

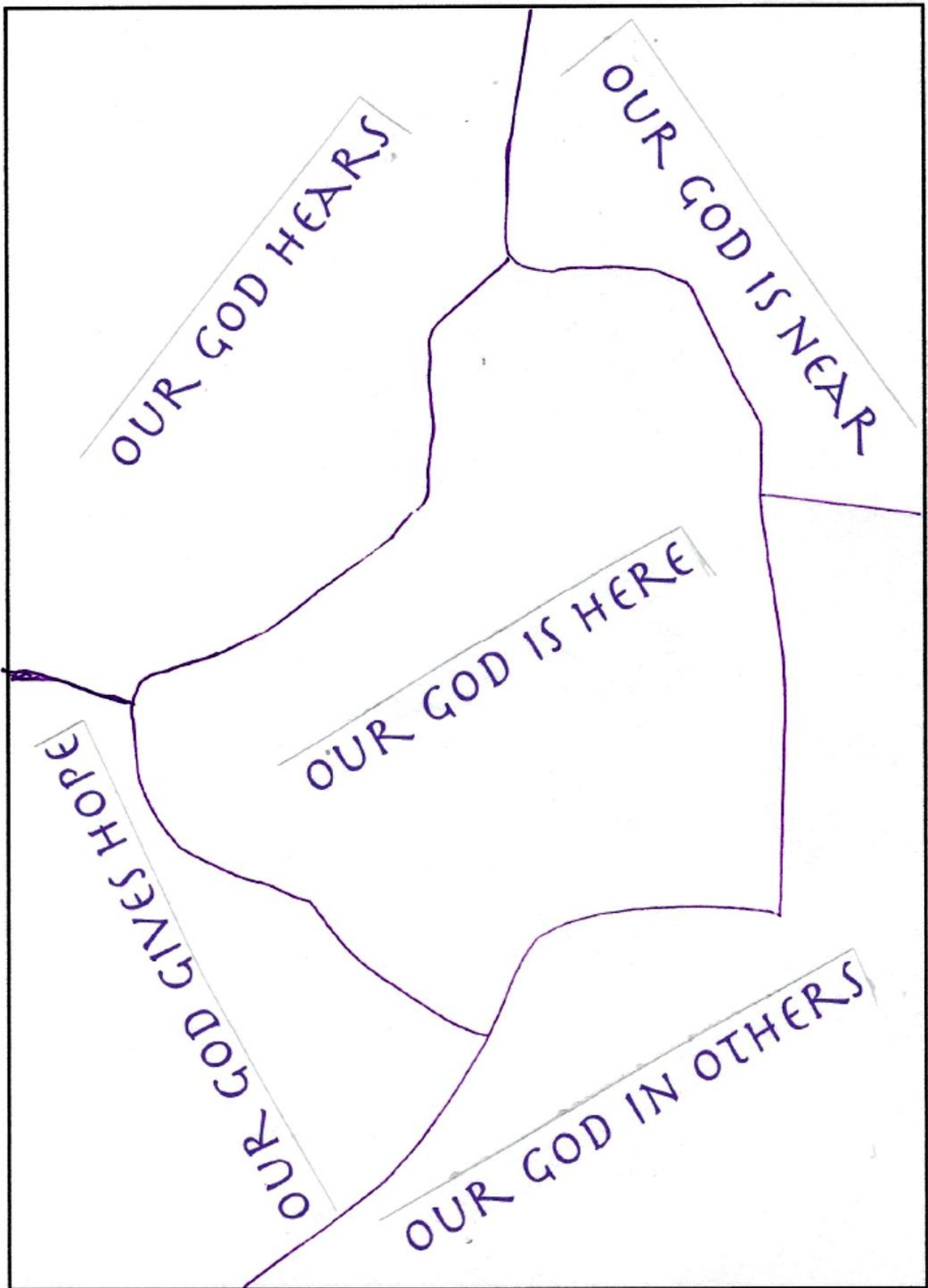
# JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS

ADVENT 2021



COMPILED BY REV. SUSAN ROSENBAUM  
EDITED BY GAIL WILSON  
ART WORK BY PAT ADAMSON HOVIS-FRENCH





## **Advent 2021**

### **Journey Toward Wholeness**

Last year at this time, we were looking forward to things being back to normal early in 2021. That did not become a reality. Instead, we approach another Advent season facing the realities of a world still caught in the grips of a changing virus, resulting in a similar number of cases and deaths as our 2020 Advent season. In the midst of this pandemic, we are discovering long held social injustices that need to be addressed as well as a lack of kindness even in everyday life. It seems that this world has lost its desire to really care about one another. We have become more interested in what we can do for ourselves than how we can care for those who are in need. It seems like the world we have desired as followers of Christ is broken and fragmented and we despair that we may never experience the Kingdom of God in the middle of this mess. And yet, we are called to celebrate the waiting, to take the time to do something different and love in ways we may not have imagined before. How do we approach and celebrate Advent in such a world?

I invite you to join the Journey Toward Wholeness. The devotions in this journey are provided by female PC(USA) clergy, both Teaching Elders and Commissioned Ruling Elders. These women are from diverse backgrounds, live all over the country and work with many different ministries. Each devotion comes from the heart of a woman who loves God and seeks to share that love with others. My hope is that you will be inspired by their different perspectives as each day we are carried one step closer to the wholeness we desire.

The front cover of the book depicts the five pieces of our brokenness and fragmentation that will be our Journey Toward Wholeness. Each week we will cut out and add a piece of the puzzle to the frame provided on page 2, with the final piece being added on Christmas Day. We know that the journey will not end with Christmas Day, but will continue for the rest of our lives, yet I am hoping that this journey leads each of us closer to the One who makes us whole, Jesus, our Savior.

Each week has a focus, and you are encouraged to discover how the devotions speak to you in the midst of that focus.

Week one:	Our God Is Near.
Week two:	Our God Hears.
Week three:	Our God Gives Hope.
Week four:	Our God in Others.
Christmas Day:	Our God Is Here.

Thank you for choosing this devotional book for your Journey Toward Wholeness during this Advent Season. May you be blessed through your participation.

**The artwork** for this project comes from Pat Adamson Hovis-French, a friend and colleague from St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Kimberling City, Missouri where she is currently serving as a Ruling Elder and Clerk of Session. I want to thank her for her hard work and patience with me as we put this project together. Pat has this to say about herself:



*It warms my heart to share my art with you! In this autumn of my life (I've now entered my 8th decade), I aspire to finally fulfill my early childhood dream of being an artist when I grow up! I let myself get side-tracked by marriage, children, divorce, remarriage, more children, etc. The "dream" went on hold, but never died. I pursued multiple degrees at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) during the 33 plus years I worked there and discovered that, in addition to art, I had passions for researching issues related to women and work and helping women and other minorities realize their potential. Joining the Table Rock Art Guild (TRAG) when I moved to Kimberling City in 2004 was a turning point in my journey along the Artist's Way. Taking classes from fellow TRAG members showed me new ways to look at things and encouraged me to just keep painting. The diverse paths I've taken along the way have all helped grind the lens through which I experience the world and shape the way my artistic efforts are evolving. I used to think that "art" was a very solitary pursuit. With the wisdom of advanced years, however, and after experiencing the joy and hilarity of joint artistic efforts with my TRAG buddies," I realize that true art must be shared to be appreciated!*

*Patricia Adamson Hovis-French, aspiring artist*

I would like to thank the 26 women who contributed to this Advent Devotional when I felt led by God to do this project. When I contacted most of you in July, your eagerness to be a part of this project was the confirmation I needed to make it a reality. Your faith and faithfulness were an inspiration to me as I compiled this book.

I would also like to thank Gail Wilson, who edited and helped me put together the final project. Her expertise in all things printed was a blessing throughout the process.

The Reverend Susan Rosenbaum

November 28, 2021

By *The Reverend Melana Scruggs*



**Read Isaiah 64:1-4, 8-9**

There is so much chaos, fear, and concern in the world and in our individual lives and sometimes we think we are at a new low in the history of humanity. We only have to look at Scripture to realize that humanity repeats its mistakes over and over again, never seeming to learn the lessons of the past.

In the last eleven chapters of Isaiah, the prophet is speaking to the people who returned from Babylon after Cyrus allowed them to go back to rebuild the Temple. What happens instead is they begin to set up their own homes, farms, vineyards, and businesses, but fail to pay attention to the call to restore the Temple. Throughout the last chapters of Isaiah, we see the chaos that comes when people think they can get by without listening to God, when they focus only on personal gain, and when corruption is the order of the day. Sound familiar? Different time and place, same kind of story.

We come, then to the passage in the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter, in which the prophet is asking God to act decisively, as God did in former times. The prophet thinks that the people will only listen if God will break open the heavens and come down with power like an earthquake or fire. The world cannot be renewed by the people who live in it, but only by the mighty acts of God, and the prophet is asking for God to begin that renewal. Isaiah ends the passage with a more soothing reminder that we are the clay and that God is the potter, the One who can create and make all things new. An ever-important reminder of whose we are and how much God loves us.

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of watching, a time of preparation. We read this passage of Isaiah and we know that the world continues to find itself in chaos, under the power of fear, greed, distrust, and faithlessness.

We want God to come and as we wait during Advent, we realize that God has broken open the heavens and come down to earth – not in earthquake or fire, but in the form of a tiny baby, born with no place to sleep but a manger. Jesus was born into the very chaos in which we live.

He experienced the pain of loss and loneliness. He and his family knew what it was like to have no place to call home. He understood the many things that separate us from God’s love and imprison us in pain of our own making. Jesus knows all the fears and concerns that we have today.

We do live in the midst of the chaos, but we do not live here alone – God has broken into the world so that we know that the chaos is not all there is. As we begin this journey into wholeness in the season of Advent, God meets us right where we are and invites us to move out of the fear and chaos and come into the presence of God. We don’t have to wait, God is here. In the coming days, look for the places where you see God at work, notice it, and then join in it.

**Prayer:**

God of hope, who shapes us and molds us with love and compassion, open our hearts to see where you are at work in the midst of the chaos. Inspire us to join you in that work as part of our journey to wholeness, for ourselves and for your world. Amen.

*Melana Scruggs is the General Presbyter in Peace River Presbytery in Southwest Florida. She has served churches in Oklahoma, Florida, and Missouri. She was previously the Stated Clerk and Governance Presbyter in John Calvin Presbytery and the Stated Clerk in Cincinnati Presbytery. She lives in Punta Gorda and enjoys walking, kayaking, and reading.*

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**November 29, 2021**

**By The Reverend Dr. Peggy Jo Wobbema**

**Read Isaiah 2:2-3**

Advent—the journey begins. But what will this journey look like to you? Will it be one of scurrying about, anxious about the holiday to come, stressing over holiday activities; or will this season be one of spiritual anticipation? It is so crucial, at this time in in our personal lives, to slow ourselves down both internally and externally so that we might hear the voice of Spirit speaking to the depths of our being. What will you do to quiet yourself during Advent? What will you do to enhance your ability to hear the Spirit of God speaking to your heart? Only you can answer these questions and it is important that you take the time to think it through. Perhaps as Advent goes forward you would choose to journal your goals of quieting and listening during this time. What do you want the Lord to do in your heart and life during Advent? As you quiet yourself and listen, how will you walk out what you hear?

Advent—coming--waiting! As we embark on this fresh opportunity of faith, a journey to not only enrich ourselves spiritually but to realize that what we do personally at this time will have an impact on those around us. Let us, as Paul writes in Colossians 3, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and to set our minds on those same things.

My prayer for all is that this Advent will be a time of refreshing and not exhaustion as we embark on this sweet journey of dwelling in the loving presence of Immanuel—God with us!

**Prayer:**

Immanuel, the God who is with us, help us during this Advent season to quiet ourselves and hear your voice clearly. Refresh us during this time of waiting. Amen.

*The Reveremd Dr. Peggy J. Wobbema is the pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Shell Knob, Missouri. She began serving Trinity in May of 2016. Shell Knob is a small community in Southern Missouri, located on Table Rock Lake. Pastor Peggy loves the outdoors and finds its renewing graces to enhance her ministry and well-being. Peggy serves on the Board of the Alliance of Churches and is an active member of the local Lions Club.*

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**November 30, 2021**

**By The Reverend Jennifer Dawson**

**Read James 5:15-16 ESV**

What would it mean to be whole? I usually think in medical terms when I imagine wholeness simply because medicine today is so divided. We see a separate doctor for each system of our bodies. The doctors are rarely able to take the time to consult with one another. This leads us to missing wholeness in our bodies. Our lungs may be doing well but our kidneys are not. We fight to keep our blood sugar low but inadvertently take medicines that raise it. Wholeness in our bodies is a balancing act that requires a great deal of conversation.

Wholeness in our society requires conversations as well. We cannot retreat to separate corners and shout slogans at one another if we want to journey toward wholeness. We must find ways to talk to one another. We must find some way to listen even when we hear things we do not like.

The world is a mess. We know that. We don't even need social media sites admitting they are working to tear us apart to know that. We can talk to our friends and quickly realize there are more topics off limits than ever. We cannot discuss politics or religion or healthcare or employment.

I don't care for life as it is. I am tired of people being angry. I am tired of having to pass this or that person's test of proper thought. We were not meant to live in segregated worlds where those who believe in one thing cannot speak to those who believe differently. We are meant to live in community.

We are meant to have conversations that cause us to carefully consider what we believe. If at the end of the conversation we still understand things differently, that's ok. We have spoken to one another and learned from the life of another. When we refuse to converse with people who see things differently, we lose the ability to grow in wisdom.

James was well known for his wisdom. His letter in the New Testament is full of practical advice for believers. He said that the prayer of the righteous person "availeth much". God hears our prayers. God responds to our prayers. If we want the world to change, to move toward wholeness, then we must pray. Pray that God's amazing love would be known by all people. Pray that our hearts would be soft and wiling to hear opposing opinions. Pray that the walls we have constructed between ourselves would be lowered so we can hear the voices of others who pray as well. Perhaps by praying together we will hear the voice of God in response.

**Challenge:**

My challenge to you today is to engage in a difficult conversation. Try to hear the point of view of someone who disagrees with you. (Don't subject yourself to someone who dismisses your worth as a person. That is not a difficult conversation. That is opening yourself to abuse.)

**Prayer:**

Sovereign God whose love for us is limitless, we call to you this advent. Help us to hear the words of those who disagree with us. Help us to find ways to bridge divides. Grant us the ability to guard our boundaries while challenging the comfort of complete agreement. Be with those who are ill in mind, body, or spirit. Send your healing Spirit to bring wholeness to our broken bodies and broken world. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

*The Reverend. Jennifer Dawson is pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Parsons, Kansas. She traveled a long road to becoming a PC(USA) minister. She has been a teacher, a principal, and a missionary to motorcyclists. Her denominational background is vast. Her passion is uniting people of diverse backgrounds to do the work of God in the world. She lives with her three overly pampered dogs, a malcontent cat, a hedgehog and a teenage daughter on a little plot of land she is working to transform into a place of rest and feeding.*

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**December 1, 2021**

**By The Reverend Diane Cooke**

**Read Philippians 4:5-7**

As a kid growing up in Texas, I remember that adults might comment about someone, "They aren't having much Christmas this year." It seemed a strange thing to say, so I asked my parents about it. They explained that for some folks there was great sickness, great sadness, or loss. Maybe money was tight, so the family wasn't planning a big Christmas. They just didn't feel like it, or they couldn't afford it. For whatever reason, it wasn't possible.

Last year was like that. The pandemic affected travel and made in-person gathering risky to our health." This year," we say, "it will be different! We'll have a big Christmas!" It is December 1<sup>st</sup>, and the world around us is launching a countdown to December 25<sup>th</sup>, and the temptation is to join the frantic planning, decorating, and shopping. Let me just say that a "big" Christmas does not require that.



1. May we...*travel at the pace of Advent*. Day by day. Week by week. Advent has a pace that is slow. It is the opposite to our culture's holiday rush. As Paul says, "The Lord is near", so we can go slow.
2. Each day may we remember to... *pray*. Read the scriptures and reflect on God's gifts to us. Give thanks.
3. Take time to...*seek God's peace*. Create space in your day. Allow time. Remember the words to the carol, "Let every heart prepare Him room!"

Let's make it a big Christmas, but not by crushing so many activities into our calendar that we get overwhelmed, overdrawn, or exhausted by the 25<sup>th</sup>. May we prepare a larger space in our lives, in our hearts, so that Christ may be born anew in us. How can there be a bigger Christmas blessing than that?

**Challenge:**

Make a prayer garland. Cut 24 slips of paper for a paper chain. Use construction paper or holiday gift wrap. Beginning today, 12/1, write the name of a person, family, group of people, or helping organization, on one slip. Pray that God will be with them and bless them. Each day add a new slip with a new name and take time to pray for them.

**Prayer:**

Lead us out of darkness into the light of your grace. Help us to move at the pace of Advent, and to pray each day for our brothers and sisters as we prepare for Christ's birth anew. Amen.

*Diane Cooke grew up in Beaumont, Texas, but lives now in West Plains, Missouri. She is the part-time pastor at Willow Springs Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, Mountain View, Missouri. She has always enjoyed Christmas and finds more meaning in Advent each year.*

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**December 2, 2021**

**By Phyllis Winzenried, CLP**

**Read Luke 1:30**

Mary was an ordinary girl, leading an ordinary life, living in an ordinary community. There is nothing to indicate that she was especially pretty, extra smart or had more money than anyone else. She was just an ordinary girl ... living life one day at a time. So ... what of the fact that she found "favor" with God?

As I looked through the Bible, I found several accounts of individuals who found favor with God. "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." (Gen. 6:8). "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering." (Gen 4:4). Moses: "I know you by name and you have found favor with me." (Ex 33:12) "And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people." (1 Sam 2:26) Likewise "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52)

Granted, Jesus preached, healed, taught and loved, still he lived a rather ordinary life, as did each of the others, including Mary. None of them had any special qualifications, extraordinary gifts or abilities, wealth ... any of the qualities we might equate with finding favor. Yet, in finding favor, delight in God's eyes, they each did something extraordinary.

As I think about the Mary's joy in finding favor in the eyes of the Lord, she must have also pondered the responsibility that favor brought to her. My pondering this Advent comes as I wonder: have I found favor in the eyes of the Lord? Have I willingly accepted the favor of the Lord and willingly taken the responsibility that comes with that favor?

As you think about the joy and responsibility of finding the favor of the Lord in your life, think also about the fact that the joy and responsibility that Mary accepted in giving birth to Jesus is your saving grace.

*Phyllis Winzenried, CLP describes herself like this:*

*I am a child of God. Born an Illinois farm girl, the oldest of 6, I graduated from high school in Boulder, Colorado. I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University and a PHT (Put Hubby Through) from Austin Seminary, Austin Texas. I have been married to Dennis for 47 years, have 2 sons, 2 daughters by marriage and 3 grandchildren. I enjoy preaching God's Word, my family, quilting, scrapbooking, reading, and making penny jewelry for Copper Coin.*

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**December 3, 2021**

**by *The Reverend Susan Rosenbaum***

**Read Mark 9:36-37**

Five and a half years ago, my husband and I began a new adventure. We began classes to become foster parents. It was the beginning of a journey that continues to this day. I can say that being a foster parent has been an eye-opening experience. We have been challenged, delighted, loved, confused, and frustrated just to name a few of the emotions on this journey. The most difficult part of being a foster parent was understanding the whole process of fostering. I admit that our view of fostering was a lot different than actually being a foster parent. From the very beginning of our first placement at the end of June 2018, our view was skewed by a system that may not exactly be well oiled, to say the least. Everything takes time and tons of paperwork, and lots of patience. And many times, the foster parents and the caseworkers have different ideas of ideal outcomes. In our case, reunification did not turn out to be an option and our two little boys are now with a loving family who will be adopting them. But, in the end, it is all about what is best for the children.

Then, just as we were ending our placement, COVID became a major issue. We did not really realize how much of an issue until we received another placement in September, a year and a half later. Because of the virus, an already backed up court system became almost nonfunctional, and cases were delayed months, and sometimes even more than a year. And those that suffered the most were the children. Their lives were put on hold until things could be worked out. COVID forced offices to close, courts to have only essential personnel, and parents (both foster and biological) to wonder if cases would ever be resolved. Caseworkers now have an increase in the number of cases they had before because there is a lack of qualified caseworkers. They also have more paperwork, more visits, and more court dates. And they are expected to get it done in the same amount of time as they did before COVID. An overloaded system is limping along, now broken and fragmented.

Yet in the midst of all this fragmentation, there is still hope. Our baby girl still gets to see her mom every week and the bond between them is growing stronger every day. Reunification is the goal of every case, and it is happening even though it is taking longer. The whole process can be successful. Parents can have a second chance and children can be loved and cherished while their parents work on life and parenting skills. What I see in all of this is that giving parents an opportunity to have a "do over" is something I believe Jesus supports. None of us are perfect and Jesus gives us opportunities to do things over on a regular basis. It is up to us to support those efforts in any way we can.

Our challenge during this Advent season is to become involved. Prayer is needed for parents, caseworkers, foster parents, judges, clerks, and all other personnel involved in the foster system. Support

is needed for biological parents as they seek to become better parents for their children. Support is also needed for foster parents, who are willing to take a placement on a moment's notice, as they love and protect the children entrusted to their care. I encourage each of you to also get to know someone in the foster system personally and help them understand that even in the midst of this broken and fragmented system, they are appreciated for all they do.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, in the midst of a broken and hurting world, we are seeking the wholeness that comes from knowing, loving and following our Savior. Help us open our eyes to see the needs in the foster care system so that we can encourage them and help them in any way we can so they may achieve their goals of loving the little children. Amen.

*The Reverend Susan Rosenbaum is an Honorably Retired pastor in the PC(USA). She has served smaller rural churches in southwest Missouri and southeast Kansas and retired from the position of Pastoral Presbyter of John Calvin Presbytery. Presently she and her husband, Randy, are fostering a baby girl and volunteering in the local church.*

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**December 4, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Jane Martinez***

**Read Hebrews 13:12-16 (NRSV)**

In this second pandemic Advent the longing for what is familiar, comfortable, and comforting is strong. The journey toward the celebration of the Incarnation is often one filled with traditions, many deep with meaning. We can feel an emptiness or incompleteness without these customs. Yet, as we hope for a safe return to traditional celebration, it is important not to come out of a COVID cocoon only to crawl under a blanket of the familiar. We would risk missing the broader communities around us, the world in which we are called to serve. We need to remember that much of what Jesus calls us to do is outside the traditional and outside of what is comfortable.

We live in a time of great division. It is not only COVID-19 that has kept us apart from one another. It is too easy to stay within our own circles, to hear only what we want, to dehumanize those who think or look or speak or act differently than we do. Those who call for working together or for respectful listening to other views are often criticized, even pushed aside and ignored.

The author of Hebrews reminds us of the great sacrifice of Jesus. The author then tells us that Christ's sacrifice is not to go without a response. We are to go "outside the camp", to go where there is need for God's love even if it is outside our comfort zone. As followers of Jesus, we look at the world differently than many do. We know that there is a life and a world beyond this one; but that understanding does not give us license to ignore this world. Instead, it gives us courage and freedom to make this world more like the next one. In words of the tradition of which I am a part, a "Great End" or purpose of the Church is "the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world."

Building a community that is open to all and where interactions are done with mercy, kindness, and dignity is not an easy task. It requires that we stretch ourselves, that we reach beyond usual boundaries. It is the darkest time of year for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. We remain in a pandemic that is far from over. Too many people choose arguing and fighting over finding common ground. It is so very tempting to hide in what is comfortable. Jesus did not set an example of taking the easy route. Jesus does not call us to do what is easy or to stay in our own familiar corners. We are part of something larger than ourselves. Reaching out to those in need—that is what is required. It is not enough if only part of

the community is whole. The sacrifices and examples of Jesus were not for one part of society only. If we help others have the opportunity to be whole, we will progress in our own journeys toward wholeness.

As much as we may long to return to our traditional celebrations this time of year, it is worthwhile to pause and examine both our own and others' ways of recognizing God at work in the Incarnation. We should learn about and try something outside our usual Advent/Christmas practices as well as rethink our own celebrations and gift-giving. Depending on where one lives and what is safe to do in the time of COVID-19, it could be driving to another neighborhood and seeing a different style of decorations or eating a different kind of holiday food. Worshiping with those outside of one's tradition can give fresh insight into God at work and into one's own ways. If staying home is what needs to happen, reading about celebratory or gift-giving traditions in different cultures or trying a recipe from another part of the world can help stretch our thinking about God's work through the Incarnation.

Why do people celebrate as they do? Why do I celebrate as I do? Why do some find no reason to celebrate? What have I gained from learning about others? What do I have to share that shows God's love to a world that very much needs it? Asking such questions and seeking their answers can deepen understanding, and greater understanding is a step toward wholeness.

**Prayer:**

Gracious Lord, I thank You for your willingness to go beyond the usual, to cross boundaries, and to come near to those who are "outsiders". Make me unafraid, I pray, to increase my knowledge and understanding. Grant me the courage to encounter those who are "other". May I in so doing bring myself and the community closer to wholeness. In the name of the Incarnate One, Amen.

*Jane Martinez is a 1986 (BSN) graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and a 1991 (MDiv) and 1993 (MAR) graduate of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. In her work as an RN and her work as a Pastor she has served people in Germany, Iowa, New Mexico, and Colorado. Currently she is the stated supply for Calvary Presbyterian Church of Pine River in Bayfield, Colorado.*

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**Second Sunday of Advent - Our God hears**

**Put the second puzzle piece in place**

**December 5, 2021**



**By The Reverend Danelle Crawford McKinney**

**Read Isaiah 40:9-11**

In the spring, I had the opportunity to assist some coworkers with putting up a tipi, a traditional Plains Tribal dwelling. I was so excited to be invited because I never really had the time to learn. What I discovered was that each tapered tree that represents each value of our Indigenous culture, also has a specific size and purpose for its position in the lodge. It is important that the trees are intact and available, or the dwelling would be broken.

This made me think of our community. When we have one who is missing or murdered, our community is broken, and we are not in a good place to help our community members thrive. 4 out of 5 Indigenous women are affected by violence. It is difficult to count the number of women who are missing because there are no official categories that classify Indigenous women who are missing. The numbers are also most likely to be undercounted, because there are jurisdiction issues on the reservations and

communities, and it is difficult to identify which jurisdiction the laws are governed by with the appropriate law enforcement agency.

While there are challenges that Indigenous communities are faced with today, the scripture lesson from Isaiah brings some comfort to those affected by violence. In this passage, Isaiah uses imagery to prophesy about the coming of the Messiah. The words describe the comforting image of a shepherd taking care of the flock. There is an image of the gentleness and kindness that so many people who are faced with violence need to recognize. It is the Good News of hope that is desperately needed in our communities.

As Indigenous peoples, we need to know that there is someone who cares about our communities. We want the names of our loved ones to be remembered the same way people remember Gabby Petito. We long for the publicity to have everyone searching for our loved ones the way everyone searches for those prominent names splashed across screens everywhere.

We cannot afford to lose another Indigenous language learner, an Indigenous cultural teacher, and a water protector. We need to have the caretakers of our communities with us so that our communities are not broken. We long for our children to have strong Indigenous women give us permission to carry out the teachings and the values of our Indigenous culture.

**The challenge for everyone is this:** recognize that Indigenous missing and murdered peoples are more than just a number. Talk or write to your congressional representatives to write laws that get early response protocols in place once someone goes missing. Most importantly, when someone shares their pain with you, please don't try to fix their problems or discount their feelings or even ask questions that place blame on victims. Recognize that perhaps the Creator put you in a place at that moment to be a listener and a comforter to someone who has experienced violence.

**Prayer:** Creator God, we thank you for making us in your image. We thank you for diversity and we thank you for preparing us for a journey to help others. We pray for the Indigenous peoples, that their voices may be heard and their lives be validated by the world. We ask for your loving kindness to shine through to those who are experience dark times when dealing with violence. Heal our wounds and make us whole and strong again. In your holy name we pray. AMEN.

*Danelle Crawford McKinney is an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota Oyate and is a teaching elder in the Dakota Presbytery of the PCUSA. She works with Indigenous students at Haskell Indian Nations University as the Student Rights Specialist. She resides in Lawrence, Kansas with her husband Ron and teenage son, Ronston. Danelle also has 2 adult daughters, Madison who lives in Lawrence, Kansas and Alethia Oatman who lives in Idaho.*

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**December 6, 2021**

**By The Reverend Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

**Read Zephaniah 3:14-20**

The night before I was scheduled to defend my doctorate thesis, I was feeling very anxious, allowing myself to have doubts. "What if it isn't good enough? What if I can't explain it clearly? What if it just doesn't make sense? What if the judges don't think it's really a thesis?" I was allowing my anxiety to take

over and realized I needed to pray and ask for peace, calm, assurance. I spent some time in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for help. And I went to bed.

As I was trying to fall asleep, I began to hear a song in my mind. It was the chorus of an anthem the choir had sung a few weeks back and it was based on the Scripture from Zephaniah 3:14-20, particularly on these two verses:

<sup>17</sup> *The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing*  
<sup>18</sup> *as on a day of festival*

The chorus of the anthem said over and over – *I will rejoice over you. I will rejoice over you.* At the time when we sang it, I remember feeling very moved by the tune and the words. And that night, as I lay alone in a hotel room, needing comfort and assurance, it was as if the Lord himself was singing me to sleep with those words. *I will rejoice over you with gladness.*

Since that time there have been numerous occasions when I turned to that Scripture and invited those words to enter my heart and mind again: interviewing for a new position as pastor; when my close friend was extremely ill from COVID-19; when my husband was dying.

Zephaniah was preaching to Judah about God's judgement because of their turning from God, worshipping idols, becoming complacent regarding their worship of the Lord. They found themselves exiled in a foreign land feeling hopeless and in deep grief and despair. Finally, God speaks through the prophet, bringing words of hope and healing, of restoration and joy, promising to rejoice once again over God's beloved people.

I love the assurance we hear from the prophet of old. Zephaniah says - *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; The Lord promises "I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time, I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you," says the Lord.*"

There is something so promising for the people of God in these passages of old. We know that God came to us in Jesus. We know that he still comes to us. He is here.

And yet, at the same time, we are also waiting. We wait for the day when Christ returns, when we are finally at peace; when there will be no more weeping; no more sorrow.

Today we struggle with many issues. The entire world has faced a pandemic that has killed thousands upon thousands of people. Crime is rising in our cities; the leaders of our own country are so at odds with one another it seems we will never have unity. There is so much change happening in a way that many of us who are older don't even recognize the country we grew up in.

COVID – 19 caused churches to be forced to find new ways of worshipping and of meeting. While live streaming worship and zoom meetings are better than nothing at all, they do not quite meet the level of spirituality many of us experience with in-person worship and community. However, now that we are gradually getting back to normal, we find that many people are not returning, for different reasons. Some are still hesitant to enter places where there are crowds, still very concerned about the virus with its different strands. But some have simply decided that staying home is just too easy rather than going back to the Sunday morning rush. Many people do enjoy worshipping virtually, but for some of us, that didn't last too long. Sleeping in or sitting in pajamas, chatting on the phone, or getting ready for a Sunday outing with family wins over.

Advent is about preparing and watching for the coming of Christ. God knew the chaos, the grief, the despair of the people throughout the ages, just as he also knew the great need for a Savior to bring redemption from sin and the revelation of God's great love and mercy. Jesus, the Messiah was the fulfillment of all the prophecies and promises of old.

God also knows the chaos, fear and confusion of our world today. Advent calls us to rise up out of our complacency, to seek the Lord with all our hearts, to prepare for his coming – as we celebrate his birth again, and as we look for his promised return.

Wherever you are on your journey of life, I pray you will hear the sweet words of the Spirit singing and restoring your peace and joy: *I will rejoice over you with gladness; I will renew you in my love.*

**Prayer:**

Gracious Lord, come into our hearts with your sweet voice that reassures us of your love and grace. Nudge us from our places of complacency; quicken our hearts so that we might be fully present in the waiting and watching for the coming of your Son, our Savior, Jesus. Give us courage to face these days of turmoil and give us a strong sense of you being in our midst. Amen.

*The Reverend Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates is a retired minister in the PC(USA). She lives in Williamston, Michigan with her dog, Charlee. She has three children and five grandchildren. You can find her inspirational blog at [www.sharlyndgates.com](http://www.sharlyndgates.com)*

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**December 7, 2021**

**By The Reverend Mary Kay Glunt**

**Read Mark 5:25-34**

A perusal of radio stations on Saturday mornings will likely produce an abundance of theories on how to cure anything from itchy skin to diabetes, from vitamin deficiencies to cancer, and everything in between. Everyone has a theory or a treatment or a supplement and trying to sort them out can be quite the challenge.

The name of the woman in this passage will never be known to us here. Yet, for centuries she been an example of perseverance through despair, of tenacity in spite of loss, of persistence in the threat of humiliation. She had suffered for twelve years with a bleeding problem. Because of this she was considered unclean, not permitted to worship with others or be in the marketplace. She likely was ostracized from her family, as well. She went from doctor to doctor, spending all she had and suffering through all of their remedies, but to no avail. She continued to bleed and continued to be treated as an “other,” an outcast.

The presence of suffering tends to build walls around the sufferer. Those walls may be built by the individual to protect himself from prying eyes or from judgment by those who wouldn’t understand. The walls may be built by society, trying to keep “that kind of person” away from us. Society wants to see joy and happiness, and a sufferer makes us uncomfortable. So, we avoid them, avoiding the pain and the problems, because we can’t deal with them. If we acknowledge their pain, then we must acknowledge that we might suffer, as well.

Our woman heard about Jesus, and she thought, *maybe this is the one time I might find help. Perhaps Jesus can heal me.* Disregarding all social conventions and rules, she slid into the crowd so no one would recognize her, and she made her way to Jesus. This was her last hope, and she thought, *If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.* Stealthily she moved toward Jesus, all the while keeping her presence a secret. She leaned into the crowd, reached out, and touched Jesus’ garment, and she was healed. End of story, or so she thought.

This gospel story is not just about healing of the body, although she was healed. This story is about transformation and deliverance, about redemption and restoration. Jesus called out, "Who touched me?" We can understand the disciples' puzzlement at his question. There were hundreds of people crowding them and Jesus. How could Jesus single out one person who touched Him?

Have you ever wondered why He asked that question, why Jesus sought to identify this woman, to bring her presence out in the open and reveal her disregard of the Law? It wasn't to destroy or shame her, but to restore her. Who touched me? Jesus asked. She had pushed through the crowd, risking everything, and she was healed. And yet, Jesus was offering her something even greater than physical healing.

The woman had been healed. The bleeding stopped. She could have slipped away, with no one any wiser concerning her venture. No one need know she had been there. And even though she was healed in body, the years of dishonor and restriction, of segregation from society, of rejection, remained her companions. Perhaps she still saw herself as the "other," as the unclean, despite her healing.

God is not satisfied with giving us a partial gift, a not-so-complete answer to prayer. God desires to bless us beyond what we can ask or think, to fill us with God's Holy Spirit and the freedom that accompanies that presence.

This woman wanted her body to be healed. I imagine it took every bit of faith and determination to stand up and identify herself when Jesus called. Taking that step, she fell at Jesus' feet and confessed all. Jesus chose to lift this woman up, to help her to, for the first time in years, stand tall and unashamed. Removing the labels of *outcast*, *unclean*, and *alone*, Jesus identified her as a woman of faith, a daughter of the Most High.

Labels and diagnoses, reputations and pain, problems and hurts, we carry them with us, and sometimes they become so heavy that we dwell in quiet desperation. But then, with a spark of faith, we try, one more time, to seek God's hand, but we settle for less than all God has for us. Although we experience a measure of freedom, we often stop short, not falling fully at the feet of Jesus to experience full deliverance and wholeness.

Advent is a time of introspection and retrospection. We look back on our lives and inward, considering our hearts and minds and our relationship with Jesus Christ. It can also be a time of tremendous healing as we come, once again, before the throne of grace, bringing our needs, hopes, and hurts to God.

For what have you sought the Lord? Do you have a problem, whether emotional, physical, or spiritual, that has bound you and kept you from experiencing true freedom in Christ? Have you settled for "some" freedom, never pressing further into God's presence to find fullness of joy and peace, restoration and exhilaration in God's presence? Are you ready to hear Jesus' words: "Your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Press on through and touch Jesus today. He will raise you up.

**Prayer:**

God of grace, we are so short-sighted that we often fail to see the blessings you have set aside for us. We seek you, but we settle for small victories, earthly strides, and fail to recognize the true victories you have planned for us. Inspire us to faith. Draw us forward in hope. Teach us to ignore the impediments of the world and, without fear of reprisal, throw ourselves at your feet, our Healer and Deliverer. Amen.

*Mary Kay Glunt is a PCUSA teaching elder and pastors First Presbyterian Church in Belle Vernon/Rostraver Township, Pennsylvania. In addition to being Presbyterian, her faith background includes her upbringing in the Roman Catholic Church and education and service in the Assemblies of God. Her book, Words of Wisdom, Thoughts of Hope, presents original poetry and thoughtful devotions to provide encouragement and exhortation toward discipleship.*

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**December 8, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Ellen Gurnon***

**Read Psalm 130:5**

I remember a conversation between my brother and my mom decades ago. I don't remember the topic of their conversation; I only remember that when Mom used the word, anxious, my brother corrected her. He pointed out that anxious has a negative connotation. If you're worried or dreading something, then you're anxious about it. But if you're excited for something in the future, you're eager for it.

Many of us don't like waiting; it makes us feel anxious. Even if know something good is coming – even if we're eager for it – we get anxious because it's taking too long. We find ourselves praying, *Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now!* We feel like waiting is the hardest part of a difficult medical diagnosis. We shake our heads over the state of our country and the world, remembering John Mayer's song, *Waiting on the World to Change*.

In Advent, we're eagerly awaiting the birth of Jesus. But we're also waiting for Jesus to come again. I wonder, are we eager or anxious about the Second Coming? I guess it depends on your theology.

My theology is centered on God's unconditional and everlasting love in Jesus Christ, and the gifts of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. The Psalmist summarizes well the message in all of scripture: that when we trust in God's word, we wait with **hope**.

My memory is not that good that I can remember conversations from decades ago. Furthermore, I was never one to hang on every word spoken by my brother! But I am grateful for the Spirit's reminder to wait eagerly – with hope – rather than anxiously with dread. Not only in Advent, but in all seasons of life.

**Action:** Practice *eager* waiting – with hope in the Lord.

**Prayer:**

God of hope, help me to trust you and love you with my whole being. Relieve my anxiety and replace it with an eager spirit, knowing that you are with me whatever the future holds.

*The Reverend Ellen Gurnon has been an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) for 27 years. She has served churches in Goldfield, Iowa, Springfield, Missouri, and is currently serving First Presbyterian and Westminster Presbyterian Churches in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. She has a son, a daughter, and a new grandson.*

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**December 9, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Alex Rodgers***

**Read Psalm 18:16-19**

The Psalms have always been a refuge for me. Their honesty and often raw quality speak loudly to my heart. It is in the Psalms that we are reminded to bring all of who we are to God. We are reminded that God can handle our whole selves, and when our aches, our hurts, or even our joys are deemed outsized by others God invites us in.

Nearly two years of pandemic living has left many feeling less than whole. The mighty waters of uncertainty, discomfort, anxiety, and dis-ease have been overwhelming.

The enemy has often been the inner voice of doubt and that inner voice always seems to speak the loudest in times of disaster. It is the voice that questions our choices, our motivations, our abilities. In times of upheaval, all of those things about ourselves come into question.

And just when those waves of doubt seem to come at us from all sides, it is God who rescues us from the deep. It is God who tells the inner voice of doubt to pipe down. It is God who brings us out into a spacious place after we have felt closed in and towed under. It is in the spacious place that we can breathe again. The spacious place allows us to stretch out our arms and throw back our head and take a deep breath of God’s mercy and grace. We are reset and refreshed by God’s goodness. We are reminded of our wholeness and our belovedness.

The reason that God reaches down to us and pulls us out of that which diminishes us is for the simple and powerful truth that God delights in us. God takes joy in us. God loves us beyond our wildest imaginations.

We are not the only ones who need to know the truth of our own belovedness. This is news to share. We can let others know that God delights in them just as they are. We do this by loving others well and meeting them in their calamity.

**Prayer:**

Holy One, thank you for reaching down from on high to draw us out of the deep. Thank you for calling us your own. Help us to sit with others in their calamity and to remind them that they, too, are a delight to you. Amen

*The Reverend Alex Rodgers serves as an associate pastor at Decatur Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia. She is a homesick Texan, a dog mom, a spouse to Keenan, a lover of books, and a devoted fan of Ted Lasso.*

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**December 10, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Jane Huffstetler***

**Read Matthew 23:27-28**

These words fall in my category of “things I wish Jesus has never said!” So....Jesus’ words to us today are words about hypocrisy, coming from the Greek word, *hypokrisis*, which means more than just being insincere. *Hypokrisis* means claiming to belong to God and yet acting against God. It’s exactly what we do in all our maneuvering for power and control. It’s the hypocrisy we practice when we insist on conformity to our way of life as “God’s way,” and set up our traditions in an idolatrous fashion as if we and we alone know the mind of God.

We have to pay attention to Jesus’ words accusing people of hypocrisy because we live in a world where God’s name is evoked on a regular basis to support the way we want things to be. Instead of asking if this is God’s way, if this is how Jesus would act, we try to make God serve our purposes. Instead of wondering if we are on God’s side, we proclaim that God is on our side. We all do it...and we do it all the time. We’re such hypocrites.

How do the scribes and Pharisees serve as negative models? Basically, they do not practice what they teach. Their lives give no evidence that they take seriously the very law about which they endlessly debate. Consistency and wholeness are missing. At this point in the narrative, the issue is not the content of their teaching, but the living out of their teaching.

The model of the Christian Church is not one in which an authoritarian figure dispenses truth to fawning followers, but an egalitarian community where all are students of Jesus and children of God. Greatness is manifest in service, and in the economy of God, the humble (those who maintain integrity in life and avoid showiness in leadership) will finally be exalted.

We may wish Jesus hadn't said some of the things he said. But he said them. Now, what are we going to do about it?

**Prayer:**

We wait before you, Jesus...hoping against hope that you might make all things right...hoping against hope that goodness and kindness will win the day...hoping against hope that hate for others will melt away. We continue to face times of great decision in our country, so be with us God, we pray! Show us again the way of Jesus. We are surrounded by loud voices that seem so sure of themselves...help us to remember your promise that your love and truth are what will endure.

You came to us, opening wide the door, showing us your desire that we serve the poor among us, that we welcome the stranger, that we seek justice for all, not just for ourselves. May we see the worth of every person regardless of the color of their skin or the heritage of their people. In this age of greed which threatens to destroy your creation, to inflict the most harm on those in need, you call us to care for those in prison, for children, for those who are ill, for those who have lost homeland and are in need of welcome. Remind us again Lord, lest we forget, remind us that Jesus said those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.

**Challenge to action:**

Consider this day the numbers of displaced refugees in our world. How might we as individuals and congregations serve Jesus by serving those who are desperately searching for a safe home?

*The Reverend Jane Huffstetler has served churches in Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Georgia as a church musician. A graduate of Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Atlanta, she has served as pastor or transitional pastor in churches in Alabama, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. Her passion for worship and music has inspired her ministry with her church musician husband for over 50 years. She believes that relationship building in church and community is the bedrock of ministry for clergy, officers, and congregants.*

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**December 11, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Lou Ellen Hartley***

**Read Luke 3:7-18**

Several years ago my first husband died from cancer. We lived in a modest three bedroom house, just the two of us and our dog. One spare bedroom was my room to fill with my hobbies and books. The other spare bedroom was his to do with as he pleased. His collections, his books, his music, his artwork, and his keep sakes were in that room. When he got sick, we closed the door to that room. He did not have the energy to be in there. After he died, I didn't have the energy to be in that room without him. In the middle of his things. His treasures. As time went by, as is the way of things, I began to box up his clothing to donate to charity. I gave away some of his collections to friends and family who would appreciate them. I gathered the treasures I wanted to keep and put them into boxes, except for the few I like to display.

I was struck by the fact that I could put into just a few small boxes the stuff to keep when he was gone. The keepsakes are important, don't get me wrong. They truly are treasures to me and my family. But

what we really miss is him. His life and the relationship that ended so abruptly. Going through his illness, his death, and the aftermath led me to realize how much time we spend accruing and maintaining things. Since then, I have had a love – hate relationship with things. Do I buy something because I want it or need it? Because I am bored and just want some shopping therapy? What would happen if I spent as much time on relationships in my life as I did on maintaining and adding to all of the stuff in my life?

In our passage John the Baptizer calls people to be aware of those around them in order to meet other’s needs. He tells the soldiers to be satisfied with what they have instead of striving for more at the expense of others. We might hear the same call today as our consumer economy calls us to consume more and more. We can almost hear John saying, “understand the difference between what you want and what you need.” Striving for what we want can distract us from the blessing of daily bread, daily grace, daily encounters with others in our lives. Is life made richer because we can purchase stuff or because we meet interesting people? Instead of going to the store to shop, could we spend time in prayer? Educating ourselves about poverty? Collecting items people need? Visiting people who are lonely or shut in?

During this season and in the seasons to come, I encourage you to find a way to consider how to fill your life with “enough”.

**Prayer:**

Giving God, we offer thanks for all we have. We thank you we know what it is to have extra and enough to give away. Help us to be satisfied so we can work with and for your peaceful kin-dom. Amen.

*The Reverend Lou Ellen Hartley and her husband, Brett, live in Inverness, Florida where Lou Ellen is pastor of First Presbyterian Church.*

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**Third Sunday of Advent - Our God Gives Hope**

**Put the third puzzle piece in place**

**December 12, 2021**

**By *The Reverend Nancy Kahaian***



**Read Isaiah 11:1-2**

One of my favorite beautiful places to contemplate the power of God is a fossil ledge on the northern edge of an island that floats in the passage between Lake Huron and Lake Superior. The ledges are the remains of a saltwater coral bed, a place where the salt water met the freshwater thousands and thousands of years ago. Ledges of fossil rock provide a visible image of how past meets present, and how what is possible when the world relies on God’s sense of direction. It is the unexpected inexplicably breathtaking geography of God’s future, the ‘word we see,’ preach, and teach as the reliable hope for a despairing world. This magnificent fresh water source known as the Great Lakes has passed through many seasons to bring hope to this part of God’s world, and the fossil ledges remind us that it is so. This is reminder of what has been, and what is not yet, a glimpse of what the creative power of God can do.

The text from the eleventh chapter of Isaiah opens in the forest after God levels Jerusalem. Stumps dot the landscape. There is a silence in the air, and then the wind blows. The smallest hint of new life, a small shoot from a stump, reaches skyward out of the devastation. With a tender branch, the prophet proclaims, God will usher in the future. This is a glimpse of what the power of God can do. God will breathe hope into the landscape of hopelessness, God will raise up a king. With this future king as our

beacon, the prophet calls us to embody a particular form of leadership. This form of leadership is characterized by wisdom, manifest in decisions and actions for justice and peace for all persons. God encourages us to pay attention, to watch for the Spirit dancing throughout the world, and to be ready for the power of God to work something new when we see no possibilities.

**Challenge to action**

During Advent, the prophet Isaiah calls us to a new vibrant hope, one that is grounded in God’s promises, wisdom, and justice, and can be seen beyond human struggle and despair.

We are challenged to a hope that comes in peacemaking, wise leadership, justice for all people, and the nurture of one another. How can reach toward God to hear the word of hope God needs you to bring? What more hopeful version of you can bring peace and perspective to a family dynamic? How does wisdom need to be spoken by you to serve the needs of your congregation? How can you work as a consistent courageous person to bring justice to the vulnerable and marginalized people in your community?

**Prayer**

Almighty and Ancient God, I wait and watch for you.

Rekindle my hope.

Encourage me to embrace hope in my life now.

Captivate my imagination about the coming of Immanuel, and draw me into a world transformed, marked by divine justice, and universal peace.

Grab hold of my life, give me momentum and power, and move me ahead on the journey to the future you intend. AMEN

*Nancy Kahaian is a daughter, sister, aunt, niece and friend. A graduate of Kalamazoo College, Yale University Divinity School, and McCormick Theological Seminary, she has been ordained for over thirty years. During those years, she’s labored in the vineyard of our Lord in a variety of settings including rural church, yoked congregation, downtown church setting, and suburbia and in middle-governing body ministry. She’s most happy with her little West Virginia white dog named Betty White, or riding her bike, or preparing the next culinary adventure for friends and family.*

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**December 13, 2021**

**By Louise Jones CLP**

**Read Mark 9:2- 7**

When we are children, Christmas could be a magical time of year. Family traditions are created bringing expectations of what will come. The mail brought Christmas cards and presents were delivered. There were Christmas cookies to be made, often with Mom or Dad or another special person. Many bright lights and decorations appeared around the town adding to the exciting feeling of expectation.

As adults we can still get caught up in these wonderful memories of childhood and want to experience that feeling again. It puts a lot of pressure on us and can end up causing anxious moments. The burden of work that we create for ourselves starts to change the anticipation of our wonderful expectations into an overwhelming sense of inadequacy.

When Jesus took Peter, James and John up on the mountain they had a wonderful experience, which they would remember the rest of their life. The disciples realized the importance of the moment and wanted it to last. Let’s not be like Peter, trying to hang on to memories that were so important at one time

but now can cause conflict in our lives today. It wasn't just what the disciples saw that was so important, it was the message that they received. They could not recreate what happened nor could they remain there indefinitely. They saw the power of God, God's love for Jesus and they heard God's message for us. "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him."

We can enjoy traditions that we have created but not at the expense of letting those traditions become a burden that may keep us from celebrating and sharing the message of Christmas. We have been given the most important gift of Christmas by God. Jesus is the most important gift we will ever receive. God's message to the disciples and thus to us should be life changing every day. God spoke, saying, "Listen to him!"

We should not exhaust ourselves trying to recreate our own pleasant memories of the past. We must infuse ourselves with love and hope given to us by God so many years ago, through the gift of his son, Jesus. Let us focus not on our Christmas traditions but make our tradition giving thanks for the first gift of Christmas, Jesus.

**Prayer:**

Gracious and loving God, help us to remember Jesus each day of advent and the lessons He taught about love, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion. Show us how to encourage others to share these gifts that have been given for all of God's children. Amen

*Louise Jones joined the Presbyterian church in Littleton Colorado in the early 1960s as a charter member. Although attending regularly for several years she fell away after starting college and then getting married and starting a family. Late in her 40's she had an encounter with the Holy Spirit which changed her life. She went back to church as a regular attendee and started volunteering, becoming a very active member of the congregation. After several years she was asked to be an Elder. At this time the Presbytery of Denver had started a class to train Lay Pastors. Two years later having meet all the requirements, she was called to a position of Lay pastor for a small Presbyterian Church in Denver. She served for 9 years before taking early retirement and moving to Missouri with her husband. She has since served a year as Stated Supply for a Presbyterian Church in Springfield and has been active at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Kimberling City Missouri. Now at age 74 she has retied again to spend more time with her family and pursue some of her hobbies.*

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**December 14, 2021**

**By The Reverend Dr. Deanna Ferree Womack**

**Read Isaiah 11:1,5,6**

I was seated in a circle at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian conference center in New Mexico that is one of my favorite places on earth. It was the early 2000s and I was a young white seminarian from the Midwest surrounded by veteran PC(USA) leaders. Most of them were not ordained; many were of African American, Asian, or Latinx backgrounds; and all of us were women. We were discussing what Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of The Beloved Community might look like while contemplating the first nine verses of Isaiah 11. When Dr. King confronted poverty, racism, and militarism as interrelated forms of violence in the 1950s and 1960s, he saw these evils as barriers that prevent us from living in true, Beloved Community. He drew the concept of Beloved Community from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest American peace and justice organization, and he used this image to envision the end of segregation. When explaining the goal of nonviolent boycotts, King said in 1956, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of The Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this love which will bring about miracles in [human] hearts..."

Some of my conversation partners at Ghost Ranch had lived through the civil rights era. Some had vivid memories of the segregationist south. Others spoke about Japanese American parents and grandparents held in internment camps in the western US during World War Two. Their personal stories made clear why our group leaders in New Mexico paired Isaiah's prophetic message with King's Beloved Community. When opponents are transformed into friends, it is like a wolf lying down with a lamb—it doesn't happen very often. To find a lion and a calf coexisting would be miraculous, like the changed heart of a KKK member or neo-Nazi. If we were to allow a little child to lead us today toward a different future, this would turn our normal way of doing things upside down. This brings to mind the young Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg who sailed from Europe to the US to beg adults worldwide to take better care of the earth. To transform our world into a Beloved Community, we would have to love our children more than we love ourselves, and certainly more than we hate our enemies.

Yet Jesus Christ, that descendant of Jesse, called us to learn from the faith of little children. He too had a vision of Beloved Community, one that is still needed today just as much as it was in first century Palestine and in Reverend King's Day.

Poverty. Racism. Military and police violence. Environmental exploitation. Sexism. Christians are called to confront a seemingly endless list of injustices today. In this Advent season, our challenge is to follow the descendant of Jesse who was born vulnerable in a lowly manger. We must recognize that Christ's birth turned the world upside down, just like the wolf lying down with the lamb. What would such a transformed world look like in your context? As Christmas approaches, find one way to work toward Christ's Beloved Community of peace, justice, and love.

**Dear Lord of the wolf and the lamb,**

As we await the celebration of Christ's birth, give us the imagination and fortitude to become your Beloved Community. Like the leopard laying down with the kid and the lion coexisting with the calf, may our own conflicts and enmities cease. May we look expectantly for the little child of Jesse to lead us. Amen.

*The Reverend Dr. Deanna Ferree Womack is Associate Professor of History of Religions and Interfaith Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, where she teaches on interfaith dialogue, Christian-Muslim relations, and American Islam. She is the author of two books: Protestants, Gender and the Arab Renaissance in Late Ottoman Syria (Edinburgh University Press, 2019) and Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020). Deanna grew up in Nevada, Missouri, and was ordained by the John Calvin Presbytery in 2008 before serving as a mission volunteer and Christian educator for two years in Lebanon.*

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**December 15, 2021**

**By The Reverend Linda Whitworth-Reed**

**Read Luke 7:33-35,**

So much of Jesus' ministry and teaching happens around the table. His first miracle happens at a wedding banquet when he turns water into wine. Certainly, *that* was a festive occasion! I can't help but think that those who complained about the company he kept at the table were jealous. At Jesus' table, people were included who were not normally considered acceptable to the respectable religious people of the day.

Jesus' spirit accepted anyone at table who was willing to enter into a realm where the kingdom of God was visible. And Jesus demonstrated the kingdom's inclusiveness by welcoming all who were willing to

participate in recognizing the dignity of the others at the table, in respecting people no matter their background or economic standing. And whenever diverse people were sharing together, the kingdom of God was, indeed, at hand.

Sure. There were those who were excluded. It is not Jesus who excluded them directly, though. They did it to themselves by considering themselves too good to share in the feasting. Or they did it to themselves by considering themselves unworthy to join in, too. They excluded themselves by not being willing to participate in the transformative love of the Divine presence among them.

The kingdom of God is at hand when each person is received in table fellowship with dignity, when personhood is respected, when economic status is no barrier (for the too rich or the too poor). This inclusiveness was radical in Jesus' day. The world I see around me today is still challenged by it.

I wonder how often we fail to even recognize how exclusionary we are, how we dis-invite ourselves from certain gatherings when we make the excuse that we just won't fit in or how we dismiss opportunities to gather with others who are different from ourselves because they don't meet our standards.

Our holiday tables give us an opportunity to practice the loving inclusion of Jesus' divine presence, even, and sometimes especially, with our own family members. In my own family – all practicing Christians – we nevertheless have widely differing understandings of how following Christ influences our personal, social and political life. In fact, I find that sometimes my lovingkindness and openheartedness are most tested when sitting at table with family sharing sincere conversations that go to the heart of Jesus' inclusion. I know that in the current political and social climate, some families have broken apart under the strain of widely opposing views.

Invite someone from outside your inner circle to share a meal with you. Avoid food that is problematic for them by asking ahead of time if they have food allergies or dietary preferences. What things do you have in common? How can you show respect and graciousness in spite of differences? Can you see the face of Christ in the faces of those around you?

**Prayer:**

Gracious God, you invite us to your table. As we emerge from the isolation of COVID, help us find imaginative ways to open our hearts and hands and tables to satisfy each other's deepest longings for connection with your Divine Presence, just as your open hand satisfies every living thing. Amen.

*Linda Whitworth-Reed, a Presbyterian preacher's kid, is a long-time serving elder and ordained teaching elder in the PC(USA). She and her husband David Reed are now honorably retired and continuing to preach, sing and serve in the Presbytery of Arkansas. Her joys include meeting strangers and connecting with friends, gardening for pollinators and birds, reading and home renovation.*

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**December 16, 2021**

**By Clancy Cherry, CLP**

**Read Matthew 25:1-13**

In this passage by Matthew, we are given instructions about how we should prepare until Jesus returns. The urgency of Jesus returning is waning and Matthew tells us a parable to help rekindle the expectancy of Jesus return. After all it has been over forty years since Jesus' ministry had come to an abrupt halt.

Our charge for this devotional is to view a scripture passage through the lens of social justice.



Reading this parable two thousand years later, in our current context, we are given an opportunity to add more oil to our lamps and refresh how we think, live our lives as Christians and send the light of God out into the world.

After reading the text in a social justice light I bristled most by wondering why ten young girls should be kept up late at night, just so the bridegroom could impress his friends. Were these ten young women indigenous, black, or Latina? Were they from poor families who needed to find jobs wherever they could? Would the children of the wealthy Romans jumped at the opportunity to have job? Were these young girls paid a wage and if so, was it a fair wage? In so many ways women have soared and yet in so many ways nothing has changed.

I remember a time in my company when there had been a salary freeze for two years. We had just signed the contracts with two new clients and soon the freeze would be lifted. I prepared the list of raises for my department and my boss walked in my office to discuss my recommendations. In the course of our conversation, he asked how my relationship was with a guy I had been dating. We chatted for a few minutes longer and then we finished and locked in the numbers for the raises for my department.

He left and then in a few minutes came back and asked me if I intended to marry the man I was dating. I asked what prompted the question and he said, he was headed to a meeting with the other two owners to discuss top level salaries and wanted to know if I was going to get married.

Knowing what was behind the question I told him that raises were determined on the work and contribution to the corporation not marital status and I promptly called the company's labor lawyer. When he answered my call, I handed the phone to my boss and said, "tell Don what you just asked me." He did ask Don the question and then my boss listened to his response.

My boss left my office contemplating Don's words and ten minutes later as I was on the phone he walked back into my office and said, "Just between us are you thinking of getting married?" I groaned and said to Don who had called to console me in regard to my bosses' misogynistic question, and said, "I think we have more work to do." It took a long time and hard work to break that glass ceiling in my office but eventually it shattered into a thousand pieces. Not all companies can say the same.

I think about the role women in biblical times know they were mere pawns in the male dominated world. Women were bartered to gain property, women lost their security when their spouse died, and children were sold into slavery. Men are still trying to control women, so much so, in some states we are not even allowed to make decisions about our own bodies.

Young girls even though some are smart, and some are silly, are especially the vulnerable. Those of you who are reading these words will say we know some silly girls (and boys), some of them are in our congregations and we don't know about you, but we will share our oil with them, we will walk hand in hand with them, we will protect them, and we will support them. In other words, we will keep doing the work we are called to do, while we are waiting.

These days I think most of us would fall into the category as silly or foolish for running out of oil. Maybe God wanted our oil to run out see who continue to live our lives as a Christians and who wouldn't? Do you shape your daily life by doing what the God requires of you; to do justice, to love kindness, share your oil, and walk humbly with God?

Don't fall asleep to injustice when it happens in front of you and keep awake to the needs of others:

**The Most Vulnerable:** In 2020 the Missouri Kids First organization reported, there were 55,853 reports of child abuse. One in seven children have experienced child abuse and or neglect and one in 10 children will be sexually abused before they turn 18. The child abuse hotline is 1-800-752-6200

**Our neighbors:** Trafficking humans. The trafficking locations outside St. Louis and Kansas City, the hot spots for trafficking humans, are close to us; Joplin, Springfield, Rolla and other locations along I-44 are on the list. In 2017 the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 34,068 calls. Missouri was the 17<sup>th</sup> highest call volume in the nation. The National Human Trafficking Hotline is 1-888-373-7888.

How do you recognize Human trafficking? You can seek more information at:  
<http://www.mshp.dps.missouri.gov/MSHPWeb/PatrolDivisions/DDCC/Units/HumanTrafficking/info.html>

**The Unnoticed:** On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men. Adult abuse and neglect hotline is: 1-800-392-0210

My call to action would be to invite a local law enforcement officer to come to your church and help you to recognize the signs for abuse and trafficking.

**Prayer:**

Holy God, your light is burning bright in our hearts. No matter what our age we can be silly, and we can be wise, and everything in between and still you are with us. We do yearn for your return but until then we will keep busy doing what we are called to do. Help us to extend your light and love to our neighbor, walk with you daily, and are alert to the needs of the least of these. We take comfort in knowing in the promise that we are justified by grace. Amen

*Clancy Cherry was born and reared in Ohio, graduated from Kent State University, and moved to New York City where she worked for over twenty years. She arrived here in Springfield, MO by way of Ohio, New York City, Ohio, Kentucky, Kansas City MO, Albany NY. In her previous professional life, she was a Chief Financial Officer for an advertising agency. She received her MDiv from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and during that time her dear friend became dearer, and when she graduated, they were married. Two years later he died from cancer. Clancy serves Hollister Presbyterian Church and is a zoom chaplain for two rural hospitals. Clancy is on this journey bruised and scarred, blessed and loved, and always growing. Thanks be to God.*

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**December 17**

**By The Reverend Julie Mercer**

**Read Isaiah 7:14**

Today's reflection is sparked by one of the most popular Advent hymns, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." This hymn, originally composed in Latin, is one of the oldest in any hymnal. It is based on an even older set of prayers, known as the "O Antiphons." An antiphon is a sung response to a psalm or other biblical text. The O Antiphons, deriving from the eighth century A.D., if not earlier, are a series of seven musical prayers beginning with "O" and a title of Jesus. After some brief elaboration on the implications of this title, the O Antiphons ask Jesus to come. For example, the seventh antiphon reads in English translation, "O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the gatherer of the people and their Savior: come Thou to save us, O Lord our God." As you can see, this antiphon inspired the first verse of the hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Other verses were inspired by other antiphons.

Crying out for Emmanuel to come is a response to a prophetic text in Isaiah. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet says, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." In light of the miraculous birth of Jesus, Christians have understood this verse referring to Jesus (see Matt. 1:22). He was born of a virgin. He was quite literally Emmanuel, which is an English rendering of the Hebrew phrase that means "with us God."

The lyrics of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" are far removed from joyful celebrations of Christmas. When we sing this song, we put ourselves into the place of "captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here." We pray to be set free "from Satan's tyranny" and to be saved "from depths of Hell." We ask our coming

Lord to "disperse the gloomy clouds of night" and "death's dark shadows put to flight." In some years, these words might seem overly glum, disconnected from our blessed lives. But this year is different, partly because our hearts have been broken by so many lives lost to COVID-19 and all the senseless violence and political unrest that continues to plague our world. We mourn with those who have lost loved ones. We all have caught a glimpse of "Satan's tyranny" and yearn for God to send away "death's dark shadows." We long for the day when God's kingdom will come, when God's justice will prevail over all the earth, and when God will wipe away every tear. Sorrow intensifies our Advent hope for God's future.

As we long for the second coming of Emmanuel, there is much we cannot understand about our world. We cannot fathom why the innocent suffer, why evil has such opportunity, why God does not make things better right now. But, in our perplexity, we do know something that keeps us going, something that strengthens us in the midst of sorrow and confusion. We know that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. In our pain and puzzlement, God is with us. In our sadness and yearning, God is with us. In our doubt and fear, God is with us. Through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, God is with us. And not just with us, but for us, beside us, before us, behind us, within us, and among us. So we are comforted, even as we pray, "O Come, O come, Emmanuel."

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:**

In what ways are you longing for Emmanuel to come today?

**PRAYER:**

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.  
O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave.  
O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight!  
O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
O come, Desire of nations, bind  
In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,  
And be Thyself our King of Peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel. *Amen.*

*The Reverend Julie Mercer serves as Vice President of Mission for Mercy Joplin. She also serves First Presbyterian Church, Mt Vernon, on Sunday mornings.*

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December 18, 2021

By *The Reverend Susan Rosenbaum*

**Read Isaiah 42:3b-4**

In our world of instant everything, we have come to expect instant gratification on a regular basis. From fast food to same day delivery for packages, we want everything NOW! And when we do not get what we want, we write scathing reviews and complain to everyone we know. We have placed our wants and needs first and expect businesses, friends, and family to do the same. Forget about everyone else. And yet, when we really think about it, we have to rely on everyone else to get what we want. If the orders don't get taken, they cannot be fulfilled. If the orders aren't fulfilled, there are no packages or food to deliver. We are so focused on our own perceived need that we do not take into consideration those who help fulfill those needs. What about the single mom who is late to her job at the fast food place because her child had to go to the doctor? What about the father at the fulfillment center who couldn't come to work that day because his son was in a serious car accident? What about the transgender worker who must check everything twice, so they do not get fired for making the tiniest mistake? What I am trying to get to here is that we are not the most important people on the planet just because we think we are. We interact with people every day whose lives matter just as much as ours and who deserve justice in their own situations.

In this verse from Isaiah, God promises to bring forth justice. This promise gives people hope in spite of their situations. There is hope for the single mom, the distraught father, the transgender worker, and many more whose lives are not even noticed because of their jobs, their living circumstances, or the way they dress. While the privileged ignore the people and the situations that make them uncomfortable, God in God's faithfulness is challenging each of us to confront those injustices head on even when it makes us uncomfortable. God is calling us to participate in the lives of those around us and discover the injustices they experience on a daily basis. God is calling us to look beyond ourselves, beyond our own wants and needs, and participate in establishing justice here on earth. Injustices will not be simple to overcome. Nor will they make us the most popular person in our community. But fighting injustice in our communities will give us the opportunity to offer God's hope to those who are disenfranchised.

Our challenge today is to open our eyes to ways people face injustice in our communities and find a place where we can use our gifts to make a difference in the lives of those who suffer.

**Prayer:**

Almighty God, open our eyes to the ways we promote injustice in our communities and help us to follow you as we seek to fight that injustice. Amen.

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December 19, 2021



By the Reverend Dr. Mary Newbern-Williams, HR

**Read John 1:1-18.**

Looking for a new beginning is one way to share Advent. Congregations prepare and tell the stories of the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament foretells Christ’s coming, and the New Testament lays claim to the fulfillment. When we anticipate/commemorate Christ’s coming into the world, new beginnings emerge. Congregations share the story more creatively. They acknowledge differences in the Gospel stories while searching for new ways to tell the “Old, Old Story.”

The concept of “Sankofa” may come to mind when we plan and prepare for Advent. This word translates from the Akan, Twi, and Fante languages of Ghana. It means to “retrieve” or “go back and get” (return to). We develop innovative approaches to Advent by retelling God’s story in creative, new ways. It is the same story that is centuries old but approached with new anticipation. The concept of Sankofa teaches us to respect and remember the past as we embrace the future. We treasure and learn from the past. We take these lessons into the future with new insights. This move into the future keeps us anticipating Christ’s coming with new and strengthened love for God’s creation. May we continue to seek God’s call upon our lives and God’s mercies which are “new every day.”

**\*Challenge Question:**

*How does your congregation develop, and how effective is your congregation as you develop innovative approaches to commemorating Advent?*

**\*Prayer:**

Sovereign God, create in us new vision as we share the Advent stories. May we cherish the age-old tradition and continue looking for new beginnings in sharing the story and responding to your call. In the Name of the Christ who was, who is, and who is to come. **AMEN.**

*The Reverend Dr. Mary Newbern-Williams, HR is the Covenant Pastor for First United Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia*

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December 20, 2021

By the Reverend Becky Schwandt

**Read John 1:1-4 and Matthew 1:23**

I have not only a favorite Christmas hymn, but also a favorite line *in* a Christmas hymn - oddly those two things are not the same. My favorite line comes from the song “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” in the second verse:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail th’incarnated Deity,  
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.

I don't love this line because it uses an amazing number of theological words in a short space, though it does. I don't love it because it sounds fancy and sophisticated, though it does that too. I love it because in those 19 words we see God in Jesus. We see all the amazing, sacrificial love our God offers us in the Incarnation.

We see the all-powerful, all knowing, eternal God choosing not to break into the world again with power and might or signs and portents, but in the one way that is both simple and miraculous. God-with-us, Immanuel, is born naked and helpless. God-with-us had skin, bones, a heart, lungs, kidneys, fingers, toes, ears, and eyes. *Veiled in flesh*. Can you imagine? How does the world look to God-with-us, not as the Creator of everything, but through eyes that function and interpret shapes, colors, and feelings like our eyes do? Do things appear differently to God in heaven and God with human eyes on earth?

God was present and spoke to believers before the time of Jesus in a variety of ways: as a voice on top of a mountain, as a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, with messengers sent from above, in visions received in dreams, and with prophets living among them. But this was something different, something special. God, who could have approached humanity in any number of ways, choose to do so in the same way that you or I or anyone else joins the human family - through birth as an infant.

God choose to experience the human condition from birth to death - to see how we see, to hear how we hear, to love how we love, to experience betrayal as we experience betrayal, to feel joy and to feel sorrow - all in the same ways we do. Jesus even experienced moments of spiritual confusion and despair - praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to let this cup pass from him, and crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

You see, to me, there is nothing, (nothing!) more powerful than the Incarnation. There is nothing that could convince me more than the Incarnation that God is present and active in creation, that God desires all of us to experience God's justice and reconciliation in our lives, and especially that God loves even me. The Incarnation is God's most personal gift to all of us, and to each of us. It is the gift of God's self.

**Challenge:**

In the next few days find a stranger - it could be someone at the grocery store, it could be someone ringing a Salvation Army bell, it could be the drive-thru attendant, it could be a person asking for money or food on the street corner, it could be someone you see at the gym everyday but never talk to, it could be anyone - find that stranger and look into their eyes. While you are making eye contact and sharing a few words, think about how God sees that person. Do your human eyes see and interpret with only human judgments? Can you, if you really make an effort, get past you own eyes and catch a glimpse of the holy found in that person? The part of that person whom God-with-us came to see, to love, to heal, or to save?

**Prayer:**

God-with-us, in this season when we await your coming, help us not to hurry. Not to rush around so quickly and so busily we forget to look to those around us. Help us to see the how God so loved the world that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Help us to speak and to listen and to act like Immanuel is ever in our midst. Amen.

*Becky Schwandt is currently the pastor at Ozark Presbyterian Church in Ozark, Missouri and Ozark Prairie (Brick) Presbyterian Church in Mt. Vernon, Missouri. She loves to kayak in the summer and play in the snow in the winter! She is also currently trying to train her (pandemic) puppy, a corgi named Gryphin, with varying degrees of success depending on the day.*

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**December 21, 2021**

**By the Reverend Gwen Brandfass**

**Read Psalm 113**

Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! My first call in ministry was a Chaplain at Oakwood Lutheran Homes in Madison, Wisconsin. At the time we were living 35 miles north where my husband served Bonnet Prairie Lutheran Church. For the most part I enjoyed the commute to Madison watching the seasons change. One summer evening, as I was heading home, I could see that there were black ominous clouds of a summer storm just waiting for me. But I had no choice, so I made the turn onto the highway clutching the steering wheel, clearly not relishing the idea of driving into this storm. As I drove, I was compelled to look to the left and there I saw how the clouds had parted, just a bit, and the sun and a rainbow peered through! Such a calm came over me! I still had to face the summer storm, but I did so with such a comfort of knowing I was not alone. "I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of my covenant between me and the earth (Gen. 9:13) ....When I see the bow I will remember the covenant" (Gen 9:16)

As I drove north songs of praise filled my spirit as the rain pelted my windshield. "Who is like our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?" (Psa. 115: 5-6)

Indeed, who is like our God who sent his Son into the world that we might know God – Emmanuel!

During this beautiful season of Advent, I hope you will not let the season overwhelm you but pause. Pause and look around at the numerous ways God makes God's self-known to us! Alleluia, come Lord Jesus!

**Prayer:**

Eternal and everlasting God, in the stillness of this season help us to slow down and open our eyes to see you at work in our lives. May our voices join with the choir of angels singing your praise. Amen

*The Reverend Gwen Brandfass, Graduate of UDTS – ordained for 25 years. Board certified Chaplain serving as a Hospice Chaplain with Compasses Hospice. Married to David, ELCA Pastor at Christ Lutheran Church of Sedona, Arizona.*

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**December 22, 2021**

**By the Reverend Maureen Olson**

**Read Psalm 46:10**

This is the time of the year when we tend to exhaust ourselves with all that we "must" do. To be honest, this happens throughout the year, but perhaps we feel and show our exhaustion more readily or openly as we approach Christmas.

There almost seems to be a purposeful and competitive quality to how busy we are. We try to outdo our previous busyness (trying to fit more into each day, attend more events and basically have more on our calendars). This isn't only personal; it can become a competition to have more on your plate than your friends and family. You may be exhausted but at least you have "bragging rights"!

But... is it necessary? I'm going to have to go with a "hard no" on that question!

Sometime ago I was asked if I was ready for Christmas; it's a common question as the big day approaches. As I got ready to answer the question, I realized that ..Christmas comes whether or not I'm ready. This actually was and is a comforting concept. I've learned to do what I can, take care of what I absolutely have to care of and to relax and enjoy the season (while the season is still unfolding).

The Psalmist reminds us to stop, to be still and to let God and God's world become part of our lives.

This is one of my favorite stories from "God Always Has a Plan B" \*. The story is that there were some American Missionaries in Africa who had hired some native workers to carry their supplies. The Americans were of the "push-rush-hurry" mentality, and verbally encouraged the workers to go faster and further each day. After three days of this, the workers sat down and refused to proceed any further. When asked why the spokesperson explained "It is not wise to go so fast. We have moved too fast yesterday. Now today we must stop and wait here for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

"Be still and know that I am your God." Be still and let your souls catch up with your bodies! There is a simple prayer that might help you to do so; The Body Prayer requires deep breaths as you move through the five positions, no speaking, simply breathing. The first position is what may be seen as a traditional pose; hands together in front of you. The second position is reaching to the sky as if asking to be picked up. The third position is with your arms stretched out in front of you as if you are giving and receiving a hug. The fourth position is with your arms crossed across your chest, with your head down. Finally, with your head still down, let your arms drop to your sides, in an attitude of penance. Do this for as many times as you need, as slowly as you need to draw your focus on God.

\**God Always Has a Plan B*; copyright 1999, The Zondervan Corporation. Stories contributed by Babara Johnson, Patsy Clairmont, Luci Swindoll, Marilyn Meberg, Thelma Wells and Sheila Walsh. Selection contributed by Luci Swindoll.

*The Reverend Maureen Olson, First Presbyterian Church, Yates Center, Kansas. "I am who God is creating me to be!" (also a mother, a mother in law, a Meemi (grandmother), a paraeducator for special needs kids and a genuine seeker!)*

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**December 23, 2021.**

**By the Reverend Christine Iannucilli**

**Read Psalm 23:1**

It was the eve of Christmas Eve, December 23rd. As a hospital chaplain I was called to the room of a patient I had gotten to know well. She was a devout Catholic. Jenna was 83 and she was dying from liver failure. Her psychotropic medications over time damaged her liver. But she said, "Chaplain the sanity I have known before my disease hit me at 33 is because of the new medicines that came out in 1988. I was so sick and out of it for decades. I did not get to raise my children. Raising my beautiful children was all I really wanted to do. But I was way too sick. I found strength through my faith and in knowing the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want. The doctor told me I am dying. My two sons were killed together in a car accident over 5 years ago. My daughter lives right here in Joplin. She never forgave me for being sick. And I hit her a lot when she was only a child. Chaplain would you call her? I have her phone number. She has not spoken to me in 20 years. Please tell her I love her. Please tell her how sorry I am for how I treated her. But I do not have long. I so want to see her face."

As I left the room, I could barely contain my tears. I called her daughter-praying she would come to see her mom. She only lived ten minutes away. Her daughter came into the room and went to the side of her mother's bed. Jenna said, "darling I never meant to hurt you. You were so different as a child, and I did not know how to raise you. Please forgive me."



Jenna's daughter tenderly took her mother's hands and with tears flowing down her face, she said, "Mom, I spent a lot of my life afraid of you because I did not understand. But it was you who taught me to get down on my knees and to pray and to love God and do good to people. You taught me the words to the Lord's Prayer, and I say it a lot during the day. It's gotten me through life well mom." Jenna then put her daughter's hands on her face and kissed them and said, "Let's pray the Lord's Prayer together now."

It was less than a minute after praying Amen together that Jenna closed her eyes and entered into eternal life.

I knew I had witnessed a true Christmas miracle. The peace of Christ was present in that room as mother and daughter embraced with the gift of forgiveness.

**Questions for reflection:** What do these words of scripture mean for you:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?

How can these words help you in your relationship with God and your other important relationships?

**Closing Prayer:**

Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

*The Reverend Christine Iannucilli is a retired hospital chaplain from the Freeman Healthcare System in Joplin, Missouri. She continues to joyfully serve the First Presbyterian Church in Golden City, Missouri as their stated supply pastor.*

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**December 24, 2021**

**By the Reverend Dr. Kathryn Threadgill**

**Read Isaiah 9:2-7**

I grew up in a family with twelve siblings. My white parents adopted 11 of us from around the world and had two biological children. I can still remember Christmas growing up when my dad, who was the Commissioned Lay Pastor of the only African American Presbyterian Church (USA) in South Alabama, would dress up like Santa Claus. My siblings and I would be the elves and reindeers, and we'd load up in our fifteen-passenger van and make our way to the lower-income housing neighborhoods. I couldn't understand why we had to go every year and do this. Why couldn't I play with my new Christmas gifts like a "normal" kid? Why did we spend our Christmas passing out gifts to families in my dad's congregation dressed in these ridiculous outfits?

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...A child is born for us, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...He shall establish and uphold his kingdom with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore."

Isaiah's prophecy reminds us that the child of God, the Savior of the world, born to all the world this day, is the light that shines in our darkness. Through this infant miracle child, there will be justice and righteousness spread throughout the kin-dom of God from now until forevermore. Through Christ Jesus, God's justice and righteousness have been poured out to all creation, and it is greater than we can

fathom or imagine. It is the light that transforms our darkness, it is the hope of salvation and redemption, it is the reconciling power of God given for all people.

See, I may not have understood why it was necessary to dress up like elves and wander the lower-income housing neighborhoods of our community growing up; with Santa Claus behind the wheel of this fifteen-passenger tan van. Yet, Jesus Christ had a different plan of righteousness and justice for us to see. We got to experience the love of Christ as we sang Christmas carols on doorsteps and offered items to meet tangible needs throughout households in Christ's family. Christ turned my darkness into light and showed me just how powerful and precious the family of God truly is. Christ showed me how his justice and righteousness made families weep and children shout with joy at a single present they were offered this Christmas day. Christ allowed me to see God's justice and righteousness in the faces of siblings who truly knew what it meant to call upon the Lord as "wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace." Thanks be to God for those moments and memories that still live on today.

What are ways you can share in the loving justice and righteousness of Jesus Christ this Christmas? Who around you are in need and longing for the gift of Jesus Christ in their life? What are tangible ways you can help to offer light and love this Christmas season?

**My challenge into action is simple.** Look. Listen. Learn. Look around you at those who are in need, those forced to the margins, those oppressed by the injustices of this world. Listen to their stories. Give voice to their needs. Sit with them in their suffering. Pay attention to the darkness. Learn how to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ who boldly dares to follow Christ's light, to offer Christ's justice, to share in Christ's mission of justice and reconciling righteousness in this world.

There is a world out there longing for Christ's light. People who are in need of a true glimpse of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. How are you called to share Christ's love and light with others this Christmas day? Who is longing for the justice and righteousness that Christ brings? How can you share with others this day and forevermore?

**Prayer:**

God of righteousness and justice, pour out your love upon our people this day. Help us to walk faithfully as true follower of Jesus Christ. Enable us to pour out your love and your light in a world that so desperately needs your salvation and hope. Let us see where there is great need and help us to respond with the bold faithfulness of Jesus Christ who is Lord and Savior of all. Make us true disciples of the Christ-child, who came into this world to save all and to restore all of creation. Make us bold and daring to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. For we pray this in the name of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Kathryn Threadgill is the Associate Director of Theology, Formation and Evangelism for the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (USA). She attended Montreat College, PC(USA) on a soccer scholarship. There she obtained her B.A. majoring in Bible and Religion with a concentration in Youth Ministry. Kathryn went on to study at Columbia Theological Seminary for both her Masters of Divinity and her Doctorate of Educational Ministries degrees. Her thesis explored why youth today are not experiencing the wonder of God in worship. As a minister of the Word and Sacraments, Kathryn has served churches in Greensboro, NC. and Mobile, AL. She is the beloved daughter of Ollie Rix and Dorothy Threadgill, and has twelve siblings from all over the world. Kathryn enjoys oil painting, wood working, kayaking, hiking, and spending time with the people she loves.*

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Christmas Day, December 25, 2021

Put the fifth puzzle piece in place

Our God is Here!



By *The Reverend Erin Hayes-Cook*

**Read Isaiah 9:2-7**

Christmas is a promise that love and freedom are born out of the unanticipated chaos of life. If we place our hope in these words from Isaiah then we imagine a world where the joy of Christmas will sustain all year.

I believe these past two years uncovered again what stands in the way of joy. The rod of oppression expressed in racism is a large burden for the United States. We carry that weight in our spirits and bodies. Our work is to acknowledge Dr. Resmaa Manakem, a counselor and activist who does work to unburden the body of the trauma of racism. Everyone carries the trauma of white supremacy in different ways.

The promise of Christmas is that we experience a God who came to us in a vulnerable baby boy. We need the rod and bar to be broken for the sake of our wholeness. In the story of Jesus' birth, we find the hope of freedom. That freedom transforms our trauma to vulnerable invitations to peace in our daily lives. Don't we all desire a Christmas gift that will shine all year long?

**Call to action:**

Make a commitment to educate yourself on what the trauma of racism has done to African-Americans and Caucasians in the US by looking up the work of Dr. Resmaa Manakem. Spend time praying for the awareness in your own life.

**Prayer:**

Dear liberating God, free us from the bond of racial oppression. We've carried this burden far too long. Open our hearts like Mary to say yes to your transforming power. Give us the faithfulness of Joseph to do the work of peace even when it is hard. May this Christmas be the filled with the undeniable joy of good news of Jesus. In the name of the vulnerable baby boy Jesus, Amen.

*The Reverend Erin Hayes-Cook is a pastor in New Jersey where she serves a multi-cultural congregation close to New York City. She has a passion for communities to heal from the trauma of racism. Life is full being the mother to a toddler and wife to her husband Lawrence.*

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