



ADVENT

A Calendar of Devotions

2022

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 27

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows... Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming... Be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know.

Matthew 24:36, 42-44

I am the kind of person who likes a schedule. I thrive when I have an agenda. The voice of my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Menigen, rings, "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail!" *Advent* means "coming," and the season calls us to prepare. In Advent, preparation is about being attentive.

We are called to wait, and that waiting is full of unknowns. Throughout Advent, we wait for Christ. We wait to recall Christ's birth in Bethlehem and for Christ's return. Jesus tells us that only God knows the timing of that return. We must wait and prepare, but we don't know when. It is not comforting to me to be told to be ready for something but not receive all of the details.

If we had all the information, it would take away the opportunities to be attentive. If we knew the exact day and time, it would rob us of the opportunity to live in faith and to dwell in hope, looking for signs of God's promises all around us.

During a season where there is exhaustion and preparation, what might it mean to prepare in the sense that Jesus is talking about? How might we work towards God's call to be more attentive? For me, this looks like being alert to God's offer of hope and trying my best to surrender my agendas.

Prayer

God help me to find that beautiful balance of waiting and preparing, for that balance is faith. Help me to live in a way that my faith reflects Your hope to others who may need a glimmer of that same hope. Amen.

Monday, November 28

This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

*In the days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
will be the highest of the mountains.
It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.*

Isaiah 2:1-2

When we turn to Isaiah, we are in the genre of prophecy, not uncommon within the first testament. Isaiah describes the prophecy as something that he saw, a series of visions concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah's words urge us to see with a hopeful imagination and to embody that vision in our very lives.

Isaiah is sweeping as it relays the vision. For Jerusalem, there will be judgment, destruction, and exile. There will also be restoration and finally, a reunification and reorganization. Isaiah uses vivid and colorful language to describe what the prophet sees. The rich words and imagery in Isaiah invite us to join in that prophetic seeing of God's justice and restoration—not only for this text, but for our entire journey towards Christmas. We approach God's Scripture as the beautiful and enlivening words which empower and encourage us to embody God's hope for the world.

A lot of the hesitation for people who have never encountered the church exists because they see Christians lacking the very things we say are foundational to faith: love, grace, justice, and peace. This season needs less words telling people about God's vision and more prophetic living.

Prayer

God, we dream of the day when all people will stream not to our churches but to your house. Help us to be the connection between the words of Scripture and the ways of justice and restoration for Your people. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29

*Many nations will go and say,
“Come, let’s go up to the LORD’s mountain,
to the house of Jacob’s God
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God’s paths...”*

*God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.*

Isaiah 2:3-4

We see what some describe as a “peaceable kingdom” in today’s passage from Isaiah. This vision promises to teach us God’s ways where we so often want to demand our own. “They will no longer learn how to make war” (Isaiah 2:4). This powerful and popular passage reminds us that conflict is very human, and it is not inherent to us. We learn this behavior. And where there is conflict, we prefer to be on the “winning” side.

A beautiful part of the human spirit is that we can work to un-learn behaviors. The transformation of swords into iron plows and spears into pruning hooks is most often approached as the metaphorical unlearning of our retributive tendencies. In a metaphorical sense, where are the places that we have learned war? Where are the places you have learned to exert dominance, to desire your own way of retribution, to behave as if your sense of right and wrong is cosmic law? God is calling us today to stop learning war and to embrace God’s instruction.

Prayer

God, when the world wants to fight, let us do the work of providing for all of Your beloved. When we want to defend ourselves, remove all of our selfish ways. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

“Let’s go to the LORD’s house!”

*Now our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem!*

*Jerusalem is built like a city
joined together in unity.*

*That is where the tribes go up—
the LORD’s tribes!*

*It is the law for Israel
to give thanks there to the LORD’s name,
because the thrones of justice are there—
the thrones of the house of David!*

Pray that Jerusalem has peace:

*“Let those who love you have rest.
Let there be peace on your walls;
let there be rest on your fortifications.”*

*For the sake of my family and friends,
I say, “Peace be with you, Jerusalem.”*

*For the sake of the LORD our God’s house
I will pray for your good.*

Psalm 122

When you flip in your Bible (whether on a screen or in the beautifully thin pages of a bound book), I wonder if you pay attention to headings. The heading above Psalm 122 reads, “A pilgrimage song.” It beckons us to go up to the house of God. In Advent, the lectionary pairs this psalm with the second chapter of Isaiah, which tells us, “Come, let’s go up to the LORD’s mountain, to the house of Jacob’s God” (Isaiah 2:3).

I have been blessed to travel to Jerusalem. Along with my spouse and much of my ordination class, I was transformed by my time spent in this most beautiful and bustling city. As I read this psalm, I can almost hear the people joyfully shouting, “Let’s go to the LORD’s house!” (Psalm 122:1). It is impossible to exist in Jerusalem without undergoing some sort of change in elevation. To visit holy sites (whether

Jewish, Christian, or Muslim), one must ascend. Going up is not easy, but it is the anticipation of what waits for us at the precipice that makes the journey upwards worth taking.

Whether our journey upward is physical or spiritual, we share in that anticipation of what waits for us when we arrive. In this very brief psalm, the promise of rest, peace, and safety awaits us when we arrive at the top. Whatever the journey up looks like, whether it is easy or the path uneven, the climate too hot or too cold, at the top we can deeply inhale and rest.

But then as we exhale, we send out prayers. We pray for Jerusalem now as much as the day the psalmist first penned the plea. We also join our hearts with the psalmist as we pray for the good of others.

Prayer

God, whether today is my first step of ascent or I am nearing the top, fill me with peace and prayer.

Thursday, December 1

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light.

Romans 13:11-12

This passage seems to stand in stark contrast to the Gospel lesson for the week which read, “But nobody knows when that day or hour will come...” (Matthew 24:36). In our modern context, we always know what time it is. I have found time to be a bit exhausting, honestly. I feel like I live under the rule of time more than anything else. Setting an alarm to wake up, needing to drop my child off at school, a day full of appointments—that is the norm. To exist outside of the rule of time is both a luxury and something about which I have to be quite intentional. As I think about it now, there are few places in my daily life where the time is not displayed just a glance away.

I have found it fascinating, though, to watch my child learn to tell time (a childhood milestone that I am trying my best to not resent). In the classroom, the children are learning about both analog and digital time, but my own child has struggled to tell analog time. This is likely because we live in a digital world. I found her in my office after worship one Sunday staring at my analog clock, with a second hand that sweeps instead of ticking. She said to me, “Mom, with your clock time looks blurry.”

I think this is the sort of time Paul is writing about. On an analog clock, you get a sense of the time that has past, the moment of the present, and the time that stands before you. The seconds move quickly; if we are attentive, we see the minute hand move, and the hours advance. Time in this

passage from Romans means not so much the second or even the moment. Time is blurry, past, present, and future flowing into one another. Paul wants us to understand that, as God's creation marked the beginning of our time, there will be a time when God calls this creation to completion, ushering in a new and unfathomable time.

Prayer

God, help us in these to not simply mark time, but to live in it. Grant us an understanding of our salvation which was not a moment in time but an always unfolding event on God's timeline. Amen.

Friday, December 2

Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Romans 13:13-14

In Paul's writing in this passage, I find a familiar feeling. "Get up!" he says. "Get dressed for the day!" But Paul is not talking about the dawning of a new, single day. Paul is talking about the dawning of our life in faith; waking into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Often, thinking about how I will live my whole life differently because of my love of and faith in Jesus seems daunting. What will I miss out on? What relationships will fall by the wayside? How will my family interact with the increasingly secular world?

For years of my life, I was an early morning exerciser. Here's the thing though: a lifetime of exercise and wellness seems daunting. If I think about waking up for a 5 a.m. run every morning for the rest of my life, I'm already tired of it. The only way to do it is to live one day at a time. I lay out my clothes each night, and I get up each morning. We can shape our spiritual lives the same way. Pray and reflect each night to prepare us to wake in gratitude and commitment. Get up with a prayer to face the day. How would our spiritual lives look different if we embraced a pattern of prayer, one day at a time, to follow not our own selfish desires but the wholeness that Christ offers us?

Prayer

God of exhausted evenings and fresh mornings, help me to get up each day thankful for Your child, Jesus. Allow my gratitude to shape my whole life; all the patterns of waking up, engaging life, and resting in You. For the times when the darkness feels daunting and I cannot rest, God, sustain me with Your Spirit. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn’t know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that.

Matthew 24:36-39

I recently walked through the accelerated illness and, ultimately, the death of my father. My dad was a faith-giant for me, a person who I knew and respected deeply. My days in college studying religion and the time that followed in seminary were often full of conversations with my dad about what I was learning and what it meant for my faith. I remember one day we were deep in conversation about the *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. He had chewed through the whole series in his days as a long-haul truck driver, and I told him that after my studies, I was reframing my understanding of what the end times could look like. He grew quiet, and after a pause he said, “Well, now is a good time to tell you this...”

My dad confided in me (and I later learned that he shared this with a few other trusted companions) that he once had a dream where God revealed to him the date of Christ’s return. Now, before you go thinking that my sweet and Jesus-loving dad was a basket case, you should know that he never told anyone what that date was. He would not even share if the date was in “our lifetime” or not. He clung to this passage of Scripture and believed that the date did not matter, and that he was likely wrong. He took the dream to be a personal call to faithful living, and he shared that call with others, too. That dream

date died with him, but the urgency of being prepared in Christ did not.

I wonder now if that date may have been the date of his death. I was blessed to be present with him when he drew his last breath, and if there is anything I can say about it, it was peaceful. Our whole family knew his death was coming, including him, but I know deep within my heart of hearts that he was peaceful because he knew that even as his body turned towards death, his spirit was awake in the love of Jesus Christ.

As I grieved his death, I found it challenging that the world kept moving. People went about their daily lives. Social media posts were mundane that day, with people posting pictures of their food or commenting on current events. I wondered how their lives could feel so normal when mine was shaken to its core?

That's the heart of this passage from Matthew: life will feel normal for so many when Jesus comes. Being prepared is not some insider knowledge, it is instead an unshakable knowledge that whenever Jesus comes, we will have peace.

Prayer

Lord, grant us peace.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 4

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
a branch will sprout from his roots.
The LORD's spirit will rest upon him,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of planning and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.
He will delight in fearing the LORD.
He won't judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.
He will judge the needy with righteousness,
and decide with equity for those who suffer in
the land.
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.
Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.*

Isaiah 11:1-5

In one of my favorite commentaries, this week's lectionary passage from Isaiah 11:1-10 is divided on the page: verse 1-5 printed on the left panel and verses 6-10 on the right. Verses 1-5 can be summarized in one word: *justice*. The royal family tree is thought to be finished; cut down, a stump. And yet! A sprig of hope, unlike any other ruler who has existed. The LORD will rule with justice. The verses above show us in rich imagery this way of justice, a new way of existing. God's way of existing cannot evolve from any iteration of authority as we understand it. This passage is messianic prophecy. The prophet envisioned a future ideal ruler characterized by fear of God. We as Christians cannot read this passage without seeing the character of Christ.

It is at the same time both freeing and frightening to remember that the Messiah comes not to reframe our understanding of authority but to completely recreate authority. The Messiah's authority is paired with judgment, but this

judgment is lived out in a new way. It is not hearsay or based on senses. Righteousness is the new standard of judgement, and God's favor rests on the needy. This is God's justice.

I'm wondering where in our experiences, both individuals and collectively, we began to feel as though we can take that justice back into our own hands. The only way we participate in justice is to strive for it as Jesus does: not by our own standards, but by the standards of the Messiah. This is the peaceable kin-dom of which each of us is a citizen. This is the royal lineage to which we pay homage.

Prayerful Practice

Today and through the entire season of Advent, be attentive to those you judge by your own standards. How does God see these beloved, and how are you called to exist in community with them?

Monday, December 5

*The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.*

*The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.*

*A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.*

*They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy
mountain.*

*The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of
the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.*

Isaiah 11:6-9

God bless the memory of my sweet, tender-hearted mom. While the rest of our family cackled at the misfortune of people who stumbled or fell on the TV show *America's Funniest Home Videos*, my mom would turn her head, especially if the person falling was a child. Even when my brother would say something like, "they wouldn't show the video if anyone was hurt," it was not enough. My mom just didn't want to watch a kid tumble down a slide or fall off a bike.

As an educator by trade, she found it difficult to separate entertainment from concern for a child's well-being. The show put my mother's heart on full display. She modeled for me, long before I knew it for myself, the importance of a child's safety. As an adult with a child of my own, I see it more clearly now. Once a person has a child to care for (as a parent, a grandparent, a caregiver, an aunt/uncle, or a trusted friend), our greatest fears are no longer personal danger or harm, but instead danger or harm befalling a child we love.

If a child in your life has experienced harm or sickness, or if you have experienced the holy grief of losing a child, please know that God's

grace covers you. For those who haven't, you are no doubt experienced in seeing children endure hardship in the age of social and broadcast media.

Isaiah's prophecy promises security in the future, even for children, for the most vulnerable and precious among us. We can also read this prophecy as a current reality. We've read earlier in Isaiah 11 that this peace and security comes from a stump. It does not come from a mighty tree but from a place where the tree has been felled. Isn't that how hope emerges for us? No matter what hardship or grief we have endured, hope is born in a thing that seems lifeless. But when this hope for safety is realized fully in the future, our very ideas of safety will change because there will be no opposite. There will be no harm on God's holy mountain.

Prayerful Focus

Pray for the safety and security of children.

Tuesday, December 6

God, give your judgments to the king.

Give your righteousness to the king's son.

*Let him judge your people with righteousness
and your poor ones with justice.*

*Let the mountains bring peace to the people;
let the hills bring righteousness.*

*Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;
let him save the children of those who are needy,
but let him crush oppressors!*

*Let the king live as long as the sun,
as long as the moon,
generation to generation.*

*Let him fall like rain upon fresh-cut grass,
like showers that water the earth.*

*Let the righteous flourish throughout their lives,
and let peace prosper until the moon is no more.*

Psalm 72:1-7

As a resident and voter in the United States of America, I can say confidently that our last two Presidents are markedly different from each other. If one could ever be “happy” with presidential leadership, it is highly unlikely that a person would have been happy with both of these presidents. We’ll leave partisan politics out of devotional life for today, but this psalm is explicitly a prayer for the king. In the United States, where we don’t have a king, we can understand it as a prayer for our government. Not just the president but our legislators and courts as well. Governments are charged with ordering our common life, and in many cases, it is the government that sets the goals towards which a society strives.

As a part of a democracy, I am called to participate in the political process for which the psalmist has just encouraged us to pray. The way the psalmist prays is indicative of how the government’s power should be used. Righteousness are themes, not just today but throughout the entirety of the Advent season.

What would it look like if we both prayed for and participated in the same values?

During the Advent season, and throughout our Christian life, we talk about the Incarnation (God becoming flesh), and when God becomes flesh, God becomes not only human but also participates in the systems that govern, shape, and direct all of humanity. There seem to be two extremes in the way we integrate faith and politics. We either tend to keep them entirely separate, or we keep them so entwined that politics become our religion. This psalm shows us that there is a middle way, and that way calls us to both pray for and live in righteousness and peace.

Prayer

God of justice, guide and direct those who make decisions on behalf of others. Be with leaders and rulers at all levels and grant Your wisdom to all who govern. Bless them with hearts for justice, and let them lead with righteousness. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7

*Bless the LORD God, the God of Israel—
the only one who does wondrous things!
Bless God's glorious name forever;
let his glory fill all the earth!
Amen and Amen!*

Psalm 72:18-19

Wondrous (adj.)—inspiring a feeling of wonder or delight; marvelous.

I invite you to ponder things that are wondrous. Here is a list of things that are wondrous to me:

- how my heart sustains my body day after day, while I am awake or asleep;
- my child's laugh;
- the relentless love and support of my spouse;
- clean and safe water (and the coffee it creates);
- the way the earth sounds different after it snows;
- technology that allows me to keep track of where I'm supposed to be and when;
- a job that is also a vocation;
- a church community which is committed to learning and growth;
- the trusted sister and friend who always knows when to talk and when to listen;
- the companionship of pets;
- the range of my feelings;
- breath prayers;
- a dark, quiet night sky filled with stars; and
- the fact that life isn't fair.

Prayerful Practice

Make a list of what is wondrous in your life and give thanks to God for each wonder!

Thursday, December 8

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

One of my best friends told me about how a specific bird is meaningful to her. Until she was in my life, I never thought twice about this bird; I knew that I had seen them but was never able to place exactly when or where. But once she shared with me, it was as though my senses were heightened to these birds. I notice them now, and I know that it is not because there are more of them.

Hope is the way that God speaks to us of what has been promised. Hope is not needing some random event to land at the right time to change our lives nor is it the last resort after we have done all we can in a certain situation. Hope is our holding on to God's grace. Just as I notice birds all the time, I also see signs of God's love and grace all around me. I notice God's love not because the signs of it are more frequent, intense, or prevalent, but because I have been reminded that it exists. It is incredible to me that the more I think about hope, the more of it I find. I see it perched in the lush green shrubs of comfortable, sunny spring days, and I also see it darting and diving through the bare branches in the frigid winters.

My favorite part of noticing these birds? Each time I see one, I think of my loving friend. Sometimes I text her to let her know that I've seen one, but more often, I offer a prayer of gratitude for her. I do the same for the hope that God continues to place in my soul, sometimes stopping to write or articulate a prayer of gratitude, but more often, simply dwelling in hope for a blissful moment.

Prayerful Practice

What are your signs of hope? How do you notice God's promises in your life?

Friday, December 9

So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory.

Romans 15:7

During my freshman year of college, I got to know my roommate's family pretty well. My mom approached college in a way that could be described as, "You're an adult now; call if you need anything." My roommate's family took a different approach. I felt like her mom, who lived a short twenty-minute drive away, was always dropping something off or coming to visit. This also meant that my roommate went home often. I was fortunate that she took me home with her on a few occasions. The first time I set foot in her parents' home, her mother, Deb, waited on me hand and foot. I never got up from the table. Deb brought me drinks and snacks, and she cleared my plate and glass from the table the moment I was done. What amazing hospitality!

This happened the next time I visited, too. When I humbly thanked Deb for her care and hospitality, she chuckled and said, "Don't get used to it! You get to be a guest twice. The next time? You're family. You'll get your own drink!" I was a bit taken aback by her sentiment, but as it turned out, I discovered what she meant the third time I visited. Our entire dorm building (and whole campus, for that matter) needed to be quickly evacuated after a severe ice storm left all of campus without power. We quickly packed necessities and headed to Deb's house.

We ended up staying at Deb's house for almost a week. As I think back now, it was lovely to be waited upon, but I felt most welcome when I was grafted into the rhythm of their family. I cleared not only my plate but those of others. I folded not only my laundry but also what belonged to my roommate and four other students who spent the ice storm at Deb's house. Now that I'm an

adult and have a home of my own, I realize what a tremendous stress and inconvenience suddenly having an additional handful of quasi-adults in your home would cause. But I did not sense that inconvenience at all, partly because Deb made me a part of her family.

This is a Christ-like welcome. Come and be a guest. Get used to the flow of life together! But once you've been here a time or two, you're a part of the fabric of our communal life. You're family.

Prayer

God, allow me to not settle into being hosted, but instead help me to welcome others. Make that welcome be, from me, a way that helps anyone I meet feel that they are welcome not only in my heart but in Yours. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”

John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

Matthew 3:1-6

My upbringing happened in a small, rural village in Ohio. Though my family lived “in town” and did not farm or own livestock, I was quite used to the ways agriculture shaped the patterns of our community. When I moved to college, I moved to a village even smaller than the one in which I was raised. It felt comfortable to me. When I moved to continue my education in seminary, I suddenly felt torn between the suburban community in which I lived and studied and the comfortable, rural communities that held the first churches I served. It became almost disorienting to shift constantly back and forth between communities which looked and felt very different.

In these first verses of Matthew 3, we see a similar disorienting shift. In Jesus’s day, power resided in cities. Temples and structures of government stood as physical reminders that shaped the understanding of the people: cities are where life happens. It was usual for someone from a rural area to travel into the city for trading or pilgrimage, but it was less common for people who resided within the city to travel outward. We read that John the Baptist appeared in the desert, and people came to him. People went from Jerusalem

to the wilderness. In this way, John prepared the way for Jesus. He called people outward, causing the physical shift of power out of the city and into the wilderness.

I don't get back to my hometown often anymore, but when I do, it feels a bit like this movement we hear as people listen to John. I experience the shift of power away from the centers around which I build much of my life. This is not to say that city life is bad or even a thing to be avoided, but it is to say that all of the busyness and reminders of power and pilgrimage that exist within a city sometimes need to be left behind for the sake of hearing about Jesus.

Prayer

*Help me to be comfortable in the open spaces, God.
Help me to hear Your voice amidst all the power
positioning that swirls around me. Amen.*

December 11

*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
The wilderness will rejoice and blossom
like the crocus.*

*They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
They will receive the glory of Lebanon,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They will see the LORD's glory,
the splendor of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.*

*Say to those who are panicking:
"Be strong! Don't fear!
Here's your God,
coming with vengeance;
with divine retribution
God will come to save you."*

Isaiah 35:1-4

I don't know how often you think about how strong your hands are, but I think of mine often.

Over the last few years I have taken up competitive powerlifting, and in the beginning of my training, my hands were not very strong. I do not mean simply that I could not hold onto the bar (though that was a part of it), but often, I would leave the gym with my hands in pretty bad shape.

As I moved through training, my coach showed me how to change my grip to strengthen my hold on the bar in the heavy lifts. He also taught me when to protect my hands with grips and when to use chalk so my hands did not slide on the bar. Different ways of working with my hands have benefits and detriments. Using grips allows you to hold onto the bar longer, increasing the number of repetitions you can make in any given movement. It allows you to strengthen the

rest of your muscles. The problem? Grips give you a different sense of hold, steadying the bar in your hands. In preparing for my first competition, my coach specifically taught me to not use my grips anymore. I needed to put the strength of my hands to the test because in competition I am not allowed to use grips.

What does any of this have to do with faith? I see both ways that I use my hands reflected in the passage. "Strengthen the weak hands, / and support the unsteady knees" (Isaiah 35:3). Increase strength and provide support when strength fails. The reason that I am who I am in faith is because God exists in my life to both strengthen and support me. Sometimes those loving actions happen at the same time, and sometimes it feels like God is challenging me with one or the other. In times when I am being spiritually strengthened, I know it is because there will be times I need to be strong for myself and for others. In the times I am being spiritually supported, it is to care for me. Support allows me to move through experiences knowing that I can do, be, and endure more.

Prayer

God strengthen me and steady me. Allow me to trust the strength You have placed in my spirit, and yet allow me the humility to understand that You steady me, too. Amen.

Monday, December 12

A highway will be there.

It will be called The Holy Way.

The unclean won't travel on it,

but it will be for those walking on that way.

Even fools won't get lost on it;

no lion will be there,

and no predator will go up on it.

None of these will be there;

only the redeemed will walk on it.

The LORD's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing,

with everlasting joy upon their heads.

Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;

grief and groaning will flee away.

Isaiah 35:8-10

Spoiler alert is a term used to describe when crucial elements of a movie, show, or book are about to be revealed. I am not sure of the “statute of limitations” for when a spoiler alert should be given, but I am fairly confident that if you have not watched the movie *The Sixth Sense* (debuted in 1999), you do not need guarded from the plot twist. Still...*spoiler alert*...

I remember watching the M. Night Shyamalan thriller and being completely gobsmacked when I learned that Bruce Willis's character had been dead the whole time. When I watched the movie a second time, having this vital piece of information, I watched the entire film differently. This time, the movie felt boring, almost unenjoyable. Once you know the ending, you can no longer miss that information in the movie. When I was talking later in life about this movie, a friend mentioned that she disliked the movie because she sensed (pun intended) that crucial piece of information from the beginning. She had not understood the attention the movie got because to her everyone knew the twist. She did not think the movie had a twist at all!

When I read this passage from Isaiah, I cannot help but chuckle a bit when reading, “Even fools won’t get lost on it.” No one can miss this! Not even the most foolish will miss what is laid out in front of them! How often for us in this season of Advent do we think about what we know because we have walked, read, and even lived it before? We are great at recalling the story of Christ’s birth. It can be easy to miss the power of it because it feels so familiar.

This Advent, let’s think forward to what is stretched out in front of us, so clear and poignant, experiencing God in this season like we are watching a riveting movie, waiting for the plot twist.

Prayer

Surprising God, write Your story in our hearts again. Grant us fresh eyes and open hearts so that we are shocked at the plot-twist of Jesus, born not a mighty ruler but instead an infant. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

*The person whose help is the God of Jacob—
the person whose hope rests on the LORD
their God—
is truly happy!...*

*God: who is faithful forever,
who gives justice to people who are oppressed,
who gives bread to people who are starving!...*

Praise the LORD!

Psalm 146:5-10

Psalm 146 is one of the last psalms, starting off a grouping of psalms known as Hallel psalms. The word *hallel* means “praise.” Psalms 146-150 all begin and end with, “Praise the Lord!”

A few Christmas seasons ago, I was helping a neighbor sift through my church’s food pantry. This neighbor shared with me that she was experiencing homelessness and that she considered herself blessed to have her vehicle to take shelter from the cold winter. While we talked, she would take cans out and set some aside for herself. Others she placed back on the shelf. I saw that she took a can of chicken and rice soup, so I searched for more of that kind. I found one and added it to her selections. She handed the can back to me, saying that she would pass. “Is it expired?” I asked her. “No, Pastor,” she quietly replied, “I don’t have a can opener, so I can only open the cans with the pop tops.” I realized that her needs had more layers than I knew about. Providing for her meant having food and a reliable way to open and eat it.

When we read this psalm as a whole, we see the contrast between how humans fail one another and how God provides. God provides bread to the hungry, not just the ingredients. When God provides, God sees it through to the finest detail.

Prayerful Practice

Today try to meet the need of another, asking how you can imitate God and provide for them fully.

Wednesday, December 14

Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness.

James 5:7-10

There are a lot of reasons I am not a farmer, but perhaps the biggest is my penchant for exerting (or wanting to exert) control over all circumstances. I once read *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah, a piece of historical fiction set in the Great Depression. I struggled through the early part of this work because I became anxious over how the drought and dust storms rendered the main character's family helpless. The patient father, Tony, believed with steadfast patience that the land would provide, and I gave up on the land far sooner than Tony's son.

This exhortation from James makes an interesting pairing with patience, however. It does not seem enough to just be patient, instead we hear that we must also strengthen our resolve. The reason for both patience and resolve is the same: "The Lord is near" (James 5:8). In Hannah's novel, an elderly Tony and his wife, Rose, decide to stay behind with the farm while the rest of the family travels to California to escape the dust and drought. I felt frustrated because it seemed like Tony's patience with the land would literally kill him. Eventually, I found myself endeared to all of the characters because of their respective resolve and how they responded to the poverty that befell

them. Some stayed on their farms while others could suffer no longer and moved on, seeking a different life.

Patience is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all prescription to endure suffering at all costs. Resolve is being able to discern the nearness of the Lord, deciding whether to be patient with circumstances beyond our control or exerting our agency to shape our experiences differently.

Prayer

God, bless those who work with the land so that we may be fed. In the patience they demonstrate and the strength of their resolve, shape us so that we, too, may possess both faithful patience and faithful resolve. Amen.

Thursday, December 15

Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

James 5:9

Where the Common English Bible uses the word *complain*, many other translations use the word *grumble*. Where in scripture have we heard about grumbling before? Oh, that's right! The Israelites grumbled in the wilderness. God dealt pretty harshly with them as a result. Does that mean God will act with similar anger when we grumble? I'm not God, so I do not definitively know.

What I do know, however, is that learning to not complain about others is a way to strengthen our resolve (if you recall yesterday's devotion). If you will also recall yesterday, resolve is only part of the equation. The other part is patience. Doesn't it make sense that if we are truly being patient with another person, there would be no need to complain? James seems pretty stark in saying that the reason you should not complain is because God will judge you by your grumbling. "The judge is standing at the door!" (James 5:9).

Listen. I get it. I need to vent sometimes, and we all know that the church is full of people who exhaust us. But that is not exactly who James is talking about. Flip back and spend some time in James 2, and you will see that James is talking about the people who desire special attention because of their wealth or status. These are the people who will drag a person to court just because that person's poverty is an affront to them. These are the people that deny the sacred creation of our very selves.

James is trying to tell the early church that they will be plagued by people who succumb to injustice. By saying the judge is at the door, James is reminding them that these people will get their

justice from God. Instead of complaining about them, let us work to care for those they cast aside and bring down the systems which hold up their oppressive power.

We might also infer that complaining is empty, and what does empty complaining do for the witness we are called to bear? If we will complain about injustice but do nothing to topple it, how might someone who only knows Jesus through us be robbed of liberation and love?

Prayer

Lord of love and liberation, help us to work with patience and resolve to witness for and with those who are oppressed. When we want to complain, turn our grumbling into action. Help us to remember that judgement belongs to You, but peace belongs to us all. Amen.

Friday, December 16

Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me."

Matthew 11:2-6

When we need clarity, why do we hesitate to ask questions? Are we afraid of what people will think of us? That fear is most often my hesitation. Will someone think I did not pay attention? Will they think that I am unintelligent? Will the authority I am questioning find me defiant when I am simply seeking clarity? How often have we found, however, that as soon as a question is asked, someone else breathes a sigh of relief and declares, "Oh, good! I was wondering the same thing!"

In this Gospel passage, someone asks what others are wondering: Are you it? Or are we waiting for someone else? Especially as we round the calendar toward Christmas, we might find ourselves asking if Jesus is who many people proclaim he is or if he is just another interesting character from our collective past who is great to shape our lives after but is not really the fullness of human redemption.

I trust this question does not only invade the hearts and minds of pre-Christians. I suspect that many Christians, well advanced in seasons and years of Christian practice, come back to this question. When the world seems like it is falling apart, when despair reigns supreme, when grief pervades, when evil rages, is Jesus still the one we

have been waiting for? Or is there some other hope for redemption that we should look toward? For the disciples of Jesus, this question was dangerous. Would you want to be the one asking while Jesus was still living, preaching, teaching, and healing? For disciples today, what implications are drawn of those who ask the question? Do we think that those who ask this question are less faithful?

We should recognize that it is John, the one who cried out for the world to prepare the way of the Lord, who asks the question. Shouldn't John of all people trust that Jesus is who he says he is? But John asks this question after experiencing an unexpected Messiah. Jesus was not fitting with John's expectations of what should unfold. Does that make John less faithful? No. It gives John, and indeed it gives us, an opportunity to decide for ourselves.

Prayerful Reflection

How does Jesus reframe our expectations of what a Messiah should be or do?

Saturday, December 17

When John's disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.

"I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Matthew 11:7-11

I try my very best to never say something about a person that I would not say directly to them. I wonder if Jesus had the same practice when reading this passage about Matthew. Jesus speaks to the crowd about John after John's disciples have gone. The whole scene feels a bit strange. For as much time as we hear John talking about Jesus throughout the Gospels, it seems an odd role reversal to hear Jesus talking about John. It feels a little bit like as soon as Jesus shows up, we do not need John anymore. In this passage, however, Jesus keeps John front and center, both as a notable person and as a prophet.

Back in my Old Testament class in college, Dr. P. was a professor who loved to spring one question pop-quizzes on us from the previous day's reading. One day we strolled into class, and as soon as class began he rolled up the projection screen to reveal two words: "Define prophet." Many students received a zero because they wrote down simply that a prophet tells the future, when in truth a prophet's role is to speak on behalf of God. Sometimes forecasting the future is a part, but prophecy can reflect current realities, call for repentance, and so much more!

Prophets were often found in the wilderness, sometimes because they had been driven out from close proximity to the religious and politically powerful. Turns out that powerful people do not actually want to be told that they are sinners who will receive the mighty smiting of God if they do not correct their ways.

When Jesus speaks of John here, I think he's saying something like, "You can't be surprised by this...you came to the wilderness having a sense of what you would find in John. Why does this surprise you?" Jesus is articulating an interesting partnership: what John announced, Jesus implemented. We do not have John the Baptist with us anymore to make announcements, but the words of Jesus can be for us what the words of John were to Jesus.

Prayerful Reflection

In this season, what might Jesus be announcing and calling me to bring about?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 18

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign from the LORD your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.”

But Ahaz said, “I won’t ask; I won’t test the LORD.”

Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? 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. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

Isaiah 7:10-16

When we hear the familiar words in Isaiah 7:14, it starts to feel like Christmas. Through Isaiah is the story of King Ahaz who is full of fear and is often kind of clumsy-mannered. God sent Isaiah to offer reassurance that the disaster Ahaz feared would not be realized, but Ahaz was hesitant to receive that reassurance and trust it fully. As we read in today’s passage, God offers Ahaz a sign, but Ahaz says, “I won’t ask” (Isaiah 7:12). You might think him respectful and faithful, but God does not receive Ahaz’s response in this way.

If we would continue reading, we would find that Ahaz’s fearful response was unwarranted. God ultimately delivered Judah from the nations arrayed against them. God’s message to Ahaz, however, continued to ring out for centuries until that same invitation to trust was extended to so many in the coming of Christ; invitations to Joseph, Mary, shepherds, and wise ones. We are all invited to place our trust in God.

Prayerful Reflection

How is God inviting you to trust in God’s promises?

Monday, December 19

*LORD God of heavenly forces,
how long will you fume against your people's prayer?
You've fed them bread made of tears;
you've given them tears to drink three times over!
You've put us at odds with our neighbors;
our enemies make fun of us.
Restore us, God of heavenly forces!
Make your face shine so that we can be saved!*

Psalm 80:4-7

When I was worshiping with another congregation, I was stunned by the omission of something very important: the words of assurance after the prayer of confession.

I'm not upset with the exclusion of a prayer of confession. I personally like having it in a worship service, but there are reasons for leaving it out. What was omitted this time, however, was the assurance of pardon, when the worship leader proclaims to the people, "In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." Offering words of assurance is a tremendous privilege that I cannot imagine withholding.

This psalm stands for me as that moment just between the confession and the pardon. Is there any more anticipation than when you've admitted your shortcomings to God and you are leaning forward in spirit to be reminded of that gift of Christ? The week leading up to Christmas feels a bit like that moment of pause, too.

That pause can be as short as the moment in liturgy, the final week of preparation before Christmas, or our lifelong experience in the time between the physical birth of Jesus and the moment of his return.

Prayerful Reflection

What confession do I need to make in order to fully anticipate the presence of Christ?

(and a note from Pastor Anna... In the Name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.)

Tuesday, December 20

*Let your hand be with the one on your right side—
with the one whom you secured as your own—
then we will not turn away from you!*

Revive us so that we can call on your name.

Restore us, LORD God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

Psalm 80:17-19

Goodness. I read this passage about God's shining face differently after spending a few years wearing masks everywhere in public. I've found that relating in public during this pandemic world is all in the eyes.

Comically, when I was first in ministry, I thought it would be prudent to have some professional headshots. A friend of mine set me up with a photographer. I was fresh out of the "awkward teenager" phase and new to life wearing blazers and jewelry that was not made out of plastic. The whole endeavor would make any model cringe. Scott, the photographer, kept snapping away, and each time he reviewed the picture he would say, "You need to put some life in your eyes!" Um, what does that even mean?! He showed me a picture, and I understood. I had zero idea, however, how to fix it. Ultimately, with the photographer's quick shutter and my friend's patient coaching, I learned how to turn into my light source.

A metaphorical turning toward our light source will indeed be what revives and restores us. God's shining face upon us will be what makes us look and feel alive. I hope that by the time we read this page together, our days of mask wearing will be behind us. But if they are not, we might gaze into the eyes of those we pass and see the glimmering light of divinity within each person's eyes.

Invitation

Imagine God's face shining upon you. Smile with intention and carry the feeling throughout your day.

Wednesday, December 21

From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God's good news. God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. He was publicly identified as God's Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received God's grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name's sake. You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles.

To those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:1-7

“‘Salutations are greetings,’ said the voice. When I say ‘salutations’ it is just my fancy way of saying ‘hello’ or ‘good morning.’”

(Charlotte's Web, E.B. White).

I have read *Charlotte's Web* more times than I can remember. My mother was an elementary school teacher, and this was a perennial favorite in our family. I remember relating to the confusion of Wilbur the pig when I first hear the word *salutations*. Now, three decades after my first reading of the book, salutations may be going by the wayside. When we wrote, pen and paper, to each other, we would address each other with a “Dear Mrs. Smith,” or at least a sterile yet respectful “To Whom It May Concern.” Now, in the era of digital communication, we are moving away from salutations at all.

How strange it seems to us, then, to read this salutation from Paul to people in a city which he had never visited. This is precisely why this greeting is longer and more verbose than any other we see in Paul's writing. He is trying to share

his identity and his purpose. He is sharing his devotion to Jesus Christ. Of all the ways that Paul could identify himself (geographic location, social status, family configuration), he is identifying first and foremost with the person of Jesus Christ.

Why does Paul take such lengths to identify himself this way? It is to build relationship. Paul is committed, by virtue of his devotion to Jesus, to other individuals and communities who share that relationship. No matter what things are counted as diverse or different among them, their bond in Jesus Christ keeps them together. Do we feel a similar bond to people we have never met? Could we?

Prayer

God of relationship, help us to identify with Your child, Jesus, so that we may share in the bonds of grace and peace. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. . . .

Matthew 1:18

If two Christmases were ever different, they would have to be the Christmas before my mom died and the one that followed. Rich with tradition, cheer, and new toothbrushes peeking out of our stockings, little changed in our family's celebration of Christmas for many years. Christmas photos from 1986 and 2004 could have been identical with the exception of the two children (my brother and me) getting older and my mom's hair getting shorter. The year 2004 was the first (and consequently only) Christmas that my parents could have been called empty nesters; me having left for college and my brother having finally moved out. We both came home, though, newly equipped with the wisdom of hasty adulthood. We indulged our parents in our family traditions: the Burl Ives record, now warped and crackly with years, and staying upstairs on Christmas morning until my dad read the Christmas story.

The following year was completely different. My mother had died just two months earlier, my dad was preparing to sell the home in which my brother and I were raised, and the three of us gathered in my brother's small and cheap apartment in the city. My dad spent Christmas Eve on the couch. I slept in the oversized chair that had just been moved from our home into my brother's possession, freshly christened with a cigarette burn from his roommate. On Christmas morning, the three of us did not really know what to do, so we went to Denny's for breakfast.

I wonder where along the way we became obsessed with picture perfect Christmas. I suspect social media has played a role. In this story of Mary and Joseph, nothing is picture perfect. There was no painstaking preparation which included a birth

plan and details flawlessly executed. “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place,” Matthew tells us, and then relates a messy story of a pregnancy out of wedlock and a dangerous flight to Egypt (Matthew 1:18).

The thing about my first non-traditional Christmas that I love the most is that somehow these three humans who had lost someone so very important managed to be together, releasing our expectations. Over the slightly singed coffee and the sticky menus, we cried together, we laughed together, and we just were. There was no tree. I do not remember if there were presents. Though some may look at our Denny’s Christmas and feel pity, I look with fondness on that morning as one of the times when I felt God’s presence the most. I felt a bit like the Holy Family, life sprawling out in front us in ways that we could not have comprehended just a few months before.

Prayerful Reflection

What preparations towards perfection might you need to release in order to feel God’s presence as Christmas approaches?

Friday, December 23

When Mary [Jesus's] mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 1:18b-20

When I think of Mary and Joseph, there are pieces of their story that leave me curious. Did Mary tell Joseph that she was pregnant? Did a member of her family send word to his family to relay this curious news? Did Mary get a chance to have a conversation with Joseph about their path forward, and if she did, did he listen to her? Joseph is described as a righteous man, and I believe that he was. Did Mary have a part in that reputation, though, encouraging him to call the whole thing off? We are not privy to all the details, nor should we try too desperately to fill in the plot holes.

What we can glean from the early parts of this story, however, is that there are always complicated decisions, relationships, and consequences that an outsider looking into the situation of another person or family may not understand. The decisions that a person or family makes are often ones that seem scandalous, troublesome, or even downright confusing to the onlooker. We see in this story that God prefers to work in unconventional ways.

Prayerful Practice

Write down a private story from your life and stash it away somewhere safe for another day. You may choose to share that story with another person, or you may keep it to yourself. Entrust it to God, however, and ask God to sanctify it for holy purpose.

CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world. At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us in order to rescue us from every kind of lawless behavior, and cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions.

Titus 2:11-14

As a preacher, I find there is a delicate balance in preparing a sermon for Christmas Eve. On one hand, it may be the only time a person hears the sacred story. On the other, a precious few can recall what was preached. The sermon is upstaged by the passionate reading of the Gospel, the beauty of the poinsettias, the harmonies of familiar hymns, and the glow of the candlelight. Whenever I start to feel that my preparation is futile, I think about how poor Titus shows up nowhere in the Revised Common Lectionary except for Christmas Eve and a third set of lessons for Christmas Day.

Just when I feel bad about being rightly upstaged by adorable children dressed as sheep, here comes Titus with the always popular message to live sensible and ethical lives that reject the desires of this world. Do we read this before or after we open the present that we have so desperately waited for? There is always a complicated struggle in the Pastoral Epistles where those who follow Jesus are supposed to live in harmony with and witness to the culture around us, and yet we are, as Titus says, called to reject ungodly lives.

Quite honestly, I think people hear the first phrase of this Titus passage and then let their eyes wander to the decorations or their thoughts

to the list of preparations. How can we wait with blessed hope when we are antsy that the preacher will go on too long and Great-Aunt Linda may arrive with the sweet potatoes before we have done the last tidying of the house? And perhaps that is OK. For just one night, a person who may never set foot in a church or tune into a worship service may simply hear that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. We can live and learn tonight, and leave all of the other action-oriented verbs Titus presents for the year ahead. We can and should pursue godly lives, reject ungodly things. But just for tonight, let us rest in the message of God's grace for us.

The grace of God has appeared amidst the candlelight, in the music, even in the infant playing the role of Jesus who is screaming like a banshee.

Prayerful Practice

For just tonight, remember God's grace. It is for all people, and that includes you.

CHRISTMAS DAY

December 25

Sing to the LORD a new song!

Sing to the LORD, all the earth!

Sing to the LORD! Bless his name!

Share the news of his saving work every single day!

Declare God's glory among the nations;

declare his wondrous works among all people

because the LORD is great and so worthy of praise.

Psalm 96:1-4a

Thank you, beloved, for journeying with me through this season of Advent. You can hear and recall the Gospel lesson for today in so many places, whether it is in the quiet reading you do over coffee before your family wakes, the jammie-clad worship at church on Christmas morning, watching the Pope's sermon, or even from the mouth of a blankie-dropping Linus on a *Peanuts* television special. For now, however, I want to offer you a prayerful poem for Christmas, based on Psalm 96.

*God, You tell me to sing, but how can I sing
when my voice and my spirit are tired?*

*How can I sing when I do not know
how to make harmony with the voices
around me?*

*You, Creator of all notes, can make a
beautiful song out of my ragged, raspy
voice. Fill me with holy breath to sing.*

*God, You tell me to make declarations of
Your goodness, but how can I when I am
unsure if that goodness is for me?*

*How can I declare Your goodness when
I do not want to share it, fearful that if I
declare it for someone else my portion will
become diminished?*

*Will my declaration count if I feel so lonely
there is no one to hear it?*

*Help me to see that not only are strength
and beauty in Your sanctuary, but that
Your sanctuary is found in strength
and beauty. You created me strong and
beautiful.*

*Let me join in the splendor of nature;
roaring, celebrating, and shouting.*

*Maybe that is my song, God. I roar and
shout;*

Create, God, I beg You.

*Create like You did in the dark and
formless void.*

*Create like You did in the dark mystery
of a strong and beautiful woman's body,
a woman who roared and shouted like
creation... in creation...*

Let this be the new song for all the earth.