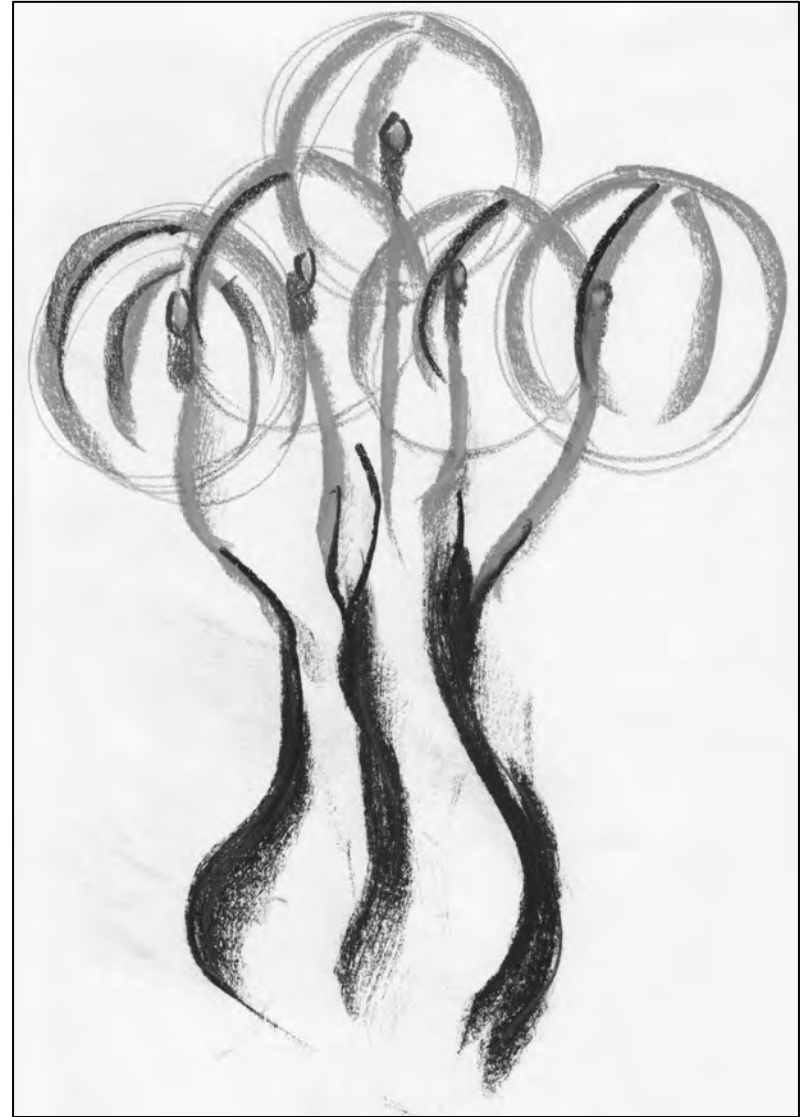


Advent Reflections

2009



Daily readings for the season of Advent, written by members of Hope Church in Holland, Michigan

Art by Kari Miller Fenwood, "Studies of Advent Sculpture 2008 for Hope Church, Holland, MI"

Sunday, November 29: First Sunday of Advent

In Those Days

Jeremiah 33:14-16

“In those days...” When we hear that phrase, we tend to expect a story from days gone by. “In those days, they had hitching posts along the streets to secure the horse-drawn buggies.” “In those days, white sheets hung on backyard clothes lines every Monday morning.” The phrase calls up a vision of something that once was but no longer is.

Jeremiah employs these words to lead us to a vision of something that isn't yet but that is coming. “The days are surely coming...In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.” “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” It's as though the not-yet and the already-have-been are meeting. And Jeremiah says that those days will be called “The Lord is our righteousness.”

May your time of Advent be “those days” in which the traditions of the season lead you into the surprise of a new day. May you receive the gift of a new inspiration—in those days. In those days, may the dawn of redemption and the hope of justice fill you with the joy of the season. It's the season when the already-have-been and the not-yet are joined in witness to the wonder of our God.

Watch and see as each day of Advent (all of “those days”) witnesses that the Lord is your righteousness.

Prayer: Those days are upon us, O Lord, when holiday traditions are unboxed and customs are placed on calendars. May we see you come in new ways into our established Advent patterns. We are in those days when it seems there are more tasks than time. We pray that each of these days of Advent may be named “The Lord is our righteousness.” Amen.

—Larry Schuyler

Thursday, December 24: Christmas Eve
The Light Is Coming
Isaiah 9:2-7

Advent is a time of preparation—a tree with lights and ornaments, the family newsletter and greeting cards, presents, and cookies. But what about us? How do we prepare our hearts to celebrate the miracle of Emmanuel—God with us? We focus on the baby in the manger, but what does that baby mean to us? Isaiah gives us God’s promise of “a great light,” one who will shoulder the burdens of leadership. The well-known and the unfamiliar come together to offer a single promise of hope. Strains of Handel’s *Messiah* mingle with Isaiah’s images of victorious war. It’s easy to pick out the familiar verses of light and a promised child and leave out the lines about burdens and warriors’ boots, but these five verses form a whole, a promise made and fulfilled.

The times in which Isaiah and Jesus lived seem distant. Life has changed—or has it? Today, people struggle with financial burdens, and social injustice seems to prevail. Consider Isaiah’s promise for our lives today. *We* are the people living in darkness. God’s Light has come in the person of Jesus the Messiah, Emmanuel—God with us. Our burdens will be broken and the government will establish justice. Sounds great, but how? Through “the zeal of the Lord,” by us living as Jesus lived and loving as Jesus loved.

This promise was made almost 3,000 years ago and was fulfilled 2,000 years ago, yet it is still being made to us today. The Light came to show the world God’s way. The Light is coming again tonight, for you and for me, to illuminate the way we should live. So trim the tree, bake cookies, and send cards if you must, but be sure to let the Light come into your heart to transform your life and your world.

Prayer: Dear God, let your light shine in my heart tonight, that I may know the fulfillment of your promise. May I be a part of your government of peace. May burdens be lifted. May everyone see your promised fulfilled. Amen.

—Kristy Bradfield

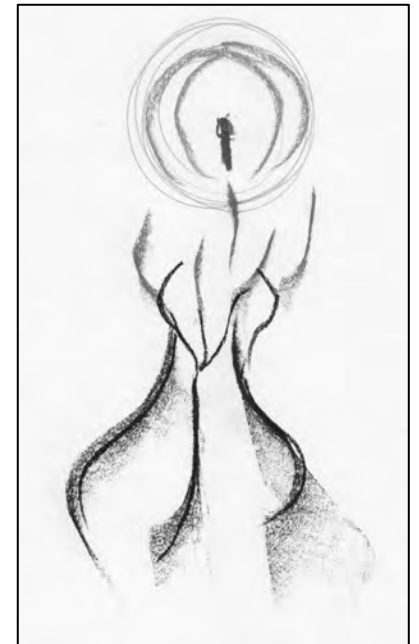
Monday, November 30
Change
Malachi 3:1-4

Change is hard. It is easy to find comfort in our own routines. Moving from place to place, from relationship to relationship, we often find it painful to let go of what we are accustomed to in order to embrace a new beginning. We can be stubborn, holding on to what is comfortable to us and refusing to let go.

As Christians, we see Advent as a time of great anticipation and excitement for the coming of our Lord. Many aspects of Advent are just that. However, this passage shows us that Advent includes change—our change. Verses 2 and 3 say that the messenger of God is like fire and soap that will purify and cleanse us. This change will not be an easy ride to heaven. It will be hard—even painful—but we need to embrace this change of heart and mind and learn to trust that God knows exactly what is best for us. We need to let go of our stubborn hold on who we are and let God purify and refine us through Jesus Christ. During this Advent season, we wait in anticipation for a great change that is unlike any other, a change that will be “pleasing to the Lord” (verse 4).

Prayer: God, you call us to change in this season of Advent. Help us to prepare our hearts and minds to be open to your call so that we will be pleasing to you. Amen.

—Rachel Chase



Tuesday, December 1

Promises

Luke 1:68-75

One child in the family gets a new toy. The siblings ask if they can play with this toy, and a promise is made. On a regular basis, the siblings remind that child of the promise he or she made.

We make promises all the time: promises to give money to the church for operations and to keep programs funded, promises to children during baptism to love and raise them in the ways of the church, promises to love and care for each other in marriage, promises to repay money we've borrowed.

Zechariah's prophecy in today's text reminds us of God's promises to "perform the mercy promised to our fathers" (KJV) and "rescue us from the hand of our enemies" (NIV). Those promises were made through Abraham, David, and the prophets so the nation of Israel would live according to God's word. During Advent we wait and watch for God's promise to be fulfilled through the birth of God's son. We serve God "without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

Prayer: Gracious and holy God, we wait and watch for the coming of the one who fulfills the promise you made long ago. Give us the belief of Zechariah to see the coming of Jesus the Redeemer. Help us as we wait and watch throughout this Advent season. Amen.

—David Van Heest

Wednesday, December 23

Child of God

Colossians 3:12-17

Say these words out loud: "I am a child of God, chosen, holy, and beloved." (If you are doing this devotional with your family, have each person repeat the words.)

Advent is a time of preparation, a time to clean up our act. That is what this text is about, too. The text uses the image of stripping off our old, dirty clothing and putting on new, clean, and beautiful garments. Who isn't guilty at some time of anger, hatred, telling lies, or using abusive language? Wouldn't it be great if becoming compassionate, humble, kind, and patient was as easy as putting on a clean shirt?

Well, it is, because those ugly things we do are not who we are. The good news of this text and of Advent is that we can cast aside the negatives because they do not define who we are. When we remind ourselves that we are children of God, chosen, holy, and beloved, it widens the God-space in our hearts. It helps us prepare a place where the peace of God can rule in our hearts. As we love one another, forgive each other, and act in the name of the Lord Jesus, love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience become the garments we choose. They are beautiful, free, custom-made, and new every day. You don't even have to do the laundry! What could be easier?

Repeat these words daily—and as often as needed: "I am a child of God, chosen, holy, and beloved."

Let love rule in your heart and be visible in your words and deeds. And be thankful.

Prayer: Thank you, thank you, thank you, loving God!

—Loretta Smith

Tuesday, December 22

Praise

Psalm 148

During this season of Advent, when our thoughts are centered on the coming of the Christ child, it is important to take a moment to step back and ponder the wonders of the Christmas story. When reading this psalm, the story of the shepherds comes to mind, when the angels are praising God and proclaiming peace through our Savior, Christ the Lord. I imagine the shepherds out on a cold evening watching their sheep while the sun sets, the moon rises, and the stars become brilliant in the night sky. The psalmist sees the same natural beauty and is also compelled to praise the Lord.

Even though the shepherds are afraid of the angels, they listen to the story and follow the signs to find the baby Jesus. They are overwhelmed with joy and return praising the Lord. Let us search for and find joy and peace in our Savior, Jesus Christ, and continue praising the name of the Lord just like the psalmist and the shepherds.

Praise the name of the Lord!

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for the gift of your Son and the gift of your Word. Help us to lift our hearts in praise to you, not only during Advent, but also throughout the year. In Jesus' name, Amen.

—Joyce Teusink

Wednesday, December 2

The Impossible Becoming Possible

Luke 1:76-79

This passage is a little easier to understand if it is read in the context of the 75 verses that precede it. It is the wonderful and sometimes amusing story of Zechariah's response to the angel Gabriel's message that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a child. Zechariah is old, has seen a lot in the world, and has prayed with his wife for a child for many years. He simply does not believe it will ever happen.

Because of his disbelief, Zechariah is struck mute for the next nine months. He is finally allowed to speak at his son's circumcision ceremony at the temple. Gabriel had told Zechariah that his son's name was to be John, an unusual choice since the child had no relatives with that name. When Elizabeth tells the priest that her son's name is John, the priest questions this and looks to Zechariah. Zechariah writes out "His name is John," and is immediately able to speak.

And speak he does! Not only does he speak, he sings! With his very first words he sings God's praises. Today's passage is near the end of what has become known as "Zechariah's Song." In it, Zechariah tells the child, his son John, that he will be a prophet who will tell of the coming of the Lord. He will tell of salvation and forgiveness, of tender mercy, and of light. And he will tell of the one who will show us peace. And this will be for all people, including those who sit in darkness and those who are in the shadow of death. Israel had not had a prophet in 400 years, and with the birth of John, God's silence, like Zechariah's, is broken.

John, of course, grew up to be known as John the Baptist.

Advent is about the impossible becoming possible. It's about the possibility of light seeping into the darkest crevices. It's about the possibility of peace in a world that's discouraging because of the continual outcry of war. It's about justice having a chance to thrive in spite of the unfair world we see before us. Advent is a time for us to trust God. We celebrate the coming of Christ every year, and we remember that God has always been faithful to us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive our unbelief. Help us remember your promises and your faithfulness to us, so that in our times of trial, we, like Zechariah, can open our mouths to first sing your praises. Amen.

—Kyle Vohlken

Thursday, December 3
The Gift of Fellow Believers
Philippians 1:3-7

These words from the first verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians were written while Paul was in prison in Rome. Arrested for preaching the gospel, taken far away by ship to the capital city of the empire to stand trial, and sitting in a prison cell, Paul remembers fondly and longs for his Christian sisters and brothers in Philippi. He knows they also are thinking of him.

During World War II, another time of oppression for those seeking to be faithful to the gospel, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer...It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us..." (*Life Together*, p. 19-20). From the time of Paul through the following centuries, many Christians have experienced the truth of these words; we must never take for granted the presence of others around us who share and strengthen our faith.

During this Advent season, in addition to all the usual things which bring us joy and hope—celebrating Jesus' birth at special worship services, family gatherings, giving and receiving gifts—use these weeks to see the members of your own Christian community in a new way. Say a prayer, write a note, or speak a word of thanks to others in your church who have supported you and enriched your faith. Look around at your own community of faith in expectation that in Christ your relationships will increasingly demonstrate love and mutual concern. Look toward your fellow believers with the same joyful confidence Paul voiced long ago: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

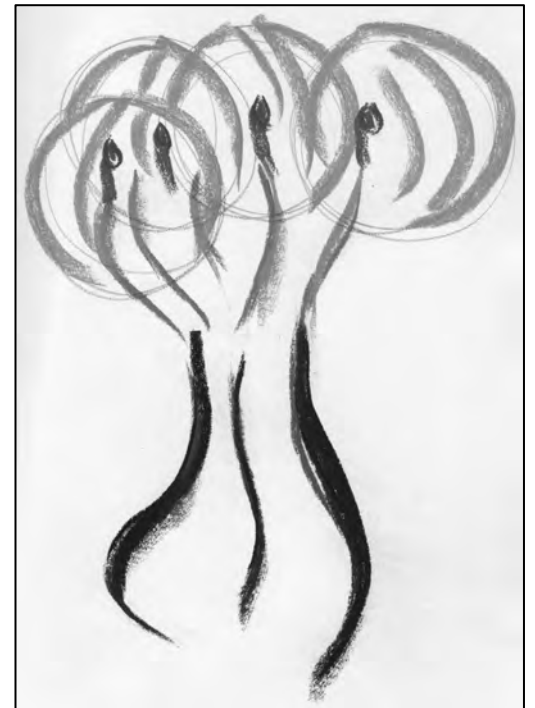
Prayer: Faithful God, thank you for the gift of other believers near us who enrich our faith. Be with our Christian sisters and brothers who must live this day isolated from the encouragement of others; with them, may we find our faith brought to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Paul Smith

Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Write a note to someone simply asking them how they are. Try to make it through a whole day without complaining, and when you slip up, share a wonderful "oops!" moment with God. And when you're tempted to forget about patience and ask for something in return for all your giving and giving and giving, just remember Samuel's mom and the robe.

Prayer: God, thank you for the times when we feel you working in our lives. Wrap your arms around us when we can't quite find you. Give us patience, comfort, and peace. Push us to live in generosity and love. Thank you for loving us first. Amen.

—Bethany Wiersma



Monday, December 21

Waiting Patiently

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

I am a busy teenage girl living in a technological world, so naturally I started my thought process for this devotional by searching Google for “What Is Advent?” One of the most repetitive themes I found was “waiting.” Well, one thing I know in all of my 15-year-old wisdom is that waiting takes patience. Profound, right? However, it’s not as easy as it sounds. I in particular will confess to being an extremely impatient person. My parents have told me that I am part of the “now” generation—while I don’t have the patience to wait the 0.18 seconds it would take for Google to look that up, apparently they mean patience is not one of my strengths. And in this passage, Samuel’s mother sure beats me in patience—she waits an entire year to see her little son. I texted my sister five minutes after dropping her off at college! A whole YEAR? Not gonna happen.

The next thing that struck me is the robe Samuel’s mother makes him each year. This little robe represents to me the faithful giving of a mother who has given up a LOT—her son. She waits a whole year to give him her little gift of love, and then goes back home to wait for another year. Her reward? A blessing once a year. That’s all. In this “season of giving,” it’s easy to give—it’s expected! All we ask for in return is, well, a pile of gifts for ourselves. Samuel’s mom has such a humble spirit—if I were her I’d be showing off this year’s ephod, but no. She humbly gives her son what she has to offer, accepts her blessing, and is on her way.

I often try to think about living this way, but do I ever follow through? Not so much—I want my recognition; I want something in return. I tell God, “I give so much! Don’t I deserve something in return?” With true giving, deep down we know there is no immediate reward, just like the blessing for Samuel’s mom does not suddenly put her life in a perfect place. And sometimes, let’s face it, giving really stinks. You feel like you have given all you can and you are fed up with giving for a God who doesn’t seem to care. Nothing is coming back. But wait. Wait. God is there, somewhere in your giving and in that ache in your heart. God gives us peace, God gives us love, and God gives us joy.

So, give—give without thought of consequences. Give yourself willingly. Give yourself with joy. Buy your friend a cookie without being asked. Pay for the person behind you in the drive-through line.

Friday, December 4

A Christmas Letter?

Philippians 1:8-11

These words certainly sound like a Christmas letter. There are people we miss and can’t be with, so we send them our news and love in letter form.

Paul sends a love letter to the Philippians, whom he longs to be with. This letter contains the gift of a prayer that they will be swelled with love—a love that will bring deep knowledge, rich perspective, and fuller discernment of what is best in life. Is there anything we need more?

At Christmastime especially, there is much to make us anxious, cranky, distracted, impatient, harried, phony, and spiritually shallow. So how do we keep a heart of love flowing?

Many of us have learned that unless we long, pray, and deeply desire to be loving people, blockages develop and our loving intentions can be diluted and polluted. Amongst all the hectic activity of Christmastime, is it possible for us to purposefully pause, quietly question, and silently seek to be in touch with the source of love?

Prayer: Spirit of God, may our hearts always be open to and welcome your kind of love, so that your love may be at the center of all we become, do, and give.

—Earl Laman

Saturday, December 5
Grounded in History

Luke 3:1-6

The grandeur and mystery of the Advent and Christmas seasons can all too easily turn the story of the birth of Christ into a tale beyond belief: a wandering couple, desperate for a place to stay; wisemen following a bright, shining star; a choir of angels singing in all their glory to a group of shepherds; a savior born in a stable surrounded by animals.

But Luke reminds us in this passage that the work of God and the story of Jesus, beginning even before his birth, is grounded in real history. We have the infamous Tiberius and Herod—unpopular leaders, but far-reaching enough to leave significant evidence of their existence. Lesser leaders Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas all make Luke's list before he reaches his true target: the voice of God coming through his prophet, John the Baptist.

John the Baptist calls, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Christ is fully real, deeply embedded in our history; indeed, in God's story for us! And this is the good news of the season, that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. May your story this season be wrapped up into the history of God.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for coming to transform our story this season. May we have eyes to see your salvation that surrounds us through your son, Jesus. Enable us to prepare the way for others to see you as well. Amen.

—Phil Tanis and Gretchen Schoon Tanis

your call. Open our eyes to the downtrodden. Fill us with compassion for the plight of the alien, the refugee, and the immigrant. Lead us into ministries that help orphans and widows. Give us courage to block the paths of the ungodly who exploit the poor. So may your justice roll down like waters, your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Lead my footsteps to stand with the poor, to protect the common good, that I may stand with Jesus and glorify him until he comes again. Amen.
(Adapted from a prayer by Paul Janssen based on the Belhar Confession).

—Marlin Vander Wilt

Sunday, December 20: Fourth Sunday of Advent
Revolutionary Words

Luke 1:46-55

Luke put into the mouth and heart of this young girl, Mary of Nazareth, a powerful song of liberation and a call to justice. In fact, these words are so revolutionary that William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India not to read the Magnificat in public. This song could inflame the fears of the establishment that this son of a peasant girl was going to turn the order of things upside down. The powerful could lose their places in the political order and the underclass and powerless might be led to revolt. We tend to spiritualize these words, but in Mary's day, both the political and the religious powerbrokers were threatened by her son, and eventually they allowed their fears to conspire to put Jesus to death.

We are a long time removed from that event, and we look back in condemnation of those who crucified him to save their own power. Yet, in truth, we have done little to promote justice in the world of the twenty-first century or even in our own country. Too many Christians do not see justice as a major aspect of what God seeks to do in the work of Jesus. N.T. Wright begins his book *Simply Christian* with a chapter entitled "Putting the World to Right." He writes, "I began this book by talking about justice. It is important to see, and to say, that those who follow Jesus are committed, as he taught us to pray, to God's will being done 'on earth as it is in heaven.' And that means that God's passion for justice must become ours, too. When Christians use their belief in Jesus as a way of escaping from that demand and challenge, they are abandoning a central element in their own faith."

Many of today's policy debates are centered on the protection of our individual rights rather than the protection of the rights of the poor, the weak, the ill, and the hungry. In this season of Advent, I must enter into the call of the Magnificat, remembering that justice remains one of the greatest of human goals and dreams. I need to hear the voice of Mary calling me to the song of God's magnificence made visible in her son's righteousness, mercy, and grace. This Advent, I am once again called by God to live like Jesus, even at the risk of my personal interests and the protection of my life.

Prayer: Lord our God, you have revealed yourself as One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people. You have called us to follow you. Be present with your church, Lord, as we respond to

Sunday, December 6: Second Sunday of Advent
Actively Waiting

Philippians 1:3-11

It is said that the church at Philippi was the apostle Paul's favorite church, but not because he had great success on his first visit there. He went to Philippi in response to a vision from God—a man saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"

Everything started just fine. Silas was with Paul and Timothy for the first time. Lydia, a much-respected businesswoman who traded in fine purple cloth, the cloth of royalty, and who was deeply committed to God, became an early convert to Christ. She hosted Paul and his mission team while he was in the city. But very soon Paul was brought before the magistrates for disturbing the peace and thrown into prison. That night there was a sudden earthquake and the prisoners' chains were broken. Had the prisoners escaped, the jailer would have paid with his life, but Paul and Silas remained in the prison and the jailer then became a convert to Christ. The city judges also were impressed; they apologized to Paul and asked them to leave the city to avoid further problems. The visit to Philippi was exciting, dangerous, and brief, yet successful. Still, Paul held this church in the center of his heart.

When we read today's passage from Philippians we have to be impressed by how much Paul loved these people. He remembers them with joy and constantly prays for them. He reminds them of the good work that God is doing in their lives, and how that good work will be completed in the day of Christ, when they appear before the Lord. Paul prays that the Philippians will continue to grow in Christ, growing in knowledge, insight, and their love for Christ and for one another. He prays that they may produce a harvest of righteousness through Christ.

Advent is a time of waiting. People wait for the day of Christmas for many different reasons, but Paul tells us in today's Scripture what it means to wait. It is not a passive waiting; it is very active. The Christian's waiting is that of working for the promotion of all that Christ wills for this world. It is a waiting that reaches out to serve all in need. It is taking the time to work at those disciplines that will help us to grow as believers. And it is doing all of this in love and prayer. I pray that I may await the coming of the Messiah just as Paul does in today's Scripture.

Prayer: As we await the celebration of your coming, O Lord, help us to grow in the faith, to reach out to one another, and to be your people, helping to bring your reign to the world. Amen.

—Gerard Van Heest

Monday, December 7
Rejoicing without Fear
Zephaniah 3:14-16

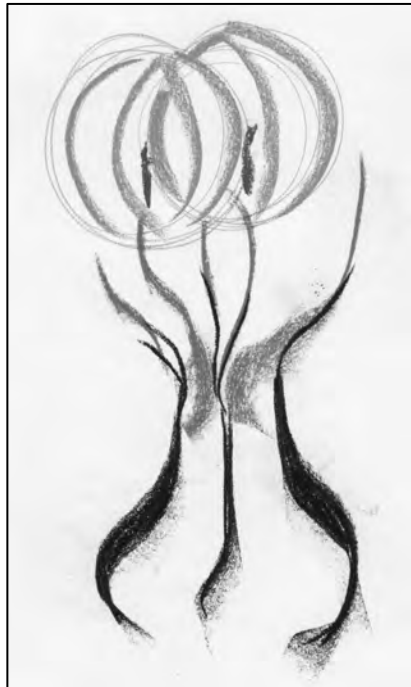
It is difficult for me to read this passage quietly in my head. There is something about it that touches the core of who I am. It impregnates me with joy, and I must read it out loud!

The prophet's call in this passage reminds me of a concert I went to this past September. I had the chance of a lifetime to see my favorite band perform at Soldier Field in Chicago. I stood there in a sea of 70,000 people, singing out loud with everything that was in our hearts. There was no fear of what people were thinking as we sang and swayed with the sounds swirling in the stadium. This is what we were all doing!

Just like I did in this concert experience, we as Christians are to sing with all our hearts and without fear, rejoicing in what God has done. We stand in a sea of millions of people around the world who are singing the story of God without fear! May our hands not grow weak in doing good and may our hearts never stop singing the song of what God has done and is doing.

Prayer: Holy One, let my hands not grow weak in doing good. Be gracious with me as I grow in exalting you with my whole heart. Let me not forget the worldwide chorus that I am a part of as together we rejoice in what you have done. Amen.

—Jes Kast-Keat



Saturday, December 19
With God, Everything Is Possible
Luke 1:39-45

Amidst the beauty and the blessedness of this holy Advent season, while we wait for the full celebration of the Nativity, our hope is kept alive by stories of God's eternal love. One is the joy-filled reunion of Mary and Elizabeth.

Both women received God's approval and a commission to take part in the eternal plan of salvation for a creation that God loves in spite of its sin. Both Mary and Elizabeth experienced a visit from the angel Gabriel, who brought them their good news. Both responded with agreement and hearts full of love and praise for their Creator. Then they had to wait. But what joy-filled waiting! God made their tension more tolerable by placing them together so they could reflect each other's faith and happiness and jointly witness the miracles of God's heart unfold.

We, too, have our time of waiting during Advent. This is the time when we experience all over again the joy of the coming of Emmanuel—God with us. So we fill our waiting with praise and adoration, supporting one another in the happy assurance that Christ has come and has paid the penalty for our sin; Christ has risen and will come again. Eternal love came down to dwell in our hearts forever.

While we wait together, let us take Mary as our example. John Calvin said, "God paid her the highest honor," and Martin Luther acknowledged, "We can never honor her enough." We thank God for this modest maiden who was Jesus' earthly guardian. We can also recall Elizabeth, who, at first wary of believing in her great miracle, trusted God implicitly to deliver on his promises. They had not seen, but they had believed. Through God's grace, we have seen and we believe.

Prayer: Holy Lord Jesus, help us feel your love to the depth of our beings as we experience these miracles of your heart unfolding again this Advent season.

—Mary Jo Waters

Prayer: We know, O God, that our only necessary sacrifice now is to present ourselves faithfully and fully to you. In this Advent season, we look and hope for a deeper experience and participation in your love and forgiveness as it has been shown in Christ's final and effective sacrifice. Help us by your Holy Spirit to draw closer to you through Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

—Francis Fike

Tuesday, December 8
Love in Our Midst
Zephaniah 3:17-20

These evocative images from Zephaniah cause me to think of some words from a mystic love poet of our day, John O'Donohue (in an interview published in *The Sun* in April 2007):
"Creativity is listening in on the places where the opposites are dancing with each other."

Here in this hopeful vision arising from the very midst of Zephaniah's prophecy of grief, feel how these words stir paradoxical possibilities. A fierce warrior becomes an ardent troubadour. An avenging advocate murmurs mothering words like "home" and "gather" with a particular tenderness toward the disabled and marginalized.

Look where this creative energy arises! "In your midst." Could there be a more compelling image of pregnancy in this promise of the redemptive word of the Lord our God? Love is transformed into life—straining and dancing in our midst. Suppose we nurture that hope within our own humble earthly selves in these days of Advent waiting, and bring forth our creativity to a world that awaits the new life we bear. We are called by love to participation in the incarnation by the power of the same Spirit that filled Mary. Will you creatively and courageously speak your own "yes" in response?

Prayer: God of creation, Creative Love present in our midst, come to fullness in us so that we bear your nature of "Yes," of new possibilities to a world awaiting your redemptive grace. Thank you for indwelling and guiding us with your Holy Spirit, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Rachelle Oppenhuizen

Wednesday, December 9
Celebrating the Little Things
Isaiah 12:2-6

The season of Advent brings about different thoughts and emotions for different people. In today's challenging economic times, it may be difficult to embrace the joy found in this holy season, even as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In these most challenging of times—whether the challenge is financial or other—this passage from Isaiah gives us reason to hope, to let go of our worries for a while, and to find joy, even in the depth of uncertainty and pain. There is good news and there are reasons to celebrate! Look in everyday or unexpected places—a hug from a child, early morning birdsong in late fall, the first snowflake resting on an evergreen, a smile from a stranger, a win for your team, a hot cup of tea, a can't-put-it-down novel, a change in season...there are so many things, large and small, to celebrate.

Let this Advent time be a space where you can reflect and find reasons to "shout aloud and sing for joy." Soon we will celebrate the birth of the One who makes all things possible—and this is the ultimate source of hope and joy for us all!

Prayer: Dear God who knows our innermost struggles and pain, please guide us to find joy, peace, and hope during this Advent season and beyond. Lead us to a place where we can celebrate the little things that we might ordinarily take for granted. May they be a source of joy, allowing us to release our worries, giving them up to you. May we feel a deepening sense of peace in our hearts as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of your Son, and everything that Jesus' birth means for our lives. Amen.

—Kimberly McGraw

Friday, December 18
A New Sacrifice
Hebrews 10:8-10

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews sets aside the sacrificial rituals of the Old Testament covenant and points us to the superior effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice. Elsewhere in this book he argues that if the old system of guilt removal by animal sacrifice, even on the Day of Atonement, were effective, it would not have had to be repeated as it regularly was, even in Jesus' time. Alluding to Jesus' own affirmation of the limitation of burnt offerings and sacrifices in Mark 12:33-34, the writer shows that the saving work of Jesus the Christ, the long-expected Messiah, has done what the old sacrificial system could not do: it offers us a permanent cleansing of our guilt and a lasting reconciliation with the God whose identity is not wrath and punishment but forgiveness and love.

To emphasize the momentous nature of this change in the means of our salvation, the writer uses the word "abolish" as a final dismissal of the old sacrificial way. The old system was a mere foreshadowing of what was to come. Now it has come—Christ, the Son of God, has made the supreme sacrifice, covering our sin and guilt with forgiveness and love: we may now be assured that "we have been sanctified" by that sacrifice. No longer will the faithful have to be anxious about their guilt from sin. Christ's offering of himself on the cross, "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood," has secured "eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

Here in our twenty-first century Advent, as we prepare for the coming of Jesus as a child into the world, we know the events that followed. Our knowledge of who this child is and what he will become and do enhances our joy at his birth. But like the "Hebrews" to whom our writer addressed his text, we also look forward to our own fuller experience of Christ's redemptive act. These days we find ourselves surrounded, not by the animal sacrifices of old, but by many tempting self-help systems and promises of a better life, most of which ultimately provide us with no more than animal sacrifice could achieve. This passage confronts us with an alternative—the powerful saving act of God in Christ to which we are invited to respond with faith, assurance, and joy, looking to a fuller participation in the forgiveness and reconciliation it offers. The only sacrifice we need to make is the offering of ourselves to God, affirming and participating in the new being that Christ has made possible for us.

Thursday, December 17
In Human Form
Hebrews 10:5-7

The Bible quotes the Psalms a lot. Jesus quotes the Psalms, Paul quotes the Psalms, the Psalms quote other Psalms, and the writer of the book of Hebrews quotes the Psalms. This text from Hebrews 10 is a near-direct quote from Psalm 40:6-8. But there is an added piece that does not appear in the psalm. The added words are “but a body you have prepared for me.” This line is inserted by the writer of Hebrews to flag its meaning. The writer takes this ancient song of the people of God, a song that everyone in the Jewish tradition would have learned by heart as children, and makes it a confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

The fragment from Psalm 40, along with the extra line “but a body you have prepared for me,” is a clear reference to the incarnation of Christ. The text is making the confession that God has sent Christ, with a body, to do the will of God. An odd plan it is, according to all those people, both ancient and modern, who want to make faith something “spiritual.” A body is so, well, unspiritual. But Hebrews 10 makes it clear that it is in the life of the earthly, embodied Jesus Christ that God’s plan is fulfilled. This quote from the Psalms, with its added line of explanation, is a small Advent treasure, an affirmation of God’s plan fulfilled in the one for whom we wait during this season.

Prayer: Lord of all our seasons and times, we praise you because you came in human form like us. We look forward to when you will come again to make all things new. Amen.

—Leanne Van Dyk

Thursday, December 10
Waiting in the Face of Uncertainty
Philippians 4:4-7

Advent is a season of waiting expectantly for the good news of Christ’s coming. But this year it seems more like waiting for the other shoe to drop. The headlines can easily eclipse our hope: escalating war and violence, rising unemployment, increasing poverty, mounting pollution, and growing divisions among us. As we work and pray for peace and justice in the world, we wonder how much longer we can wait.

Into these times of change and uncertainty come the words of an apostle who knew a thing or two about unforeseeable futures: “Do not worry about anything,” Paul writes. “Rejoice.” Then, in case we missed it the first time, “again I will say, Rejoice.” The joy he speaks about is not mere cheerfulness or a false sense of optimism in the face of troubling times. It is something deeper and more lasting.

“The Lord is near,” Paul writes to remind us in this Advent season that God is still creating life out of chaos and death. In Jesus, the reign of God was inaugurated. We live and work within that reign even as we look forward to the day of its completion. Though the results may not be evident to us, we have faith that God is at work in the world, moving us and all creation toward a future full of hope. We are not alone. In that we can rejoice.

Prayer: Creator God, we give thanks and praise for the gift of your presence that comes to us in Christ Jesus. Grant us faith and courage that we might do our part to bring about the reign of God here on earth even as we await the day of its completion. Amen.

—Beverly Zell

Friday, December 11
Called to Selflessness

Luke 3:7-14

John the Baptist is “preparing the way” for Jesus’ mission on earth. Along with sharing the good news about salvation, he also challenges people’s perceptions about who they are, how they fit into society, and what rules they should follow.

John breaks down barriers among people, telling them that the importance of their ancestors’ place in society doesn’t matter to God. The way we live out our faith is what matters: we are called to be selfless and fair, we are not to seek advantages for ourselves, and we are to be satisfied with enough.

Advent is, by tradition, a time of generosity and giving. Reading this passage at this time suggests that it’s also a time to recommit ourselves as Christians. In this time of beginnings, we can be challenged, along with John the Baptist’s audience, in our thinking about how God wants us to live compassionately in our world.

Prayer: Lord, help us to bear good fruit. Give us courage to see ourselves as you see us, to live with justice, and to recognize “enough.” Sustain us as we work to live out your compassion in our communities.

—Lois Maassen

Wednesday, December 16
God’s Supreme Power

Luke 1:51-55

Daily we are witness to God’s presence as Creator—sunrises and sunsets, a newborn’s cry, the immensity of the universe, the beauty and complexity of the earth, the creative colors and designs of the seasons, and the miracles of healing. All the blessings and glories we experience and sense every day can easily move from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from the unexpected to the expected. In the daily rush of living, God, our Creator, the source of our every breath and our being, is given no more than a nod.

God moves with supreme power across the human landscape. Our God has the power to transform, to exalt and to humble, to bring down to the grave and to make alive. Upon the image of a hand with a child curled into the palm are the words “I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:15-16). “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Let our hearts rejoice and magnify the Lord our God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we are in reverent awe that you are the supreme source of our being and our breathing. Our hearts are full of deep gratitude that you do not forget us and that you are with us through Emmanuel, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

—Carole Hintz

Tuesday, December 15
Loving Shelter
Luke 1:46-50

After Mary said her famous “yes” to the angel, she headed for her cousin Elizabeth’s house. While she was there, according to Luke’s gospel, she burst forth with this song of praise, which has resonated for two thousand years, inspiring painters, poets, and musicians with its beauty and power. It’s a song that tells of a world upended by divine decree, with Mary’s unborn child at the center of it all. And then Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

I wonder if it is an accident that Mary’s song is tucked into this story of a visit between kinswomen, a long stay in a place of loving shelter. I wonder if Mary’s faith in the strange ways of God needed a place of safety and counsel in which to grow strong enough to sustain her life and the life of her child. I wonder how many seemingly insignificant households have given birth to astonishing visions of what God is really up to, despite the way things may appear.

Prayer: God, help us create for each other places of loving shelter and wisdom, that we might recognize the miracles now growing among us.

—Laurie Baron

Saturday, December 12
Good News?
Luke 3:15-18

My first reaction to this passage was to wonder what part of John’s message was “good news.” This picture of Christ coming in power, baptizing with fire, using his winnowing fork to clear out his threshing floor, and sending the chaff to unquenchable fire did not meld with my longing for peace and love to reign in the world.

But maybe we need God to do a clean sweep in order to bring about the peace and the love we long for. How else can we get rid of the useless parts of our lives and gather the valuable parts safely into the granary? It will take the power of God to root out the greed, pride, and misuse of power that inhibits us from living at peace with each other. Are we longing for such a Messiah?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, come to us anew to cleanse our lives of the unnecessary and fill us with the joy of your presence. Amen.

—Judith Boogaart

Sunday, December 13: Third Sunday of Advent
Hope amidst Collapse
Zephaniah 3:14-17

Okay, it's been a while since I read Zephaniah—is that before or after Zechariah? The book of Zephaniah is a power-packed three-and-a-half pages in my Bible, full of words of warning from a young royal prince-turned-prophet. Written 625 years before Jesus, it is full of warning about rebellious Jerusalem, the power of the evil empire Assyria, and the impending captivity of the people of Judah. Things were pretty bad. The whole nation was about to collapse. Zephaniah boldly makes such cheery pronouncements as, “Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God.” I believe the term used elsewhere is “stiff-necked people.” I recognize in this a description of our world in this Advent season of 2009.

Then, in the midst of this gloom and doom comes a rare word: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!...You shall fear disaster no more...The Lord, your God, is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love.”

Our world—with its fears about climate, bickering politics, and “stiff-necked” pundits—sometimes seem to be on the verge of collapse. And truth be told, like the soon-to-be enslaved Hebrew people in Zephaniah's time, our world might suffer great pain due to our own rebellion and short-sighted self-centeredness. So what could be a good word on this third Sunday of Advent?

The Lord will renew you in love! This love from the Lord, in this crying baby turned Redeemer, will outlast our rebellion, our stiff necks, the collapse of nations, and even climates. It is a kingdom coming in Jesus that shall overcome our sin. It will make new. It does give hope. It helps us be partners in the Lord's reign as we seek personal, national, and international repentance. The Lord Jesus came just in the nick of time and reigns even now. The Lord's kingdom shall have no end. And it's almost here in Bethlehem!

Prayer: (Begin with quiet silence.) Lord Jesus, Creator and Sustainer, take away our fear. Give us hope. Bring peace. Turn us back to you. Amen.

—David Blauw

Monday, December 14
Humbly Called to Serve
Micah 5:2-5

I remember thinking it had to be one of the smallest churches I'd ever worshipped in—room for only sixty or seventy people in the pews, tops, and yet with plenty of good seats still available amongst the smattering of people there that Sunday. As I sang the last hymn and looked out the window onto a broad, windswept plain, I found myself wondering about the future of this place. In such a vast setting, in a world of huge issues, how does such a tiny congregation survive, let alone make a difference?

The hymn over, the benediction pronounced, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “You're the visitor from the Reformed Church in America staff,” he said, extending a huge paw of a hand. “Just wanted you to know—this church saved my life. Bunch of others, too. Don't let our size fool you.”

Whenever I find myself thinking that the world is too big, its problems just too enormous, I am reminded by that little church, one of the “little clans” of the RCA, that we are all called by the One who came from little Bethlehem—called to make a difference in our place in this vast world. And I am assured that, through Jesus, we can.

Prayer: Never let us despair, O Lord, of your gospel—humble in beginning, humble in character, yet able to change the world.

—Jeff Japinga

