tells her she will have a son. Manoah is skeptical, not believing his wife until the angel makes things abundantly clear to him. Even then, the woman is the one to see what is actually happening and to keep Manoah from overreacting. Throughout, it is the woman who faithfully believes what the Lord is doing in their lives, although she remains unnamed because of her gender.

How often do we doubt what others tell us about their experiences with the holy? How quick are we to question, to assume, to let our own egos get in the way?

Of course, we are surrounded by fake news, and by folks telling us that real news is fake news. How do we discern? How do we know who to trust?

Maybe trust is formed in relationship, in knowing the character of and having respect for the news-bearer. If we believe the source, we can have more confidence in the message.



READ:

Judges 13:2-24

John 7:40-52

. . . and the angel of God came again to the woman . . .
Judges 13:9b

PRAYER:

Lord, teach us to listen for your word
Amen.

Sunday, December 20 *Al Rider*

READ:

2 Samuel
7:1-11, 16

Luke
1:46-55

PRAYER:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham [and Sarah] and to [their] descendants forever."

Women and Justice in Scripture

Bible scholars all recognize that Israel's tradition was patriarchal. No *complete* book of the Bible is attributed just to a woman. However, wise women of the times were not silent, and many are quoted. Today's passage gives us the best-known biblical poem by a woman, Mary.

Others include these: Moses's sister Miriam leading the women in song and dance at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:21); Deborah's psalm celebrating the military triumph over Canaan that she had led with Barack (Judges 5); Hannah's praising God at the dedication of her son Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1–10); and the book of Proverbs' teachings by and about women to guide the entire community in integrity, wisdom, and justice.

In Advent we hear Elizabeth voicing a poetic and prophetic blessing for her cousin Mary (Luke 1:42–45), followed by Mary's magnificent psalm as the two pregnant women visit and support one another (see today's reading and prayer).

It's interesting that all these scriptural contributions by women invariably focus on the wisdom of justice. They sing of God's great love for—and solidarity with—upright people who live together in integrity and compassion, with respect for the Creator and the Creation.

Today, in the post-election time in which our country now lives, we are still bold to sing a prayer for justice with our wise, brave, visionary Mary.

Connie Criswell *Monday, December 21*

Empathy and Compassion

This passage tells the story of Hannah, a childless woman who has been tormented by her husband's other wife, Peninnah, who has children. Desperate, Hannah goes to the temple to pray, and her lips move while she is in silent prayer. Eli the priest sees her and supposes her to be drunk, but she explains that she is deeply troubled and has not been drinking. Hannah is weeping bitterly during her prayers and the exchange with Eli, and once he understands her problem, he sends her home with the blessing cited here. God does have mercy on her, finally granting her wish for a child, and she eventually gives birth to Samuel the prophet.

The words *mercy*, *compassion*, and *empathy* are closely related terms, and the Bible is full of examples. Time and again, God is merciful to the Israelites even when they have broken the Mosaic covenant with God. The gospels tell of the many times Jesus healed or fed people in need during his ministry because he felt compassion for them. Those of us who are followers of Jesus try to do the same.

In some quarters, empathy is considered to be weakness, especially among the rich and powerful, perhaps stemming from their greed and lust for more power. In January 2025 the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, gave a sermon during an inaugural prayer service directly addressing the newly elected political leaders. She courageously asked the new president to have mercy on vulnerable and frightened groups in the country such as refugees, undocumented immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people. This was not well received and later was vehemently rejected by the powers-that-be. She did not back down, however, and later encouraged protests against heavy-handed immigration enforcement in Minneapolis. In so doing, she was following Jesus in her words and actions, just as he resisted corruption among the Pharisees and Roman occupiers. She showed that empathy and compassion are signs of strength, not weakness. Let us, too, challenge the dominant powers with our compassion for those who are vulnerable and needy.

READ:

1 Samuel 1:1-18

Hebrews 9:1-14

Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."
1 Samuel 1:17

PRAYER:

O God, give us the loving strength to continue helping and protecting the vulnerable ones among us. Amen.

Tuesday, December 22 *Ashley Bird*

READ:

Zephaniah
3:8-13

Romans
10:5-13

. . . those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.
Zephaniah 3:13
[RSV]

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'"
Romans 10:12-13
[RSV]

PRAYER:

Mother/Father of all creation, guide us as we call on your name.
Amen.

God's Wrath and Salvation

Beginning with Zephaniah 1:2, God declares, "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth . . . I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea."

God has every reason to be angry with us. The next two and a half chapters enumerate God's disappointments and declare that ". . . the day of the Lord is at hand (1:7). . . the day of the wrath of the Lord. . . [when] all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth" (1:18).

God then pivots from "in the fire of my jealous wrath all the earth shall be consumed" (3:8) to ". . . I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord" (3:9). There will be a remnant, ". . . humble and lowly . . . They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord . . . They shall do no wrong and utter no lies . . . they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid" (3:12-13). Certainly consistent with our being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)!

In Romans Paul writes, "For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved . . . the same Lord is Lord of all . . . For, 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved'" (10:10-13).

Does one have to call upon the name of the Lord as a Christian, or as a Jew? Does one even have to have a religion (Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, Confucian, Shinto, Yoruba, folk, native, etc.) to call on the name of the Lord?

Julianne Johnson *Wednesday, December 23*

Let Go

As Advent draws to a close and we make ready for the birth of our Savior, I'll bet you are busy—maybe even frazzled. Gifts to wrap, tree to decorate, food to prepare, the spirit of Christmas is joy! You are probably not keenly aware of the burdens you have carried—are carrying. It seems that our souls' burdens wait for quiet times, and times when we are alone. But take a breath—take a break from the busyness the season brings and hear this good news: you've carried those burdens long enough. And if this season finds you alone or sad, know that your God is present with you—and will uphold you with love.



READ:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Romans 13:11-14

The accumulated sorrow of your exile will dissipate. I, your God, will get rid of them for you. You've carried those burdens long enough . . . I'll heal the maimed; I'll bring home the homeless. In the very countries where they were hated they will be venerated. On Judgment Day I'll bring you back home—a great family gathering!
Zephaniah 3:18-20 [MSG]

PRAYER:

Thank you, Lord, for knowing that we carry sorrows. If we can let them go—turn them over to you—we know you can get rid of them. Thanks be to God!
Amen.

Thursday, December 24 *Judith Bird*

READ:

Isaiah
9:2-7

Luke
2:1-14

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"
Luke 2:14
[RSV]

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, may the memory of hearing the Christmas story as a child return every season for us all and remind us that Jesus came to earth for our sakes.
Amen.

In Those Days . . . in These Days

Oh, how this Luke passage evokes memories of the Christmas pageants of my childhood—times when I stood on stage in a white robe with a tinsel crown and these words were read to the audience. Words that had—and still have—a lyrical ring and that well up from deep in my soul to confirm my belief that Jesus came to this earth. No other words will do on this day than those from the Revised Standard Version of Luke 2:1-14:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

Pastor Kayla *Friday, December 25*

Merry Christmas!

I'm writing this devotion as I sit next to a kid who is home sick from school. Between the coughing and temperature checks, these days remind me how fragile life really is, even for invincible four-year-olds who "never need sleep nor need to eat vegetables." We all reach our limits whether we'd like to admit it or not. It strikes me that you are reading this while you, too, might have *nearly* hit your limit. It's a season of joy, to be sure, but it's also a season of too-much-is-going-on, and you may be happy to have made it to Christmas morning amid the growing list of commitments you've been carrying. *Phew.* It's here. Christmas Day. You've made it once more!

This day came, though, whether you were ready for it or not. That's part of the Good News of Christmas. The Word came to dwell not when we had all our ducks in a row, but when things were rather untidy and fragile. I've always loved how *The Message* translates the prologue to the Gospel of John because it helps us see that this story is ours, too: "The Word . . . *moved into the neighborhood*." It is good news that Christ broke forth in the lowest of places in the most vulnerable circumstances in the ancient world, and Christ broke forth for us in the year 2026 CE, too. In truth, Christ is in the neighborhood!

This is evident to me through all that happens at 1555 S. James Road, but the Word also dwells with each of us in the moments we'd rather no one know, the messes we keep hidden in our homes, the worries that keep us up at night, and the places where we reach our limits. Its staying power speaks to its beginnings: breaking forth in a shambled and fragile world into nearly impossible circumstances. This day, *this beginning*, comes as a pure gift for us—no matter how we greet Christmas morning. Christ is here. The inbreaking of God against all odds and limitations with the gift of limitless love and grace. Amen and amen! Merry Christmas!

READ:

Isaiah 52:7-10

John 1:1-14

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood . . .

John 1:14a [MSG]

PRAYER:

Light of life, you came in flesh, born into human pain and joy, and gave us power to be your children. Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us, so that all of creation might sing new songs of gladness and walk in the way of peace. Amen.



Christmas Eve Worship

7:00 pm

Thursday, December 24

Christmas Day Worship

10:00 am

Friday, December 25

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worship services, meetings, classes, and Bible study.