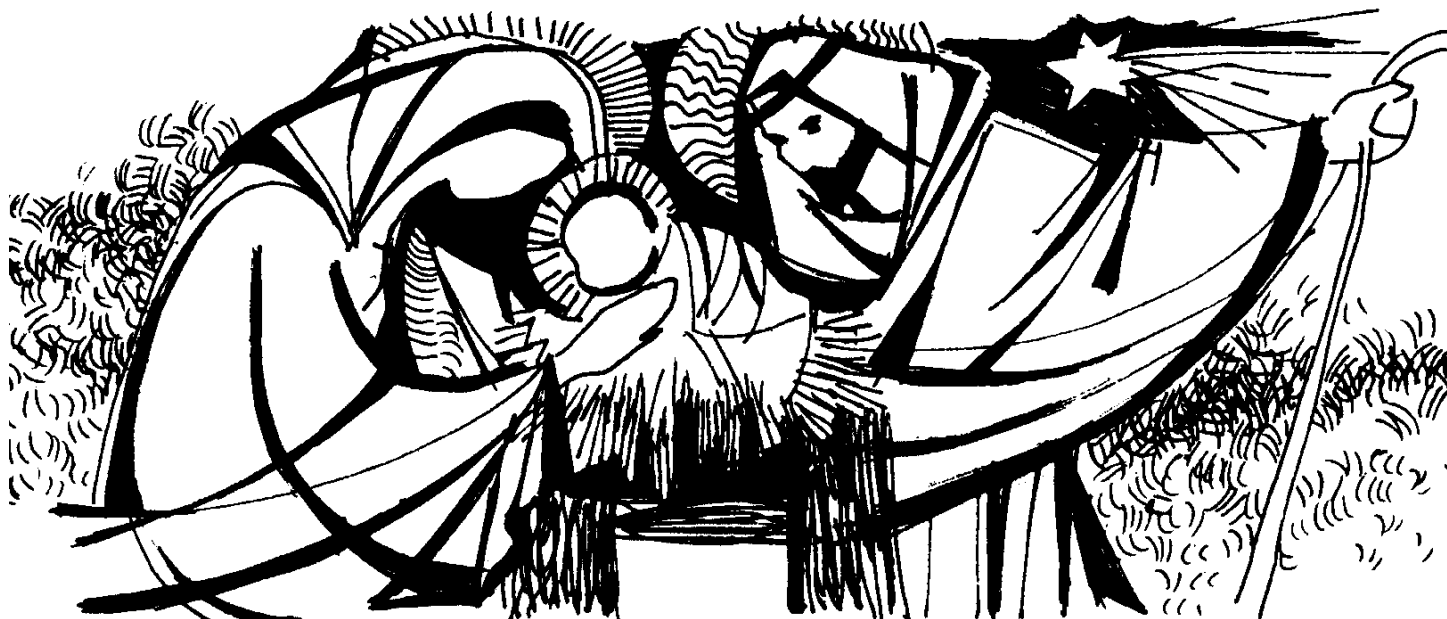


Advent Daily Devotional

*Made by the Members & Friends of
Saint Mark Presbyterian Church*



November 27-December 26, 2016

Dear Saint Mark Family,

It is with great joy that we share with you the daily reflections and prayers of Saint Mark members and friends of all ages to accompany you on your journey this Advent season. On these pages you will find stories of hope, peace, joy and love.

Advent is a season of waiting and watching, as we prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord to dwell among us. It is our hope and prayer that these pages will help you to do that.

Each entry lists a daily scripture reading and excerpt from this reading, as well as a reflection and prayer.

As we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Lord, let us journey together.

–Jennifer Carr and Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty

November 27

Romans 13: 10-14

¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Reflection

I am a morning person. Most of the time, I do my clearest thinking and planning in the morning and after organizing the tasks I need to accomplish, I usually feel energized and ready to start my day. For as long as I can remember, it's been easy for me to get up in the morning. But I share a house with people who find my behaviors, at best, perplexing. My son can be either a morning or an evening person, and he adapts easily to either schedule depending on what captures his interest. My husband and my daughter are night people. For them, nothing about waking up is easy or quick. They do not greet the morning eagerly. Instead, they do what they need to do to get going, and a couple of hours later, they feel fully awake and ready to take on the challenges of the day. They do not understand why I'm talkative and energetic first thing in the morning and expect them to be, too. I confess, I don't understand how they can be talkative and energetic late into the night.

This time of year, as the nights grow longer, and the days shorter, I find myself anticipating the morning light more intensely. While the ongoing tasks stay the same, the available light, and therefore the energy to get them done, has gotten shorter. There's some self-induced pressure to speed things up to get ahead of the night.

These feelings of both longing and anticipation describe Advent perfectly. Waking up and being ready to receive the gift that has already come. Waiting and watching for the light to come.

In our passage of scripture, Paul writes about the time in between night and day as a time to be especially watchful. It's as though he's saying wake up before you need to. Things are already happening! Start moving! God's new world has begun. Paul asks us to put on the armor of light, but he may as well have said, "wear Jesus" (and all that he taught us to do and be). To really "wear" Jesus, we need to be our best selves. When we wear Jesus, we can love our neighbors and by doing so, fulfill the law that God has designed for us. We're in the light. Because the light is on, we can't get away with doing things that separate us from Christ. We need to live honorably as Jesus taught us to do. Not because we think we can earn God's favor by doing so. We can't. Instead, by living honorably in love, we reflect most fully what God has given to us. And it multiplies. And people are watching.

Prayer

God of every time and place, we long for your light. Wake us up. Let your light show us how you have enlarged the nation...How vast is your dominion! Remind us your light always banishes the darkness and in Jesus, your promises to us are fulfilled.

–Rachel Kaufmann

November 28

Isaiah 2: 1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Reflection

This text from Isaiah is the Old Testament reading for the First Sunday of Advent, and it is a word from the Lord. That word is justice.

The word of the Lord will make an actual, physical, real difference in the way the world works: inequalities will be balanced, shackles will be broken, wrongs will be made right. With this justice will come transformation: weapons of violence will be turned into tools of abundance and nourishment, nations will put their swords down, no one will train for war anymore. These things may seem really, really far away right now, and I have to admit that they do to me, but Isaiah tells us that they will happen, "in days to come." We don't know when that will be, but it will be one day, at some point, in our history. This is a vision I have to hold on to. A vision of unity, a vision where God is the one who decides what is right and what is wrong, not human beings with our flawed and messed up systems.

At the end of this passage, we are drawn into God's work. The prophet says "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" We are not supposed to sit idly by and wait for God's transformation, we are invited, we are called to participate in this vision by doing things, small and large, to bring about this vision today. Advent offers us an opportunity (perhaps this Advent in particular) to reflect and understand the work God is calling us to do.

In the midst of my own fear and uncertainty, I trust that the future belongs to God. But the first step toward that future belongs to me, and it belongs to us, the ones who trust that God's light lies ahead.

Prayer

Show me your light, O God. Help me to walk in your path. Make me an instrument of your justice. Help me to be a maker of your peace. Amen.

—Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty

November 29

Psalm 122

¹ I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.

⁴ To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers."

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, "Peace be within you."

⁹ For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.

Reflection

Don't we share the Psalmist's joy each Sunday when we gather at Saint Mark? A refuge from the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, we hear words and music that lift our spirits. We visit with our friends. In the Psalmist's day, this gathering only occurred three times a year, after a long journey. Then the entire city would celebrate in an elaborate festival, including worship and instruction at the temple. We might wonder how the Israelites practiced their religion the rest of the year. Perhaps there was a great deal of personal reflection and prayer.

Jerusalem is an important hub to three of the world's major religions, all of whom believe that God favors them. The region has been fraught with conflict for millennia. The Psalmist's prayer for peace continues to be relevant, however ethnocentric. It is also relevant for us in this post-election national identity crisis.

As I prepared my lesson for the Friends' class this week, the passage was from Joshua 4. The Israelites were preparing to invade Canaan, the land that God had "given" them. In this Together curriculum from Friendship Ministries, they skip the violent part of the story and conclude that we are to have courage, trusting God and following where he leads us. There are many biblical examples of violence dictated by God, yet we should be wary of any such voice. Those who claim that God is on their side often confuse the voice of God with their own.

Prayer

As we seek healing from the divisive rhetoric of the election season and its frightful outcome, let us go to the house of the Lord in our hearts and minds. The Prince of Peace is coming. May we keep peace and seek reconciliation, while having the courage to stand up to injustice. Amen.

—Pamela Boswell Gunn

November 30

Matthew 24:36-44

36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Reflection

More than 50 years after Jesus' crucifixion and ascension the Early Church wrestled with his continued failure to return as promised and gather them up into the fully realized Kingdom of God. Why?! What had gone wrong?!

In this passage, Matthew with apocalyptic fervor reassures his anxious congregation that Jesus will indeed fulfill his promise. He counsels patience but also takes the opportunity to remind them that God's time is not their time, that no one can "crack the code" of God's specific actions. All they need to know is that the Kingdom of God has already begun in Christ even though it has not yet been fully realized. He goes on, however, to stress the importance of being watchful—of "staying awake"—so as not to miss its coming.

What message do these ancient words send to us today, especially during Advent as we once again this year pause to pray and to reflect upon the imminent birth of Jesus at Christmastime?

Certainly it is a call to action in the interim as we wait for the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven." It is a call to us in our day and place to imitate Jesus' acts of love and compassion by caring for the downtrodden and the poor, by welcoming the stranger in our midst, by speaking and acting for the powerless, and by helping to heal the sick.

It is surely also a call for us to contemplate the teachings of Jesus as they have come to us in the biblical record and to "pay attention" to them patiently and faithfully, even in the midst of the global and local crises of violence, greed, and self-promotion of our day.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We are your people walking in darkness yet seeking your light. Send your Holy Spirit upon our preparation for Christmas. To you we say, Come Lord Jesus!

—Louise Winfield

December 1

Psalm 27: A Prayer of Praise

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
I will fear no one.

The Lord protects me from all danger;
I will never be afraid.

2 When evil people attack me and try to kill me,
they stumble and fall.

3 Even if a whole army surrounds me,
I will not be afraid;

even if enemies attack me,
I will still trust God.

4 I have asked the Lord for one thing;
one thing only do I want:
to live in the Lord's house all my life...



Reflection

Oh boy, David's life has seen some trouble! And yet his heart is full of praise for God. That, to me, defines faith. Putting your life in God's hands, believing—truly, wholeheartedly believing—that no matter what life presents us, God will take care of us. And the older I am, the more I am able to look back and see that God is amazing and always pulls us through.

The first line of this psalm makes me happy because I hear it three ways:

- 1) *The Lord is MY light and salvation.* I am reminded of my personal relationship with God. It is mine with him alone. While God cares for all his children, I know that I can bring him anything—any frustration, concern, or problem, as well as praise and gratitude, and my burden is lightened. I can, and do, tell him everything. And he never betrays me.
- 2) *The Lord is my LIGHT and salvation.* Light is so important to me; I'd say I'm emotionally dependent on it! Especially this time of year, when it's not just colder, but darker more hours of the day than not. I struggle with the urge to curl up in a ball and sleep from January through March! Jesus tells us, "I am the light of the world." So, I don't need to look outside for the light; I just need to allow it in. When I keep my heart and mind open, light enters... through prayer, worship, reading, service work, or in conversation with others. Light lifts and heals and I can carry that light to others.
- 3) *The Lord is my light and SALVATION.* Can there be any greater reassurance than knowing that we are saved? Jesus told us to love God with all our souls, our strength, and our minds, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and eternal life will be ours. This psalm, full of David's praise of God and the depth of his love for us, makes preparing for the birth of Jesus in this season of Advent that much more meaningful.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, how blessed we are in the knowledge that you will never fail us, no matter our challenges. Help us to trust in you always. Guide us with your ever-shining light, and show us how to shine that light on others, as we make way for the arrival of your son, our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Diane Wirono

December 2

Matthew 3: 1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6

Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Reflection

John is both a comfort and a terror. He comforts us when he announces the savior of the world, and kicks off Jesus' ministry with the act of Baptism, an act we have all shared. But he is a terror. A wild man living in the wilderness scrounging to keep himself clothed and fed, yelling at people to repent or be thrown into the fire, and giving an especially hard time to the authorities of the day. He is yelling at us.

In John I find the embodiment of our Christian practice. We are challenged and made uncomfortable. How many times have I sat in church and been reminded of my shortcomings? We are taught that an unexamined life is a burden that will drag us down and lead to misery. Yet we are also taught there is a light in the world; there is a savior. That Christ offers us a way to live a good life if we will just take it.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for yelling at me, for getting my attention. In this Advent season, help me to keep alert for the coming of the Christ in my life. Amen.

–Mike Lutz

December 3

Matthew 3:13-17 (New International Version)

[13] Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. [14] But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

[15] Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

[16] As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. [17] And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Reflection

Jesus was a pretty cool guy. He did lots of crazy stuff, like turning water into wine and walking on water. But even while He was super powerful and never, ever sinned, He was still baptized in the same baptism and submerged in the same river as we were. Jesus is God, but He is also human. It gives Him the ability to relate to us in ways that God never did before. Jesus feels the same temptations as us, the same pain, the same hardship. And since he never did anything wrong, He wasn't baptized just to be cleansed of the stain of sin. He was baptized to commit Himself to God's plan. Just as He said, "it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." It seems like Jesus has that task all wrapped up—He is divine, so of course He'd be able to save the world by himself. He is God in the flesh, after all! But Jesus is still human. He said to John that it is proper for us to be baptized and to fulfill God's plan of righteousness. And though it also is intended to purify us, our baptism, just like Jesus', is a commitment to strive to follow God's decrees. To strive to be kind, and giving, and honest, and accepting; to be the best Christians we can be. And yeah, we're going to mess up; we're still sinful people. But just as God came down from the heavens and said He loved Jesus, God loves us, too.

Prayer

Lord,

Please help us to be better Christians by recognizing the opportunities that come by us. Help us to remain humble servants you created us to be.

We pray that you continue to smother us with your kindness and blessings.

Help us to keep level heads during this time of uncertainty in our world.

Amen.

—Lindsay Hutton, 11th grade and Olivia Kaufmann, 10th grade

December 4

Romans 15: 4-13 New International Version (NIV)

4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed 9 and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."

10 Again, it says,

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

11 And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
Let all the peoples extol him."

12 And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,

One who will arise to rule over the nations?

In him the Gentiles will hope."

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection

So many words and phrases stick out in these verses that symbolize my past and current walk with Christ: Endurance, Encouragement, Hope, Accept one another, Rejoice, Praise the Lord, Joy, Peace, Power of the Holy Spirit and TRUST.

TRUST is the word that I have tattooed on my wrist. It wasn't until later in life that I even entertained the thought of getting "inked," and I'm still not sure why I felt the need. Seeing the constant reminder of my reliance on one simple word now makes sense. When I got the tattoo about 3 1/2 years ago, outwardly I came across as fine. Internally I was a mess and in a very dark place. As time goes the darkness is much less frequent but I still suffer. I am constantly comforted and encouraged by scripture, particularly Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him."

I have Trust, hope, and peace in him. There are many more people that have it much worse off than me/us. My surrounding cast is incredible: My wife and boys, family, friends, and church are better than one could hope for. I didn't ask for these things; they were part of GOD's plan and I am beyond grateful. I continue to show up for him and he never disappoints.

What an awesome time of year to have this scripture as a reminder of hope. Thanksgiving and Christmas memories flood my mind. These holidays, filled with rooms not big enough to accommodate, overwhelm our spirits with family and friends and blessings.

Prayer

I pray that if you are going through a difficult or dark time this season you would be reminded of the unconditional love that Christ has for all of us. Embrace that love!

–Teddy Ferguson

December 5

Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
5 May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
7 In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
18 Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
19 Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.

Reflection

This Psalm reminds us that justice, righteousness, and peace are characteristics of God's reign. As Christ-followers, it points us in the direction of caring for each other with love and compassion, just as God has done by sending his son into the world for us.

During the season of Advent as we remember and celebrate the birth of Christ, we look hopefully to the future as the psalmist did, realizing that we are called to love as Jesus loved.

Prayer

Lord, guide us as we try to figure out how to make "...righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more." Amen and Amen.

–Lyn Hill

December 6

Romans 5: 1-5

1 Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. 2 Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. 3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4 And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. 5 And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

Reflection

Even in my darkest hour, there always seemed to be a flicker of hope that things would eventually work out, one way or another. However, without faith to support that hope, I continued to self-sabotage and lose my way in the dark. Somewhere, through the repeated trials and tribulations, it dawned on me that if I just let go and let God, things worked out in ways that I could never have conceived.

I know in my heart, through faith, that I don't need to burden myself with worry any longer. I believe that when I put my hope, trust, and faith in God's plan for me and my own, I won't have to tell lies, or manipulate the outcome of any given situation. I've learned that when I do, someone always gets hurt, or angry, and it's usually me. Because I am a child of God, I can stand in the light of the world, and be used as a vessel to spread that light wherever it leads me.

Prayer

Use me Lord, in whatever capacity you see fit. Help me not to stumble with doubt, or hesitate when opportunities present themselves. Awaken my spirit to receive your grace, that I may live in the light of your love for all the days of my life.

–Stewart Edwards

December 7

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all
people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Reflection

These are some of the most beautiful and most familiar advent verses. For ancient Israel they were an assurance that they would return from Babylonian exile to see the glory of the Lord. We see it as a prophesy of the coming of Jesus. In Luke (and other gospels) these verses are associated with John the Baptist as the one who is coming to prepare the way of the Lord.

In reading them this time, I noticed something I had never seen before when I compared Isaiah's language with Luke's quotation of the latter portion of these verses. Luke 3:4 says, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth...'"

I think I always have had the Luke version in my head—John, this strange man who eats locusts and wild honey is the voice in the wilderness who is coming to tell us of the Lord's coming. But Isaiah puts us squarely in the wilderness (we aren't told in Isaiah where the voice is)—and that resonates. Isaiah is telling us that we in the wilderness have responsibility for the hard work of leveling the ground for the coming of the Lord. We should not be lulled by the beautiful strains of "The Messiah" and the passive voice in the verses to think this is all just going to happen in an easy way. We have work to do.

Still, these are hopeful verses. God is promising us comfort—if we do our part, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for coming to talk with us in the wilderness. Help us to prepare a way for your Kingdom. Help us to discern how to do the engineering to level the ground. Give us the tools we need. Be with us when we get discouraged. And help us always to hold in our hearts the hope that you offer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

—Sara Coe

December 8

James 5:7-10

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ ... See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

Reflection

The New Testament abounds in references to the second coming of Christ, and this is just one example. In recent years, it has become fashionable to doubt a literal interpretation of Christ's return to this earth, while others have taken Scripture and somehow fashioned the texts into a detailed and somewhat fanciful account of how the Last Days will unfold. Here's why I believe both approaches to Scripture may be wrong.

We worship an *awesome creator* God, and I don't mean this in a trite, happy-clappy, Christian chorus kind of way. Modern cosmology reveals a Universe whose scope is ever more stunning. A recent estimate raised the number of galaxies in the Universe by a factor of 20, from 100 billion to 2 trillion. Our own Milky Way galaxy, 100,000 light years in diameter and whose grandeur fills the sky on a dark night, is just one these 2 trillion, so "awesome" really seems an understatement. And we believe that it all began with a massive explosion of matter from a point source about 13.6 billion years ago. The Universe has been expanding ever since this Big Bang, with generations of stars forming from hydrogen gas, clumping into galaxies and eventually dying, releasing their core material in supernovae explosions. The stuff that the earth and our own bodies are made from is formed from heavy elements ejected billions of years ago from the centers of stars in their death throes. We might well feel tiny and insignificant in relation to the Universe. We are! But we simply wouldn't be here if the Universe was not a very big, very old place.

To me, it is not a stretch to think that the God who initiated all this and provided a generous window of time for us to develop and thrive, might one day call a halt to the proceedings. And it's also possible that the second coming of Christ will be not so much a cosmological event as the beginning of a God-ordained New Order on the Earth. None of us know exactly what is meant, but references are so numerous in Scripture that it can't reasonably be dismissed. We are called to be patient, to strengthen our hearts and to be at peace with each other. This is what the farmer does. He plants and waits for the sun and rain, elements beyond his control, and continues to work. He watches for the signs of the seasons and is aware that the longer he waits the closer the crop and the more important it is to wait.

So, let us not fall into the error of thinking that God can't or won't intervene again in human history, or be obsessed with 'end time' theology and think we can figure out what will happen and when. The call is simply to be faithful followers of Christ, always allowing for the possibility that He could return and gather us up to be with Him. And as always, in this Advent season, we wait to celebrate the birth of the Christ child whose life and witness changed the world.

Prayer

Father, help me to wait upon you humbly this day, to be kind to those around me, to be patient and not arrogant. Help me to accept all things without complaint, and if you choose today to intervene on this earth, help me to be ready to welcome you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

—Guy Roberts

December 9

Psalm 146:5-10

5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,
6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

Reflection

Psalm 146 is the first of five praise Psalms that end the book of Psalms. Each of those psalms begins and ends with the imperative, "Praise the LORD!"

This Psalm is one of the two morning Psalms included every Tuesday as part of the Daily Lectionary. I read it this past Election Day, and as the results of the Presidential election began to become clearer much later that day, I worried about the future of our country. I realized, too, however, that we cannot put our faith in any person to be our help. Our help is the LORD. Consider how the descriptions of the LORD in the Psalm are descriptions of Jesus, who is our true help and in whom we place our trust; and whom we are to love with all our hearts, our minds, and all our might.

Prayer

Dear LORD, as we await with hope the coming of your son, our LORD Jesus, we ask that you help us to keep our faith in you, who is our true help. Often we ask you to bless America; perhaps it is time for America to bless God. Praise the LORD!

–Tom Prelovsky

December 10

Isaiah 35: 1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.
³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Reflection (It's your turn to reflect. What is this text saying to you today? How is God working in your life?)

Prayer (What are you grateful for today? What is your prayer for this day?)

December 11

Matthew 11:2-11

When John the Baptist heard in prison about the things that Christ was doing, he sent some of his disciples to him. "Tell us," they asked Jesus, "are you the one John said was going to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus answered, "Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me!"

While John's disciples were leaving, Jesus spoke about him to the crowds; "When you went out to John in the desert, what did you expect to see? A blade of grass bending in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in fancy clothes? People who dress like that live in palaces! Tell me, what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes indeed, but you saw much more than a prophet. For John is the one of whom the scripture says: 'God said, I will send my messenger ahead of you to open the way for you.' I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived! But the one who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John."

Reflection

Despite many years of listening to lectionary passages, I must say that this passage seems completely unfamiliar. After the baptism story, I thought that John knew that Jesus was the Christ he was foretelling, but apparently not. Jesus knew, but not John.

The idea of someone "opening the way" made me think about how foreign this idea is to us now. I tried to think of times that someone "opens the way" for someone greater, and came up only with these motley ideas: The opening act at a concert, which warms up the audience. The emcee who introduces the speaker with background and accolades. The advance man (or team) who makes sure of the arrangements for a traveling political figure. Trumpeters in costume dramas who signal the entrance of the king. The man who announces the President as he comes to Capitol Hill for the State of the Union speech. Most of the time, we get notified of someone's arrival by phone or email (We'll be there about 3! Hugs and kisses!) or by ad in the Washington Post (Paula Poundstone at 8!). Perhaps in biblical times, having a live messenger of character was the best way to get the news out. Or, perhaps a messenger just underlines the importance of the Good News.

Jesus praises John as a prophet, strong and plain, and "greater than anyone who has ever lived." But he then seems to demote John by saying that the lowest one in the Kingdom of heaven is even greater. This shows us the importance of striving to enter the Kingdom of heaven. I can only believe that John also achieved the Kingdom eventually.

Prayer

Lord, help us to get the message, with plenty of bars and clear transmission, that Jesus is the Christ. He is the one who cares for us in our infirmity and shows us God's love. Help us to emulate the messenger, not bending in the wind, not dressed in fancy clothes. But help us also to strive for the Kingdom of heaven, where God's will is done. Amen.

–Gina Vitale

December 12

Psalm 98

1 Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

2 The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

3 He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;

5 make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,

6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.

7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.

8 Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;

9 let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

Reflection

In the rare event that we're on time, it's just after 7 a.m., and Elizabeth, 4, and William, almost 2, are buckled into their car seats. There's a good chance that at least one of us is in a bad mood as I back the car out of the driveway.

"Should we sing or say morning prayer?" I always try to ask before we turn onto one of the main roads, even though the response from the backseat rarely changes.

"Sing!"

What and how we sing changes from week to week. Some mornings I calmly repeat the chorus to "Lord Prepare Me," hoping to leave the kids with a sense of peace after rushing them up and out the door. Other days Elizabeth and I try to see who can sing a sillier version of "Johnny Appleseed," allowing Will's giggles and squeals to be our guide.

Outside the car, there's a lot of noise. Horns are honking. Emails and texts are coming in. Metro just announced more delays. Strangers and friends whisper and shout as they try to make sense of what's next for our divided country. But, as we sing joyfully inside my car, we can't hear any of this. Instead, we're reminded of what an incredible blessing it is to live another day—here in this place where sun rays tear through the morning clouds, where trees that just a few days ago looked like any other now burst forth with radiant color, where God welcomes us to laugh and love and rejoice.

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for the gift of song. May we never stop singing your praise. Amen.

—Jennifer Carr

December 13

Isaiah 9: 2-7

²The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

³You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest

Reflection

When I was a little girl, one of my favorite Christmas traditions was celebrating Saint Lucia Day, recognizing my Swedish heritage. While officially on December 13, we celebrated the day on Christmas morning with the whole family gathered. I wore the white dress and crown of candles (don't worry, they were battery powered!), and served coffee and pastries to everyone. It always felt like an honor and a joy to be the Lucia!

As I grew older, more of the meaning of the tradition became clear to me. The meaning of light and joy with serving your loved ones with sustenance is such a wonderful way to usher in the start of the Christmas season and the meaning of Christ with us. More and more I see the importance of having Christ's light to guide us, allowing our hands to be free to serve in His name.

Prayer

Lord of Light, I pray that you guide our way as we work to serve all your people with joy and love. Be with those who are walking in darkness, and help us to show them your light. Amen.

–Carey Stipe

A brief history of Saint Lucia Day:

Saint Lucia Day, also called the Feast of Saint Lucy, is a Christian feast day celebrated on 13 December in Advent, commemorating Saint Lucy, who according to legend brought "food and aid to Christians hiding in the catacombs" using a candle-lit wreath to "light her way and leave her hands free to carry as much food as possible". Her feast once coincided with the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year before calendar reforms, so her feast day has become a festival of light. Falling within the Advent season, Saint Lucy's Day is viewed as an event signaling the arrival of Christmastide, pointing to the arrival of the Light of Christ on Christmas Day.



December 14

Galatians 4:4-7 New International Version (NIV)

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Reflection

This passage clarifies the dual intent of Christ's role as our Savior; (1) to fulfill the prophecy of his arrival both per the time and manner indicated by God; and (2) to outline the great purpose that the Son has been sent to fulfill.

Through Galatians we may clearly ascertain the ultimate purpose of Christ's arrival, to redeem us from slavery to sin, and to secure through grace our inheritance of Salvation and our familial relationship with God as his children. By understanding this message, we can both be receptive and grateful for Christ's sacrifice, and be fulfilled in the knowledge that we are God's children who are called through faith to inherit his love and our place in his kingdom.

Prayer

Thank you Lord for the redemption you've provided through your Son. We confess that we often fail to show our gratitude by placing you and your kingdom first in our daily lives. We thank you for your steadfast love and endless forgiveness as we navigate and often stumble down the paths set before us. We pray that you strengthen and fortify us so that we may withstand temptations of this world and that, with your grace, we become better disciples, living examples of your message to the world.

– Amie and John Gribbins

December 15

Romans 1: 1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God - the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection

Well, these aren't verses we associate with Advent or that make us think about and look towards Christmas, are they? This passage doesn't feature in the traditional readings we hear in the lead up to Christmas. Did someone at church make a mistake when they chose this as one of the passages for our Advent Devotional? Actually, I don't think so. Sometimes we simply need to accept the unexpected and go with it wherever it leads us—if we're willing.

Throughout his letters to the young churches, Paul ties together the threads from the Old Testament and the Gospels to ensure those hearing his words—then and now—understand that everything fits into God's master plan. Prophets foretold the birth of Christ at Christmas, tracing his lineage back to King David, then the power of His life on earth and His death and resurrection at Easter. Here at the beginning of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds us of the gifts of grace and peace Christ gave to us. Isn't that also the key message of Christmas?

We often talk of being "Easter People," but we can't be Easter People without first being Christmas People and accepting the gifts of grace and peace the infant Christ brought us. We can make every day Christmas Day—not in the sense of the sentimental pop songs (though I do love them!), or the frantic gift-buying and chaotic preparations for one (often stressful) day of the year, but in realizing that every day is a joyful gift given generously and without expecting anything in return.

Grace and peace are wrapped up beautifully and presented to us every day. Shouldn't we accept them with joy and gratitude, then keep them within us to help us cope with whatever today brings?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your wonderful gifts of grace and peace. As we head toward Christmas with that mixture of excitement, anticipation, long to-do lists, and the fear of forgetting something, please help us to pause often and remember that we are celebrating you. May we be filled with the joy and gratitude of Christmas every day of the year and know you are with us as we face our unexpected challenges. Amen.

—Kathy Whitelaw

December 16

Psalm 80 (NIRV)

1 Shepherd of Israel, hear us.

You lead the people of Joseph like a flock.

You sit on your throne between the cherubim.

Show your glory

2 to the people of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.

Call your strength into action.

Come and save us.

3 God, make us new again.

May you be pleased with us.

Then we will be saved.

4 LORD God, you rule over all.

How long will you be angry?

Will you be angry with your people even when they pray to you?

5 You have given us tears as our food.

You have made us drink tears by the bowlful.

6 You have let our neighbors mock us.

Our enemies laugh at us.

7 God who rules over all, make us new again.

May you be pleased with us.

Then we will be saved.

...

18 Then we won't turn away from you.

Give us new life. We will worship you.

19 LORD God who rules over all, make us new again.

May you be pleased with us.

Then we will be saved.

Reflection

As the year draws to an end and we reflect on all of the events that happened, it feels tempting to lament the state of our world—wars that devastate entire cities and victimize children, attacks on innocent people, natural disasters that ravish already broken communities, bigotry and intolerance in our own country, unkindness and lack of hope all around us. It feels tempting to fill our prayers with only pain, confusion, even anger, as we try to make sense of it all. It feels tempting to feel discouraged, just like the psalmist in Psalm 80.

But as Christians, we are reminded that our God is the God of hope. It is the God of what is good in the world—and there is, in spite of it all, so much goodness in this world! As Christians, we are reminded to look forward with hope to God's messianic kingdom, and praise Him for what he has done for us.

During this month, our Christian community all over our imperfect world looks ahead and celebrates the birth of the perfect gift God has given humanity: his only son, our only hope of a kingdom that is perfect and beautiful, where love and kindness abound.

As we reflect about God's gift, we shift our prayer of lament to a prayer of hope, of joy and celebration, just like our ancestors did in the book of Psalms. We don't ignore our pain, but with our hearts filled with faith and hope, we look forward to a kingdom of love through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Shepherd of Israel, we know you hear us and we see your glory every day, all around us. Thank you for giving us new life in your only son. Help us be examples of love, kindness, faith, and hope in a world that may, at times, discourage us. Please help us be a steady light in this world, and be with us as we bring the good news of your messianic kingdom to all our neighbors in this advent season and always. Amen.

—The Delgado Turkman family

December 17

Isaiah 7: 10-16

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Reflection

Ahaz gets most of the attention for turning his back on God in this portion of Isaiah. During his sixteen-year reign, Judah was invaded by both the Edomites and the Philistines, with Judah losing territory and people to each. Syria and Israel joined together to attack Judah, laying siege to Jerusalem. Isaiah is the one who gives Ahaz God's promise to preserve Judah. Instead of trusting in God, Ahaz goes his own way, rejecting God's promise, and takes matters into his own hands. Even when he is given a clear invitation to ask for any sign of God's attention he wants, "as deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (NRSV, Isaiah 7:11) Ahaz refuses. God, as always, doesn't take no for an answer, Ahaz is getting a sign anyway. "Therefore the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel" (CEB, Isaiah 7:14). There is immediacy in Isaiah's words as they are translated in the Common English Bible, she is about to give birth. But we know that it was some 700 years after King Ahaz's rule before that birth happened. Talk about a long Advent of waiting!

Waiting is hard. Trusting can be even harder. We're culturally conditioned to take control, to take quick and decisive action. But when it comes to the fulfillment of God's promises for us and for the world, what we must do is wait. We wait for the signs that show what we should do. We wait for the gifts of God to arrive, for the promised blessings to appear. We struggle to trust that they will appear.

Ahaz did neither. He turned to Assyria to save Judah from Israel and Syria, which led to the desecration of the temple, the subservience of Judah to Assyria, and took God's people further from God. We may not have the fate of nations in our hands, but by not trusting when we are called to trust and seizing control to act according to our own desires when we are called to wait damages us, our relationships, and moves us further from God. Despite Ahaz's turning away, God still acted to redeem his people, just as God promised, through the son born to the young woman Isaiah spoke of. God also promises us complete reconciliation with each other and with God. And so we wait and trust. May we recognize the Isaiahs in our lives who point the way, who help us trust, and may we be patient in the waiting.

Prayer

God of every time and place,

Quiet our anxious and impatient hearts. Loosen our grips on those things that are yours to control. Help us to see the signs of your promises to us and to the world. May we learn to do your will as we wait the flowering of your kingdom.

Amen

–Karl Kaufmann

December 18

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

I think of Jesus' birth as a miracle. One of those miracles that never goes away, but just sticks there. I think about it every day and the only word that comes to mind is "wow." I thought it was very cool that the angel came to talk to Joseph to tell him to go and marry Mary and name his son Jesus (son of God). If an angel actually came to talk to me, I would be totally amazed. Then I would be convinced that Jesus is real. Every day, I think about how great Jesus is. Every night, I say the "Our father" prayer with my mom or dad.

The Christmas season is my favorite time of the year. I love spending time with my family, and having hot cocoa on cold days. I also love putting the Christmas tree up and hanging all the ornaments. Getting all the presents is very fun, too! Christmas just gets my spirits up and puts a smile on my face. My favorite service at church for the whole year is definitely the Christmas Eve service, when we sing Christmas songs.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you so much for Christmas and the time we get to spend with our families and friends. Thank you for dying on the cross for us. And, thank you for the chance to live in this beautiful, awesome world. Amen.

–Max Ferguson, 6th grade

December 19

Psalm 148

The Cosmic Hymn of Praise

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.

6 He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,

8 fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the Lord!

Reflection

This Psalm is a popular daily prayer of the Jewish faith. What greater way to praise the Lord than to recite this each morning. It is a call to prayer for the Christian faith. God should be exalted in everything. There is no creature, plant, place, or act of nature that is not evidence of God's greatness. God's creation is everlasting. Give praise, rejoice in his greatness, and live life knowing that God is in everything and everyone.

Prayer

Lord, Let us rejoice in your greatness and let us find greatness in all of your creations. Give us strength and humility to be unbridled in your praise. In your name we pray. Amen.

–Alison Dewey and Brian Hooker

December 20

Titus 3:4-7

4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Reflection

This is the essence of the Gospel, the good news. I am saved by God's kindness, love and mercy alone and not by anything that I should have done in the past or could do in the future. And I know that I am loved and forgiven but part of me wants to deserve what God has given me through the Son and I don't. The good news of the Gospel is easy to understand but difficult to accept because it's so humbling. There can be no pride in unmerited favor.

I think often of what I could've, should've, would've done better but always fall so short. Nevertheless, I rejoice that I am saved by Christ through the baptism of the Holy Spirit who was poured out over me generously so that I am covered by grace and can claim my inheritance of eternal life. In Christ, each day is new and the power of His forgiveness means that I don't need to be weighed down by yesterday's regrets about what might have been.

Even though I sometimes continue to go my own way, Christ through his mercy has chosen to bestow on me, a prodigal daughter, a rich and undeserved inheritance. That is the great depth and breadth of the love of our Father God. Hallelujah!

Prayer

Father, thank you for your great gift of forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ. Your mercies are truly new every morning. Help us to seek your righteousness day by day and please continue to bathe us in your kindness and love.

–Meisie Roberts

December 21

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist. And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. Then in that day The nations will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious.

Reflection

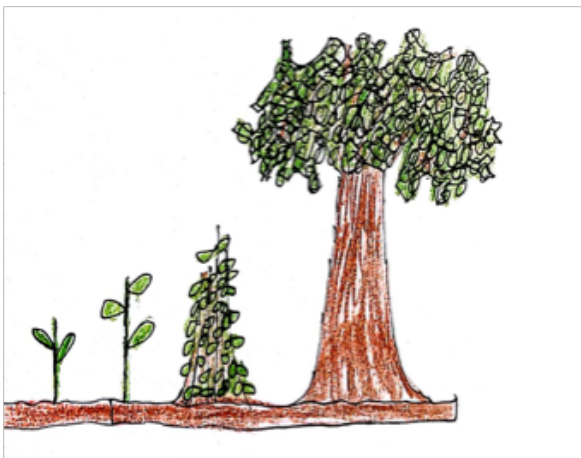
Arthur (age 17): The scripture means that in God's Kingdom, the strong will help the weak, and they will join together.

Iris (age 6): Usually bears eat fish and lions are meat eaters. But if Jesus tell them to, they can become vegetarians.

May the Earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

May all creatures be filled with the presence of the Lord.

Take mini sabbaths (many of them!) daily - to walk with Him, delight and rest in Him. Waves and wind calm at His presence in you.



Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for your love and peace in us. May your kingdom grow in our heart, every day, every second. We love you. Amen.

–Iris, Arthur, and Li-Jen, hand-in-hand

Drawing by Arthur

December 22

Luke 1: 26-45

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God.

36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Reflection

We are in awe of Mary's faith. When we were expecting our first child, we were excited but also fearful of all to come. Mary takes the responsibility of bearing God's son with open arms and devout faith despite all she could be scared of. We still often feel overwhelmed raising children. Having responsibility for the lives of other people is daunting, and this often leads to fears or anxieties that we will make a mistake that will affect their lives. At times like these, it is helpful to take a step back and put our faith in God that everything will turn out fine through good and bad. There are many other people, in past and present times, who have been given greater responsibilities with less resources and support, and they have been successful. Sometimes letting go of the fear and anxiety and remembering our faith in God (like Mary's) is the only way to deal with it.

Prayer

Lord, help me to remember that you are always with us even in the most difficult times. If we turn to you, we can get through anything. When I feel overwhelmed, I will think of those that have walked before me and have put their faith in you.

—Brian and Jenny Hoshaw

December 23

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Reflection

In the midst of her possible fear and uncertainty about the future (after being greeted by the angel and given the message that she will soon become a pregnant virgin), Mary says, "let it be unto me as you have said"—in other words, "thy will be done." In my own fear and uncertainty in life this week, I have found it difficult to say this. How did Mary do it?? What courage she had! As she greets Elizabeth, she exclaims, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God, my Savior." Where is MY faith in times of distress?

We can certainly take a lesson from Mary's thanksgiving. As our American holiday of Thanksgiving approaches and I wonder what to be thankful for, I realize that in the seeking, I will find... fall foliage that stuns; my children giving me hugs; peace despite uncertain times; a church that reaches out; passion for justice all around us; a community where I can say how I feel; good health; a supportive family; God coming to us through a blessed virgin, and on and on...

We can also see how highly regarded and cherished women are as part of God's plan. He leaves the bearing, care and rearing of his son, Jesus, to a young woman, of no special standing. And, not only that, but he sends an angel to tell her the plan ahead of time and to comfort her possible concerns. May we also be comforted in this season, giving thanks and praise to God as Mary did, despite our fears, concerns or circumstances.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Lead the way along the path that you have laid out for us... Let us not remain self-focused, but instead become focused on You, and on those things that bring You joy and glory... And, in so doing be blessed.

Amen.

—Jen Ferguson

December 24

Luke 2: 1-20

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

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

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

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

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Reflection

This familiar passage reminded us of different nativity sets that we have seen. Elliott recalled seeing the large nativity outside of the Mormon temple during the Festival of Lights. This is a night that I remember well. We were new to Maryland and I was feeling lonely, but seeing the beauty of the lights and the nativity with our family together helped bring the Christmas spirit back to me. The boys also remembered the child-proof nativity that they used to play with when they were younger. One day, when Isaac was around 3, I saw him playing with his trucks and some of the nativity pieces. He told me that Mary was riding in the back of a monster truck. My first thought was that this was somehow inappropriate, but I didn't have any real reason to ask him to stop. Reflecting upon it now, I think there is a lesson for me that the nativity scene doesn't need to be separated from other parts of our life. We can remember the wonder of the birth of Jesus while at work, doing laundry, or riding in a monster truck. We can remember what an incredible gift we were given and think about how we can demonstrate peace and love every day.

Prayer

Dear God, help us open our hearts to your love every day.

–The Gilchrist Family

December 25

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. [...]

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection

What sustains my heart and gives me courage is the knowledge that the living God loved us enough to come to us in flesh. God did not choose to watch us from a distance; rather God freely chose to come to us in Jesus Christ and to live among us a human being, bearing all the joys and sorrow and facing all the temptations that I face. When chaos descends upon my spirit because of my own failures or the brokenness of the world around me, I find consolation knowing that God knows that experience fully. I can call upon my Lord Jesus confident that he is the one who is full of grace—the fount of undeserved forgiveness and love. When I am lost or weary or not sure of the way forward, I can look to Jesus Christ because in him is truth. He is my compass. As I look to Jesus—his life and ministry among us in the flesh—I find my bearings and discover the path for each day. What's more, there is no darkness in my life or in the world that is not illuminated by the Light that is Christ.

Prayer

Blessed and loving God, thank you for choosing to come among us in the flesh and living among us in Jesus Christ. Thank you for giving the light that this world's darkness can never overcome. Grant me, and all your people, confidence in your grace and wisdom to seek daily your truth in Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Rev. Roy Howard

