

First Congregational Church
of St. Louis

United Church of Christ

Advent 2019
Devotional



Advent 2019

Dear Friends,

The church year invites us to think about time differently. Instead of being built around calendar months, lunar cycles, or the rhythm of educational institutions, the church year is based on the major events in the life of Jesus. In this way of counting time, the first Sunday of Advent is New Years Day!

The church year always begins with a season of waiting; remembering that God's people waited a long time for the Messiah's appearance. Advent also helps us remember that God's plans for creation and for our lives unfold according to God's time frame and not our own.

Within these pages you will find a number of heartwarming stories and deep reflections on the meaning and the mystery of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Each of these devotions has been written by a member or friend or staff member of First Congregational Church. Additionally, you will find the carefully crafted words of several poets. All of these writings are meant to inspire as they help us patiently journey through the days of Advent.

My hope and prayer for each of us, is that something we read within these pages will spark ideas, build connections, and help us to more fully engage in meaningful conversation about the faith we hold dear. As these devotions speak to you, I encourage you to connect with the author and continue the conversation.

Bill Smutz
Interim/Transitional Senior Minister

December 1

A voice cries out: “Clear a path in the wilderness for YHWH! Make a straight road through the desert a highway for our God!”

ISAIAH 40:3 (The Inclusive Bible)

“Are we there yet”? a familiar refrain for any family on a shared car trip. Impatient children inquire, “Are we there yet”? In a child’s question is a clear understanding that there is an endpoint coming, hopefully soon. The season of Advent shares this expectation, there is an endpoint coming, and hopefully soon.

In churches like ours we rarely speak of an endpoint apart from very limited cases—like the end of a calendar year, or the end of the interim period. We don’t have much of a sense of God’s coming in the end.

In this regard we are like the people of Isaiah’s time. They had learned the hard way that relying on God led to disappointment. They had come to believe that they had to make it on their own. Self-reliance was the reasonable option left to them, after all “God helps those who help themselves.” It is a fairly easy step from self-reliance to not needing or expecting God.

The prophet Isaiah, through his beautiful poetry, speaks precisely to the lack of expectation in the community. A voice cries out that God is coming right through the desert. Expect it! Get ready! Hold on, things are about to change!

A wonderful gain from expecting the coming of an endpoint in the hands of God, is a new imagination for the shape of the world. Things that seem “baked in” to the way things are, suddenly are not. Persistent social ills, that are just the way it is, no longer hold sway. Pain that won’t go away, can be healed. This is not magic, it is hope. Hope in the coming of God. Expecting an endpoint when all is calm, and all is bright.

Are we there yet? No, not yet, but it is surely coming and hopefully soon.

David Greenhaw

December 2

The Pharisees asked Jesus when the reign of God would come. Jesus replied, “The reign of God doesn’t come in a visible way. You can’t say, ‘See, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

LUKE 17:20-21 (The Inclusive Bible)

It is well known among my friends, family, and colleagues that I am a Christmas junkie. There is just something about the season that fills my spirit with joy. I tried to explain it to someone the other day and I said, “It’s like this excitement from inside my body. I can’t explain it, but I feel like joy is going to burst out of me.” I am a freak for the decorations, the food, the movies, the music, the general atmosphere. It all makes me a bit giddy.

And yet... at the end of October a member of the church came up to me and said, “You know the matching Christmas dresses we have? When can we start wearing them?” I told her that while I am a huge Christmas fan, I am also a fervent believer in waiting until the appropriate time (which is the Friday after Thanksgiving) to begin celebrating the Advent/Christmas season. I did, however, tell her that I listen to Christmas music all year round.

This admission usually elicits some form of judgement, but I must admit I just can’t help myself. Now, to be fair, I listen to *good* Christmas music year round. Not the stuff you hear on the radio incessantly from Halloween till New Year’s. When people ask me how I can listen to Christmas music while laying out at the pool I tell them, “Shouldn’t I celebrate the birth of Jesus *every day*?” It’s not a popular decision... listening to Christmas music year round, but I can’t help but revel in the knowledge that Jesus came to this earth to teach us how to be and create the kingdom of God. It seems like something I should remember and celebrate every day.

As we wait in anticipation for Christmas this Advent season, remember what Luke says. “For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” Christmas is already here and you can celebrate it every day!!

Emily Stokes

December 3

A shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom: The Spirit of YHWH will rest on you – a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for YHWA. You will delight in obeying YHWH...

ISAIAH 11:1-3A (The Inclusive Bible)

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming, as men of old have sung.
It came a flowret bright, amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.*

Nothing brings Christmas home for me like music, and the simple yet lush harmonies of this traditional carol are among my favorites at Christmastime. It's a reminder of the roots from where we all come – family – and the joy our family and friends can bring us when we're together for the holidays. As Christmas approaches, we may grow weary of the Frostys and Winter Wonderlands, but it is the music of our faith traditions that can draw us in to God's presence if we take a moment to listen quietly and meditate upon them.

*This Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere;
True man, yet very God, from sin and death He saves us,
And lightens every load.*

This fourth verse, which we sometimes don't even get to when singing the hymn, is the heart of the piece for me. We may get lost in the familiarity of the second and third verses which tell the story of the birth of Jesus – Mary's Rose – and the shepherds and angels and wise men. But the fourth verse reminds us of the true gift God is giving us, and the grace he bestows upon those who follow his path.

May we all find God's spirit anew in the music this year.

Jim Kemyr

December 4

You must be ready in the same way. The Promised One is coming at the time you least expect. MATTHEW 24:44 (The Inclusive Bible)

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till... nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait

Till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's Light would not go out.

God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

~Madeleine L'Engle, "First Coming"

December 5

The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessings I promised them. JEREMIAH 33:14 (The Inclusive Bible)

The songs and stories
all suggest a breathless hush,
that time stood sacred still
the moment that the child was born
and bedded holy in the manger.
But I suspect things tramped along
in much the way they ever did.
The watch was passed at Bethlehem's gate.
Torches were doused and hearth fires
banked with sod or dung till morning.
The innkeeper called "Time" again,
and spread fresh dampened sawdust on the floor.
The maid, emptying tavern slops out back,
may just have paused a weary, hasty moment,
wondered at the more-than-lantern light
beneath the stable door,
the sudden, piercing urgency
of that infant's helpless cry.

~J. Barrie Shepherd, "Nativity"

December 6

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” LUKE 11:9 (NRSV)

Ask, search, knock. Eat, pray, love. Run (or your favorite activity), rest, repeat. Advice in three words. Long lived is the common trope, found here even coming from the mouth of the incarnate One who speaks to us in vernacular phrases, tells us confounding stories, defies, overcomes and upends every earthly and spiritual power that would contain Him and becomes the Light which illuminates our reality both in life and in death.

But who needs this kind of advice? Who needs to be told to “Ask” in order to receive, or to “search” in order to find, or to “knock” in order to gain entry? These actions are obvious to our children by the time they are toddlers. To us and our children, yes; but not so much to the poor, the marginalized, the shunned, the “others” of the third world with whom we have no personal relationship. What we know of their lives and experience we know mostly from the images on our televisions, computers and smart phones, even when they are just blocks away.

If you shop in the city you will likely see a toddler dragged by his arm through the store. If he asks his mother or father for something, like a toy or candy or simply some shiny object that has caught his eye, he is likely to be met with a slap and told to shut up. He learns not to ask. Asking is dangerous. Curiosity is dangerous. Imagination becomes unimaginable. When he gets home, he learns that to search for something to eat is futile because it is never there. He learns to do without. . .or to steal. He learns not to knock on his mother’s closed bedroom door, or the door of a neighbor. Knocking on a door in suburbia might be life threatening. There is never anything good on the other side of a door.

We may think Jesus’ advice simplistic. Would it make more sense to us if Jesus had said “I say to you, when you are feeling lost, empty or in need, get some sleep and call your therapist”? We have to go way out of our way to understand the profoundly hopeful and empowering trope, “Ask, search, knock”, from the perspective of the poor, the marginalized, the shunned, the “others” for whom those simple actions are, more often than not, off limits.

Mike McKee

December 7

Forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago! Look, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, can't you see it? I'm making a road in the desert and setting rivers to flow in the wasteland.

ISAIAH 43:18-19 (The Inclusive Bible)

The spirit is breathing.

All those with eyes to see,
women and men with ears for hearing
detect a coming dawn;
a reason to go on.

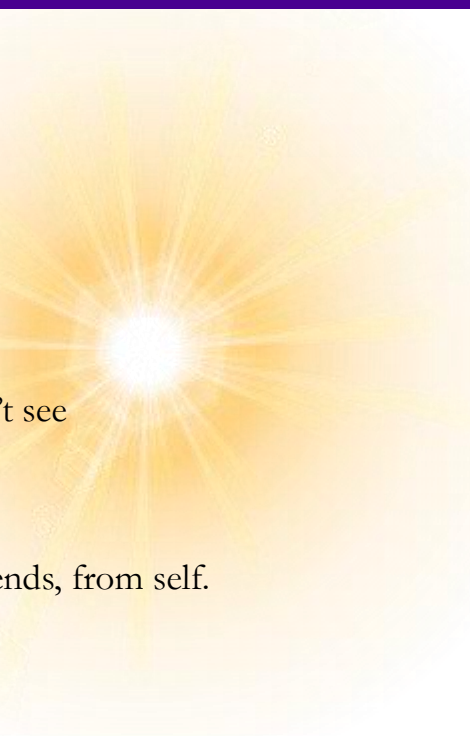
They seem small, these signs of dawn,
perhaps ridiculous.

All those with eyes to see,
women and men with ears for hearing
uncover in the night
a certain gleam of light;
they see the reason to go on.

~Dom Helder Camara, "The Spirit is Breathing"

December 8

“...Because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all peoples to see – a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.” LUKE 2:30-32 (The Inclusive Bible)



Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem
but running away.
We ought to know by now that we can't see
where we're going in the dark.
Running away is rampant...
separation is stylish:
separation from mates, from friends, from self.
Run and tranquilize,
don't talk about it,
avoid.
Run away and join the army
of those who have already run away.
When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn and face the darkness?
Only then will we be able to see
the Light of the World.

~Ann Weems, “Toward the Light”

December 9

In the last days the mountain of YHWH'S temple will be established as the most important mountain, and raised above all other hills – all nations shall stream toward it. Many people will come and say, "Come, let us climb YHWH'S mountain, to the Temple of the God of Jacob; that we may be instructed in God's ways and walk in God's paths."

ISAIAH 2:2-3A (The Inclusive Bible)

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.

We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.

Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.

In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

~Ann Weems, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places"

December 10

Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, “Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!” Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel’s greeting meant. The angel went on to say, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You’ll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus – ‘Deliverance.’”

LUKE 1:28-31 (The Inclusive Bible)

When agreeing to do this scripture assignment, I (probably flippantly) thought I could pop out a Reflection and put a checkmark on my Christmas-To-Do List (filed under: Remember to Make Christmas Religious) in a fairly quick turnaround time. Then, I opened my email from Rev. Smutz and saw this scripture staring back at me. Yikes. I was going to have to dig a bit deeper.

This verse has a vivid memory attached for me. In 2006, Rev. Ann Wilson asked me to portray Mary as this scripture was read. I was pregnant with twins and we all thought this would be cute. It was and Ann even mused “What if Jesus had been a twin?” in her response to the scripture.

A month later, the twins were born and died and our lives became divided into a Before and an After. Standing in front of the church in my blue maternity top, feeling such pride and joy, this became one of the few parenting memories that I have of the twins.

Before, everything seemed simple and things turned out for the best. Phrases such as “Everything happens for a reason” seemed fine and a nice way to comfort people. My Before faith, of the “if I go to church and am a kind person, then God will send good things my way” variety, was tested and shaken. In the hours after we learned that I would deliver the twins months too early, I prayed my hardest prayers to God and for some reason thought that He was some sort of Genie who could grant wishes. In our After, I took refuge in the thought that God was just as sorrowful as we were in the twins’ death. Having lived an embarrassingly charmed life up until that point, it hit me that God does not control bad things happening. In this After, I began the journey to forgive God and to learn and accept how grief can live alongside my faith.

Jennifer Garrison Brown

December 11

Instruction will be given from Zion, and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations, and render decisions for many countries. They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation will not raise the sword against another, and never again will they train for war. ISAIAH 2:3B-4 (The Inclusive Bible)

When I was a kid, my older brother Zach and I would often turn household objects and discarded items into musical instruments. Our favorite instrument to make was a guitar, usually crafted from an old shoebox and rubber bands. We didn't have real guitars, but we could sure make them when we wanted to play some music. It just took a little creativity.

I'm sure many of us look at the world around us and think, "Surely this is not what God intends." I know I do. We sit behind computer or cellphone screens flinging insults at people we don't agree with. People in our own city, our state, our country, our world, continue to go without the basic necessities of life. We slap labels on people we don't understand. Instruments designed for the purpose of killing human beings continue to be readily available. We listen to the loudest voices, the ones with the most power, and ignore those on the margins. We refuse to address systems of oppression and racism. We lose sight of the image of God in one another.

In this scripture from Isaiah, I hear God calling us to more creativity. Jesus showed us what it's like to live a life of creativity, moving toward God's vision for our world. He interrupted the status quo and turned society on its head. Can we do the same?

We celebrate Advent and Christmas every year, reminding ourselves of the light of Christ, which still shines so brightly. As we prepare our hearts this Advent, I pray that this light ignites the creativity within us to begin beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks.

Hannah Rice

December 12

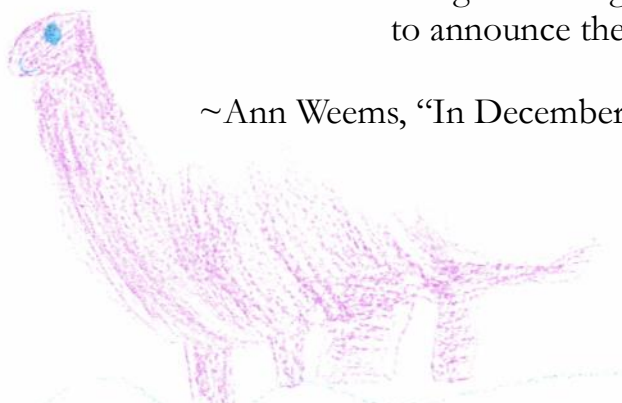
“...His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God. God will give Jesus the judgment seat of David, his ancestor, to rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end.”

LUKE 1:32-33 (The Inclusive Bible)



The whole world waits in December darkness
for a glimpse of the Light of God.
Even those who snarl “Humbug!”
and chase away the carolers
have been seen looking toward the skies.
The one who declared he never would forgive
has forgiven,
and the those who left home
have returned,
and even wars are halted,
if briefly,
as the whole world looks starward.
In the December darkness
we peer from our windows
watching for an angel with rainbow wings
to announce the Hope of the World.

~Ann Weems, “In December Darkness”



Isaiah friend of Owen Solomon

December 13

Then the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the lion cub will graze together, and a little child will lead them. ISAAH 11:6 (The Inclusive Bible)



I love the weeks leading to Christmas. It's my favorite time of year. The light has an ethereal quality. There is anticipation and excitement in the air. There is the promise of something much bigger than us. There should be a feeling of peace and remembrance of happy and carefree times.

But sometimes that feeling of peace is not there. Seeing extended family and old friends can be such a joy, but it can also feel like a burden. Sometimes I even dread seeing those folks who differ from my world views and ways of being. Maybe I even feel that I have to pretend to be someone else just to keep the peace and avoid conflict or uncomfortable conversations.

As I reflect on this Scripture, I think of the great divisiveness in the world today. People are hurting and it can be easier to blame someone else, or some other group, for that suffering and turn against them rather than turning toward God. Maybe this scripture is to remind us to always look to Jesus when we face our inevitable battles. He will keep us centered and in His peace if we let Him. Wishing you a wonder-filled holiday season.

Mark Barlow

December 14

As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy." LUKE 1:41-44 (The Inclusive Bible)

The moment most mothers feel the first movement of their unborn child is often remembered for a lifetime as a magnificent and magical experience. We remember where we were, who we were with, what was happening. It is the moment many of us fully realized that a miracle was truly happening; a new little spirit was inhabiting our bodies.

How extraordinary for Elizabeth to have experienced that moment in the presence of Mary, and to realize that Mary was to be the mother of the Messiah!

God works in mysterious ways and God's love is ever present. Allowing ourselves to accept the wonder of God's presence in our lives opens us to the miracles of God's love.



Anne Chao

December 15

“As for you, Bethlehem in Ephrathah,” says YHWH, “small as you are among Judah’s clans, from you will come a ruler for me over Israel, one whose goings out are from times long past, from ancient days.”

MICAH 5.1 (The Inclusive Bible)

One of the longest-lasting gifts I have received over the years is that of a subscription to Guideposts magazine, founded by Norman Vincent Peale of The Power of Positive Thinking fame, from an aunt with whom I had, shall we say, a sometimes rocky relationship. Despite our differences, we both found value in this magazine, which some years later, started publishing a daily devotional, to which I’ve maintained a subscription for over twenty years. The writers are willing to expose themselves in a way I’m usually far too reticent to do but I’ll see what I can expose with this literary effort. If they’re willing to lay themselves out to become an “old friend” who am I to not try to do likewise?

The text I have is from the “minor” prophet Micah and is, except for its final phrase, essentially a foreshadowing of the oft-invoked Christmas-time text at Luke 2:6. At the level I can operate as I write, this seems to be one of many instances one finds of promises that the small shall be significant, the lame walk and so forth. This is also, unusually, a prophecy which has literally come true. How many more are there which are not so obvious examples of what Mark Twain (hardly a Bible-thumper!) would have described as history not repeating but surely rhyming some? Or how many prayers are answered not in perhaps precisely the manner one would have expected or wanted?

Regardless, the most important thing is that greatness (or significance) can issue forth from small places of things. Do not sell the seemingly minor short.

Bill Piper

December 16

Mary said, “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly of servant... Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you.

LUKE 1:46-47B, 50 (The Inclusive Bible)

My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant’s plight, and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest. Could the world be about to turn?

Refrain: *My heart shall sing of the day you bring.*
 Let the fires of your justice burn.
 Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
 And the world is about to turn!

Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me,
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame, and to those who would for you yearn,
You will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the world is about to turn.

Refrain.

From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears ev’ry tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn;
There are tables spread, ev’ry mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.

Refrain.

Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast:
God’s mercy must deliver us from the conqueror’s crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound,
‘Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.

Refrain.

~Rory Cooney, “Canticle of the Turning”

December 17

Your reign is a reign for all the ages, and your dominion endures from generation to generation. PSALM 145:13 (The Inclusive Bible)

Christ climbed down
from His bare Tree
this year
and softly stole away into
some anonymous Mary's womb again
where in the darkest night
of everybody's anonymous soul
He awaits again
an unimaginable
and impossibly
Immaculate Reconciliation
the very craziest
of Second Comings

~Lawrence Ferlinghetti, excerpt from "Christ Climbed Down"

December 18

“...And the child will be named Immanuel,” – a name that means “God is with us.” MATTHEW 1.23B (The Inclusive Bible)

When I think about Jesus being “God with us,” I think about two different things.

First, that God became - and is - embodied. Before Jesus, God was not embodied. And in Jesus’ incarnation, God becomes embodied. When I hear anti-body messaging like “Your body is too [fat, skinny, ugly, wrinkled]” - or see folks spouting off theological views that make bodies a footnote, I remember: It isn’t a footnote that God is embodied. Jesus didn’t **have** to be embodied - and there are so many instances where God has appeared to people as a spirit, a voice, a wind. But God chose to become embodied. And in doing that, the One who is all goodness, shows that bodies, in their very essence, are Good.

Second, I think about experiencing and living into the radical belief that all people are “God with us.” How could I say that all people are God with us? I say that because we all are made in God’s image. Every one of us - the stinkers and the saints, or as my little one puts it, the ones making “bad choices” and the ones making “good choices.” All of us are “God with us.” That means you, and that means me.

Sarah Bereza

December 19

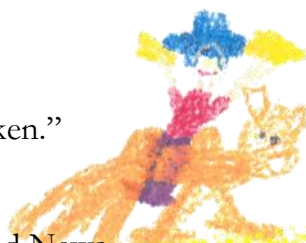
Go up on a high mountain, you who bring good news to Zion! Shout with a loud voice with strength, you who bring good news to Jerusalem! Shout without fear, and say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' YHWH, O Sovereign One, you come with power, and rule with a strong arm! You bring your reward with you, and your reparation comes before you. Like a shepherd you feed your flock, gathering the lambs and holding them close, and leading mother ewes with gentleness. ISAIAH 40:9-11 (The Inclusive Bible)



Go up to the high mountain.
Go up above the shadows into the Light.
Go where your eyes see far enough:
Salvation coming to the shattered people.
Go up to the high mountain.
Lift up your voice!
Shout down to the valleys:
"Though the grass withers
and the flowers fade,
the Promise will not be broken."

Look east to Bethlehem!
Do not be afraid to tell Good News.
Speak tenderly with words of strength:
"Messiah comes.
Your God is here!"

~David Beebe, "The Promise"



Owen Solomon

December 20

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. The angel of God appeared to them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were sore afraid. The angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior – the Messiah – who is Christ the Lord.”

LUKE 2:8-11, adapted

In my favorite Christmas special, Charlie Brown asks, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” The older kids all “know” that Christmas is a commercial racket run by an East Coast syndicate, but one of the littlest kids, Linus, knows what Christmas is all about. He relates the King James translation of this passage, in what became known in our house as the “Book of Linus”. The words “sore afraid” provided us with hours of amusement, and to me, this passage became what Christmas was all about. It still is.

When God chose to bring the Messiah to us, the message was not delivered to Kings and Queens. It was not delivered to the High Priests or Temple Scribes. The good news was delivered to the shepherds, and likely the lowest ranking shepherds who were charged with the night watch of the flocks. I don’t think it is a coincidence that Charles Schultz chose to present the meaning of Christmas through Linus, who is not only a young child, but also plays a shepherd in the Christmas play.

It makes sense to me that the message of Christ’s birth was announced first to the shepherds. Christmas is the embodiment of the love of God for all people. This message is simple. It doesn’t need proclamations, embellishments, or interpretation. Perhaps, it can be best understood by the simplest among us, like the shepherds and the children. During this time of year, I try to simplify my thoughts, and focus on the true message of Christmas: love.

David Piston

December 21

Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in high heaven! And on earth, peace to those on whom God’s favor rest!” LUKE 2:13-14 (The Inclusive Bible)

Our God is the One who comes to us
in a burning bush,
in an angel’s song,
in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found
locked in the church,
not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be
with no constraints,
no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,
and destruction has no power
and even death cannot stop
the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,
but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready
God will come
even to a godforsaken place
like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch...
for you know not when
God comes.

Watch, that you might be found
whenever
wherever
God comes.

~Ann Weems, “The Coming of God”

December 22

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see this event that God has made known to us.” They hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. LUKE 2:15-16 (The Inclusive Bible)

Many of us hold Luke’s familiar recounting as a stand-alone story, something to read and share only in December. But the story of the first Christmas is a Bible verse like any other. Put in that broader context, the story reinforces the lessons of faith offered throughout the Bible. The shepherds serve as our surrogates in the re-telling, placing us inside the nativity scene. We often focus on and get lost in their wonder and amazement — at the angels from on high, at the magi from far away, at the star up above.

Luke doesn’t stop at wonder and amazement, though. He tells us what the shepherds do in response to what they heard the angels proclaim. The shepherds depart immediately, taking action to follow God’s word. The shepherds leave behind their flock and their families, making sacrifices to live God’s love. And the shepherds celebrate the birth of Jesus, accepting the gift of God’s grace in a complete stranger, a baby in a lowly manger.

In the Christmas story, the shepherds breathe life into the tenets of faith echoed again and again in the New Testament:

Galatians 3:2 *I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?*

1 John 3:18 *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but with action and truth.*

James 2:18 *But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

2 Corinthians 12:9 *But God said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*

As we make our way through another Advent season, seek out a faith as persistent as the faith displayed the shepherds. Follow God’s word in action. Live God’s love in sacrifice. Accept God’s grace in others.

Grant Wiens

December 23

After their audience with the ruler, they set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star.

MATTHEW 2:9-10 (The Inclusive Bible)

A star shone in heaven
brighter than all the stars,
and its light was ineffable,
and its novelty caused astonishment;
all the other stars
together with sun and moon
became a chorus for the star,
and it outshone them all with its light;
and there was perplexity (as to) whence (came)
this novelty (so) unlike them.
Thence was destroyed all magic,
and every bond vanished;
evil's ignorance was abolished,
the old kingdom perished,
God being revealed as human
to bring newness of eternal life,
and what had been prepared by God
had its beginning;
hence all things were disturbed
because the destruction of death was being worked out.

~Ignatius of Antioch



December 24

For a child is born to us, a heir is given us; upon whose shoulders dominion will rest. This one shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Strength of God, Eternal Protector, Champion of Peace. ISAIAH 9:6 (The Inclusive Bible)

The birth of a child is a transformational time in everyone's life. Most impacted are the parents of course but the impact will ripple through the family and even the community. If you are a parent, you have a firsthand account of the miracle that children bring. But you don't have to birth children to feel that miracle. Families are made up in all colors and groups.

In the life of the church, there is often a village approach to rearing children. I experienced that personally growing up in the church. The older generation became surrogate grandparents and my confirmation peers, my siblings. It is the community that I hope my children will experience as they grow in the church.

While not every child is the Messiah, we wish upon them the "strength of God", that they will be surrounded by "eternal protectors" in their lives and be "champions of peace" in the world. During this time of year, when the stresses of the holiday can overshadow the true meaning of the holiday, I pray for patience and grace to keep what really matters first and to act from my heart when my head starts to forget.

Chelsea Jafe



December 25

The people walking in darkness are seeing brilliant light – upon those who dwell in a land of deep shadows, light is shining.

ISAIAH 9:2 (The Inclusive Bible)

Jesus as light is one of the primary images of Christmas. God sends Jesus into a dark world to bring light, which in turn begins to bring order out of the chaos of darkness!

As a child I was always intrigued by the glow of the candles which my family would light each Sunday evening during Advent. Their lumens were nowhere near as great as the overhead lights in our house, or even the colored bulbs on the Christmas tree. Yet, to me, the tiny flickering lights of the candles on the Advent wreath commanded attention! These ordinary lights symbolized God's extraordinary concern... hope...peace...joy...love for the world. While these big symbolic metaphors were way more than I could comprehend or appreciate as a child, the attention we paid to them as a family helped me to realize they are important! Knowing that Jesus is a source of light that makes the darkness easier to see in, and easier to exist in, also helped me know that Jesus is worth my paying attention to!

It feels like there is so much darkness in our world most days. Knowing that God sent us Jesus so that the darkness never overcomes, never wins... is a gift I treasure and rely on more and more each day.

Take a few moments to light a candle today, and enjoy its glow, and celebrate the places where Jesus is bringing light to your life. Merry Christmas!

Bill Smutz

Poetry:

“Nativity” by J. Barrie Shepherd: from “Faces at the Manger”

“The Coming of God” by Ann Weems: from “Kneeling in Bethlehem”

“In Search of Kneeling Places” by Ann Weems: from “Kneeling in Bethlehem”

“Toward the Light” by Ann Weems: from “Kneeling in Bethlehem”

“The Spirit is Breathing” by Dom Helder Camara: from “Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 1” edited by Kenneth T. Lawrence

“First Coming” by Madeleine L’Engle: from “Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 1” edited by Kenneth T. Lawrence

“Canticle of the Turning” by Rory Cooney: GIA Publications, Inc., 1990.

“The Promise” by David Beebe: from 2008 Christmas Fund Worship Resources, The Pension Boards, United Church of Christ, Inc.



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Christmas Eve

At First Congregational Church of St. Louis

5:00 PM CHILD-FRIENDLY WORSHIP SERVICE

This service is designed and appropriately timed for young children, and the child in all of us. We'll sing favorite carols, experience the Christmas story, and the service will end with the warm glow of candlelight or glow sticks for the children.

9:45 PM FESTIVE PRELUDE

The prelude ahead of our Lessons & Carols service will feature festive music on the organ.

10:00 PM LESSONS & CAROLS WORSHIP SERVICE

This traditional service includes beautiful choral music, favorite carols, and the reading of scripture. Singing "Silent Night" in the warm glow of candlelight will conclude the service.