

2024 Advent Devotional

God

making room
among us

The background features a dark blue, textured sky with several white, four-pointed stars. At the bottom, there is a stylized cityscape with buildings in shades of purple, blue, and green, each with glowing yellow windows. The overall aesthetic is artistic and evocative of a winter night.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the NIV Bible.

Introduction

Have you noticed that in order to make room for one thing, something else needs to be cleared away? In order to make room for a new time commitment such as volunteering or joining a book club, something in the schedule needs to be removed. In order to make room for a beautiful and peaceful nursery, a spare bedroom once filled with unpacked boxes and disorganized clutter must be packed or moved. In order to create a safer and more hospitable walkway between the buildings on First Presbyterian's campus, coveted parking spaces must be taken away.

The same goes for when we submit our lives to Christ. The old self is cleared away; Christ has now made room in our hearts for Him. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being," the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Because of Christ's salvation, our old selves have passed away. *But*, Christ does not leave us empty—He makes us into a *new creation*. Paul also writes: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Throughout Scripture we see examples of the Triune God making room and clearing space—sanctifying, forming, and shaping His people. Through the prophet Isaiah, Yahweh delivered these comforting and promising words to the Israelites in exile, during a time away from their promised land, language, and temple: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland" (Isaiah 43:18-19). Sometimes even *good* things are cleared away, and this can be painful. However, God does not clear away arbitrarily. Rather, the Holy Spirit lovingly and compassionately works and mends to make

room in our hearts for Him. God does this individually, communally, and globally. Instead of allowing us and this world to remain filled with sin, pride, injustice, fear, and loneliness, Christ wants to make room for His peace, love, compassion, justice, courage, humility, and wonder.

If you gathered for communal worship on Sunday mornings at First Presbyterian in September, you may recall a sermon series called “Making Room,” in which we explored what it means to make room for others as we follow Jesus’ command to love our neighbors. As followers of Christ who represent Him in the world, we make room for the stranger and the unlovable; we make room for our enemies, and we reach out to the lost. Making room for others, sharing the love of Christ, is not just something we *do*, but it’s a *way of life*.

During the Advent season, as we anticipate, wait for, remember, and celebrate Christ’s birth, we return to this theme of “making room.” The Advent story is the greatest and most true story ever told: the Son of God left His throne of glory to come to earth as a human to ***make room among us***. His birth, even with its humble and unexpected beginnings, has cosmic and everlasting implications for all of Creation. I gave birth to my daughter, Joanna, in February of this year, and it has changed my husband Chris’s and my life forever. The birth of baby Jesus over 2,000 years ago changed *all* lives for *all* time.

And so, our theme this Advent season is **“God Making Room Among Us.”** Throughout these next several weeks, as we explore His coming and dwelling among us¹, we will ask:

- What does Jesus *make room* for in our understanding of who He is?

1. John 14:1 says “The Word became flesh and **made his dwelling among us**. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

- What does Jesus *clear away* that may be hindering our understanding of Him?
- In turn, how do we respond to *make room* in our hearts for Him?

Each week will explore a different theme or topic as we prayerfully navigate the Advent story. Other questions we hope to address include:

- What characters and events in the Advent story exemplify for us how God has made—and is—*making room* among us?
- How can the most important and beautiful story ever told shape our imaginations and hearts as we daily live out our identity as Christ followers? In other words, we may know the details and characters of the story in our heads—it is not a new story to most of us—but do we accept Jesus’ invitation to allow it to shape our hearts?
- How can the Advent story shape and sanctify us both individually and as a community of worshipers?

This is what we will traverse as a faith community together and as individuals this season. The sermons we’ll hear as we gather on Sundays will explore how, in the Advent story, God has *made room* among us. This devotional is a tool, or guide, for you to use and pray with each day. We hope and pray God can use it to remind each of us how deeply loved we are.

Our hope for this Advent season is that we embrace Christ fully and accept His invitation of peace, joy, and love, as we remember and celebrate His coming to, and dwelling, among us. As the Lord has *made room* among us, we respond and **make room for Him in our hearts.**

Allysen Waters

Spiritual Practices ~ Practicing the Presence

In the Christian tradition, there are a variety of ways to describe what spiritual practices (or habits, rhythms, disciplines) are and how we do them, whether as individuals or a community. In her book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Pastor Adele Calhoun calls these intentional habits “practicing the presence.” Consider Calhoun’s insightful and inviting description: “practicing the presence is a way of living into a deeper awareness of God’s activity in our lives,” and an **“invitation to see and experience every moment as a gift of God.** It is to live alive to union with the Trinity.” Why do we do this? To cultivate and develop a **“continual openness and awareness of Christ’s presence”** living within each of us.

Spend a few moments to reflect upon these passages and what they may say about spiritual practices or “practicing the presence:”

“Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you’ll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.” (Colossians 3:3-4, *The Message*)

“No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.” (Deuteronomy 30:14)

“You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you’ll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren’t willing to receive from me the life you say you want.” (John 5:39-40, *The Message*)

Practices range from morning prayer to *lectio divina* (divine reading)

to even bird watching. The point is to keep company with Jesus all day long and to understand more and more how alive He is within you.

Below are two ideas of how you can “practice the presence” this Advent season. Simply put, they are ways to pray, informed by our theme of “God Making Room Among Us.”

Notice and Adore

In the Advent story, there are many examples of people (and angels) who respond to the birth of Christ with utter worship, wonder, and adoration (we’ll explore the theme of wonder in week three). Throughout this season, practice noticing and adoring.

First, notice how God is present and active in your life or in the lives of those around you. This noticing could be as simple as noticing a beautiful tree on a walk or as big as celebrating the birth of a grandchild.

Second, stop and adore God, giving thanks for what you have noticed. A simple prayer is often enough, such as “My God, I praise you for this gorgeous and sturdy maple tree in my yard.” Or, you may feel the invitation to pray longer—allow the Spirit to lead your prayer.

Prayer Postures

Practice a new prayer posture this season. Even though we *know* we are created in God’s image, *trust* in the Incarnation (God made flesh), and *hope* for the final resurrection and redemption of our bodies (and all of Creation), we can often forget that what we do with our gifted and sacred physical bodies matters. Praying with our bodies, not just our minds, is a simple thing we can practice to remind us of our Creator’s presence. These postures can also help with focus.

Below are suggested postures and examples of reasons to pray in

these ways:

- Pray with your hands open to demonstrate an openness to receiving God’s love, care, and peace.
- Pray kneeling to confess and receive God’s pardon, or to intercede, asking the Spirit to intervene in your and others’ lives.
- Pray standing to praise God for His mighty and beautiful works, especially in the Advent story.
- Pray while bowing down² to show your complete surrender to God’s will, even if you don’t understand it. This is perhaps a forgotten or unfamiliar prayer posture for many of us. Scripture has many examples of people praying his way. In the Advent story, for example, we read: “on coming to the house, [the Magi] saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

Throughout this devotional, we will include reminders of these prayer practices. On Sundays, there is space for you to take note of what you notice and prayers of adoration. We leave it up to you to use these ways of praying or “practicing the presence” throughout the season.

2. Catholic priest Fr. Derek Sakowski writes: “to prostrate oneself is to lie flat on one’s face, or to bow low and touch one’s face to the ground. It is the ultimate gesture of submission and worship. Our bodies speak outwardly the act of surrender we are choosing with our will” (www.abideinlove.com).

Music

Each week we offer songs that reflect the ways Scripture is inviting us into God’s Story. Access our curated Spotify playlist to listen, enjoy, and pray. The Spotify app is available for free download from the Apple Store and Google Play Store.

To access the FPC Advent 2024 playlist on a mobile device:

OPEN the SPOTIFY app.

CLICK SEARCH.

Click on the CAMERA icon.

If prompted, click SCAN.

HOVER over the SPOTIFY code below.



<https://cutt.ly/ZeDtICYI>

“Making Room for the Mystery of Christ’s Birth”

Scripture

Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.



The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner

Reflection

by Allysen Waters

In my teens, I occasionally watched the original and iconic true crime television show *Unsolved Mysteries*. Each episode features real-life mysteries, including “murders and unexplained deaths, missing persons, wanted fugitives, UFOs, ghosts, mysterious creatures, missing heirs, lost loves, amnesia, fraud, arson, and treasure,” according to the show’s website. Walking through a fog-filled, dark alley while dressed in a long beige trench coat, suit, and tie, the narrator and host, Robert Stack, guides the viewer through the depths of a mystery. As you watch interviews, hear evidence, and experience witness re-enactments, you *really hope* the mystery will be solved, even despite the show’s name! You are sorely disappointed when the case remains unsolved. Due to the popularity of the show, and a

“call-to-action,” viewers were encouraged to send in tips, and many of the cases were actually solved after an episode was first aired. Reruns occasionally include a rewarding update to solved cases: the mystery has been solved!

In a way, today’s passage could be an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*. Rather than Robert Stack, picture the writer of the Gospel of Luke: the beloved physician and companion of apostle Paul, as our host and narrator. Luke, after all, is the Gospel writer who includes the most eyewitness accounts in telling the story of Jesus. He “carefully investigated everything from the beginning [of Jesus’ life] to write an orderly account” (Luke 1:1). Just imagine Luke dressed in a knee-length, linen tunic walking along the coastline of the Sea of Galilee describing the extraordinary events that took place. While it would be a very fun exercise to re-create this visitation of the angel (messenger) to the teenaged, engaged Mary in her nondescript town of Nazareth as an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*, let’s get to the bottom line: there is a lot about the annunciation (a title for today’s passage), that is mysterious, bewildering, and even seemingly impossible.

Darrell Johnson, in an compelling sermon on this very passage entitled “Believing the Impossible,”³ observes that though the spotlight of the Advent story is on the infant Jesus, the spotlight also shines prominently on the virgin Mary. Those who follow Christ relate to him as a brother, friend, Savior, and even groom, yet Mary alone claims the title of his mother (she was pregnant with him for 9 months, nursed him, taught him to speak, gave him his facial features). Mary is the first to reflect theologically on the significance and meaning of Christ’s birth (Luke 1:46-55)—in other words, she’s the first Christian theologian! Mary is also the model or prototype disciple of Christ. Why? Because she *believed the impossible could*

3. I highly recommend Johnson’s sermon accessible at www.darrelljohnson.ca/content/believing-the-impossible.

happen. Mary trusted that the “living God could do what had never been done before,” proclaims Johnson.

Mary, perhaps 14 or 15 years old, was betrothed to Joseph and lived in a small, ordinary town, and was one day interrupted by a magnificent angel, or messenger, of the Lord. As a young Jewish woman, she would have read about other angel visitations in Scripture yet she would likely have never expected something like this to happen to her (she was “greatly troubled” as the passage says). After the angel says she has found favor with God and instructs her not to fear, the angel shares something truly earth-shattering: she, as a virgin, would conceive and give birth to a son. Not an ordinary son, however. She will name him Jesus (“Yahweh saves”), and he will be called the Son of the Most High; his kingdom will have no end. Mary then asks, “*how?*” since she is a virgin.

“How indeed?” Darrell Johnson asks. *How*, as a virgin, without male sperm, would she become pregnant? Other miraculous pregnancies in Scripture, including Mary’s own cousin, Elizabeth, still involved intercourse. Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John the Baptist in her advanced years is surprising, but believable. Yet, this was a different miracle altogether—the miracle of the virgin conception. Johnson rightly points out that Mary was the first skeptic of this miracle. Johnson says:

We in the 21st century assume that 1st century people had no trouble with the miraculous elements of the gospel. We tend to think they had no trouble with the strange ways God works in the world... that’s simply not true! The Christmas miracle does not fit with the modern and postmodern view, but it did not fit Mary’s worldview either... the virgin conception is *outside of the realm of human possibility altogether*.

The angel’s response to Mary’s question of “how” highlights the

mystery of this miracle. The “question of HOW becomes a question of WHO,” says Johnson. WHO is, of course, the Holy Spirit, the agent of conception. We who are familiar with this story do not often let this miracle astound us in the way it should. Johnson compares this miracle to creation itself. In Genesis, the Spirit hovers over the void; the Spirit creates out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). In Luke, the Spirit hovers over the void of Mary’s womb and creates again. This is precisely why the scientific mind cannot wrap its head around this miracle. There is no precedence for this; it is something brand new altogether. This miracle is perhaps the greatest mystery of the Advent story.

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled,” (Luke 1:38). Mary submitted and, therefore, trusted the Lord’s word and promise, given by means of the angel, without understanding how this would work. She “believed the impossible,” as Johnson’s sermon title proclaims Without understanding *how*, Mary trusted in the *who*.

As our theme this Advent season is “God Making Room Among Us,” we ask of this passage: What does the Lord *clear away* in order to *make room* in our understanding of who He is? Upon reflecting on this particular Advent story, I believe that **Jesus clears space in our imaginations, pushing aside our need for answers and logic. The Lord makes room for us to embrace mystery and believe in the impossible, noticing the way he came to earth via the annunciation and virgin birth.**

So, then, how do we respond to *make room* in our hearts for Him? Let’s revisit Mary’s response here: she engaged with a question and submitted with trust. Mary asked the angel “how?” The angel, a messenger of the Lord, addressed her question even though there was not a clear answer about how this miraculous pregnancy would work. The angel pointed her to the Holy Spirit and reminded her that “no word from God will ever fail.” And so, Mary submitted and trusted in God’s unfailing word. As Christ followers, we are asked and invited

to do the same thing: we are invited to respond with trust as we embrace the mysterious, impossible (and often paradoxical) aspects of our faith. Embracing God's mysterious ways does not mean we cannot prayerfully engage with our questions and even doubts. The Christian life and faith are filled with mystery; God does not promise to give us all the answers to life's great questions. However, we can have confidence in what we do know and hope because we do know that Christ's kingdom is everlasting (Luke 1:33) and God's word will never fail (Luke 1:37).

No other human being will be impregnated with Jesus like Mary was. However, to be a Christ-follower means that the same eternal life that grew in Mary's womb now dwells in anyone who belongs to Christ. In a moving prayer and conversation with his disciples before his death, Jesus says: "Abide [live] in me as I abide [live] in you," (John 15:4). The Holy Spirit, the agent of Mary's miraculous conception now lives within Christ followers. That Spirit will guide, shape, and comfort us, and give us peace beyond our understanding. That Spirit is one whom we can trust to open our imaginations and hearts to submit to and trust in God's mysterious and miraculous ways.



Prayer

God of mystery and beauty, grant me the grace to let go of the need for clear logic and answers for all of life's questions. Help me embrace the mysterious and often paradoxical parts of my faith and to trust you wholeheartedly. Open my eyes to the wondrous world you have created; help me to see You in all things. Make room in my heart for Thee.

Amen.



Spiritual Practice / Notice and Adore

See page v for a description of this practice. Use the space below to write down what you notice and prayers of adoration for this coming week.

Day	Notice <i>Where have you noticed God at work? What have you witnessed in creation?</i>	Adore <i>Write a simple prayer of adoration praising God for what you have noticed.</i>
Sunday		
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		

If you need more space to write, there are blank pages at the back of the book.

Songs

- “Let all Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” by Keith and Kristyn Getty, JJ Heller
- “Come, Behold the Wondrous Mystery” by Bob Kauflin
- “Do Not Fear” by Jon Althoff, Nathan Stiff

The daily readings this week focus on the mystery of our faith and how we respond in trust.

Scripture

1 Timothy 3:16 (*The Message*)

This Christian life is a great mystery, far exceeding our understanding, but some things are clear enough:

He appeared in a human body,
was proved right by the invisible Spirit,
was seen by angels.

He was proclaimed among all kinds of peoples,
believed in all over the world,
taken up into heavenly glory.

God has and is making room among us. This week, we focus on how Jesus clears space in our imaginations, pushing aside our need for answers and logic. He makes room for us to embrace mystery, noticing the way he came to earth via the annunciation and virgin birth. We respond with trust as we embrace the mysterious, impossible (and often paradoxical) aspects of our faith.

Below is an exercise that will help you reflect and pray with God about the things in the Christian life that “far exceed our understanding” as well as truths you find comforting. It is a prayerful exercise to aid in embracing the mysterious parts of our faith, and to trust God even when we do not understand. This exercise is broken up into two days.

Reflection Questions

1. Eugene Peterson’s translation of 1 Timothy 3:16 says “the Christian life is a great mystery, far exceeding our understanding.” What might you find in the Christian life to be puzzling or confusing? What, in particular, exceeds your understanding?

2. Specifically, what is mysterious to you about the main passage for this week in Luke (the Annunciation)? What questions are you left with?
3. How does it feel to admit and be honest about what exceeds your understanding? Is this a practice you're familiar with or do you find it difficult?



Prayer

Spend some time in prayer wrestling with God for the things you reflected upon in which you have a hard time understanding. This may be new or challenging for you, and that is okay. Be reminded and encouraged that having doubt and asking God hard questions is an essential part of the journey of faith. The Psalmist and other people in Scripture exemplify an honest and intimate relationship with God. Psalm 10:1, for example, says “Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” Ask the Spirit to help you pray.

This prayer exercise is continued in tomorrow's devotion.



Scripture

Proverbs 3:5-6

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Matthew 11:28-30

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Today’s devotion continues yesterday’s prayerful exercise.

Reflection Questions

1. What truths in the Christian life are “clear enough” to you? Do they include what’s listed in 1 Timothy 3:16 (see yesterday’s devotion)?
2. What does God promise us in Scripture? Look back at the main passage from Sunday in Luke, for example, who told Mary: “the Lord is with you,” and “no word from God will ever fail.”
3. Think of promises and characteristics of God that you find comforting. Reflect upon those. Can you also recall a time in which you felt God’s presence and peace? Can you recall a time in which you’ve witnessed God’s work in someone else’s life or your community such as the life of the church?
4. Now, how does it feel to admit and be honest about what you *do* understand? How did you come to this understanding?



Prayer

Spend some time in prayer thanking God for the understanding He has given you. Thank Jesus that we do not have to know everything nor do we need to carry it all—He does that for us! Ask the Spirit to remind you of the truths you do understand in times of doubt or questioning.



Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Admitting doubt in our journey of faith can be understandably challenging and even scary. If we are honest with ourselves, others, and God, we all have questions, including questions about what happened in the Advent story. Remember, even Mary initially questioned how she would become pregnant as a virgin. Joseph was also initially a skeptic. However, we read that both Mary and Joseph chose to trust and follow God even though God's ways were mysterious and even impossible. What can we learn from their example?

As the Proverb says, we *do not lean on our own understanding*. Rather, we submit to the truth that we are limited and finite creatures with limited and often faulty understanding. We submit to our loving Creator. We ask the Spirit to help us trust that only the Triune God is almighty and all-knowing, yet full of mercy, righteousness, peace, and love.

It can be a burden to continuously seek answers to questions we may never have answers to. As we read in Matthew 11, Jesus invites us to lay our burdens at his feet and in turn, give us rest.

Reflect upon and rest in examples below of truths that we can trust:

- Each one of us are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139).
- We are each a beloved child of God (Ephesians 5:1-2).
- We will never be separated from God's love (Romans 8:38-39).
- Christ demonstrated his love for us by dying on a cross while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).
- Jesus promised the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and with us for all time (John 14:16).
- Christ has defeated death and evil and promises to return to restore and redeem all of creation.
- God is good *all* the time; *all* the time, God is good.

Conclude by praying however the Spirit leads you. Try out one of the prayer postures (see page v). If you need a prayer, try the breath prayer below. Repeat as you need.

Inhale: "Son of the Most High,"

Exhale: "Help me trust you."

Scripture

Luke 1:38

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Genesis 22:1-14

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

Reflection

by Chris Waters

The story of Abraham being asked to offer up Isaac is one of the most challenging and mysterious passages in all of Scripture. Faithful Christians and Jews have wrestled with the meaning of this passage for thousands of years, drawn to the intimate relationship between God and Abraham and Isaac but also perhaps shocked by the seemingly impossible task God places before Abraham. One of the many difficult aspects of this story for me, personally, is that we hear so little from Abraham himself. What emotions flooded over him as the God who had made such seemingly impossible promises to him and his wife Sarah—that they would have a son in their old age—suddenly asked Abraham to sacrifice this miracle child? In what is often typical for Hebrew narrative, the dialogue in this story is very sparse. All Abraham says to God throughout this entire story is “Here I am.” But despite his few words, Abraham paints a picture of radical

trust in God’s plan by his brisk obedience to God’s commands and by his willingness to potentially lose his beloved son. Thus, Abraham’s “Here I am” becomes a shorthand expression of total availability to God—total trust in God’s plans—despite those plans being shrouded in mystery. Before you finish reading, take a moment to listen to Andrew Peterson retell the story of Genesis 22 (Spotify playlist song: “Holy is the Lord”) and consider the tension between Abraham’s incredible faith and his deep love for Isaac.

If you look at the way the New Revised Standard Version translates Luke 1:38, you can probably see a verbal link between the Annunciation and Genesis 22: Mary and Abraham both respond to God with a simple “Here I am.” Though the scene presented in Genesis 22 looks radically different from the one painted in the Annunciation, I hear echoes of Abraham’s radical faith in Mary’s beautiful and brave response to the angel Gabriel. After this moment, Mary’s life becomes a 33-year journey of repeatedly offering up her beloved Son to a destiny and plan she does not fully understand and that will ultimately bring her to the foot of Jesus’s cross and, after that, to the door of His empty tomb. Similar to Abraham, we hear very little from Mary after this scene at the beginning of Luke, but the reverberations of her “yes” to God, her “Here I am,” echo through the rest of scripture right up to today.



Prayer

(Excerpt from song “Holy is the Lord” by Andrew Peterson)

“Holy is the Lord

Holy is the Lord

And the Lord I will obey

Lord, help me—I don’t know the way.”



Scripture

Isaiah 52: 1-6

Awake, awake,
put on your strength, O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for there shall no more come into you
the uncircumcised and the unclean.
Shake yourself from the dust and arise;
be seated, O Jerusalem;
loose the bonds from your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion.

For thus says the Lord: “You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money.” For thus says the Lord God: “My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now therefore what have I here,” declares the Lord, “seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail,” declares the Lord, “and continually all the day my name is despised. Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am.”

Reflection

by Chris Waters

In yesterday’s devotion, we noticed that “Here I am” was a statement expressing Abraham and Mary’s availability to God—their willingness to serve Him no matter what the cost. In today’s passages from Isaiah, we see something incredible happening! Whereas Abraham, Mary, and, earlier in the book of Isaiah (6:8), Isaiah the prophet, all respond to God with “Here I am”, here in Isaiah 52, it is God who

responds to Israel with “Here I am!” Part of God’s good word for an exhausted and defeated Israel is that He will reveal Himself to them in a new way: He will stand in availability to help and serve His people—His creation.



Prayer

Jesus,

Your life on earth was defined by self-giving love, by availability to serve and to heal, and by surrender to Your Father’s will. Now, as you sit in glory at the Father’s right hand, we trust that your posture toward us remains the same—that Your word to us is still “Here I am.” May we fall into your open arms this day, entrusting our lives to Your care.

Amen.



Scripture

Luke 1:5-24

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

Reflection Questions

1. An angel of the Lord told Zechariah that his prayer had been heard. Recall a prayer in your life or in the life of your community. What was the occasion? Do you feel the prayer was heard? How so?
2. Have you, like Zechariah, asked: “How can I be sure of this?” What was the situation?
3. Is there something in your life in which you have trouble trusting that God will provide? What about in the life of our community or world? In other words, do you trust that God will provide and does care, in the small things and in the big? Spend some time in prayer asking God to open your heart to receive and trust Him.



Annunciation to Zechariah by Lauren Wright Pittman

Reflection from the Artist

Zechariah is dressed in a breastpiece, ephod, robe, checkered tunic, turban, and sash, just as the book of Exodus specifies. In my painting, gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns are woven together and bejeweled with engraved stones which bear the names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:4).

Zechariah stands in the Holy Place wearing the most meticulous of garments. Does he expect to encounter the divine? Or is he just going through the motions, lighting the incense as an all-too-familiar scent fills the air?

After all these years of fulfilling priestly duties and “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Luke 1:6), Zechariah and his wife are still childless. Regardless of their desire for children, in their culture and context, childlessness bore the implication of God’s contempt.

I ruminated on this image... a weary priest wrapped in layered fabrics, colors, symbols, textures, and rare stones that proclaim God’s providence and power. The contrast is not lost on me.

I often try to neglect my weariness by putting on a veneer of unwavering trust in God—while feeling like I may suddenly unravel into a pile of beautifully-curated threads, stones, and gold accessories.

In this image, I decided to depict the angel as smoke from the altar of incense. Zechariah has one hand over his mouth in fear and disbelief, while his other hand cradles the notion—not yet hope—of his son’s existence.

Do you bind up your weariness in a neat and tidy bow, put your head down, and project okay-ness like me? ***What would it look like to acknowledge our weariness, quit powering through, and open ourselves up to what God might have in store for us?*** Perhaps we’ll meet an angel.

Poem

“Annunciation” by Malcolm Guite

We see so little, stayed on surfaces,
We calculate the outsides of all things,
Preoccupied with our own purposes
We miss the shimmer of the angels' wings,
They coruscate around us in their joy
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled,
They guard the good we purpose to destroy,
A hidden blaze of glory in God's world.
But on this day a young girl stopped to see
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;
The promise of His glory yet to be,
As time stood still for her to make a choice;
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred,
The Word himself was waiting on her word.

Reflection Question

1. In this poem, what do you find moving, challenging, or encouraging? Spend some time in reflection and prayer pondering this poem and this week's devotional.



Prayer

While praying, try a new prayer posture (see page v).

Lord, I confess I am so often preoccupied with my own purposes—my eyes are so narrowed in on what is directly in front of me. Spirit, open my eyes and heart to You. Help me to hear Your voice. Help me to trust in your eternal promises.

Amen.



“Making Room for the Humility of Christ’s Birth”

Scripture

Luke 1:46-55 and Luke 2:1-7

Mary’s Song

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

The Birth of Jesus

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.



Nativity (2001) by Joseph Mulamba-Mandangi (Congolese artist)

Reflection

by Jeannie Evans

After many years of reading and hearing the Christmas story, I confess that I have become immune to its shock value. It is easy for us as 21st century Christians to gloss over the astonishing visitations by angels to Mary and Joseph and the grittier details of Jesus' birth because we know how it all turned out in the end—that the little baby in the manger fulfilled his destiny as the Savior of the world. But this Advent, I encourage you (and myself) to travel back in time to look at the humility embedded in this world-shaking event.

Last Sunday we considered teenage Mary's response of humble and faith-full submission to the mind-blowing message she received from the angel Gabriel. In Luke 1:46-55, we see that Mary was not only willing to accept her role as the mother of Jesus, but she was, in The Message's translation, "bursting with God-news" to share with her cousin Elizabeth. Clearly aware of her unimpressive status as a young woman in a culture dominated by men, Mary marveled that God her Savior, the Mighty One, would take notice of her and choose her to bear the Christ Child. Mary celebrated God's extending mercy to generation after generation of Abraham's descendants. God was turning the status quo upside down by frustrating the plans of the rich, proud and powerful and lifting up those who humbly acknowledged their great need for deliverance. For all these reversals of circumstances which she herself was experiencing and believed her unborn son would continue to bring about, Mary declared enthusiastic praise.

Though Mary's reaction tends to claim most of our attention in the prelude to Christ's birth, I am also amazed by Joseph's obedient willingness to surrender his reputation and dignity to marry Mary as a result of his own angel encounter. We can only imagine what others in Nazareth said about this man and his obviously pregnant

fiancée setting out for Bethlehem to register for the census. Google Maps tells me that this would be about a 34-hour walk—but that’s likely possible only with modern roads. It’s surely a trip that they would not have undertaken at this uncomfortable point in Mary’s pregnancy had they not been subjects of the Roman Empire living in an occupied territory.

It was under these less than ideal circumstances that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem near the time when she was about to give birth. Luke tells us that there wasn’t a “guest” room for them to stay in, so they ended up in a humble location (cave, stable, or other not-so-hygienic spot) in time for Mary to deliver Jesus, wrap him in cloths (most likely not super-clean ones,) and lay him in a trough from which cows and horses typically ate. The first visitors to welcome the long-awaited Savior to the world were those who watched sheep for a living and weren’t usually welcomed into homes.

In all the centuries of people longing for a Messiah who would deliver them, this unassuming birth of Jesus turned all expectations upside-down—as did the life he would go on to live, the truths he would teach, the company he would keep, and the death he would die on a cross. Brennan Manning writes “God entered our world not with the crushing impact of unbearable glory, but in the way of weakness, vulnerability, and need. On a wintry night in an obscure cave, the infant Jesus was a humble, naked, helpless God who allowed us to get close to him.”

As I consider the Christmas story this year, I am immensely grateful for the King of Glory who chose to enter the world in such an unexpectedly imperfect way for the purpose of redeeming humanity. I am thankful that the Incarnation means that God our Savior, The Mighty One, took notice of our great need and took on flesh to live in our world so Jesus could become acquainted with our grief and suffering. I am even learning to be grateful for the ways God continually challenges me to surrender my own agendas, cherished

outcomes of how I think things should turn out, and notions of what the Kingdom of God should look like. May we all clear space in our hearts and minds to make room to say “yes” to Jesus with our whole lives this Advent season and beyond!

Additional Resource:

bibleproject.com/explore/video/gospel-luke-1



Prayer

Lord, we are amazed that you, the Creator of the universe, loved us so deeply that you participated in the messiness of our humanity by enfleshing yourself as a helpless baby born in humble circumstances. Thank you. Please help us receive and understand that enormous love so that we can clear out our preoccupation with self-preservation and make room for the new work you want to do in our lives.

Amen.



Spiritual Practice / Notice and Adore

See page v for a description of this practice. Use the space below to write down what you notice and prayers of adoration for this coming week.

Day	Notice <i>Where have you noticed God at work? What have you witnessed in creation?</i>	Adore <i>Write a simple prayer of adoration praising God for what you have noticed.</i>
Sunday		
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		

If you need more space to write, there are blank pages at the back of the book.

Songs

- “Thou Who Was Rich Beyond All Splendor” by Keith & Kristyn Getty
- “Humble People, Humble Christ” by Common Hymnal
- “Once in Royal David’s City”
- “And Can It Be?”
- “God With Us”
- “Magnificat” by Martha Bassett
- “The Servant King” by Graham Kendrick

The daily readings this week focus on the humility of Christ's birth and life.

Scripture

Matthew 2:1-14

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt... “

Poem

“Refugee” by Malcolm Guite

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else’s quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.



Jesus as a Refugee by Joy Banks

Reflection

by Jeannie Evans

In our highly politicized world, we hear the words *immigrant* and *refugee*, and images and opinions immediately tend to come to our minds. Have you ever contemplated the idea that Jesus himself was a refugee? Because of the jealous wrath of Herod the Great at learning that the king of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem, an angel warned Joseph in a dream that he should take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to keep Jesus safe. Surely Joseph and Mary must have been weary after all the challenges preceding and surrounding Jesus' birth and trying to understand the implications of raising the long-awaited Messiah. But in order to keep Jesus safe from Herod's murderous plans, they traveled the long distance (over 144 hours of walking according to modern Google Maps) in the opposite direction from their hometown of Nazareth.

In our own time many parents make hazardous journeys to new countries in order to escape oppressive governments and living conditions. Do we see Jesus in the faces of those who come to our own country? Our church has partnered with the World Relief organization to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus to families who come to Winston-Salem in search of safety and a place of flourishing. In the words of Father Richard Rohr in *Preparing for Christmas*, "Suffering and solidarity with the suffering of others has an immense capacity to 'make room' inside of us." Are there ways you can come alongside the World Relief Good Neighbors team in our church to care for those who, like Jesus and his parents, have left their homes to live in a new and unfamiliar place?



Prayer

Lord, forgive us for glossing over the parts of your Incarnation that feel uncomfortable to us. Help us see your face in the faces of the refugees, immigrants, and other image bearers whom the world tends to overlook or disdain. Please fill our hearts with compassion so that we may act in solidarity with the challenges and suffering of others so that you can make room in our lives to receive and give your extravagant love.

Amen.



Song

- “Refugee King” by Liz Vice

Poem

“Kenosis” by Luci Shaw

In sleep his infant mouth works in and out.
He is so new, his silk skin has not yet
been roughed by plane and wooden beam
nor, so far, has he had to deal with human doubt.
He is in a dream of nipple found,
of blue-white milk, of curving skin
and, pulsing in his ear, the inner throb
of a warm heart's repeated sound.
His only memories float from fluid space.
So new he has not pounded nails, hung a door
broken bread, felt rebuff, bent to the lash,
wept for the sad heart of the human race.

Reflection

by Jeannie Evans

The word *kenosis* is a Greek term that means “emptying.” Typically, when we think about the word empty, we mean “not full.” In my world, empty can often be a negative concept. I don't like it when my refrigerator is empty or when my wallet is empty, and it certainly isn't good news when my gas tank is empty. But emptiness can be a blessing too. When a day on my calendar is empty, it means I have margin and don't have to rush around quite so much. And when my house is empty, I find that I can think more clearly and act a bit more purposefully. Being empty makes room for being filled.

Emptying can also have deeper meanings. For Jesus, emptying

meant giving up his divine glory so he could become human. Luci Shaw's poem, "Kenosis," reminds us that Jesus experienced the sheer physicality of being a helpless baby with all the dependence on another person that an infant requires. A verse in the hymn "And Can It Be" says of Jesus: "He left His Father's throne above / So free, so infinite His grace / Emptied Himself of all but love / And bled for Adam's helpless race." Jesus' radical emptying was motivated by love beginning with his birth, demonstrated in his life on earth, and consummated in his willingness to die on the cross. No wonder John Wesley declared this to be "amazing love!"



Prayer

Lord, we marvel at the amazing love that led you to leave your Father's throne to be born as a sleepy, needy, human baby. Thank you for emptying yourself to draw near to us. Show us what emptying ourselves can look like as we seek to love you and others well.

Amen.



Scripture

Philippians 2:1-11

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Reflection Questions

1. How can we seek to be more like-minded with others in our church even when we may have differing perspectives on non-essential matters?
2. What would it look like in our lives for us to imitate Jesus' example of servanthood and look not just to our own interests but to the interests of others? How could this be transformative in our families, our friendships, our church, our jobs, our communities, and in the world at-large?



Prayer

Jesus, your willingness to descend to us, live as one of us, and die for all of us is so amazing that enough words of gratitude are hard to find. Your life example of humble, self-emptying service is a blueprint for us to follow as we live and love others in the world. Because we are united with you and are comforted by your love, please guide our words and actions daily so that we may value and love others authentically and without selfish ambition.

Amen.





King of Kings by Laura Kestly (2023)

Scripture

Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Reflection

by Jeannie Evans

Let’s close our eyes and imagine ourselves in this scene. Jesus’ disciples have been following him around for quite awhile now and have been witnessing his teaching and dealings with people. But somehow they seem to keep missing the theme of the upside-down kingdom he is inaugurating here on earth. They have likely already been discussing among themselves who “gets the highest rank” (*The Message*) in God’s kingdom. Now they decide to pose the question to their Teacher: “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

We don’t read that Jesus sighs loudly and rolls his eyes at his disciples’ question, but neither does he answer it in the way they may anticipate. Instead, he calls over a child and suggests that this is their role model for greatness. In a culture that is centered almost exclusively around the authority of adult males, suggesting that his disciples should choose to “take the lowly position” of a vulnerable child is even more radical than it sounds today. Once again, Jesus is trying to help his followers understand that greatness in God’s eyes lies in the willingness to surrender our power and prerogatives and

trust with the willingness of those who have nothing to offer but open hearts and hands.

In his book *Hidden Christmas*, Tim Keller defines surrender to mean “take your hands off your life.” We regularly spend our days with our hands all over our lives. If you observe most young children, you’ll see that this is not usually the case for them. They tend to live in their moments with an unspoken sense of assurance that their needs will be met by benevolent caretakers and with a willingness to learn from them. Similarly, Jesus invites his disciples (and us!) to embrace this confident faith in the goodness and provision of our God.



Prayer

*Try this prayer while kneeling or bowing down
(see page v).*

Lord, we confess that it’s hard to take our hands off our lives, but we long to come to you with the faith of a child. Please help us abandon our exhausting attempts to exalt ourselves so we can make room to receive and share your grace.

Amen.



Scripture

John 13:1-15

Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

Reflection Questions

1. Why did Simon Peter resist having Jesus wash his feet?
2. What was Jesus trying to teach his disciples about humility by washing their feet?
3. What are ways we can “wash” each other’s “feet” as we care for each other in community as a church and as Christ followers in the world?



Prayer

Lord, this passage is a beautiful but challenging one. We need the humility to love and serve others when it is hard and unpleasant, and we also need the humility to allow others to serve us when we are vulnerable and undeserving. Help us follow your example and be willing to lay aside our pride and discomfort to live in rhythms of authentically giving and receiving.

Amen.





Wash Each Others Feet by Scott Erickson

Scripture

1 John 3:16-18

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Reflection

by Jeannie Evans

Our history as Americans is grounded in the idea of having rights, and our current culture often has loud and lively discussions about whose rights are worthy of being protected. We certainly rarely want to give up rights we already have, but that is exactly the example of Jesus that we have encountered over and over in our scripture passages this week. As the apostle Paul explains it, Jesus, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6). He and his parents forfeited their stability and cultural identity to live in exile as immigrants in a foreign country. He taught his disciples to let go of their conceptions of greatness and believe with the faith of a child, and he modeled for them servant leadership by setting aside his dignity and getting on the floor and washing their dirty feet.

Today’s passage reminds us of Jesus’ ultimate act of giving up his rights by laying down his life for us through his death on the cross. John tells us that this is the very definition of love. And if God loves us with so great a love, then we are urged to live lives of similarly sacrificial love. Imitating Jesus’ humility demands that we match our

actions to our proclamations of loving our neighbors. We may need to clear out our assumptions about particular groups of people so we can get proximate to them and build relationships. We may need to relinquish some of our rights and privileges to ensure the flourishing of all people—not just our family and friends. This is hard stuff, but it is the high calling of those who follow Jesus, the Servant King. May God continue to transform our hearts to his glory as we make room to love him and those around us “with actions and in truth.”



Prayer

Covenant Prayer by John Wesley

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things
To your glory and service.
And now, O wonderful and holy God,
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
You are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it also be made in heaven.
Amen.



“Making Room for the Wonder of Christ’s Birth”

Scripture

Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.



Glory to God in the Highest by Mike Moyers, 2023

Reflection

Reflection by Kurt N. Fredrickson
(fullerstudio.fuller.edu/amazement-ordinary-time/)



The day around Bethlehem seemed no different than most: shepherds in the field, people wandering through town, paying taxes! It was just another day of work, and family life.

Most of our days seem quite ordinary too. We work, go to school, spend time with family and friends, go to sleep. We wake up the next day and do it all again. But sometimes in the midst of the routine, something breaks in that is completely unexpected. It might be the best of events, or the worse. Either way, the invasion throws our life into a spin.

The Christmas story found in Luke 2 tells of a quite spectacular invasion into ordinary time. The announcement comes to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly, the ordinary is filled with the extraordinary: an angel, blazing glory, heavenly choirs, amazing news of the birth of a unique son. The shepherds run to find Mary and Joseph, and a baby lying in a manger. A most ordinary scene is now filled with amazement.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

What a goal—to live life with a sense of amazement! The message of Christmas is that God meets us in the midst of the ordinariness of our lives. “To us a Son is given.” He steps into the best, and the toughest situations of our lives. His promise—“I am with you”—brings a sense of wonder and joy.



Prayer

Try a new prayer posture while praying, such as standing (see page v).

Lord, unveil my eyes so I may see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Clear out the clutter in my heart so I may experience the joy of your Incarnation. Still my busy mind so I may be overwhelmed by the wonder of your birth. Unclog my ears so I may hear once again the beautiful sound of heaven itself crying out in adoration. Bring forth the air in my lungs so that I may join the angels in shouting “glory to God is the Highest, for our Savior is born!”



Songs

- “O, Come All Ye Faithful” by Passion and Melodie Malone
- “I Wonder as I Wander” by Audrey Assad
- “Joy to the World” by King and Country
- “Angels We Have Heard on High” by Hillsdale Church

Spiritual Practice / Notice and Adore

See page v for a description of this practice. Use the space below to write down what you notice and prayers of adoration for this coming week.

Day	Notice <i>Where have you noticed God at work? What have you witnessed in creation?</i>	Adore <i>Write a simple prayer of adoration praising God for what you have noticed.</i>
Sunday		
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		

If you need more space to write, there are blank pages at the back of the book.

Scripture

Luke 2:19

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Reflection

by Allysen Waters

Luke 2 says that Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, were visited by shepherds in the field. These ordinary shepherds came from their field where they just witnessed a multitude of angels singing and praising God for the birth of Christ. After the shepherds had left, and presumably told her and Joseph about what they witnessed in the field, Mary “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

We can think of “treasured” as something she stored away and preserved in her heart, remembering it throughout her life. We may also assume that she shared this experience with others, including Luke. Do you have experiences in your life that you treasure, experiences of God at work? Why is it important to keep these experiences close to our hearts? Have you shared this experience with others?

What would it mean for us to treasure and ponder God’s mysterious works, whether ones we read about in Scripture, or things that have happened in our individual lives as well as the life of our church? What would it mean for a community to treasure and ponder God’s works together? Spend some time praying about this, reflecting upon Mary’s response. Record your thoughts on the next page.

Notes



Prayer

Try this prayer while kneeling (see page v).

My God, search my heart and know my heart. I want to treasure and ponder your works in my heart, like Mary did so long ago. Help me to glorify and praise you like the shepherds did so long ago. Holy Spirit, teach me to hear and see You in the world around me, and testify Your works to others.

Amen.





Awake to Wonder by Lisle Gwynn Garrity



Prayer

In place of my faithless need to control, give me
a watchful heart full of expectation and wonder.

Amen.

- Philip Reinders, *Seeking God's Face*



Scripture

Psalm 146

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord, my soul.

I will praise the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.

When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.

He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

The Lord reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord.

Reflection & Prayer

The Psalms are full of praise... full of adoration for God. This Psalm lists the reasons why the Maker of heaven and earth are worthy of our praise. Turn this Psalm into a prayer, adding in your reasons for praising God with all your soul. Write your prayer below.

Scripture

Job 9:8-10

He alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.
He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.
He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.

Reflection Question

In this section of Scripture, Job is describing God. As you read, remember that this same God came as a human infant. How does this truth lead you to wonder and awe?

Scripture

John 1:1-14

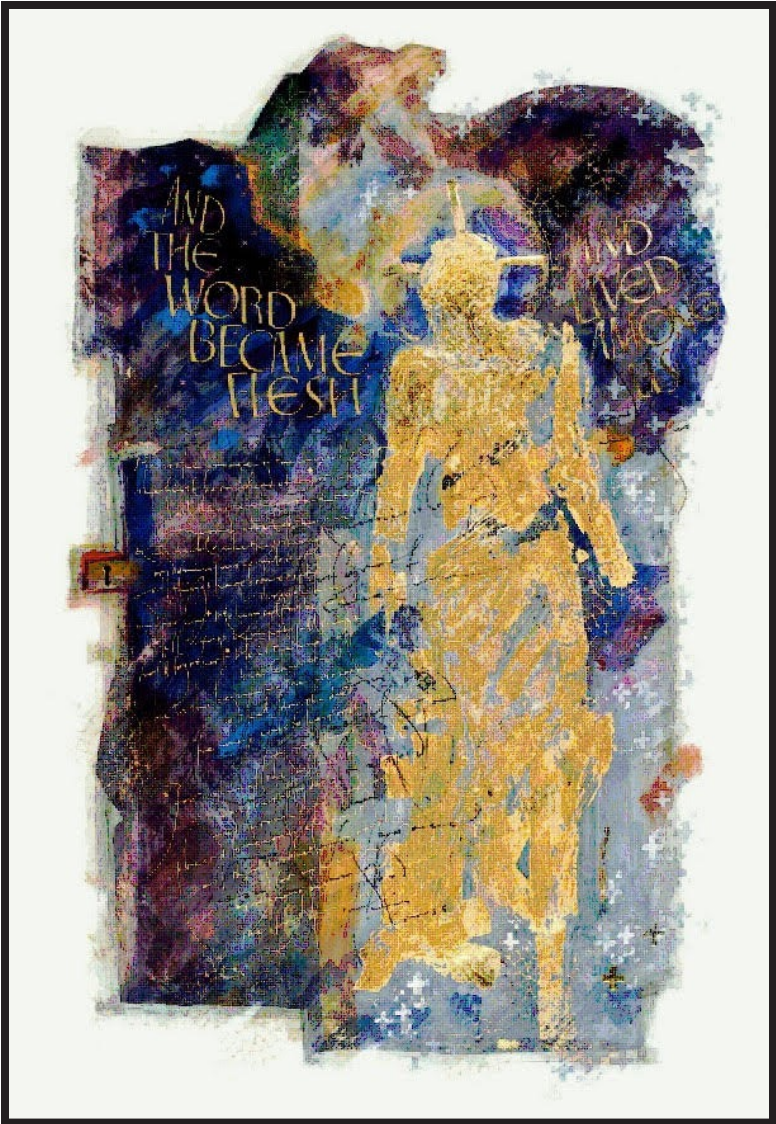
The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.



Art by Donald Jackson from the *St. John's Illuminated Bible*

Reflection

by Allysen Waters

Hallelujah, Jesus' light shines in the darkness! The darkness shall *never* overcome His light. What a wonder. This truth is a great comfort when reflecting on the darker mysteries of life—the injustices, sorrows, and evil that we may never understand. For many, suffering and evil we experience and witness is a profound mystery that pulls us away from God. In despair and doubt, we can allow the darkness to overcome our souls and hearts.

Yet, Jesus came. Jesus came while we were still sinners to rescue and redeem. Jesus came to dwell among us—to make room among us; to enter our suffering and to end all suffering through His life, death, and resurrection. Upon Christ's resurrection, He gifted us with the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Counselor who is ever present with us in the “now but not yet” as we wait for the promised final restoration when Jesus returns again. What is our response to this wondrous Love? To submit, to be embraced, to wonder at this great Love! He shines so that we may never be consumed by the dark. Amen!



Prayer

Try this prayer while bowing down (see page v).

Lord God, you defy all my tidy categories for understanding you, especially at Christmas. What a paradox the Incarnation is—true God and authentic humanity knit into one person, your Son, Jesus Christ. I worship you for this marvelous mystery—as true God you conquered death by your power, and as a real human you died for me in the weakness of your flesh.

Amen.

Philip Reinders, *Seeking God's Face*



Zechariah sang this praise-filled song upon the birth of his son, John the Baptist, and in anticipation of the birth of Jesus.

Luke 1:67-79

Zechariah's Song

[John the Baptist's father] Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Reflection Questions

1. This week is about making room for wonder. How does Zechariah praise God with wonder? How does he describe God and God's actions?
2. If you were to write a song of praise and wonder, what would you write?



Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for babies. Thank you for their little fingers and toes and their cries and their snuffles and the warmth of their bodies on our chest and shoulders as we hold them close. Thank you, Jesus, for coming to us in this way, entering into every part of our humanity—our frailty, our vulnerability in birth, and our transience of life on this planet. You came to die, Jesus—in our place. And that must have weighed heavy on your mother's heart as she held you. Thank you for giving us these accounts of your birth to remind us of how great You are and how much we, like helpless babies, need you in this perilous world.

Amen.

Dr. Michael A. Longinow



Scripture

Deuteronomy 10:14-21

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes.

Reflection Questions

In the passage above, Moses spoke to the Israelites about the wonders they had seen and experienced: that God rescued them and chose them to be a blessing to the world.

1. Moses encouraged the people to remember the wonders of the Lord. We can do the same. What wonders has the Lord done for people? For you?
2. According to the passage above, what is our response to wonder?
3. Is there a specific way the Lord is asking you to respond to the wonder of His love today?

“Making Room for the Victory of Christ’s Birth”

Scripture

Revelation 12:1-17

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God,
and the authority of his Messiah.

For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.

They triumphed over him
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death.
Therefore rejoice, you heavens
and you who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
because the devil has gone down to you!
He is filled with fury,
because he knows that his time is short.”

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

Reflection

by Amy Carlan

We often read Revelation as if it is a book solely about what is to come. While it is true that Revelation speaks about the future, it is largely a book about viewing the present in light of the victory that Jesus has won for us in his life, death, resurrection, and second advent or coming. The book does so by using apocalyptic literature, which the original readers would have been familiar with. This type of literature

was written in a time of great distress and used fantastic imagery, symbols, and numbers to “reveal” or “unveil” reality that cannot be readily seen with our human eyes in present circumstances. In a simple sentence, the reality that Revelation reveals is “Jesus wins!”

We see this reality unveiled in Revelation 12, which is a Christmas text. As Eugene Peterson wrote: “It is St. John’s Spirit-appointed task to supplement the work of St. Matthew and St. Luke so that the nativity cannot be sentimentalized into coziness, not domesticated into worldliness. This is not the nativity story we grew up with, but it is the nativity story all the same.” (Could you imagine a Christmas pageant using Revelation 12? That would be quite the show!) While Revelation 12 is not the normal nativity story we highlight, this undomesticated perspective on Jesus’ birth is a gift. Let’s look more closely at the text to see how this perspective is an encouragement.

John mentions two signs. A sign points beyond itself to a greater reality. First there is the pregnant woman. She “represents the entire story of God’s people, chosen to carry forward [God’s] plans for the nations and indeed the whole creation. That is why the sun, moon, and stars form her robe, her footstool, and her crown” (NT Wright). The second sign is dragon, which John tells us represents evil, or Satan. As Peterson reminds us, “Jesus’ birth excites more than wonder; it excited evil.” The dragon, faced with the potential of the Son of God being born for humanity, readied himself to devour the child to be born. Notice that John does not call the child a sign. The child is reality—Jesus incarnate, the one who will rule all nations. Thankfully, the dragon’s plans were thwarted and when the child was born, he was “snatched up to God and to his throne” which is John’s way of summarizing all of Jesus’ life, from his birth to his ascension. War ensued, but then we read the verdict in verse 9: “the great dragon was hurled down.” That accuser (verse 10)—the one who whispers that God doesn’t love us, that we aren’t worth it, that God’s ways are foolish—was hurled down (notice how many times

John uses that word. He relishes this victory!)

So, what does this fantastic, undomesticated perspective about Jesus' birth tell us about living in the present moment? Remember, Revelation is concerned with how we live as disciples today. First, it tells us that something cosmic and cataclysmic has happened through Jesus—God has faced the powers of evil, sin, and death and decidedly defeated them. At the risk of being too graphic, the death blow has been dealt. Second, this perspective helps to orient the evil, sin, and death that we still experience. John writes that when the Serpent learned of the death blow through Jesus, he was filled with fury and went after the woman and her other offspring. For the original readers, who were facing persecution for being Jesus-followers, these words must have brought such encouragement. Their suffering was not a sign that they were on the wrong side of history. As Darrell Johnson put it, “The suffering of the church in the world [was and] is not a sign of Satan’s victory. It [was and] is a sign of his realization of defeat.”

Sometimes, in our present world, it is difficult to see beyond suffering. Yet John pulls back the curtain for us so that we can see cosmic reality: Jesus has won and will win. This is true no matter what we experience. May we find the courage to be like the faithful in Revelation 12 who “hold fast their testimony about Jesus.”



Make All Things New by James Jankgent



Prayer

Jesus, you are the center of history, the Lord who reigns over the cosmos. Pull back the curtain of my everyday life and help me to see reality: that you have defeated sin, death, and evil; that you have hurled down my accuser; that you win. May I be one like the faithful in Revelation 12 who “holds fast to their testimony of Jesus.”



Spiritual Practice / Notice and Adore

See page v for a description of this practice. Use the space below to write down what you notice and prayers of adoration for this coming week.

Day	Notice <i>Where have you noticed God at work? What have you witnessed in creation?</i>	Adore <i>Write a simple prayer of adoration praising God for what you have noticed.</i>
Sunday		
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		

If you need more space to write, there are blank pages at the back of the book.

Songs

- “The Kingdom is Yours” by Common Hymnal
- “He Shall Reign Forevermore” by Matt Maher
- “Isaiah (O Come)” by The Porter’s Gate, Liz Vice, Paul Zach
- “In a Land by Death O’ershadowed” by The Porter’s Gate, Liz Vice, Paul Zach
- “O Holy Night” by Hillsdale Church
- “People Look East” by Brookhaven Presbyterian Church

Scripture

1 Thessalonians 3:13

May the Lord strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Revelation 22:20

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Reflection

Excerpt from from Dr. Cameron Lee's blog, Squinting Through Fog.

If we celebrate Black Friday and Cyber Monday, but not Advent, what does that say about us? Have we become too comfortable in our citizenship here in this world? Does Madison Avenue have more influence in defining our lives than the Bible? Do we “look forward” to the holidays, but not to the return of Christ?

My guess is that those who look forward the most to Jesus's return are the ones who also groan the most in this life. They see injustice and sin for what it is, even in the church. Sometimes, perhaps particularly, in the church. They see brokenness in their own lives and in the lives of those closest to them. And they have a vision of heaven, of paradise restored, where we no longer live under the curse. They want Jesus to come back, because they know what's really wrong, and want someone to put it right, finally, once and for all.

That would certainly seem to describe Paul. But it's not that good a description of me, at least not yet. I need more practice. And Advent seems as good a time as any. Come, Lord Jesus.

Scripture

Romans 8:18-25

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.



Prayer

Lord, we get bad news, we receive terrifying phone calls, and we read grim headlines—death is an inexorable part of our human experience; it is a covering that smothers us and blinds us. Help us to see you with eyes of faith: beautiful King, God of salvation, strength, and song. We look to you to swallow up death forever, wipe away tears, and restore your creation. Amen.

Dr. Kitty Barnhouse Purgason
The Advent Project, Biola University



Scripture

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.



The Manger by Mike Moyers

Poem

“Descending Theology – The Nativity” by Mary Karr

She bore no more than other women bore,
but in her belly’s globe that desert night the earth’s
full burden swayed.
Maybe she held it in her clasped hands as expecting women often do
or monks in prayer. Maybe at the womb’s first clutch
she briefly felt that star shine
as a blade point, but uttered no curses.
Then in the stable she writhed and heard
beasts stomp in their stalls,
their tails sweeping side to side
and between contractions, her skin flinched
with the thousand animal itches that plague
a standing beast’s sleep.
But in the muted womb-world with its glutinous liquid,
the child knew nothing
of its own fire. (No one ever does, though our names
are said to be writ down before
we come to be.) He came out a sticky grub, flailing
the load of his own limbs
and was bound in cloth, his cheek brushed
with fingertip touch
so his lolling head lurched, and the sloppy mouth
found that first fullness—her milk
spilled along his throat, while his pure being
flooded her. (Each
feeds the other.) Then he was left
in the grain bin. Some animal muzzle
against his swaddling perhaps breathed him warm
till sleep came pouring that first draught
of death, the one he’d wake from
(as we all do) screaming.



Prayer

Wonderful Counselor and mighty God, today I praise and celebrate your coming to us. It was your delight and will to dwell among us, to make room among and within us. Bathe me with the peace that you know what it is like to be human; you experienced it all. I praise you with all my soul!

Amen.



Song

- “The Light Came Down” by Josh Garrels

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14-16

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

In those days and at that time

I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called:
The Lord Our Righteous Savior.”



Prayer

Lord, we join our voices along with all of those who long for what is just and right in the world. We know you have won this victory through your birth, life, death, and resurrection and that you will bring it all to completion when you come again. Come, Lord Jesus!



Scripture

Luke 1:68

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Reflection Question

God has given us the gifts of redemption and union with Him. What gift do you want to give back to the Lord, as an act of gratitude and love?

Poem

“On the Mystery of the Incarnation” by Denise Levertov

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

Scripture

Isaiah 58:6-11

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,

with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,

then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always;

he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land

and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,

like a spring whose waters never fail.

Reflection

by Dr. Janelle Aijian of Biola University
(ccca.biola.edu/advent/2023/advent-2023-dec-31)



In the final chapters of Isaiah (58–66), a grand vision of future hope for God’s people prevails. Isaiah describes a renewed creation where the former, temporal things familiar to us will be forgotten. The eternal city of Jerusalem will flourish as years of war and suffering will be replaced with joyful worship. All earthly rulers and the governments they control will fade into oblivion. The only state that will last forever is God’s eternal kingdom, where everlasting life and unending bounty flow freely forever... Isaiah gives us a spectacular vision of Christ as the anointed conqueror and majestic king, seated on the throne at the center of a new Jerusalem, reigning over a world filled with his glory and righteousness. Isaiah paints a profound picture of the age to come, where “sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 51:1, NKJV). St. Paul and other New Testament authors quote or paraphrase Isaiah’s new creation prophecies to explain the conclusion of this earthly existence as we know it and the ushering in of the promised city of God.

Isaiah’s vision, prophesied in the eighth century BCE, pulls back the curtain on the distant future, detailing both the first coming of Christ as well as his glorious second appearance. Scholar Anthony Hoekema states that Isaiah’s vision is “the loftiest Old Testament description of the future life of the people of God.” What more wonderful way to end this year’s Advent journey than by meditating on the things that are in store for the people of God when this earthly race is finally finished? May Jesus Christ in his final advent find us attuned and ready to welcome him as King of kings and Lord of lords as we fall prostrate before him!



Prayer

Lord, We are simultaneously overwhelmed by the needs around us and insulated from them. Renew in us a commitment to walk alongside others in their suffering, to make space for their cries. Teach us how to act on behalf of others, not in order to feel better about ourselves but in order to truly set them free. May your light and your healing appear, and may we have the courage to be present to witness it.

Amen.

Dr. Carmen Joy Imes



“There is Room in My Heart for Thee”

Scripture

Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-21

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The Escape to Egypt

When [the Magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

The Return to Nazareth

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.



Escape to Egypt by Ivanka Demchuk

Reflection

by Allysen Waters

Have you noticed that Joseph does not speak even once throughout the Gospel letters? Rather, we read about Joseph's actions, which are a powerful example of faith and obedience. Joseph made room in his heart and life for following God above all else. God spoke to Joseph through dreams three distinct times, and each time, we see Joseph exemplify what it means to follow God. According to the law at the time, Joseph could have had Mary, his betrothed, stoned because of her unwed pregnancy. Even before hearing from the Lord, Joseph's plan was to "divorce her quietly," which exemplifies his character. Upon hearing from an angel of the Lord, Joseph did what the angel commanded and married Mary. Joseph then followed God to Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth, protecting and guiding his family. Joseph "is the father of Jesus not because of his seed but because of his reading and following Scripture" (Fr. David Neuhaus of Bethlehem University).

What does this particular story about Joseph show us about how God is making room among us? And how do we, in turn, make room in our hearts for Christ? **God invites and empowers us to clear anyone else's will or agenda (even our own) except His own as He reveals it to us.** Throughout the Advent story, we see other people who followed God and made room in their hearts for Him: Mary, Elizabeth, the Magi, and the shepherds all dropped their plans upon the Lord's revelation to them. How can we, in our particular lives and in the places we find ourselves, do the same? We will not always respond to God's will immediately or perfectly (there are also plenty of examples in Scripture of people who disobeyed), but even then there is redemption. God will not stop pursuing us—His birth and dwelling among us proves that. As the apostle Paul explains, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

How can the Advent story shape and sanctify us both individually and as a community of worshipers? What does it mean for our worshiping community at First Presbyterian (or whichever community you may find yourself in) to make room in our hearts, collectively, for God? As a community, are we listening to how God is speaking and moving among us? How does the Spirit want to lead and shape us in this particular time and place?

I encourage you to spend the next few moments in prayer, reflecting upon the Advent story and how God has been speaking to you this season. On the next page are some questions to guide your time. Feel free to answer them all or select the ones that stand out to you.

Advent Season Examen

The examen is a prayerful practice to help grow our ability to recognize the Lord's voice, reflect upon God's work in our lives, and look forward to what's coming next.

- What questions am I left with about the Advent story?
- What did I learn about myself in this season?
- What did I learn about God and God's character in this season?
- What stories or characters within the Advent story stood out to me?
- When did I notice God during the last several weeks (the events, the people, the highs, the lows)? Where and when did I see God working and speaking?
- What felt like a time of God's absence?
- What am I the most/least grateful for during that time?
- When did I feel a sense of love, peace, joy, life (the gifts of the Spirit)?
- When did I feel exhausted, dead, drained, angry, mean?
- What moments from that time speak to me of my deepest desires?
- Looking ahead, what do I need to ask God for? How do I think God is leading me?



Prayer

Try this prayer with hands open (see page v).

Lord God, we pray that we would reflect Your light to the world. Jesus, we praise You for the light You have shown in the darkness of our lives. We praise You for piercing the darkness of our sins, for redeeming us, forgiving us, taking our shame and turning it into honor, taking that which was dark and bringing to it dazzling light. Your life is light to us and God, we pray that You would use Your light in us to shine before others, so that people might be drawn to You through us. Help us to live lives that reflect the glorious light of Jesus so that others see it and give glory to You. God, please may it be so.

Amen.

Dr. Robin LaBarbera



Spiritual Practice / Notice and Adore

See page v for a description of this practice. Use the space below to write down what you notice and prayers of adoration for this coming week.

Day	Notice <i>Where have you noticed God at work? What have you witnessed in creation?</i>	Adore <i>Write a simple prayer of adoration praising God for what you have noticed.</i>
Sunday		
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		

If you need more space to write, there are blank pages at the back of the book.

Songs

- “Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne” by The Majesty and Glory Performers
- “May You Find A Light” by Josh Garrells
- “Wayfarers” by Tom Wuest
- “O Come O Come Emmanuel” by Paul Zach, Keiko Ying



Winston Salem, North Carolina
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